

“Wise Up”                      Proverbs 1-4 (selected verses)                      9/6/15

Let’s see if you can complete these American proverbs: “Early to bed, early to rise...makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” “A stitch in time... saves nine.” “A penny saved... is a penny earned.” Or, how about this one? “Before you criticize someone walk a mile in his shoes. And if you decided to criticize him later, you’ll be a mile away and you’ll have his shoes!” Proverbs are short, often witty sayings that make a point. Today we begin a two-month sermon series in the biblical book of Proverbs, a book that contains many of these short sayings. Some may be familiar to you. “Train up a children in the way they should go and when they are old, they will not depart from it.” Or, “Like clouds and wind without rain is one who boasts of a gift never given.” Or, one of my favorites, “It is better to live in the corner of an attic than in a wide house with a contentious woman.” I quoted that one to my wife... once! I have since learned to be more selective with my quotes from Proverbs!

So, what is the purpose of this book of Proverbs? Let’s read the introduction.

*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:*

<sup>2</sup>*For learning about wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight,*

<sup>3</sup>*for gaining instruction in wise dealing,  
righteousness, justice, and equity;*  
<sup>4</sup>*to teach shrewdness to the simple,  
knowledge and prudence to the young—*  
<sup>5</sup>*let the wise also hear and gain in learning,  
and the discerning acquire skill,*  
<sup>6</sup>*to understand a proverb and a figure,  
the words of the wise and their riddles. <sup>7</sup>The fear of the LORD is the  
beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:1-7)*

The purpose of Proverbs is clearly stated. It is to teach wisdom. Many of the proverbs are attributed to old King Solomon, who was renowned for his wisdom. You might recall the story from I Kings 3 when God told Solomon in a dream that he would give him anything he asked for. Rather than asking for wealth, or pleasure, or a long life, Solomon asked for wisdom because he wanted to be a good king for the people entrusted to him. So God granted him great wisdom, and all those other things as well. In the book of Proverbs, Solomon (and the other authors of the book) want to impart their wisdom to us.

So, what is wisdom? Let me illustrate with two stories. Some of you know that my son, Stephen, is a professional kayaker. A friend of his,

Bryan Dorr, is also a kayaker. A few months ago, Bryon decided to run the falls on the Potomac River at Great Falls. He had run the falls over 100 times, but this time he made some unwise decisions. First, he used a borrowed, unfamiliar boat. He ran the rapids without a partner. He failed to scout out the conditions on the falls that day, which is very important because the conditions can change significantly with just a few inches rise or drop in the river level. Finally, he rushed into the water because he was showing off for some friends.

As he went through the falls, he got caught in a hydraulic, a washing machine-like river feature that spun him around several times under the water in his boat and held him there. He realized that he was in trouble and that he was unlikely to be able to overcome the power of the water while in the boat, so he popped the skirt off the kayak and did what's called a "wet exit." But the hydraulic continued to spin him around as he attempted to swim away. He was forced to stay underwater for a long time until he finally escaped that first hazard and swam through a second one to safety. He was fortunate to escape with some bumps and bruises.

Bryon had plenty of knowledge about doing safe paddling. He had even taught this knowledge to others. But he failed to act wisely with the knowledge he had this one time, and it almost cost him his life, which he acknowledged in a recent Facebook post.

Clearly, just having a lot of knowledge doesn't make us wise. There's more to it than that. A tribe of fisherman from Thailand, known as the Morgan sea gypsies, were spending December of 2004 on the beach, where they spend every December, fishing. Unfortunately, they were right in the path of the killer tsunami which swept through that area. Fortunately, they were wise.

Their elders had passed along a warning to them. "If the water in the sea ever recedes quickly, it will quickly reappear, so get out fast." And that is exactly what happened. The water flowed out along their beach. They were tempted to stay and gather up the thousands of stranded fish along the beach. But they remembered the warning of the elders and ran into the mountains, to high ground. And every one of them survived the tsunami. They exercised wisdom.

Wisdom often involves some knowledge, as it did here, but it also involves applying that knowledge in the right way at the right time. It requires good judgment. That's the difference between the Morgan sea gypsies and my son's friend, Bryon Dorr. The sea gypsies were wise enough to resist temptation and to apply what they knew to the situation they experienced. Bryon failed to do so at Great Falls.

When the writers of Proverbs talk about wisdom, they are talking about life skills. They provide us with wisdom about managing our money, being in love, aging, the joys and dangers of alcohol, dealing with anger and with people who have power over us, family relationships, and being in a relationship with God. Real life skills- that's a primary benefit of wisdom.

But there are a couple other reasons we might want to do the work required to obtain wisdom. In chapter 2, we're told that wisdom will lead us to fear the Lord, to reverence and respect the One who is the source of all wisdom. In other words, wisdom leads us into a deeper relationship with our Creator.

In chapter 3 we're told that a sense of security can be found in wisdom. *"My child, do not let these escape from your sight: keep sound wisdom and prudence, and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely and your foot will not stumble. If you sit down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the storm that strikes the wicked; for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught."* (Prov. 3:21-26) In other words, those who are wise do not need to fear what may come, because they have prepared well for many possibilities and they have confidence that with wisdom they can

respond to whatever unforeseen thing may occur. A sense of peace and security comes from wisdom.

In chapter four we learn that the meaning of life can be found through wisdom. And, that those who are wise will be honored by those around them.

Taken together, these chapters teach that everything we want in life, all that we long for, and all that we were created for can be found in wisdom. That's a pretty bold claim! But that's what the book promises for those who will apply themselves to its teaching, and find wisdom.

And these early chapters of Proverbs give us two pieces of advice about acquiring wisdom. The first is found in verse 7 of chapter one, which we read earlier. *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."* God is the ultimate source of all wisdom. We begin our search for wisdom by acknowledging this and putting ourselves under God's care and teaching. We're not blindly flailing around trying to invent something here. God is wise and wants to impart his wisdom to us. The writer of James in the New Testament says much the same thing in chapter one, verse five. *"If anyone of you lacks wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given*

*you.*” That’s the first point. Go to the Lord, the source of wisdom, to obtain it. We’ll talk more about this one next week.

The second is found in Proverbs, chapter 4, verse 7. “*The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight.*”

That seems pretty obvious, but obtaining wisdom needs to be a priority for us. Those who would be wise know their need for more wisdom and seek it. Many of you have heard of Ken Jennings, the young man who won a record-breaking \$2.5 million a number of years ago on the television game show, “Jeopardy.” Everyone would agree that Ken is an extremely smart young man. But what is even more impressive to me is that after winning this huge amount of money, Ken went to his local library and checked out a book on how to avoid the difficulties faced by people who experience financial windfalls. Almost three-quarters of all people who have a big windfall are out of money in 2-5 years! Ken understood his need for wisdom, he sought after it, and applied it. That’s the starting point for obtaining wisdom. Admitting our need and seeking after it.

Maybe you are a person with a lot of knowledge, education, and life experience, yet you still find yourself making poor choices so that you can never seem to fully succeed at work or in relationships or whatever. You are beginning to see that you lack judgment, that you lack wisdom. That brings us to our Proverbs Challenge.

When I was in high school a retreat speaker challenged us to read one chapter in the book of Proverbs every day. So I did. All the way through high school and college. (And I still do it periodically as an adult.) And I have learned a great deal from it. If you desire to acquire wisdom, just listening to these sermons about Proverbs (exceptional though they may be!) is probably not enough. You need to read Proverbs yourself, to wrestle with it and apply it to your personal situation. So, I challenge each one of you to read one of the 31 chapters of Proverbs each day. Read the chapter corresponding with the date of the month. In other words, read chapter 6 today on Sept. 6, chapter 7 tomorrow on Sept. 7, and so on. Don't worry if you miss a day. Just skip that chapter and move on to the next one. Over the course of two months, you'll cover most of it. And you'll be sure to grow in understanding and wisdom each week, even if the sermon that week is a dud (unlikely as that may be!). And this challenge isn't just for adults. I think young people in Middle School and High School can benefit from it, too.

One more thing. Don't just read Proverbs. Be like those Morgan sea gypsies from Thailand. Apply what you read. Look for one Proverb each day that you can put into action. And look for the truth of other proverbs you read in daily situations. Apply what you read.

In the Protestant church we believe that everyone can read the Bible and understand it. Now I know that some parts of the Bible are harder to understand than others. But you can read and understand most of what is in Proverbs even if you have very little background in the Bible. And together, with your reading and our sermons and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can begin to acquire wisdom and all its benefits this Fall.