

# The Beginning of Wisdom

(by Pastor Trent Boedicker)

Text: Proverbs 4:10-19

1/17/16

There was a young man who became president of a local bank. He was sharp, graduated at the top of his class in business school, and eager to do well. One of the first things he did was schedule an appointment with his predecessor to seek some advice. He began, “Sir, as you know, I lack a great deal of the qualifications you had for this job. You were very successful as president of this bank, and I wondered if you would be kind enough to share with me some of the insights you have gained from your years here that have been the keys to your success.”

The older man looked at him with a stare and replied: “Young man, two words: *good decisions*.”

The young man responded, “Thank you very much, sir, but how does one come to know which is the good decision?”

“One word, young man: *experience*.”

“But how does one get experience?”

“Two words, young man: *bad decisions*.”

All of us want to live productive lives: we want to be successful at what we do; we want to make good choices and avoid (as much as possible) painful mistakes. Not just in our work, but this is our desire for every facet of our lives. I want to be a successful as a father... and be a good husband... We want to be successful in our relationships, and be good neighbors... We want to be successful in the way we manage our homes, and be good stewards... Most of all we want to be successful in living the Christian life, bringing glory to God in all we do. **To be successful in life, we need more than a little good advice, we need wisdom.**

The Bible has a lot to say about this topic, in fact there is an entire section of books in OT known as Wisdom Literature. The book of Proverbs is among them, and that’s going to be the focus of our study in the weeks to come. If the Psalms are the great hymnbook of the OT, Proverbs is the OT’s training manual for life. In ancient Israel, it was a wonderful resource to help young people learn to live wisely, walking in the ways of the Lord. One of the phrases repeated throughout the book is: “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction...” (1:8; 4:1) Solomon was seeking to pass on his wisdom to his son in order to prepare him to take his place one day as the leader of God’s people. But it was intended for more than just his own children, he was writing to all the sons and daughters of Israel. --Here are the qualities that make for a good life... this is what it means to live for the Lord... follow these principles and you will do well....”

Proverbs is incredibly practical, touching on all kinds of issues we deal with in our everyday lives. And it’s not just the young, but people at every stage of their lives can benefit from its wisdom. It offers timeless truth, relevant in our modern age just as much as in the days of Solomon.

As we begin our study of Proverbs, this morning, I want to say a few things about the background of the book, and then we are going to go on and ask three questions:

1. What is wisdom?
2. Why do we need wisdom?
3. Where can we find wisdom?

But first, before we seek the answers to these questions, it will be helpful to take a brief look at the background of the book.

The majority of the book is written by King Solomon, a man who was known for his unsurpassed wisdom. Verse 1 tells us these are “The proverbs of Solomon, Son of David, king of Israel...” When Solomon first became king, (in 1 Kings) he was given a unique opportunity to make any request, and the Lord promised to grant it. Think about that for a moment. God tells you: “I will give you anything you want, just say the word...” How would you answer? Would you ask for riches, fame, a long life, or victory over you enemies? Solomon could have requested any of those things, but do you know what he prayed for? He asked for wisdom. He prayed, “...give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.” (1 Kings 3:9) That was music in God’s ears, and He was more than willing to answer that prayer.

As a result, 1 Kings 4 tells us that <sup>29</sup>*God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore.* <sup>30</sup>*Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt.* <sup>31</sup>*He was wiser than any other man... And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations.* <sup>32</sup>*He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five.*”

People from around the world traveled to Israel so they could learn from the wisdom of Solomon. Many of those proverbs that Solomon wrote ended up here, for our instruction.

The NT tells us that the Lord continues to answer that prayer, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all...” (James 1:5) It takes humility to recognize our need, and to say “Lord I can’t figure things out on my own, there are so many things I don’t understand, I don’t know what the right decision is in this situation, but you do. Show me your ways.” Just as the Lord answered Solomon’s humble prayer, He will answer ours as well. It may not come instantly, like a lightbulb comes on all of the sudden, but in some way God will give us the understanding we need.

If we are going to study the Proverbs, it is helpful for us to know a little bit about the style of literature in which it was written. A proverb is a brief statement that expresses spiritual truth. Proverbs are condensed in short saying, which makes it easier to memorize, but they give us a lot to think about. I like the way one commentator puts it, “These concentrated sayings cause the reader to chew on them until the truth is extracted and digested. The reward for this effort is wisdom.” (*Proverbs: LifeChange Series, Rhodes, Ron. NavPress p.9*) So when you read through the proverbs, don’t gloss over them too quickly, take your time to reflect on the message being conveyed.

The book is written in the form of Hebrew poetry. Our poems (in the English language) as usually based on rhyme and rhythm, Hebrew poetry is structured with lines of parallel thought. If you glance through the Proverbs, in your Bible, you’ll notice that most verses are arranged in two lines. The first line

usually expresses the truth, and the second reiterates or expounds upon, or enhances the message in some way. If there are three or four lines, it enhances the thought even more. There are several ways this happens: by comparison, contrast, illustration, or expansion.

Now that we've talked about the background of the book, let's go on to look at our questions:

## 1. What is wisdom?

We've used that word quite a bit already. Proverbs 1:2 tells us that the purpose for the book is *"To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding."*

The Hebrew word for wisdom is "hokmah." It literally means to be skilled at something. It was used of the craftsmen who built the tabernacle. They were skilled with their hands, and did a good job in everything they made (Ex. 31:6). In other places the word was used the skill of a sailor, navigating the boat through rough waters. ---But here, and throughout most of the Bible, hokmah (wisdom) is used to describe the skill of living a godly life.

One Bible dictionary puts it this way: "Wisdom is the quality of discerning what is true, what is ethically right, and what should be done in different situations." (*Lexham Bible Dictionary*)

Another says, "Wisdom ...is intensely practical, not theoretical. Its seat is the heart, the center of moral and intellectual decision... Wisdom takes insights gleaned from the knowledge of God's ways and applies them in the daily walk." (*New Bible Dictionary*)

We sometimes say a person has book smarts, but they don't have common sense. Like the college kid who walks out of chemistry class scoring an A+ on his exam, but as he steps outside to walk back to the dorm he realizes that wearing shorts and a t-shirt on a cold winter day probably wasn't the best idea. He has knowledge, but lacks wisdom.

In the same way, it's not good enough just to memorize Ten Commandments, or to be able to recite dozens of verses. Are we living out God's Word in our everyday lives? Wisdom is what we do with the knowledge we've been given: taking it to heart, following God's ways. And living out the truth of His Word.

## 2. Why do we need wisdom?

I guess the quick answer is that without it, we're going to get into all kinds of trouble and make a mess of our lives. But there's more to it than that:

**Wisdom will influence our character.** Verse 3 tells us the proverbs were given, *"To receive instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice, and equity."* This is the outcome of wisdom: reflecting the values of God, and walking in his ways.

When Solomon became king, he didn't want to be like other leaders in world, many of whom did whatever they wanted, using their positions of power for their own selfish gain. No, he

wanted to do what was right the eyes of the Lord. He wanted to be a man of godly character. And he started out on the right foot.

People who are wise realize that character matters. There is standard of right and wrong that exists, established by God, and even if the rest of the world refuses to see it we recognize that it's there, and it matters.. These are the qualities we want to define us. This is the kind of person that I want to be.

How many times have we read in the newspaper stories of a politician whose career is ruined by some scandal, or a professional athlete whose awards and accomplishments are taken away because he failed a drug test and was caught using steroids. We shake our heads and wonder "how could that happen? Why would do that?" They made a series of compromises. They didn't listen to the voice within that was warning them "don't do this, turn around, this is wrong," They weren't thinking about the consequences. And all of us, every day, could find ourselves making the same kinds of compromises, tuning out the voice of our conscience.

Wisdom reminds us that character matters. In the end, it's not the world that gets to judge whether or not our lives on this earth were a success. God's opinion is the only one that counts. And our desire is to please Him.

**Wisdom equips us to make good decisions.** Verse 4 says, *"To give prudence to the naïve, to the youth knowledge and discretion."*

The person who is naïve is easily led astray. He's not paying attention to what he's doing or where he's going, which leads to all kinds of problems.

We all do dumb things, every once and awhile. Not long ago I was cooking a bowl of soup in the microwave, and it had been in there for a few minutes (because nobody likes to eat lukewarm soup). I looked around to find the potholder, but didn't see it anywhere, and for some reason I told myself if I pulled it out quickly it will be okay. As soon as I picked it up I realized that it was a mistake, I ended up spilling it all over the place. And when I cleaned up the mess I saw the potholder sitting right in front of me on the counter. I was naïve, but I learned my lesson.

The wise person considers the consequences of his actions. He is discerning. "This will hurt me, so I need to stay away from it. These things are good, so I should pursue them" When others try to entice him to follow along, and go the wrong way, the wise person is not easily led astray. --wait a minute, what they are saying over there doesn't line up with the Word of God, so I know that isn't right.---

**Wisdom keeps us on the right path.** Verse 5 says, *"A wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel."* The wise don't simply hear the instructions of God's Word, they listen. That is, follow and obey.

Sometimes our children hear what we're saying, but they don't listen. "Pick up your toys before someone steps on them." "Did you hear me?" "Yes, I heard you daddy." A few minutes later they coming crying because they hurt their foot stepping on the toy. It wouldn't have

happened had they listened. As we listen to God and apply His Word to our lives, it keeps us heading in the right direction, holds us on course.

### **3. Where can we find wisdom?**

Verse 7 tells us, *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, Fools despise wisdom and instruction.”* This isn’t the kind of dread that causes us to run away, and cower in the shadows. It is to be filled with such awe and wonder, for God, that we are brought to our knees in humble worship. Ryrie puts it this way: “fear of the Lord [is] a reverence for God expressed in submission to his will.” *(Ryrie Study Bible, p.937)*

This is recurring phrase throughout the OT: *Proverbs 15:33* says *“The fear of the Lord is the instruction for wisdom, And before honor comes humility.”* And *Proverbs 9:10* tells us *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”*

Without God, the most important piece of the puzzle will always be missing. This is where Solomon, and other wise men of his day parted ways. Historians have uncovered ancient books from Egypt, and Mesopotamia, (from around the same period of time) written by people who were on a quest for knowledge, who sought to answer the deep questions of life. But Solomon realized that true wisdom comes from the Lord—the one true God.

Life will never completely make sense, if you try to remove Him from the equation. We can scour the universe for answers, but no matter how much we learn, or how much intelligence we manage to gain, we won’t be any closer to the truth.

If you’re going to read a novel, where do you begin? At the beginning, right? Page one. If you try to skip ahead, nothing will make sense. It will be a jumbled mess. You will be confused about the characters and the plot. If you want to wise, you have to begin with God. Not just the idea of God, that He exists, that He is out there somewhere in the universe. We begin with the God of Israel, the one true God, who has revealed Himself to humanity, calling us into relationship with Him. We begin by opening the door of our heart to Him. Those who seek wisdom must first seek God. He is the source. Allow Him to teach you His ways. Be willing to follow His path.

### **Conclusion –**

Proverbs introduces us to three kinds of people, and we’ve read a little bit about each of them in our passage. There are the wise, the foolish, and the simple. The wise are those who seek the Lord, and embrace His truth. The foolish are those who reject God and do things their own way. The simple are those who are not committed to either path, and who are easily led astray. We have to decide which one we will be.

As we read these opening verses of the book this morning, God is calling us to pursue a life of wisdom. Don't just float through life, following whatever path seems good in your eyes in the moment. Follow God's path, seek His ways.

- So that you might be a person of character
- So that you will be equipped to make good choices
- So that you will not stray from the right path