

What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?

Proverbs 1

In preparation for this message I've been doing an informal survey, asking the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" For those who are already adults I've been asking, "When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?" The answers have been interesting:

- NFL (football player)
- NBA (basketball player)
- NHL (hockey player)
- Engineer on a train
- Dairy Queen lady (Brenda)
- Astronomer (1986 Haley's Comet slumber party)
- My own mother wanted to be a jockey, racing horses.
- The only person I surveyed who actually ended up being "what they wanted to be when they grew up" said she always wanted to be a mom.

It's interesting how we have a picture of what we want to be when we grow up. In addition to specific careers, jobs, and roles we might play, the book of Proverbs suggests that we should also think, "When I grow up I want to be *wise*." More accurately, Proverbs will tell us that without wisdom you never really do grow up. You may get older, but unless you have wisdom, you won't actually grow up.

This morning we begin a sermon series in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 1 sets out the agenda for the entire book of Proverbs: Proverbs is meant to help people "grow up." The book of Proverbs declares rather boldly that the most strategic, foundational thing you can do if you want to grow up is to attain wisdom. As we mentioned last week, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom/knowledge." Without the fear of the Lord you won't make any progress in wisdom. Therefore, we can also say that the fear of the Lord is indispensable for growing up.

A lot of people in this room today could confirm that you never really finish growing up and that as you get older things don't necessarily get much easier. I think we'll find that there is much in Proverbs for every person here.

Those who fear the Lord are poised to "grow up." (1:1-7) Proverbs has a rather ambitious agenda for itself:

- Proverbs 1:1 The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:
- 2 To know wisdom and instruction,
To discern the sayings of understanding,
- 3 To receive instruction in wise behavior,
Righteousness, justice and equity;
- 4 To give prudence to the naive,
To the youth knowledge and discretion,
- 5 A wise man will hear and increase in learning,

And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,
6 To understand a proverb and a figure,
The words of the wise and their riddles.

Basically, the book of Proverbs was written to impart wisdom to anybody who will receive it. Verses 2 through 6 contain a cluster of terms associated with wisdom: wisdom, instruction, sayings of understanding (NIV “words of insight”), wise behavior, prudence, knowledge, and discretion. While these terms have distinct meanings, there is quite a bit of overlap conceptually. The author is probably using such a multitude of terms to paint an overall picture of wisdom. The cumulative effect of these terms is that wisdom is rich and comprehensive, involving every aspect of our lives. Wisdom is basically skillful living. The wise person grows up and lives well. Proverbs lays out what that lifestyle is all about.

We see in verses 4 and 5 that wisdom is for everybody. First and foremost, wisdom is for the “simple” or the “naïve” – the person who is gullible and easily influenced by others. The naïve person can go either way; s/he is neither foolish nor wise. But unless this person seeks wisdom and gains knowledge, she will surely turn to foolishness. The battleground in the book of Proverbs is for the “naïve.” The parallelism in verse 4 makes clear that “the young” are primarily in mind here (I take that to mean anybody under the age of 50). Specifically, the father will appeal to his son six times in the first nine chapters of Proverbs. In the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, this was a powerful way to communicate this perspective on wisdom.

Verse 5 makes clear that those who are already wise and discerning can also benefit from Proverbs. If the wise listen, they will add to their learning; the man of understanding will acquire wise counsel. One attribute of a wise person is that s/he never stops learning and growing. Life is so complex and wisdom is so comprehensive that we never come to the point where we say, “I have attained as much wisdom as I’ll ever need.”

If verses 1 through 6 give the benefit of the book of Proverbs, verse 7 tells who will actually benefit from what is offered:

7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

There are two types of people. On one hand are those who “fear the Lord” – those who are intensely concerned to align their lives with God and His purposes. Because they fear being opposed to God, they are teachable. They come to the book of Proverbs hungry for the knowledge and wisdom from God that it can impart. Consequently, those who fear the Lord will grow up well. They will make steady progress in terms of “wise behavior.”

On the other hand are “fools” who “despise wisdom and instruction.” They are not merely unteachable; they positively despise what the book of Proverbs has to offer. They are convinced that the lifestyle they’re living is far superior to anything “Lady Wisdom” (see verse 20) has to offer. Consequently, they will never grow up. They are perpetually immature in the things that really matter. That may sound harsh, but the stakes are too high for the author of Proverbs to sugar coat this reality.

Those who fear the Lord are teachable, eager to learn how to live their lives. As we'll see later in the chapter, we aren't helpless when it comes to fearing the Lord; by the grace of God, fearing the Lord is something we can choose to do. My question for you at this point is, "How would you evaluate your fear of the Lord?" This is the stance of looking into the face of God and say, "I need and want You to teach me how to live my life. Even if it means huge changes, I want to be wise in every area of my life." The alternative would be to say, "God, I sort of want to live my life the way you want, but there are areas of my life that You can't touch." How would you evaluate your fear of the Lord? ***Those who fear the Lord are poised to grow up.***

Those who fear the Lord understand the dangers they will face in growing up. (1:8-19)

In these verses, we have a father pleading with his son to hang onto the teaching that his father and mother have imparted to him. Parents can teach their children well, but ultimately the children have the responsibility to live out what they've been taught.

8 Hear, my son, your father's instruction
And do not forsake your mother's teaching;
9 Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head
And ornaments about your neck.

Here the idea is that the son will be adorned with wisdom. The father and mother's teaching will be like a gracious wreath on his head and like ornaments around his neck. He will be "decked out" in wisdom. You've probably noticed that there is a certain charm and attractiveness about the wise person.

In verses 10ff the father anticipates a situation in which his son might find himself. This father wants his son to understand the foundational issues that he will face. He paints the picture of his son being lured into violent crime by others.

10 My son, if sinners entice you,
Do not consent.
11 If they say, "Come with us, Let us lie in wait for blood,
Let us ambush the innocent without cause;
12 Let us swallow them alive like Sheol,
Even whole, as those who go down to the pit;
13 We will find all *kinds* of precious wealth,
We will fill our houses with spoil;
14 Throw in your lot with us,
We shall all have one purse,"
15 My son, do not walk in the way with them.
Keep your feet from their path,
16 For their feet run to evil
And they hasten to shed blood.
17 Indeed, it is useless to spread the *baited* net
In the sight of any bird;
18 But they lie in wait for their own blood;
They ambush their own lives.
19 So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence;

It takes away the life of its possessors.

This scenario surfaces several foundational issues that are mentioned time and again throughout proverbs.

The Seduction of Sin. In verses 11 through 14, this young man is being *enticed* to join in a life of crime. “We’ve got this great plan. We’re going to hide in the bushes and wait for people to wander by. We’re going to jump them and take their money and their possessions. Our houses will be full to overflowing. We’ll have more than we need. We’ll be brothers. It’s gonna be great.” This is basically the mindset of a street gang. This proposal is seductive to many because it offers the prospect of wealth, of brotherhood/family/belonging, and of excitement. This father wants his son to be prepared when people will come to him with these types of seductive proposals.

Most of us here at Faith eFree in Manhattan, Kansas won’t be lured into a life of marauding and pillaging. Such a lifestyle really doesn’t hold much appeal for most of us. But Proverbs will go on to describe how *other* lifestyles of sin are equally seductive. In chapter 2, for example, the adulteress is seductive in her words (2:16). Lying is very seductive; sometimes it seems like telling a lie is going to make everything better, but Proverbs will make clear that lying only makes things worse. Alcohol can be seductive; it promises nothing but good times, but it can lead to ruin (it doesn’t have to, but it often does).

Sin and indulgence promise a lot more than they can deliver. The person who fears the Lord understands the seduction of sin ahead of time and makes appropriate choices. Proverbs tells us that we need to understand the seduction of sin if we want to grow up.

Two Paths. In Proverbs, as in the rest of the Scriptures, two paths/ways are laid out before each of us.

15 My son, do not walk in the way with them.
Keep your feet from their path,
16 For their feet run to evil
And they hasten to shed blood.

A characteristic of foolish people is that they don’t ponder the “path” that they are on (see 5:6). They don’t stop to consider the course of their lives – where they have been and where they are going. Here the father is warning his son not to take the path of those who run to evil.

Proverbs will make a series of contrasts between the path of the wicked and the path of the righteous. The wicked/foolish are on a crooked path (in the sense of perverted; see 2:15); those who acknowledge God in all their ways will have straight paths (3:5-6). The path of the foolish leads to death (9:15-18), whereas the path of the wise leads to life (12:28). Another contrast is between darkness and light in chapter 4:

18 But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.
19 The way of the wicked is like darkness;

They do not know over what they stumble.

The wise are on a path that gets brighter and brighter; the wicked are on a path of darkness. If you've ever walked down a path on a dark night, you know how easy it is to stumble. The wicked are like that: they will not stand; they will fall.

Psalms 1 spoke of this same thing.

1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

Jesus spoke of two paths:

13 "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. 14 "For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.

Jesus' teachings are steeped in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. It is not surprising that Jesus taught that there are two paths/ways. One is followed by few people; it is narrow and leads to life. Many, many people take the other, broader path; the problem is that it leads to destruction.

Do you realize that you are on one of two paths? The person who fears the Lord makes sure that s/he is on the path that leads to life. The fool says, "Path? I'm not on a path. Leave me alone. I'm just living my life and having fun." Again, the Scriptures would say that a person is foolish not to consider which path s/he is on.

Self-Destruction of Sin. Here Proverbs goes beyond saying that the foolish are on a path of destruction. Proverbs makes clear that the foolish are actually ***destroying themselves***; they are engaging in self-destructive behavior. The emphasis is upon personal responsibility for our actions. Instead of blaming others for our sinful behavior, Proverbs emphasizes how we need to "own" our own sinful behaviors.

17 Indeed, it is useless to spread the *baited* net
In the sight of any bird;

In other words, if a bird sees you setting up a trap, it will fly away. But those who want you to join them in sin aren't half that smart. They set up a trap and walk right into it themselves (see 5:2, 6:32, 7:23, 8:36).

18 But they lie in wait for their own blood;
They ambush their own lives.
19 So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence;
It takes away the life of its possessors.

They don't even realize it, but they are ambushing their own lives. They think they're gaining great wealth without consequences, but they're really losing everything. They are

destroying their own lives. “Life” in Proverbs is not only physical life, but also vitality and fullness. This is the same thing Jesus spoke of when He said, “I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly.” Those who walk in His ways experience true life. Those who walk in the paths of the wicked forfeit such life.

It’s so much easier to detect self-destructive and dangerous behavior in other people. We see other people’s immorality, alcohol or drug abuse, anger, laziness, or slander. We spot their self-destruction a mile away. But if we fear the Lord we will be alert to the same things within ourselves.

The father in Proverbs understands the seduction of sin, the two paths before his son, and the self-destruction of sin. Because he loves his son, he pleads with him to fear God and understand the dangers he’ll face as he grows up. *If we fear the Lord, we too will understand these dangers and do everything within our power to avoid them.*

Those who choose the fear of the Lord receive the wisdom God offers, grow up well, and live securely. (1:20-33) This is the first of three speeches in Proverbs by Lady Wisdom (wisdom personified as a woman). The good news is that wisdom isn’t hidden in some remote cave in the Himalayas; wisdom is standing out in the street shouting at people. Wisdom is standing in the middle of town square offering to guide people through the dangers of growing up. In contrast with the father (vv. 8-19) who is pleading tenderly with his son, Lady Wisdom has a prophetic tone. There is a certain fierce holiness about the way she speaks.

20 Wisdom shouts in the street,
She lifts her voice in the square;
21 At the head of the noisy *streets* she cries out;
At the entrance of the gates in the city she utters her sayings:
22 "How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded?
And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing
And fools hate knowledge?

The implication is that the naïve, the scoffers, and fools have been refusing her wisdom for some time. This is what we saw in verse 7: fools despise/hate knowledge and instruction. In verse 23 Wisdom repeats her standing offer of wisdom and then talks about what will happen if they continually refuse.

23 "Turn to my reproof,
Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you;
I will make my words known to you.
24 "Because I called and you refused,
I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention;
25 And you neglected all my counsel
And did not want my reproof;
26 I will also laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when your dread comes,
27 When your dread comes like a storm
And your calamity comes like a whirlwind,

When distress and anguish come upon you.
28 "Then they will call on me, but I will not answer;
They will seek me diligently but they will not find me,
29 Because they hated knowledge
And did not choose the fear of the LORD.

When they run headlong into destruction, she will tell them, "I told you so. You are experiencing the calamity that I said you would experience." Verse 29 is critical for us to understand: they did not choose the fear of the Lord. By the grace of God, we can choose the fear of the Lord. We can adopt a stance before God in which we say, "God, I want to align my life with Yours." Even if you don't *feel* like doing so, you can choose the fear of the Lord. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, this is already your deepest desire. You are a new creature in Christ. You know that you are most fully alive when you align your life with God's. Choosing the fear of the Lord is simply choosing to live out your identity and your calling in Christ.

30 "They would not accept my counsel,
They spurned all my reproof.
31 "So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way
And be satiated with their own devices.
32 "For the waywardness of the naive will kill them,
And the complacency of fools will destroy them.
33 "But he who listens to me shall live securely
And will be at ease from the dread of evil."

This is a sober warning from Lady Wisdom. At the same time, there is a standing invitation in verse 33. She says that those who listen to her will "dwell securely" and "will be at ease from the dread of evil." If we fear God and receive wisdom, we will grow up without having the dread of being "found out" and of not having to look over our shoulder all the time for fear that somebody is watching. Imagine the prospect of having genuine, abiding security in your life. If you fear God and receive the wisdom He offers, that will be your experience.

Next week we're going to look at Proverbs 2 which explains that we receive the wisdom that God offers by *seeking* it with everything we've got. But that's next week. This week I simply want us to challenge us to say, "When I grow up I want to be wise. I want to live my life well. Therefore I choose the fear of the Lord." When we say that we are really saying that we want to be like Jesus because it was written of Jesus in Luke 2:52 that as He grew older, He grew "in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man."