

Growing Up

Proverbs 1

I grew up in a rather normal home. We lived in a nice, modest house. We always had everything we needed materially. I went to church 2 or 3 times a week. I did well in school. I had lots of friends. I was in Boy Scouts. I did sports. Our family went camping together. I got to travel around the US and even to other parts of the world. We even had a dog. When I think back to my growing up years, I'm so very thankful for all the things my parents provided for me and for all the opportunities I had. Compared to the vast majority of people who have ever lived, I had something of a privileged upbringing. Many of you would say the same thing.

But guess what? Even with all those advantages, growing up was still incredibly difficult and in some ways even dangerous.

- Even though I had lots of friends, I was a lonely kid.
- I was very confused in relationships. I really didn't know how to treat people. I was very selfish in dating relationships, and there were times when I betrayed my closest friends by the things I said and did.
- My first year-and-a-half in college I jumped into the party scene and did some things that could have had negative consequences for the rest of my life. I lived my life in a very careless, reckless way.

Growing up was very confusing and difficult for me.

Some of you here today are right where I was. You are in the process of growing up. Some of you are freshmen at K-State/MCC and you are spending your first weekend away from home. You will find many different voices calling out to you, inviting you to try different things (exciting, daring things). You will find how difficult it is to have healthy relationships. You will make decisions that will affect your mental, physical, and spiritual health. Many of you will establish a lifestyle that you will maintain (for better or worse) the rest of your time on earth.

The good news is that the Scriptures anticipate the difficulties and dangers of growing up. The Scriptures provide time-tested, proven ways of living your life that invite peace and wholeness instead of confusion and heartache. There is even a book of the Bible that explicitly says that it wants to help young people grow up well: the book of Proverbs.

Each year incoming freshmen at K-State are given a book to read. In past years they've been given Hunger Games, Ready Player One, and Ghost Map. I understand that this year's book is "The Other Wes Moore." If I could give incoming freshmen a book, it would be the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is written from the perspective of a father to his son who is moving out into the world. In the patriarchal society of ancient Israel, this was a natural way to communicate about the dangers of growing up. The father pleads with his son to remember what he'd heard growing up, to avoid certain people, and to seek wisdom.

Of course, Proverbs is not **only** for young people. A lot of us who are older can confirm that you never really finish growing up and that as you get older things don't necessarily get much easier. Proverbs is for everybody in the room today. Next week we return to our study in Roman (chapter 9). But as we walk into the fall, I thought it would be timely for all of us to hear the message of Proverbs 1.

God's offer of Wisdom. (vv. 1-6, 20-33) Proverbs has a rather ambitious agenda for itself:

- 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;

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, wise behavior, prudence, knowledge, and discretion. While these terms have distinct meanings, there is quite a bit of overlap conceptually. The author multiplies 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 thinking and our behavior.

Simply put, wisdom is skillful living. A wise person lives well. The book of Proverbs teaches us how to live well in every area of life. It will instruct us how to think, how to speak, how to treat friends and enemies alike, about food and drink, about money, purity, and marriage. Proverbs 15:2, for example, says that "The tongue of the wise make knowledge acceptable, but the mouth of fools spouts folly." It's not enough to be right; if we're also wise, we will speak in a way so that others can hear. That type of skillful speaking can change the culture of a family or a workplace or a church.

We see in verses 4 through 6 that wisdom is for everybody.

- 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.

The battleground in the book of Proverbs is for the "naïve" (or "simple"). The naive are gullible and easily influenced by others. Unless they seek wisdom and gain knowledge, they will surely turn to foolishness. The parallelism in verse 4 makes clear that "the youth" are primarily in mind here. The father will appeal to his son six times in the first nine chapters of Proverbs.

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, "Wisdom? Check. I've got all I need."

Look at the end of the chapter. Wisdom is personified as a woman who is out in the streets crying out to anybody who will listen:

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?
23 "Turn to my reproof,
Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you;
I will make my words known to you.

God wants us to know that He is very eager to give us wisdom. If you and I don't have wisdom, it's not because God is stingy or that wisdom is inaccessible. No, God is very eager to give wisdom. Proverbs tells us that if we really want wisdom, we will seek it; and if we seek it we will find it.

The centrality of the Fear of the Lord. (1:7)

Verse 7 is one of many verses in Proverbs that mention "the fear of the Lord" (see 2:5, 8:13, 9:10, 10:27, 14:27, 15:33, 22:4, 31:30, etc). This could be considered the theme verse of the book of Proverbs; both the first and the last chapter of Proverbs talk about the fear of the Lord.

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

Here "knowledge" is used interchangeably with wisdom; the emphasis of "knowledge" would be upon the content of wisdom. If you want wisdom, the place to ***begin*** is with the fear of the Lord. If you want to have wisdom (and live your life skillfully), the most foundational thing you can do is to fear God. What does that mean? It doesn't mean cowering in the corner because you're terrified of God.

The fear of the Lord is a healthy fear of being at odds with the God of the universe. If you've been at Faith for a while you've probably heard this description from Dallas Willard:

Fear is the anticipation of harm. The intelligent person recognizes that his or her well-being lies in being in harmony with God and what God is doing in the "kingdom." God is not mean, but he is dangerous. It is the same with other great

forces he has placed in reality. Electricity and nuclear power, for example, are not mean, but they are dangerous. One who does not, in a certain sense, “worry” about God simply isn’t smart.

(Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, p. 51)

The person who fears God understands who He is and responds accordingly. The opposite is a careless, take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward God.

The event that reveals who God is more clearly than any other event in history is the death and resurrection of Jesus. The cross reveals that God’s love is so fierce that He sent His one-and-only Son to die for our sins. The resurrection reveals that God is powerful enough to raise Him from the dead and to give life to all who believe in Him. Those who fear God look at the death and resurrection of Jesus and say, “Because God has provided payment for my sin, I accept that payment and I want to live as a follower of Christ. Since He died for me, I will live for Him.”

Many people in this room would tell you that when their lives were forever different when they began to fear the Lord in this way. When you accept His payment for your sin, you enter into a relationship with Him. This fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Warnings from a father’s heart. (vv. 8-19) In these verses, we have a father pleading with his son to remember what mom and dad have taught him. They had taught their son well; now it was his responsibility to live it out.

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.

The image is that of the son “decked out” in wisdom. The father and mother’s teaching will be like a gracious wreath on his head and like ornaments around his neck. A wise person has a certain dignity and winsomeness that is very noticeable.

Beware the Seduction of Sin. (vv. 10-14)

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,”

One day the son will be **enticed** to join in a life of crime. “We’ve got this great plan. We’re going to lie in wait and ambush people; they won’t know what hit them. We’ll take their money and their possessions. Our houses will be full of wealth. We’ll have a common purse. We’ll be brothers. It’s gonna be great.” This is the mindset of a street gang. For many, such a lifestyle is seductive to many because it offers the prospect of wealth, of brotherhood/family/belonging, and of excitement.

Proverbs will go on to describe how other types of sin are equally seductive: immorality, “ill-gotten gain”, lying, getting drunk, etc. It’s amazing how relevant and contemporary Proverbs is (even though it was written 3,000 years ago).

As in Proverbs 1, there will be times when people (in person or through mass media) try to entice us to sin: “Man you’ve got to try this. It’s great. There’s nothing like it.” If you’re wise, warning bells will go off in your head and you’ll think, “These people are foolish. They are foolish to think they can live that way and not pay a high price.” Most of us can probably think of some area of sin that we find especially seductive. Proverbs can be a powerful deterrent.

Avoid the path that leads to destruction. (vv. 15-16) In Proverbs, as in the rest of the Scriptures, two paths/ways are laid out before 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 do not 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' teachings are steeped in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. It is not surprising that Jesus taught that there are two paths/ways.

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.

One path is very narrow and taken by only a few people. But it leads to life. The other path is very broad and it taken by many, many people. The problem is that it leads to destruction.

Which path are you on today? Are you on the path of life or the path of destruction? When I think back to my first year-and-a-half of college, I never would have said that I was on the path that leads to death. "Path? I'm not on a path. I'm just having fun." Again, the Scriptures would say that a person is foolish not to consider which path s/he is on.

Beware the Self-Destruction of Sin. (vv. 17-19) 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 will be upon personal responsibility for our actions. Instead of blaming others for our sinful behavior, Proverbs exposes 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 of life. 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.

The father wants better for his son. And honestly, I want better for you and for myself. The message of Proverbs 1 (and the rest of the Bible) is that you don't have to live your life by trial-and-error. There are time-tested ways of living that will bring you peace and wholeness instead of confusion and heartache. If you're really smart, you will seek after wisdom and you will seek after God with all of your heart.

My first year and a half of college I was under the mistaken assumption that people who were serious about God (i.e., those that "fear the Lord") lived a small, boring life. It turns out I was 180 degrees off. When I put my faith in Jesus as a sophomore in college, I began to walk out in the vast expanse of God's kingdom. Instead of my life getting smaller, God has been expanding my life in amazing ways. My life hasn't always been easy, but it's been good. Instead of the Bible being a rigid book of rules, I've found it to be nourishing and life-giving.

I would plead with every single one of us to choose the fear of the Lord which is foundational to wisdom. There is too much at stake in every single one of our lives to do anything less - such as live our lives carelessly and foolishly. Ultimately the fear of the Lord means trusting in Jesus and living a life of discipleship (following Jesus). As we saw in Proverbs 1, God is more than eager to give wisdom and life to everyone who wants it.