

## ***Do You Want to Become Wise?***

*Proverbs 1:1-19*

Do you want to become wise? What is your honest answer to that question? Do you want to become wise? I suspect that almost every single one of us would say, “Yes, of course I want to become wise.” I don’t know anybody who consciously says, “My goal is to become so foolish that I make an absolute mess of my life.” Nobody says that, but it happens all the time. Becoming foolish is actually very, very easy (much easier than becoming wise).

The good news is that God offers wisdom to anybody who truly wants it. It doesn’t matter whether you have already made a mess of your life (most of us have done that at some time in some way). God is so gracious that he offers wisdom to **anybody** who truly wants it. And you know if someone truly wants to become wise by whether or not they seek it wholeheartedly. Becoming wise does not happen by accident.

This morning we begin an eleven-week series, ***Becoming Wise: A Matter of Life and Death***. We hope that these messages will motivate and equip you to seek wisdom wholeheartedly. Toward that end, we are going to approach “becoming wise” in this way:

First, we’ll devote six messages to the primary wisdom books in the Old Testament: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. We want you to become conversant with the content and the argument of these three books so that you can return to them with more confidence for years to come. We’ll spend 4 weeks in the book of Proverbs, one week in Job, and one week in Ecclesiastes. [In the early 90s I afflicted this church by taking 14 weeks teaching through the book of Ecclesiastes; giving a 1-week overview is our gift to you.]

Second, we will devote three messages to study three individuals who are known for their wisdom: Joseph, Daniel, and Solomon. Their wisdom, or lack thereof, will be instructive for us.

The final two messages will explore wisdom in the New Testament; Jesus was wisdom personified, and wisdom is pervasive in his teachings and in the New Testament.

**Becoming Wise through Proverbs.** Today we begin in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs consists of seven collections of proverbs. At the beginning of each collection we are told the author of that collection. [See 1:2, 10:1, 22:7, 24:23, 25:1, 30:1, 31:1]. The first collection of proverbs, chapters 1 through 9, is an extended introduction to the entire book. Whereas the rest of Proverbs is mostly individual sayings/proverbs, these first nine chapters contain very personal, emotive appeals to pursue wisdom. Some of these appeals are a father pleading with his son as he makes his way out into the world. Other times Wisdom herself pleads with anyone who will listen to come to her and find wisdom.

Today we'll consider the first 19 verses of chapter 1. Since the book of Proverbs includes more of Solomon's proverbs than anyone else's, it's not surprising that the book of Proverbs begins this way:

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

As I mentioned earlier, we'll devote an entire message to the life of Solomon. We'll see that in response to his request, God gave him "a wise and discerning mind" unlike anybody before him or after him (see 1 Kings 3:5, 9, 12). 1 Kings 4:32 tells us that Solomon spoke 3,000 proverbs (and over 1,000 songs).

Verses 2, 3, and 6 tell us the purpose of the book of Proverbs.

***The Ambition of Proverbs: Wisdom*** (Proverbs 1:2-3, 6) We see here that the author of Proverbs has very high ambitions. *Proverbs was written to impart wisdom.* As we go through these verses, I want us to notice what is required of us if we're going to receive the wisdom that Proverbs wants to impart.

In verses 2 and 3 we see a cluster of terms related to wisdom. There's a good amount of overlap in these terms. In verse 2 we read:

2 To know wisdom and instruction,  
to understand words of insight,

Wisdom and instruction are paired together five times in the book of Proverbs (see 19:20, for example). The connection is that if you want to know wisdom you need to receive instruction. If you want an experiential knowledge of wisdom (one that guides the way you live), you need to be teachable and receive instruction.

The second line of a proverb often clarifies the first line; it can be a restatement or a contrast or a clarification of the first line. The second line in verse 2 clarifies that Proverbs wants us "to understand words of insight." Instead of walking around clueless, the wisdom available in Proverbs imparts true understanding and insight so that we can *live skillfully*.

For example, Proverbs 18:17 tells us:

17 The one who states his case first seems right,  
until the other comes and examines him.

This reminds us of a courtroom scene. The first witness is very compelling and everybody thinks, "There's no doubt about the verdict here. . ." And then the witness is cross-examined and you're not so sure. That's the way it is in everyday life. If somebody tells you their side of the story, don't assume you've got the whole truth. Proverbs wants to educate you to be skillful in how you listen to other people.

Verse 3 makes clear that wisdom isn't *merely* skillful living. You can be skillful in listening, for example, and use what you hear to manipulate other people. And so, in

addition to living skillfully, wisdom teaches us to *live ethically*, in ways that reflect the character of God. Proverbs was written:

3 to receive instruction in wise dealing,  
in righteousness, justice, and equity;

Those three terms - righteousness, justice, and equity - are sometimes interchangeable. They denote the right, just, equitable way to live, especially when it comes to how we treat other people. The rest of Proverbs is full of such instruction. Five of the ten commandments are restated in various forms in Proverbs: honor father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness (see Longman, p. 11).

Down in verse 6 we find another statement about the purpose of Proverbs. We see another cluster of terms related to wisdom.

6 to understand a proverb and a saying,  
the words of the wise and their riddles.

Again the focus is upon *understanding* wisdom (not merely getting information). The second line speaks of understanding “the words of the wise and *their riddles*.” A riddle is a saying whose meaning isn’t obvious; it needs to be figured out (for example see Judges 14:14). Some of the proverbs are like that. It takes discernment to understand what it mean and/or how it applies to your life. For example, Proverbs 25:20 seems like a riddle to me.

The author of Proverbs has high ambitions: to impart wisdom to us. As we’ve seen, for that to happen, we need to be teachable and eager to learn.

A few years ago our son Riley earned a kinesiology degree at K-State. When he was taking anatomy and physiology I would ask him questions about this and that. I can remember listening to his answers, and thinking, “Wow, this child really ‘gets’ what they’re teaching. He’s not just trying to pass a class; he’s actually eager to learn.” He was teachable and eager to learn because he wanted to become a physical therapist and knew that what he was learning was *essential*.

That’s the mindset that wisdom requires of us. We can’t go to Proverbs reluctantly or out of obligation and expect to become wise. We need to show up teachable and eager to learn because we’re convinced that Proverbs is offering us something that is essential, not optional, for a good life. As we’ll see next week in chapter 2, we need to seek wisdom as if it were a treasure (because it is).

***The Beneficiaries of Proverbs: The Simple and the Wise*** (Proverbs 1:4-5) Two different audiences are mentioned in these verses. In verse 4:

4 to give prudence to the simple,  
knowledge and discretion to the youth—

Calling someone “simple” isn’t an insult. It just means that someone is young and inexperienced and neither wise nor foolish; sometimes it’s translated “uncommitted” (Waltke, p. 68). Numerous passages in Proverbs directly address the simple. We’ll see in chapter 9 that both Wisdom and Folly make the exact same appeal, “Whoever is simple. . . turn in here.” If you’re simple you are still deciding what path you’ll take in life.

That’s exactly where some of you are right now. Maybe you have just moved out of your parents’ home and you’ve come to Manhattan for school or work. All of a sudden you’ve got more freedom than you’ve ever had. Proverbs wants to help you navigate your way. If you allow it to do so, Proverbs will give you:

- \* Prudence - meaning good judgement. You’ll be able to spot when you’re about to do something very reckless or careless.
- \* Knowledge - experiential grasp of the truth. It’s no longer just information you’ve gathered; it’s become part of the way you think.
- \* Discretion - similar to prudence, discretion gives you the wisdom to make good decisions.

These are aspects of wisdom that Proverbs wants to impart to you. I wish somebody had encouraged and equipped me to read Proverbs when I went off to college. My first year and a half was an absolute disaster.

In addition to the simple, Proverbs was also written for the wise.

5 Let the wise hear and increase in learning,  
and the one who understands obtain guidance,

We tend to think that the wise are those who know all the answers and therefore do all the teaching. But we see here in the first line that the wise still need to hear and increase in learning. We see in the second line that even though the wise have understanding, they still need to obtain guidance in everyday life.

The point is that nobody ever “arrives” when it comes to wisdom. If we every stop being teachable, we will soon be on the road to becoming foolish. Solomon illustrates this better than anybody in the Bible. When we study his life in a few weeks we’ll see that there was a time when his wisdom was legendary throughout the world. And yet he ended up foolish (1 Kings 11). He ended up abandoning the very wisdom that is recorded in the book of Proverbs. Solomon’s life is a warning to all of us.

Don’t confuse experience for wisdom. Everybody who lives long enough has experience. But not everybody with experience is wise. We need to **stay hungry for wisdom** until our final breath. If we remain teachable, Proverbs will give us wisdom to guide us throughout every season of life.

***The Foundation of Wisdom: The Fear of the Lord*** (Proverbs 1:7) This verse is key to the entire book of Proverbs. The fear of the Lord is mentioned 20 times, each time adding nuance and explanation. If you didn’t catch last week’s message on the fear of the Lord, you can find it on our web site. Here in verse 7 we learn that:

7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;  
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

As we discussed last week, the fear of the Lord involves relating to him as he really is. A healthy fear of the Lord makes us run toward God instead of running away from him. We stand still and pay attention to him. We are awe-struck because he is not only **infinitely perfect**; he is also radically **for us**. Nowhere is that more evident than at the cross. On the cross God provided a perfect sacrifice (his sinless Son) for the sin that we committed against him. How can we run **away from** that type of God? We should run **to** him and receive everything he wants to give us.

If we do, we relate to God that way - humble and teachable - we have a good foundation for gaining knowledge (and wisdom - see 9:10). Without that fear of the Lord we really aren't open to the knowledge and wisdom God wants to give us.

That's the point of the second line: fools despise wisdom and instruction. That's the opposite of fearing the Lord. Instead of being teachable before God, fools are antagonistic toward God and despise the wisdom and instruction (which is the very first thing mentioned in verse 2) he offers.

*The bottom line is that you cannot be wise if you do not fear the Lord.* You can be lots of things w/o the fear of the Lord - successful in your chosen career, well-liked by many people, etc. But you cannot be wise if you're not rightly related to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

***The High Stakes of Wisdom: Life or death*** (Proverbs 1:8-19) In verses 9 through 19 a father is appealing to his son as he's leaving home. Like some of you, this young man's mom and dad had taught him wisdom growing up. He pleads with him to continue walking in wisdom, making clear that the stakes could not be higher.

8 Hear, my son, your father's instruction,  
and forsake not your mother's teaching,  
9 for they are a graceful garland for your head  
and pendants for your neck.

He's basically saying, "If you live out what you've learned at home, you will experience victory and honor." A garland was worn by a victorious king or general. A pendant was worn around the neck of someone who had done something exemplary (Waltke, p. 71). Since he wants the best for his son, he urges him to take the path that leads to victory and honor. [see also 3:6, 3:35, 4:8, 13:18, etc].

But the father knows that his son will hear many other voices which contradict what he's heard at home. So he gives this advice and warning:

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 reason;  
12 like Sheol let us swallow them alive,  
and whole, like those who go down to the pit;  
13 we shall find all precious goods,  
we shall fill our houses with plunder;  
14 throw in your lot among us;  
we will all have one purse"—  
15 my son, do not walk in the way with them;  
hold back your foot from their paths,  
16 for their feet run to evil,  
and they make haste to shed blood.

The promise was, "We'll ambush people, we'll get rich, and there's no downside." But that father says, "Actually nothing could be further from the truth."

17 For in vain is a net spread  
in the sight of any bird,  
18 but these men lie in wait for their own blood;  
they set an ambush for their own lives.

They're actually setting a trap, not for others, but for themselves!

19 Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain;  
it takes away the life of its possessors.

This father wanted his son to understand that whether or not he pursued wisdom was a matter of life and death. Proverbs wants us to know the same thing.

You may not be tempted to join a gang and go around committing armed robbery. But that doesn't mean that wisdom isn't a matter of life or death for you. I say that because proverbs tells us that departing from wisdom in **any area of our lives** is equally dangerous.

For example, far and away the most prominent warnings from the father to his son in these first nine chapters are warnings about sexual sins, specifically adultery (sleeping with someone other than your spouse). You find it in chapter 2 (vv. 16-19), all of chapter 5, half of chapter 6 (vv. 20-35), and all of chapter 7. He tells his son that if he takes the path of adultery, it will lead to death and not life (2:18-19), that his iniquities will ensnare him (5:22), that he will destroy himself (6:32), and that he will be like an ox led to the slaughter (7:22). Whether or not his son pursues wisdom in relation to his sexuality is a matter of life or death.

Will his boy seek wisdom wholeheartedly or not? Will we seek wisdom wholeheartedly or not?

As some of you know firsthand, K-State has a very interesting program called First Book in which incoming freshmen are all asked to read the same book. The web site says that First Book “is designed to provide a common experience to help first year students transition from high school to college, grow academically and socially. . .” This year’s selection is *The Unthinkable* by Amanda Ripley; the subtitle is “who survives when disaster strikes, and why.” It actually sounds like a fascinating book and very profitable to read.

You can probably guess where this is going. . . I’d like you to suggest another book that can help you make the transition from high school to college (or from your 20s to your 30s, or from your 60s to your 70s): the book of Proverbs. It was written for people just like us. If you read the first 9 chapters of Proverbs you will be presented with real life scenarios that we all face sooner or later.

Maybe you aren’t looking for an “assignment,” but I want to plead with you to purpose in your heart to seek wisdom. Begin reading the book of Proverbs. It’s very doable to read the first 9 chapters over the next couple of weeks. God really does give wisdom to everyone who truly wants it. And you demonstrate that you want it by seeking it wholeheartedly.