

The Search for Wisdom

Webster defines the word wisdom as:

“...knowledge of what is true or right coupled with just judgment as to action.”

Is it easy or difficult to know the truth?

During World War II, a leader of one country said this about the leadership of their enemy. He said:

[Their] secret does not depend on particular intelligence. Rather, it depends on a remarkably stupid thick-headedness. [They] follow the principle that when one lies, one should lie big, and stick to it. They keep up their lies, even at the risk of looking ridiculous.ⁱ

Guess who said that and about whom? Churchill? No, these are the words of Joseph Goebbels speaking ABOUT Churchill. The term, “the big lie,” wasn’t coined by the English but by Adolf Hitler himself in his book *Mein Kampf* (“My Struggle”), where he claimed it was the Jews who had perfected this practice of telling lies so colossal that no one would believe that anyone “could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously.”

Jesus said of Satan:

He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44b)

Because of this, as important as it is to know the truth, it isn’t always that easy to recognize it. Today we’re going to begin a journey to find the truth. Not just philosophical truth, but practical, every day, how-do-I-deal-with-annoying- people kind of truth. Do you need some of that? I know I do. So, how do we begin?

We begin today with a bit of an overview of this Book of Proverbs. I want us to understand the who, what, why and how of this wonderful book because it is unique. Are you ready? Okay, let’s go! First, we need to see...

I. The Who and What of Proverbs

When the Jews spoke of the Old Testament they talked about it being divided into three parts: The Law, The Prophets and The Writings. The book of Proverbs is in the section called “The Writings.” Along with Psalms, Job and Ecclesiastes, it is called “wisdom literature.” These wisdom books are associated with a class of people called “wise men” or “sages” who are listed with priests and prophets as important forces in Israelite society. It’s understood that their wisdom comes from God and so they are important teachers of the young and valued advisers to kings. The book begins by saying:

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: (Prov. 1:1)

Solomon was known as a man of great wisdom, insight and understanding “as measureless as the sand on the seashore.” (I Kings 4:29) It was also widely known that he received his wisdom directly from God because he asked for it. So,

while this verse rightly says that these are the proverbs of Solomon, they are truly the proverbs of God, passed on to us THROUGH Solomon. We should also note that, beginning in chapter 22, we find proverbs of wise men of God other than Solomon.

So that's "Who" these proverbs are from. Now, what exactly is a "proverb"? In short, it's a means of passing on wisdom through words. However, the Hebrew word for proverb can mean "taunt" (Isa. 14:4), "oracle" (Num. 23:7, 18) and "parable" (Ezek. 17:2). So, in most of this book, the proverbs are two lines long and are expressed as a contrast of two truths, like Prov. 10:14:

**Wise men store up knowledge,
but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.**

However, if you've started reading through the book with us, doing one chapter per day, you've seen in the early chapters that the proverbs are quite long, like one of Jesus' parables. So, a proverb can take several forms.

Secondly, we need to be aware of the nature of proverbs. As I pointed out in our study of Esther, biblical proverbs are not prophecies. They aren't formulas, which, if followed exactly, will always produce the same results. They're not promises but probabilities. For instance, Prov. 10:27 says:

**The fear of the LORD adds length to life,
but the years of the wicked are cut short.**

So, while we all know good people who died young and wicked people who live to be 90, on average, good people live longer than wicked people just because of the lifestyle choices they make. But this is a probability, not a promise.

Why is this? It's because proverbs are talking about people and people are created by God to have free will, not to be robots who can be programmed to our desires. Some of us as parents WISH these were promises so we could use them to "program" our children. But parents, when you think about it, you don't want a robot for a child, do you? (Some of you are saying, "Yeah, actually I do!!") No, you don't. You want someone who chooses of their own free will to love God and love you, because real love is always and only a freewill choice.

One final feature of biblical proverbs that I want us to see is that they often use figurative language. Prov. 25:25 says:

Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land.

And don't be surprised to find some humor mixed into some of these similes:

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion. (Prov. 11:22) Or

As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed. (Pr. 26:14)

This is a brief overview of the "who" and "what" of Proverbs. Next, we need to consider...

II. The Why of Proverbs

Here at the very beginning, Solomon tells us why he's written them. He says:

**...for attaining wisdom and discipline;
for understanding words of insight;
for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,
doing what is right and just and fair;** (Prov. 1:2-3)

This is classic Hebrew – an economy of words jam-packed with meaning. Why is Solomon sharing these proverbs? He has two major purposes – the first is so

that the sincere follower of God can “attain wisdom and discipline.” Now, let’s unpack that. The Hebrew word for “wisdom” is *hokmah*, which isn’t just “thinking clearly or logically.” We tend to define wisdom as just “thinking right” but the Hebrew word includes “doing right.” This word is used, for example, to describe the craftsmen who worked on the tabernacle or the wits of seasoned sailors who knew how to use the wind. In Proverbs “wisdom” signifies skillful living – the ability to make wise choices and live successfully according to morally right standards. The one who lives this way produces things of lasting value to God and to their community. ⁱⁱ

But there’s a second part of this first purpose for the proverbs. It isn’t just skill but discipline. These two must go together. You can’t have skill without discipline. This discipline isn’t focused on mindlessly repeating drills until they become second nature. No, this is discipline especially focused on being able to discern, to distinguish between things, to compare concepts and choose that which is most valuable for producing the desired result.

So, the first purpose of these proverbs is so that a sincere disciple can “attain skillful living and the ability to choose that which is most valuable to achieving the desired results.”

But there’s a second purpose. It’s tied up in the phrase “*acquiring... a prudent life.*” How often do you use the word “prudent”? Have you ever used it? President George H. W. Bush, was often quoted as saying, “Can’t do it. Wouldn’t be prudent.” I think most of us think of this as a negative or old-fashioned word, like being “Puritanical.” Who wants to be that? But what does it actually mean?

“Prudent” means having “care, caution and good judgment, as well as wisdom in looking ahead.” The Hebrew grammar in Proverbs 1 then uses three words in verse 3 to describe how a prudent person will act. It says the prudent person is one who is:

...doing what is right and just and fair; (Prov. 1:3b)

What are young, idealistic adults just graduating from college looking for in a job? They say, “I don’t want to get trapped in some meaningless job. I want to do something that matters. I want to find a wrong and make it right!” What do middle-aged people who have been sitting at a desk, staring at a computer screen for 10 hours a day say when they can’t take it anymore? They say, “I’ve had it with this! I want to get involved bringing justice into the world.” What do recently retired men and women who have an overflowing bank account but an empty soul say? They say, “I want to spend the rest of my days helping people who have been mistreated to just catch a break.” *Doing what is right and just and fair...* Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted to spend your life doing? That’s what this book is all about! Week by week, chapter by chapter, if you’ll really pay attention and give yourself to this study, you will “attain wisdom and discipline – the ability to live skillfully and to choose what is most valuable.” And you will “acquire... a prudent life” – the blessing of “doing what is right and just and fair.” In short, you’ll get what you’ve always wanted – a life with a meaningful purpose. Lastly, we must see...

III. The How of Proverbs

We’ve looked at the Who, What and Why; all important aspects of this book. But what about the How? In the end, that’s what will make all the difference.

Perhaps some of you are even saying, “Hey, Pastor, I’ve already read this book! It’s interesting but come on! Who can do all this? How do you apply it?”

Verse 7 answers that question. It’s absolutely a key verse. It is contrasting two attitudes; the attitude of a person of wisdom and the attitude of a fool. Which of those you are isn’t determined by your intelligence but by your relationship with God. The person of wisdom is said to “fear” the LORD and the fool is one who doesn’t. So what does it mean to “fear” the LORD?

The Hebrew word for *fear* is *yir’ah*. It can be translated *dread* (Deut. 1:29), *being terrified* (Jonah 1:10), *standing in awe* (I Kings 3:28), or *having reverence* (Lev. 19:3). When the LORD is the object of the *yir’ah*, *the word* really carries both the meaning of shrinking back in fear and drawing closer in awe. It’s not a trembling fear but neither is it the nonchalance of, “Hey God, how ya doing?” On the fear side it’s a reverential submission, a true willingness to do His will – not because you agree that it’s such a great idea but even when you aren’t sure it’s such a great idea, you still have so much respect for Him that you’ll do it anyway.

On the “standing in awe” side, it’s holding Him in the highest regard but not being so star struck that you fall to pieces like a 13-year-old girl at her first boy band concert. It’s honest respect and sober awe. And as Prov. 9:10 says, this...

**...fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**

Respectful awe of God is not the end result of wisdom, it’s the beginning. We don’t pursue wisdom and discipline in order to know God, we know God so that we might discover wisdom and discipline. If you know God you will have honest respect and sober awe for Him. J. I. Packer writes:

What were you made for? To know God! [Jesus prayed to His Father and said], **Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.** (John 17:3) What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment, than anything else? Knowledge of God! **This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me...”** (Jer. 9:23, 24a) ⁱⁱⁱ

But knowing God is not the same as knowing ABOUT God, any more than my knowing ABOUT Liz Mason at Wheaton College was the same as knowing Liz Mason. I knew OF her from the time she was a freshman and I was a sophomore but I couldn’t say I knew her until the last semester of my senior year when I picked up the phone and asked her out on a date. I knew a lot about her: where she grew up, things she liked to do, I even knew people who were close friends of hers – I was friends of her friends!! -but I didn’t know her!

Some of you here know a lot about God but you don’t really know Him. So, how does anyone get to know God? In John 14, Jesus is speaking with His disciples and Philip says:

...“Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” Jesus answered, “...Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (Jn. 14:8-9)

Just a moment earlier Thomas said to Jesus, “*Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*” Jesus answered Thomas:

...“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well.” (John 14:6-7)

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom and discipline and “doing what is right, just and fair.” It’s the beginning of everything important in this life! Having fear of God means knowing God. You can only know God by knowing Jesus Christ personally. You begin a relationship with Jesus by receiving Him as your Savior and Lord. John 1:12 says it best:

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -

Is there any reason why you wouldn’t want to go from knowing ABOUT God to KNOWING God right now? Let’s pray...

If it’s the desire of your heart to know God and be known BY God, just pray this prayer silently as I pray it out loud:

Lord Jesus, I want to know You personally. Thank you for dying on the cross so that my sins could be forgiven. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank you for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. I so look forward now to receiving day-by-day guidance and understanding and knowledge and discipline that lead to wisdom BECAUSE now I’ve taken the first step of really knowing You and being known by You.

I pray this all in Jesus’ name,

Amen

ⁱ Joseph Goebbels, *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1941), pp. 364-469

ⁱⁱ Throughout this “Why” section of the sermon, I am indebted to the insights of Dr. Allen P. Ross, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), pp. 904-905

ⁱⁱⁱ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 29