

## *Life of Wisdom*

Proverbs 1:1-7

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We embark on this month-long series on wisdom, living wisely, learning from the book of Proverbs. That will then be followed beginning in February as we will look at the New Testament portion of wisdom literature, specifically the book of James. So, we turn this morning to Proverbs. And we'll be looking at chapter 1, verses 1-7 that serve as an introduction to wisdom, to the life of wisdom.

If you did not join us and would like to, for the next several weeks during our Sunday school time which is from 9:30 to 10:15, we're doing the same subject but we're breaking it down into specific subjects in greater depth than we're able to do in a worship service. So, please join us if you're able in the community room in the coming weeks.

But this passage as is the whole of the book of Proverbs, it is calling us to a life of wisdom. And what better way to greet the new year than to ask God for wisdom? So, we turn to Proverbs 1:1-7. Hear now the word of God.

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

To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Now, Lord, we ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit through the wisdom that is the Lord Jesus Christ, may you guide us in all wisdom, and may you help us to receive wisdom, and may you help us to redirect our lives in dependence on your wisdom that we might enjoy life as you have intended it. Help us, O Lord. Recognize our need to receive the gift that we might live wisely. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

On December 22, 2019, at about 7:50 in the morning just outside Williamsburg, Virginia, just over the Queens River, 64 cars were piled up one after the other on top of one another on a bridge where there was road construction. The cause of the accidents was not fog but traveling too fast for conditions. A husband and wife were traveling separately that morning. The husband, as he came up on the fog just over the Queens River, recognized that he wasn't going to be able to see very far in front of him, so he turned on his hazards and he pulled over to the side. The next thing he knew, he kept seeing cars going passed him at a full rate of speed. And then he began to hear the pile-up. His wife was involved. She survived. But she called him from the car, and they were able to make contact.

Later that day as the fog lifted, the rescuers had to go car by car. And you can see in photographs online how they had to go by each one with an X because the cars were so crumpled on top of each other that there was hardly the ability to make sense of it all.

But what's interesting about the reality of fog is it's not a surprise that it happens this time of year. And unfortunately it's not a surprise that, even though we know that fog happens in this region particularly over a river when it's been cold in the morning and the sun is coming up, people refuse to yield to that type of situation and we just go headlong into the fog. But fog is an apt description much of the time of our very life. We can't see what's in front of us. We only think we can.

And when we're in fog, metaphorically or really, what is our point of contact? What do we look to as a compass? What do we look to in order to try and discern what way we ought to go? This is precisely the question that the book of Proverbs and wisdom literature in the scriptures is seeking to answer because much of the time, life is like traveling through a fog bank. Even though we might have traveled miles and miles of life where there were clear sunny skies, it doesn't prepare us for what we don't know. We don't know what we don't know. And yet, we find ourselves making mistakes and oftentimes not learning from those mistakes.

So, what do we turn to relationally? What do we turn to with regard to our business, our work, our play, our relationships, our speech, our choices, our decisions? What do we turn to for direction?

As we look at this brief passage together and introduce this entire series, it's important for us to understand it through three lenses. That is first the wisdom and the self, secondly, wisdom and the Lord, and thirdly, wisdom and life. Wisdom in the self, wisdom in the Lord, and wisdom in life.

If we continue with the fog metaphor, we come first to these opening words of the book of Proverbs. And what we jump headlong into is we have to come to a decision point with regard to ourselves. Again, hear the words. "To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction," you are passively seeking or being given something, and you receive it as something which you did not previously have. This forces us into the decision point. Do we believe fundamentally that we can discern on our own with our mirrored life experience or the knowledge that we have gained to make decisions that we need to make, to be able to understand what the potential consequence field might look like, and then to judge what we ought to decide based on the consequences, measuring that against what our intended goal is?

Wisdom is meant for us to be able to look at life and understand that we do not have the sufficient resources in and of ourselves to always choose wisely. It is required that we seek understanding from something else, and specifically from someone else, which forces us into the decision that the wisdom of God teaches us something about ourselves at a far deeper level that calls us to the point of decision. Do I believe I have what it takes to do what life requires? Because to enter into this discussion with God and to receive wisdom from Him is to acknowledge that I don't know enough, I'm not wise enough, I don't have clear enough vision to make the right decisions or to even understand the field of consequences of those decisions.

This invitation to wisdom calls us first and foremost to humility. I don't know. And I know enough about myself that I don't know it, and I need to seek counsel. God invites us to this whole idea of Proverbs' wise sayings. It's an invitation to see through the various metaphors to engage the imagination, to hear that God is inviting us into a relationship, which broadly speaking is a metaphor of father to son, parent/child. We become His children. He becomes the dispenser of wisdom. And He's inviting us to receive these words of insight so that we might receive instruction and that we might be wise and then, therefore, we might understand the difference between righteousness and self-righteousness. These are two very different things. Righteousness and evil. Wisdom and folly.

That can then be applied to all spheres of life. Not a single sphere of life is untouched by the wisdom literature of scripture. There is not a decision that we will make, small or large, that involves mortal decisions or moral decisions that don't involve some need for wisdom. But it requires that we acknowledge we need it.

Now, that might sound like, well, I think I do need that. But the realities are that what we believe about ourselves, what we believe is our need for wisdom is really an invitation to dependence on something other than ourselves. And while that's easy to say and even may be easy for us to assent to, on a Monday morning, or a Wednesday afternoon, or in the heated discussion of a debate with a child or a spouse or co-worker, oftentimes, asking for wisdom from the Lord is thrown out the window, and we simply go by what seems right to us. And we end up in a mess.

But the question is do we believe that we end up in a mess? In many ways, in our modern age, we do not. And if you consider the following ideas, as one writer says,

“However high we climb, however infinite heights will tower above us, our true worth will always be in doubt. And our wounded pride, we will always proclaim our lofty status even more assertively to avoid despair. Humanity so defined cannot love God. It can only envy and resent God.”

You see, we oftentimes fail to understand that as desiring beings, we will never have our desires fulfilled. And we will deny it. We might acknowledge it. But in our hearts, we continue to go after that which we desire. We fail to see that our desires are insatiable. And we doom ourselves to restlessness and insatiable ambition.

At the street level, at our very hearts, we want to be like God. We think we know. And so, we act accordingly. And we don't ask Him for wisdom. We think we know the consequences because it fits with our desires. And we make decisions without seeking God and His word. And we will be afraid to acknowledge when our pride is wounded. And so, know this. An invitation into wisdom and to wise living is not for the weak because it takes strength to acknowledge in humility that we need wisdom from outside of ourselves and to acknowledge before God we think we know what we're doing, but we really don't.

Spring break, 1995. I was in the middle of my seminary years. I thought at that point that I was going to be a pastor and I knew exactly what kind of person I was going to marry. And I looked at my relational history, and I didn't have a clue of who I was hardly. And I didn't know who it was or what kind of person I should date. I thought I knew that.

And so, I listened to the wisdom of Tim Keller and Kathy Keller back then. They did a series called Sex, Singleness, and Marriage. And I listened to that talk series from Kathy and Tim, and I got to the end of that. And I remember that the night after I listened to the entire thing, it was a full moon. I was a poor seminarian. I was lying on the floor with a mattress; there was no bed structure, it was just a mattress. And the moon was shining bright. And I woke up in the middle of the night. And as the moon shined through that window, it was like God brought all of the foolishness with regard to what I thought I knew about myself, what I thought I needed. And I recognized in that moment, God, I don't have a clue about what I'm doing.

The problem is it's hard to stay there and to ask God, will you forgive me of the mess that I have caused and the friendships and people that I have hurt? And so, an invitation to wisdom, in that moment, I realized is not for the weak. And I'll acknowledge to you that I don't have the strength, nor do you, to acknowledge to God that I need His wisdom. Even that is a gift. But He desires for us to recognize in ourselves that we have to come to a point where we say, Lord, help me.

And in so doing, we begin to see something about wisdom and the Lord. What the wisdom in the Lord means in this passage is it says, “To know wisdom and instruction,” that's where it begins. But what are they leading us to? He leads us in this introduction to the actual model of the whole book. Verse 7, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The reality is that wisdom which is offered here is always a reflection of God's character, the holiness, the goodness, the mercy, the beauty of His character.

What we recognize is that when the Lord gives wisdom, He's giving Himself. When He's giving instruction, He's giving of Himself. And in so doing, it invites us into this relationship. But we need to understand how the Lord is giving us this wisdom.

It isn't that the Lord is inviting us into this wisdom and giving us all these steps that if we simply obey A, B will happen. That is not how proverbs are to be read. They are not discrete laws to be followed. Rather, they are seen as ways of guidance that lead us in a broad path of places that we can go but applying the wisdom and knowledge of God in all kinds of circumstances. And just because you live

wisely doesn't mean you're not going to face great challenge. Just because you live wisely and do honorably with your money doesn't mean you're going to be a person of great wealth. Even if you teach your children in the way that they should go doesn't mean that they will always obey and follow your instruction.

But rather what we understand is that this is God giving us a guidebook for living with dignity, peace, and success. Consider the dignity that is on offer here when it says, "to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth." Then "Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles." What the Lord is saying, I am not going to hoard knowledge and truth, but I want to give it away to you as the ones who I have created in my image so that you might live wisely.

And this invitation into prudence and discernment is the way of peace. It doesn't lack challenge. It just means we will be sturdy, and we will have a firm foundation upon which we make our decisions. So, the Lord is inviting us into this relationship with Himself that is governed not by laws to obey, but rather into a relationship where we understand He wants to give us something that He has. He's giving us His character.

What's beautiful about this is that as we go further in the book of Proverbs 8:22, he takes the whole idea of wisdom and then personifies it. And wisdom is speaking about itself. Consider these words in Proverbs 8:22, "The Lord possessed me." Now, this is wisdom speaking.

"The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work. The first of his acts of old, ages ago, I was set up at the first before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths, I was brought forth. When there were no springs abounding with water, before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth. Before he had made the earth with its fields or the first dust of the world, when he established the heavens, I was there. When he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him like a master workman. And I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the children of man."

Now, why would he personify wisdom like that? It is because Proverbs, the wisdom of God written for us here described in metaphors is actually pointing to the great wisdom of God which we learn from 1 Corinthians 1 where we hear these words,

"In the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those to believe, for Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God, for the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

You see, wisdom isn't a discrete list of things that we ought to do and we ought not to do. It is an invitation of God inviting us into Himself by giving His wisdom and truth away to us, helping us to discover His character, His righteousness, His grace which finds its fulfillment in the person of Christ who is the wisdom of God. You see, God invites us into wise living by giving us wisdom and sending wisdom to us. And in that wisdom, God in the weakness of Christ on a cross demonstrates how much and to what length He is willing to give away His wisdom and love.

Wisdom isn't something we have to do. It's something we get to be because He gives of Himself. So, it's an invitation to acknowledge that we need Him. We need wisdom. And that giving up of ourselves is so hard to do. But when we see in the face of Christ how much God has given Himself away, we begin to see what wisdom is. Wisdom is God Himself showing us how to live.

Now, that is dignity. That is beautiful. That is righteous. Do you see? He's not calling us to reach a point of righteousness. He's giving it to us. God in His grace isn't saying, hey, don't make mistakes. Don't sin. No. He sent His Son to die for our sin so that we might live wisely.

This is wisdom in the Lord. Yes, to give prudence. Yes, to obtain guidance. But do you hear what the Lord is doing? He's giving Himself away.

But finally, there is then that if it requires that we acknowledge our need outside of ourselves, if we see that what the Lord has offered to us is not a discrete list of do's and don'ts, but that He's offering of Himself, His very character, His very righteousness, and enabling us to participate in that, then where do we go from here? First of all, it's knowing yourself. James tells us that. "If any one of you lacks wisdom, let him ask for it."

So, I invite you, is there a place in your life where you wish you had more wisdom? Then why not ask for it? Because the word tells us that he who asks for wisdom, God will give generously. But it takes time. And He calls us to be aware of ourselves. Do you know where you lack wisdom? Ask someone close to you. If you're married, ask your spouse. Happy new year.

I used to fight my wife's wisdom. I fought my wife's wisdom because I thought that what she was doing was she was trying to boss me around and just be right. But what I began to realize is that maybe all of my fighting back at her is just my pride saying, I don't need other people's wisdom. Do you feel that sometimes? Where are you fighting? Maybe not fighting verbally, but where are you fighting on the inside? Where do you need to listen to your spouse?

Understanding that we take this wisdom, it's more than knowledge. So, wisdom is more than knowledge, but it's more than experience. If you joined us in the class earlier, you can have experience but still make foolish mistakes. Just because you've done it before doesn't mean you're wise. But having great knowledge doesn't mean you're wise either.

Wise is the intersection between knowledge, experience, and character. Because if you have knowledge and experience but you're able to see in yourself how your pride wants to tell you to keep going, but you stop, that's an indication of wisdom where you're taking on board knowledge and wisdom outside of yourself. And you recognize, I see the consequences if I continue, so I'm going to stop here.

This is a terrible challenge for us as human beings because there are several traps we fall into. Do you know one of the greatest indicators that you will suffer and likely die in an avalanche? Go and take a class on avoiding avalanches. They've run the numbers that predominantly those who have died as a result of being involved in an avalanche is by and large that you're male and you have taken an avalanche prevention course. Those have been the two predominant factors.

And one writer as she was writing on this reality while taking an avalanche prevention course says, "There are several traps we need to be aware of as human beings." First, there is the familiarity trap, failing to remain vigilant when faced with something we already know. Sure, I've been here before. I've got this. I'll be fine. Beware of your familiarity trap.

Also, there is the social facilitation trap. Everybody is doing it. Must be okay for me to do it, too. Are you simply going along with the crowd because they seem to be okay?

Third trap, the expert halo. Experts must know what they're doing, so it's safe to unquestionably follow them. Do you wear the expert halo, or do you tend to follow those who do have them? It can be a trap.

There's also the commitment trap. That is, well, I've come this far so I can't turn back now. But the reality is that the further we go in that consistency trap, the harder and less likely it is that we're going to turn and go back the way we came. There is a consistency trap.

There is also the scarcity trap. With regard to snow skiing, you can say, it's not going to be like this again this season. We must go out today. If we don't do it now, it's probably not going to happen again. The scarcity trap can easily get us.

But finally, there is the acceptance trap. If I don't do X, what will others think of me? That's different than the social facilitation trap which says everybody else is doing it, and they're okay. But this acceptance trap says, if I don't do it, what are other people going to think of me? And how many of us have done that? In truth, oftentimes, God is small and other people are big. And we fall headfirst into the acceptance trap.

These traps are just a few of the ways that as human beings we often fail either because we're prideful or we're self-deluded. We do not recognize them. And we go headlong. And we keep doing that which we have always done. And how is that working for us?

Wisdom and wise living is turning again and hearing the invitation of the Lord in humility and saying, Lord, I don't know what I'm doing. But I think I do. Have mercy upon me, a sinner, and help me.

I close with this. The words of C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* in thinking about wisdom and the decisions that we make, he said this.

“People often think Christian morality is a kind of bargain in which God says, if you keep a lot of rules, I'll reward you. And if you don't, I'll do the other thing. I do not think this is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice, you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole with all of your innumerable choices, all your lifelong, you will slowly be turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature, either into a creature that is at harmony with God and with other creatures and with itself, or else into the one that is in a state of war and hatred with God and with his fellow creatures and with itself. To be one kind of creature is heaven. That is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to one state or the other.”

The Lord means to give His wisdom away and to invite us to increasingly become more and more as those who reflect His wisdom and knowledge and righteousness because He loves us. And He has made us. And we have dignity. And He wants us to enjoy peace and life to the fullest. But it requires the hard work of humility and asking, Lord, help me. I need wisdom.

May the Lord lead us in this month and in this new year in our words, in our relationships, in our work, in our play. Lord, give us wisdom. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your word. And we ask that you would take your word by your Spirit. Help us to receive it and to apply it. Father, help us to be aware of the traps we so easily fall into where we fear other people's opinions more than we fear and trust you and your salvation. Lord, we ask that you would give us wisdom and eyes to see the wisdom of your word as we seek to find refuge in it and as we come to you as those who are in need of wisdom. Lord, hear the prayers of your people. And may we be a people who increasingly reflect your righteousness not for our sakes, but for your glory. And that in reflecting that righteousness, we might find the greatest purpose, the greatest joy, and the greatest peace of living life wisely. It is in Jesus's name we pray. Amen.