

*The Fear of the Lord: Proverbs*

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In June our family was on vacation in Michigan, and my Bible reading plan was taking me through Proverbs at that time. And that's when I began to think about doing a short sermon series through several of the themes addressed in Proverbs. I thought about the wonderful doctrinal truth we have been learning in our study through Romans. But I was already thinking that at the end of chapter 8 we would break from Romans for a short time to do an Old Testament study. I want us always to be moving back and forth between Old Testament and New Testament, hearing from various parts of Scripture and being impacted by the whole counsel of God.

And as I was reading Proverbs I thought about the importance of teaching on the very practical matters of life, with some regularity. Issues, for instance, like parenting. We have a lot of parents in this church and a lot of little kids and older kids. And the Bible has wisdom for us that we need to hear and heed. Proverbs also speaks to real life issues like sex and marriage, work and money, friendship, and how we use our words.

So that's what we're going to do. I'm planning to do 8 sermons from Proverbs. This morning will be on the fear of the Lord. Next week will be about wisdom and folly, then the power of words, then friendship, then sex and marriage. And that will bring us to the last Sunday in October, which is Reformation Sunday and also the anniversary of when this church started back in 2000. I'm planning to preach a biographical sermon on the life of Augustine for that occasion. Last year on Reformation Sunday I talked about Martin Luther. Back in 2010 on Reformation Sunday I did a sermon based on the teaching of Jonathan Edwards. This year for Reformation Sunday we'll hear about the sovereign grace of God in the life of Augustine. And then in November we'll have 3 more sermons from Proverbs: parents and children, work and money, and God's sovereignty, which will be a good segue right back to Romans 9.

For this morning, I want to talk briefly about Solomon, since verse 1 says, "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel." And then I want to focus on the very important theme of fearing the Lord.

But before we get to that, let me say a little more about why I'm so eager to do this series on Proverbs, and how I hope it will benefit us as a church. We need wisdom. I hope you feel that need. I hope you have a hunger within you to search for godly wisdom and grow in godly understanding and knowledge. It's not that we don't have any wisdom, but we're always in need of more. We need to grow in wisdom, and we need wise insights on each new situation that comes along. There will be new trials that surface that require a wise perspective. There will be complex relational situations that need to be handled with wisdom. There will be personal decisions, family decisions, church decisions that call for godly, mature, wise action.

James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom [I won't ask for a show of hands here, because it includes all of us], let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." We need wisdom, brothers and sisters. We need it more than we realize. So we should be asking God for it. We should be looking to God's Word as to how to get it. And we should be looking to Christ as the perfect embodiment of it.

We need wisdom in so many ways. I think of the ministries of this church and the vision of this church to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ among all the peoples of Pittsburgh and the world. There could be many well-intentioned ministry strategies that would be ineffective or disastrous if wisdom is lacking. My point is: It's not enough to have a great passion for Jesus. It's possible to be zealous and foolish at the same time. Nor is it enough to have sound doctrine. You might be able to explain the 5 points of Calvinism backwards and forwards, but still make totally stupid decisions. Listen to this quote from Pastor Ray Ortlund Jr. He says, "What if we have many advantages in our lives but not wisdom? If we have love but not wisdom, we will harm people with the best of intentions. If we have courage but not wisdom, we will blunder boldly. If we have truth but not wisdom, we will make the gospel ugly to other people. If we have technology but not wisdom, we will use the best communications ever invented to broadcast stupidity. If we have revival but not wisdom, we'll use the power of God to throw the church into reverse gear." And then he quotes Jonathan Edwards, writing about the First Great Awakening. Edwards said this: "When the devil finds he can keep men quiet and [complacent] no longer, then he drives them to excesses and extravagances. He holds them back as long as he can; but when he can do it no longer, then he will push them on and, if possible, run

them upon their heads.”<sup>1</sup> So even revival can run amuck if folly prevails over wisdom.

So you see we are in desperate need of wisdom in order to rightly receive the many good things God gives us. And we need wisdom to know how to use those blessings for the good of others. God has blessed this church in tremendous ways. We have a unity around the Gospel and a God-centered understanding of salvation. We have many extremely committed individuals and families who pour their lives into various ministries of this church. There’s a passion for evangelism here. We’re connected with missionaries who are taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth. God is bringing people to this church from all around this region. God has given us this building in order to be a light in this particular community, and He has also given us a desire to impact many more communities throughout Pittsburgh. We’ve been blessed financially. We’re blessed to have deacons and elders who serve faithfully. We’re blessed to have Andrew as a full-time staff person working on many important areas of ministry.

And, oh, how we need God’s wisdom to guide us so that these many blessings can be used in ways that will glorify His Name and be a great benefit to us and to the world. Of course, this is not only the case for our church as a whole, but for each one of us as individuals. Whatever blessings God has given you, you need wisdom to know how not to squander those blessings but to make them a conduit of blessing to others. We need wisdom for so many different facets of life. So let us pray for wisdom, and let us be searching what God’s Word says about wisdom, and let us be attentive in these weeks as we study what God has to teach us in Proverbs.

### **Solomon**

Now let’s begin by talking about Solomon and his life and his role in producing this book of Proverbs. The very first line says, “The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.” This doesn’t mean that Solomon wrote the whole book. There are large sections of it that are attributed to him. But there are also sections referred to as “sayings of the wise.” And there are the sayings of Agur and the sayings of King Lemuel. So what it seems that we have here is a collection of proverbs from various individuals, but with Solomon being the chief human influence. Of course, we also recognize that this book is inspired by God. There were human beings who wrote these wise sayings, and God

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<sup>1</sup> See Ray Ortlund Jr., Proverbs, Preaching the Word series, page 17.

inspired that writing such that we are hearing from God in these proverbs.

Let me summarize some of Solomon's life for you (you can read it yourself in 1 Kings 2-11), so that we can wrestle with the question of how his wise sayings relate to his own personal life. In certain ways, it seems that Solomon started out very well. God told him, "Ask what I shall give you." What a thing to be told by God—blank check! And rather than asking for long life or riches or victory over his enemies, Solomon asked for wisdom. And God granted that to him, as well as riches and honor. It says in 1 Kings 4:32 that Solomon "spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005."

But even before that, in 1 Kings 3:1, it says that "Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt. He took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David . . ." Later, then, we see how Solomon plunged headlong into the sin of polygamy. "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. He had 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father." (1 Kings 11:1-4, ESV)

This is the tragedy of Solomon's life. There's a lot of irony here, a lot of contradiction and hypocrisy. Solomon's wisdom was lost on his own life in large part. But in God's plan, these things were written, and as is true of all Scripture, it is for our benefit. So even if Solomon didn't experience the lasting enjoyment of godly wisdom, we can still learn much from this. We can learn from the positive example of what's written here, and we can learn from the negative example of Solomon's own life.

Another thing to consider here is the way that typology works in the Old Testament. This is one of the amazing things about Scripture, which we have divided into an Old Testament and a New Testament. The Old Testament was written before Jesus came to earth. The New Testament was written after Jesus came to earth. And in this amazing book—the Bible—which was written by many human authors over the course of many, many centuries—there is an amazing unity of teaching and a focus on the Messiah. From the perspective of the Old Testament, there is an

anticipation of the coming Messiah. And one way this comes across is in types. There are individuals (like Solomon) and events (like the exodus) and even buildings (the tabernacle and the Temple) that point forward to Jesus Christ. They are like previews. They foreshadow aspects of who the Messiah is and what He accomplishes for His people.

In the person of Solomon we have a preview of Jesus' wisdom. Solomon had such amazing insight that even the Queen of Sheba traveled to learn from him and stand in awe of God's blessing upon him. But there's something important to realize about Old Testament types—the individuals who point to Jesus in some way. Their lives point beyond themselves to Someone far greater—indeed, Someone who is perfect.

Think of Sampson. He was a type of Christ in the sense that he was a deliverer. He was strong and able to deliver the people from their enemies. But Sampson's life was hardly exemplary. You wouldn't want to tell your kids, "Be like Sampson." He did a lot of very foolish things. But still, in the story of redemption, we see a picture of the Gospel in that Sampson, in the end was delivered over to his enemies but then triumphed over his enemies in his death (if you don't remember that story, you can read it this afternoon in Judges 16).

We can think of Solomon in a similar way. His life was hardly exemplary. The wisdom God gave him to govern and the wise things he wrote did not follow through to his personal decisions. But still, we see something here that gives us a profound perspective on the life of our Savior. Graeme Goldsworthy, an Australian theologian and Bible teacher, puts it like this: "The kingly figure who is the great sponsor of wisdom himself fails the test, but he stands in the line of the promise given to David. The eschatology of wisdom points to the wise rule of the Messiah-king to come. . . . In [Jesus'] teaching he uses the wisdom forms of proverb and parable. To the classic Reformation Christology based on the offices of prophet, priest, and king, we need to add wise man. So, Paul asserts that Christ became for us wisdom from God (1 Corinthians 1:30). In Jesus divine and human wisdom meet perfectly."<sup>2</sup>

That's a great summary of the connection between Solomon and Jesus. Solomon's wisdom points to Jesus, but Solomon falls far short. Jesus is the One we look to for wisdom. He is the embodiment of wisdom. So throughout our study of Proverbs let us remember this. These proverbs came through mere

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<sup>2</sup> Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture, page 187-8.

men, sinful men. But they point us to our all-wise Savior, Jesus Christ. We are saved through Him, and we are being conformed into His image.

### **The Fear of the Lord**

The Book of Proverbs begins and ends with the fear of the Lord. Chapter 1:7 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” Also, in 9:10 it says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” And then at the end of Proverbs, in the passage describing the virtuous woman, it says “a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”

And it’s mentioned several other places throughout Proverbs. Let me read you a few of them. In a passage that is probably familiar to many of you, it says this:

*“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.”* (Proverbs 3:5–7, ESV)

We see there that the fear of the Lord is the opposite of pride, and it also has an impact on the way one lives. Fearing the Lord is closely connected with trusting the Lord, and it will motivate a person to obey the Lord rather than pursuing evil.

*“The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.”* (Proverbs 8:13, ESV)

*“In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death.”* (Proverbs 14:26–27, ESV)

*“Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble with it.”* (Proverbs 15:16, ESV)

*“Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the LORD all the day.”* (Proverbs 23:17, ESV)

The fear of the Lord is an interesting concept, and could be confusing. Because fear usually has a negative connotation. But the fear of the Lord is very positive. Jerry Bridges has a book entitled, *The Joy of Fearing God*. That’s a great title, and it captures the seeming paradox of this biblical truth. Fearing God is not a bad thing. It’s not oppressive. It does not burden us, but rather builds us up and gives us just the right perspective on life.

To help us understand this, try to think of individuals you've known in the course of your life whom you highly respect and admire and care about, and you know they care about you, too. I remember certain football coaches I had over the years in middle school and high school and college, who could be very intimidating on the field. They commanded respect. They demanded that the players give their best. I looked up to those men. I learned from them. Some of them were believers and disciple me. I wanted to live up to their expectations, not only because I cared what they thought, but also because I knew it would be best for the team if I could execute the plays the way the coaches told me to. I didn't want to hear the coach yelling, "Reaach, you messed up that play!" I wanted to hear the coach saying, "Good job! Way to go!"

I also think of some of the very godly men I've been able to sit under in my training for ministry. In college I had a philosophy professor, Mark Talbot, who was a joy to listen to in class. I was in awe of his intellect, and I was inspired by the things I learned from him. I was also a bit intimidated by having a conversation with him. I remember sitting in his office on one occasion, and speaking to him on the phone on another occasion, discussing my paper topic on some aspect of Jonathan Edwards' theology. It was kind of like a 3 year old talking to an aerospace engineer about the space shuttle. There was awe and admiration, and also a palpable feeling of inferiority.

After college I entered an apprenticeship program at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, studying under Pastor John Piper. I had listened to some of his preaching. I had read some of his books. And I had been so helped by his ministry that I was extremely excited to get to know him and be involved in his church and take classes from him. And yet I remember the pressure I felt when I had to preach a sermon in our preaching class, with Piper sitting there right in front of me, scratching notes on a piece of paper which he would give me later as constructive criticism.

And there were similar feelings in seminary when I turned in exegetical papers that Tom Schreiner would read and mark up. Again, I was impressed by his knowledge of Scripture and so there was a bit of uneasiness knowing that he would be scrutinizing my work. But as I got to know him better, that uneasiness faded. His questions and comments and feedback was not intended to make me feel stupid, but to help me learn and to push me to further growth.

Well, we can't push any of those analogies too far. But I think these kinds of feelings are akin to the kind of fear we ought to have toward the Lord. We are in awe of His majesty. We admire Him deeply for His perfect attributes. We do tremble at His great power and His wrath toward sin. But knowing that He loves us, and that His power is not going to destroy us but instead is going to work for our good, that gives us a *joyful* fear of Him.

### **Fear God, and You Will Fear Him Alone**

By way of application, let's think now about how the fear of the Lord relates to other fears. The point I want you to hear is this: If you have an appropriate fear in your life for the living God, you won't have to fear anyone or anything else. The fear of the Lord will drive out every other fear in your life. If you truly fear God, then you will fear Him alone.

Let's look in Proverbs 31 for a moment. The woman who fears the Lord has found the beginning of knowledge, the beginning of wisdom. She has discovered what life is all about. It's not about charm. It's not about physical beauty, which is vain and fades away. Life is about fearing the Lord. Life is about honoring the Lord and living before Him reverently.

Now notice in these verses what this woman does NOT fear. We're told that she fears the Lord, and now look at what she does not fear. In verse 21 it says, "She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet." She has worked diligently, and her family is well-clothed, and she has no fear of the snow or the cold. She fears the Lord, but she doesn't fear for the well-being of her family. Also in verse 25, "Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come." Isn't that an awesome verse! That's something all women *and* all men should strive for. We should seek to be women and men who laugh at the time to come. Not fearful of tomorrow. Not worried about the future. Not fretting over hypothetical calamities that may or may not befall us. When we fear the future we are failing to fear God. But if we fear God, we will fear Him alone. We won't be afraid of the future. We'll laugh at the time to come!

How does this work? Why is it true that if we fear God, we will fear Him alone? If we fear the Lord, we won't have to fear anything else. Why is this true?

We need to understand that the fear of the Lord is the kind of fear that drives us *to* Him not *away* from Him. This is what I was trying to describe in my illustrations earlier, thinking of mere humans whom we revere. With God, in a far greater way, there is



awe and reverence and also some uneasiness about standing before Him. But at the same time there is the deep confidence that He loves me. He gave His Son for me. He is on my side. His immense strength is for my good.

And thus, the fear of the Lord will not cause us to run *away* from Him. It will cause us to run *to* Him. Because part of fearing the Lord is the fear of running away from Him. If you do run from the Lord, it's not because you fear Him, but because you don't fear Him enough. If you truly fear the Lord, you will stand in awe of His majesty and His power and His righteous wrath against sin, and you will tremble at the thought of being God's enemy. This is what drives us closer and closer to Him, clinging to Him for dear life. Oh God, don't let me wander. Bind me to Yourself forever!

Aslan is the Christ-figure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, written by C. S. Lewis. I love the line where Susan asks if Aslan is safe. The children have just heard of Aslan for the first time, and are told that he is a lion, the King of Beasts. And Susan says, "Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a Lion." And the response comes back, "Safe? . . . Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." I think this imagery helps us understand what it means to fear the Lord. We need to see that Jesus Christ is NOT safe! He isn't a little teddy bear who simply affirms us in everything we do. He isn't someone we can put in a little box and make Him conform to our desires and plans. He's not safe.

He's a powerful Lion, and you don't want to see His wrath. You don't want His wrath to be against you. He has infinite power, and He hates sin. And He will destroy those who run from Him. He will condemn to hell every person who persists in their sin and rebellion against Him. Those are the individuals who do not fear the Lord. They think they can live however they want to live, and there won't be any consequences. They don't know the Lord, and they don't fear Him. If you are running away from God, repent! Turn around and run to Him. Embrace Jesus.

Jesus Christ is not safe, but He's good. He is so good! He is a powerful Lion, and the thought of being His enemy is terrifying. But His infinite power is no longer against us who believe. He is for us, if we are clinging to Him. Jesus Christ died in our place, and paid the penalty for our sin, so that all who run to Him and hold on to Him will escape God's wrath and receive the reward of eternal life.

This is why our fear of Him does not mean that we have to cower in frightened terror, wondering if we'll be destroyed. Jesus

already bore that wrath for us, and now the most powerful Being in the universe is for us, not against us. This is how fearing the Lord changes our lives. Remember this: The infinite power that God will use to punish those who run away from Him, is also the infinite power that He uses to bless those who run to Him.

It's in this way that our fear of God will drive us to Him, and it will drive out every other fear. If the most powerful Being in the universe is for us, then what is there to fear? "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:30).

Let me read you a few other verses that speak of the fear of the Lord. Psalm 27:1 says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" Of course, the answer is: "No one!" I don't have to fear anyone, because the Lord is my light and my salvation. He's the stronghold of my life.

Psalm 112 begins, "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments!" Then it says in verse 7, "He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord." Just like the woman of Proverbs 31, this person fears the Lord and doesn't fear other things. In this case, there's no fear of bad news. Do you find yourself fearing bad news? The phone rings, and you worry that something bad has happened. You go to the doctor, and you fear there's going to be a bad report. You have a meeting with your boss, and you're afraid that you're going to lose your job. The bad news may come. It *will* come, in various ways throughout our lives. But the point is that we don't have to be afraid! We don't have to be afraid of bad news. Those difficult things that will come into our lives are all things that the omnipotent God is using for our good.

In Proverbs 29:25 there's a contrast between fearing man and trusting the Lord. It says, "The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe." We are all so prone to wanting the praise of other people. We tend to be people-pleasers. We want the approval of our friends, and we don't want to be criticized by anyone. But the fear of man lays a snare. Instead, we must trust the Lord. When we trust the Lord, when we fear Him, when run to Him and delight in Him, we won't live in fear of what other people think of us, or what they say about us, or whatever harm they might do to us. When we trust in the Lord we will be safe in His keeping, and that's the safety that matters most. The fear of the Lord will drive out every other fear.

So as we begin this study of Proverbs, know that true wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord. Do you want to be a better

friend, a better spouse, a better parent, a better employee? Do you want to be a blessing to others rather than a burden? Do you want your words to be helpful rather than hurtful? Do you want to be wise rather than foolish? Well, you need to start with a healthy, reverent fear of God.