

Get Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 7:11-29

Prov. 4:1 “Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, And give attention to know understanding; 2 For I give you good doctrine: Do not forsake my law. 3 When I was my father’s son, Tender and the only one in the sight of my mother, 4 He also taught me, and said to me: “Let your heart retain my words; Keep my commands, and live. 5 Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. 6 Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you; Love her, and she will keep you. 7 Wisdom is the principal thing; Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding. 8 Exalt her, and she will promote you; She will bring you honor, when you embrace her. 9 She will place on your head an ornament of grace; A crown of glory she will deliver to you.”

Do you hear the urgency in that affectionate admonition of a father. Wisdom IS the principal thing. And today, our goal here in Ecclesiastes 7 is to get her! Get wisdom, the wisdom which God has revealed to us.

Don’t forget the dilemma we have observed in recent weeks, the dilemma of increased vanity and trouble being attached to increased wealth and possessions. The more you have, the more trouble you have. Thus, from last week, the honor of a good name is far more valuable than any of this world’s riches. And from that, a more direct and focused attention upon the attainment of wisdom.

So our focus this afternoon is upon the three “B’s” of wisdom. The benefits of wisdom. The balance of wisdom. And the barrier to wisdom. And whether or not you think that use of alliteration is clever or even useful, don’t miss the main point. We all need

wisdom, and we need it desperately. So I’ll begin with the motivation to get it. The motivation for the search, which is to be found in,

I. THE BENEFITS OF WISDOM.

As I read from Proverbs 4, “Exalt her, and she will promote you; She will bring you honor, when you embrace her.” That’s wisdom. She will deliver to you a crown of glory!

Specifically, she a treasure. The treasure of an inheritance.
v.11

I don’t think that the translation “with an inheritance” is nearly as clear as, “as an inheritance.” Wisdom is not something that enhances an inheritance, but rather it is the inheritance itself. It is the treasure!

A. Wisdom is a valuable treasure.

It is a permanent possession, abiding with you as long as you live. And indeed, it is passed on to your children and children’s children as an inheritance. It is profitable, verse 11 continues. It is a gain or a profit, a word that might well be more descriptive of your bank account or other investments.

Again from the Proverbs,

Prov. 8:11 “For wisdom is better than rubies, And all the things one may desire cannot be compared with her.”

Prov. 16:16 “How much better to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.”

Here in Ecclesiastes 7, Solomon moves to define and describe just how that is so. Wisdom is not just a shade from the dangers of the sun, not just a defense, as you read in verse 12. But it actually gives life.

The comparison with money is explicit in that verse, and money does do a lot of good things for us. Money does offer much help and encouragement to us, protecting us and keeping us from much harm and trouble. But wisdom is better, for,

B. Wisdom is a protector of life.

Wisdom gives life. Actually, the Hebrew is simply, “Wisdom is life.” To have the one is to have the other. Let me back up just a moment in order to provide a good definition for wisdom in the first place,

Prov. 1:1 “The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel: 2 To know wisdom and instruction, To perceive the words of understanding, 3 To receive the instruction of wisdom, Justice, judgment, and equity; 4 To give prudence to the simple, To the young man knowledge and discretion.”

And don’t ever forget,

Prov. 1:7 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

So wisdom has to do with living, right living, instructions in godly living, living in the fear of God. Living according to God’s commandments.

Ps. 111:10 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever.”

And so wisdom is the very protector of life. It is the very guardian of your life and well-being. It is the one essential thing that you must gain in life, in order to avoid the dangers and pitfalls that otherwise await you.

And, therefore,

C. Wisdom enables you to understand God.

Surely, wisdom must begin there, knowing and recognizing the hand of God and seeing the work of God in all things.

But don’t every think that this wisdom means that you can figure God out, that you can explain what it is that God is doing. Rather, the wisdom comes when you acknowledge God’s sovereignty. God’s omnipotent power joined together with his absolute autonomy. He can do whatever he wants, both in terms of his power and in terms of his authority. He answers to no one but himself.

That’s the foundation upon which wisdom is established.

v.13

God can make something crooked, tangled or disorganized. And he can straighten it out. That’s his prerogative, and there is no implication or accusation of wrongdoing in that. The words simply reflect our limited perspective, it looks crooked to us! God still has it perfectly arranged, and wisdom dictates that you and I as creatures do not tamper with his government and oversight of all his creation. He does whatever he pleases. “The idea that we could actually straighten out what He has made crooked is unpardonable and presumptuous arrogance. Wisdom shows the right point of view.” (Leupold)

As the hymn writer puts it, “God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform...Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill he treasures up his bright designs, and works his sovereign will...Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face...Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain; God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.”

Therefore we read, v.14

That's God's providence, and no one is truly wise that does not recognize and consider such a great work of God. Just think of the words of God to his Old Testament people in exile,

Is. 45:1 "Thus says the LORD to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held-- To subdue nations before him And loose the armor of kings, To open before him the double doors, So that the gates will not be shut: 2 'I will go before you And make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze And cut the bars of iron. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden riches of secret places, That you may know that I, the LORD, Who call you by your name, Am the God of Israel. 4 For Jacob My servant's sake, And Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. 5 I am the LORD, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me, 6 That they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting That there is none besides Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; 7 I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things.'"

Wisdom begins with an apprehension of just such a God, a great and glorious God. And beloved, wisdom and the knowledge of God are absolutely inseparable. Such wisdom will give you life, a treasure worth more than all others.

Next, we see some of the substance of this wisdom, particularly the idea of balance. The avoidance of extremes.

II. THE BALANCE OF WISDOM.

Some of the actual language is quite striking.

v.16-17

So what does that mean? Don't be overly righteous! As if you

could have too much of it! Don't be overly wicked, as if a little bit is OK? That certainly doesn't make sense. Again, the idea is balance, and Solomon's words arise out of the circumstances he has observed,

v.15

Surely it is true that God works in a manner that often proves very puzzling to us. And nothing disturbs our own sense of right and wrong than a righteous man perishing in spite of his righteousness or a wicked man prospering in spite of his wickedness.

So what's the point of,

v.16

A. Do not be overly righteous.

There are people who want a little bit of religion, especially for their children, but don't want them to get too serious about it! That's not what Solomon is talking about. Instead, I believe he refers to the sort of righteousness that causes a man to think that he knows better than God. The sort of righteousness that sees fit to strive with God, even to argue with God or be angry with God when he doesn't receive the sort of reward he thinks he deserves. As one commentator puts it, "a generous dose of work-righteousness was, therefore, mingled with this attitude." It is the sort of righteousness in which you lose sense of your own ongoing and ever-present sinfulness, when you become self-righteous in your self-evaluation and forgetful of your own sinful imperfections.

So the one "overly righteous" would be the same person of whom Jesus speaks,

Luke 5:32 "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

Such “overly righteous” people would also be the ones who would add their own regulations to the laws and commandments of God, to whom Jesus responded with this rebuke,

Mark 7:6 “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. 7 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ 8 “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men--the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.” 9 He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.”

So, people of God, don’t be overly righteous. Do not be overly wise, as if you know more than God, for such an attitude will destroy you, as Jesus declares,

Mat. 23:27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 “Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

That’s the balance of wisdom, on the one side. On the other side,

B. Do not be overly wicked.

v.17

Now don’t begin to think that means its OK to be a little bit wicked! Don’t think that the Bible gives you permission to sin, a little bit. Rather the idea is this, recognize within your own heart the propensity to give expression to the remnants of that old man that are still within your heart. Never think that those sinful impulses of the old Adam are restrained enough, as if you don’t need to worry about any big sins slipping out.

Don’t be overstrict, in terms of Phariseeism. But don’t be overly lax and careless either, thinking yourself immune from heinous sin. As Charles Bridges puts it, “Take care not to loosen the reigns of sin...Flagrant sin hurries men on towards destruction of body and soul.”

Such is the danger of not taking the sinfulness of your own heart seriously enough. And such is the wisdom of Solomon, v.18

There is a great danger in living in peace with your sins. Leaving them alone, even if it is restricted to just one area of your life or one circumstance. You leave it alone, because you don’t want to do battle against your own heart. You don’t want to put the sin to death, because you have rationalized it away.

That puts you in such a great danger, and emphasizes all the more,

C. The necessity of self-restraint.

So here, beloved, is wisdom, rich and useful.

v.19

Leupold writes, “the thought developed here is rather that wisdom is a mighty hero who places himself at a man’s side to help him in combat.” And make no mistake about it, we all need such help.

v.20

And further, in the light of that wickedness and oppression that is sure to come to us, there is great need for restraint. Consider, v.21-22

Well, for all of that, still the acquisition of wisdom is extremely

difficult. As Solomon says,
v.23-24

So we come to,

III. THE BARRIER TO WISDOM.

A significant barrier. One that requires us to labor strenuously to overcome it. So the exhortation of the Proverbs is consistent with our text this morning,

A. Pursue wisdom diligently.

That's an exhortation. A command, written in the form of Solomon's own experience, describing his own diligent efforts.
v.25

"I applied my heart..., to search and seek out wisdom." He's an explorer, and he won't give up. A pilgrim in pursuit of a prized objective. In the pursuit of wisdom. What he calls, "the reason of things." An explanation, an accounting of the matters of life.

Specifically, "to know the wickedness of folly." Proving to himself that wickedness is folly. Even stupidity. Such is great wisdom, to know that nothing can be more stupid than sin.

That's where you must begin, to pursue wisdom. For Satan not only masquerades as an angel of light, but he presents to you sinful wickedness as a manifestation of that light. He presents sin as something good. Just as he did to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Gen. 3:4 "Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 "For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate."

It looks good, doesn't it? Pleasant to the eyes. That's Satan's method. He always makes sin look good. That's why it takes such strenuous effort to find wisdom.

You have to come to know "foolishness and madness," according to verse 25. Madness means to be blinded. Deceived and beguiled, expecting something of good worth to come that which has only outward glamor.

People of God, Satan does that all the time. He presents to you on a silver platter that which is actually wicked, and the pursuit of wisdom requires the insight to recognize its true nature. The pursuit of wisdom means that you will no longer walk in such blindness, no longer controlled by your madness or insanity, unable to see through his wicked schemes.

I can only say to you this afternoon, pursue such wisdom diligently. As Solomon writes also in,

Prov. 9:1 "Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars; 2 She has slaughtered her meat, She has mixed her wine, She has also furnished her table. 3 She has sent out her maidens, She cries out from the highest places of the city, 4 "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, 5 "Come, eat of my bread And drink of the wine I have mixed. 6 Forsake foolishness and live, And go in the way of understanding...[On the other hand,] 13 A foolish woman is clamorous; She is simple, and knows nothing. 14 For she sits at the door of her house, On a seat by the highest places of the city, 15 To call to those who pass by, Who go straight on their way: 16 "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here"; And as for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, 17 "Stolen water is sweet, And bread eaten in secret is pleasant." 18 But he does not know that the dead are there, That her guests are in the depths of hell."

Beware such a barrier, Satan making foolishness appear to be good. And with that,

B. Beware the deceitfulness of false human philosophy.

I believe that is the reference to “the woman” in verse 26, the adulterous woman of godless, heathen, philosophy. The description is well-fitting.

v.26

The use of an immoral woman as a symbol for the foolishness that is the opposite of wisdom is common to Solomon. Consider,

Prov. 9:13 “A foolish woman is clamorous; She is simple, and knows nothing. 14 For she sits at the door of her house, On a seat by the highest places of the city, 15 To call to those who pass by, Who go straight on their way: 16 "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here"; And as for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, 17 "Stolen water is sweet, And bread eaten in secret is pleasant." 18 But he does not know that the dead are there, That her guests are in the depths of hell.”

The contrast is with,

Prov. 9:1 “Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars; 2 She has slaughtered her meat, She has mixed her wine, She has also furnished her table. 3 She has sent out her maidens, She cries out from the highest places of the city, 4 "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, 5 "Come, eat of my bread And drink of the wine I have mixed. 6 Forsake foolishness and live, And go in the way of understanding.”

There is a similar comparison between wisdom and folly in, James 3:13 “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and self-

seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. 16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. 17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.”

Wisdom from above is the virtuous woman. Earthly, sensual and demonic “wisdom” is the adulteress. Leupold says is best, I believe, “Now to examine the warning...False wisdom rears her head continually and keeps on offering her enticements, but, on the other hand, the offers keep proving themselves unsatisfactory. As in everyday life a man who has been beguiled by a loose woman may be ready to admit afterward that death cannot be a more bitter experience than to fall prey to the allurements of such a one, so in the search after true wisdom any man who yields can lead to a taste of suffering that is more bitter than strong...Worldly wisdom, having beguiled a man, clings to him in a singularly tenacious way and binds him.”

Finally, beloved, in order to overcome this great barrier to wisdom,

C. Humbly accept the responsibility for your own sin.

Solomon laments,

v.27-28

Only one wise man, and no wise woman. A bitter verdict, to be sure, with no room in that for any male boasting. There is virtually no one wise to be found, anywhere. And that is not God’s fault!

v.29

God made man upright. When God had finished his work of creation, he declared, “It was very good.” So the fault lies with man, man the sinner. “The charge of man’s failure is to be laid at his own door.” (Leupold)

So it is that we know,

Rom. 3:10 “As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; 11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. 12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one." 13 "Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps is under their lips"; 14 "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." 15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 Destruction and misery are in their ways; 17 And the way of peace they have not known." 18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Likewise, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah,

Is. 53:6 “All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.”

And so, the barrier to wisdom is your own sin. Therefore, in order to obtain wisdom, you are left in need of saving faith. For the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Faith in Jesus Christ, by which you believe the Word of God to be true, is the only path to true wisdom.

Rom. 10:9 “...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call

upon Him. 13 For "whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

So get wisdom! Get understanding! “Wisdom is the principal thing...Exalt her, and she will promote you; She will bring you honor, when you embrace her.”

And she, wisdom, is found and embodied in Jesus himself, the one who is, by his own words, “the way, the truth and the life.”