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Pursue Wisdom

Skillful Living

Proverbs 4

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Many years ago, back in my previous ministry, I got a phone call one day from a financial advisor that had moved to town, was new in town, was a believer, attended a different church, but basically was offering his services. He wondered if he could help with newlyweds or premarital couples, just as a service helping to get them set up on a budget and get their finances straight. I thought that might be a helpful resource, so I set up a lunch with him. We met, and one of the first things I said was, “Just tell me a little bit about yourself.” And he chatted about this and that and pretty soon the conversation had moved to the struggles in his marriage and all the stress over finances and all of the credit card debt and all this financial trouble. He was going down fast. Finally he looks at me and says, “Pastor Clark, can you help me?” And I think what I said is, “I can connect you with someone who can help you.” But what I’m thinking is, “There’s *no way* I’m going to have you advise young couples on how to handle their finances when you, yourself, can’t even manage your own finances!”

Now I think we get this! If you’re a business owner, you’re probably not going to take advice from someone who just bankrupted his own business. If you’re a parent, you’re probably not going to take advice from someone who’s never had children, or take marriage advice from someone who just crashed his or her own marriage. I assume we’re not going to take relational advice from Hollywood celebrities that move from one level of dysfunction to another. But it does raise an interesting question: *Who DO we listen to?* On any given day there are hundreds of voices telling you how to live your life. There’s this sobering reality that you only get one shot at life. You only get one chance to be sixteen. You only get one chance to be thirty. You only get one shot at life, so every day matters. So how do you ensure that you live your life with the utmost skill in order to fulfill the purpose for which you were created?

That’s what we want to talk about today and over the next couple of weeks. If you have a Bible, turn with us Proverbs, Chapter 4. Every year we have these little, I call them “gaps” in the schedule, where there’s not enough weeks to start a new series or go through another book of the Bible. So maybe it’s two weeks, three weeks, in this case four weeks before Easter. We started this last year. It’s a good time to work our way through Proverbs because it doesn’t really depend on what comes before or what comes after. So every little gap like this, we’ll work through some of the proverbs and I would guess over the next few years we’ll get through all thirty-one. Last year was 1, 2 and 3; this year is 4, 5, 6 and 7, and then it will be Easter.

Now there are some real challenges to preaching through Proverbs. The most obvious challenge is that of all the books in the Bible it is by far the easiest to understand. When people are reading through the Bible, the average person finally gets to Proverbs and they say to themselves, “This is finally one book I can understand!” Because it’s pretty straight forward—they’re just simple proverbs—it leaves the challenge for me: *What do I say?* I mean, it’s pretty obvious! It just means what it means. The other challenge in trying to preach it or teach it is that it’s just not organized around any sort of an outline or progression of thought. It’s just, by and large, a collection of proverbs. So how we’re going to do it is just take a chapter at a time and go through it. I’m going to make some comments here and there, and the rest of it’s pretty straight forward, I would say. The way the material is organized is what they would refer to as a “household model”. In other

words, it's organized around the idea of a father sitting down with his son, basically offering proverbs (wisdom) to his son. Of course, ultimately, it's God the Father teaching His children. But there's also a model here that says that ultimately we, ourselves, learn to live with skill and then pass that on to the next generation and to the next generation. And that's also part of the teaching here. So, verse 1:

**Hear, O sons, the instruction of a father,
And give attention that you may gain understanding,
For I give you sound teaching;
Do not abandon my instruction.** (*NASB, Proverbs 4:1-2)

You'll see that throughout this proverb, and all the proverbs, there's this message to listen and learn in order to **gain understanding**. Verse 3:

**When I was a son to my father,
Tender and the only son in the sight of my mother,
Then he taught me ...** (Vs. 3-4a)

Basically you have the father saying, "This is how I was taught. This is what my **father** taught me. I've tried to live this way, and now I want to teach you." So you have this generational model. We probably wouldn't think much about the reference to **son**, but it's helpful to understand that in the Hebrew and in the Jewish lifestyle, to be a son went far beyond just genetics. To make this statement, "*I was my father's son*," is really a reference to obedience. In that culture, to really be a son meant that I listened to my father; I obeyed my father, and now I'm passing this on to you—so much so that in the Jewish culture, if a son rebelled to a high enough degree, the father actually disowned him. It was this sense of saying, "You're not my son because you won't listen to me; you won't obey me." So what he's saying is, "I was my father's son", meaning I *listened* and I *obeyed*, and now I'm passing this on to you, *my* son. Almost everybody believes this is Solomon speaking, so the father would be David, the great King of Israel. And David then is saying, "I was taught by *my* father, and now I'm passing this on to *you*." He also makes a reference to his **mother**, which would have been Bathsheba.

So there is a reminder here that failure is not final. No matter how many ways you've messed up, it doesn't mean you're out of the game. Yes, David and Bathsheba messed up! It was an unfortunate, adulteress affair that had all kinds of consequences. But the reality is, if you look at the scope of David's life from the beginning to end, he was a remarkable man of faith—without question, the greatest king in the history of the Hebrew people. The Bible itself describes him as "*a man after God's own heart*". We have this habit of taking this failure and having it define the entirety of David's life, which just isn't correct. It was a failure; it was a mess, but it by no means defines the entirety of his life. There should be hope for *all* of us in the realization that David and Bathsheba could come together and still say, "We have sought God's wisdom and to live that way, we are seeking now to pass it on to you." Verse 4:

**Then he taught me and said to me,
"Let your heart hold fast my words;
Keep my commandments and live;**

You'll see this several times in this proverb. The point of skillful living—the point of wisdom—is in order that we might **live**, in order that we might live life to its fullest. I think there's a tendency to think that the choice is that I can live it up *or* I can follow God. I would say that's a lie from the

enemy. I would say it this way: *If you want to really live it up, listen to God...because God's wisdom is the way of life.* This is the way to get everything that your soul longs for, to get all that God wants you to experience in life. Verse 5:

Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!
Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.

Acquire carries much more than just the idea of *purchase*. It carries the idea of *highest value*. In other words, if you have to sell *everything* in order to acquire *this*, it's because *this* is so valuable. It is the idea of pursuing wisdom with all your heart, that it *is* my highest value. We have a tendency to consistently talk about how busy we are. I understand that. Everybody's busy. Fine! We'll get that out. But the reality is that *everybody has time for that which you truly value*. So the idea of **acquire wisdom** is that it's something that really matters to me; it's something I value. Basically Proverbs chapter 4 is not dispensing the wisdom. It's starting with: *First you have to want wisdom!* That's step one in the process. It has to be of value for you.

Now let's define terms. You have the terms **wisdom** and **understanding**. There's this couplet of terms that show up again and again in Proverbs and Psalms. They're a familiar couplet. The idea of **wisdom** is basically *seeing with discernment*. I like to move it out of that vague terminology and bring it down to: It's actually talking about *skillful living*. If you bring wisdom down to its most practical language, it's: *How do you live life with a high degree of skill?* So the idea of wisdom is that of discernment. What does that mean? **Understanding** carries the idea of implementing that—in other words: *Then how do I do that?* I understand what skillful living looks like. Understanding it, then, is *How do I actually execute that in everyday, ordinary circumstances?* You'll see those words again and again here through Proverbs.

Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!
Do not forget nor turn away from the words of my mouth.
"Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;
Love her, and she will watch over you." (Vs. 5-6)

It's interesting that the discussion turns to the idea of wisdom being like a lover; it's the imagery of someone passionately pursuing a lover, and if you love her, then there's great benefit in that. Verse 7:

"The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;
And with all your acquiring, get understanding."

It's the idea that if you want to live with a high degree of skill, it starts with *wanting passionately* to live with skill. You have to want it! The question is: *How badly do you want it?* Wisdom does not necessarily come with age. As the years go by, the only guarantee is that we get older. There is virtually no guarantee that we get wiser. As a matter of fact, I've known 50 and 60 and 70 year-olds who are still very foolish. I've also known 16 year-olds who are very, very wise. We have this saying that "Hindsight is always 20/20". I would suggest to you that is absolutely *not* the case! I see this all the time. It's *not* 20/20. I can't even begin to tell you how many people I see who continue to make the same foolish decisions again and again and again and again! Hindsight is *not* 20/20! Some people just don't get it! They didn't get it when they were 20; they don't get it when they're 40; they don't get it when they're 60! So wisdom is not automatic. That's what the text is saying. The beginning of wisdom is to *want it...to want it badly...to passionately pursue it*. Again, verse 8 reminds us that it's like one who would pursue a lover.

**"Prize her, and she will exalt you;
She will honor you if you embrace her."**

The language there is actually not just to *pursue* her, but that you love her, you hug her, and literally that you cuddle up with her. It's this romantic image of pursuing wisdom, like wisdom is a lover and you're pursuing with all of your passion to hold her and to hug her and to embrace her.

You know, love makes us do funny things. I remember way back in the early 80's, I was a student at the University of Nebraska. I lived right down by Lincoln High at 24th & B. Patty lived right up here at 48th & Highway 2. I was a student paying my own way through school. I didn't have any money. My only mode of transportation was a motorcycle. I had a little Honda 360, and those were great motorcycles, although in the dead of winter, it was somewhat problematic! But, *I was in love!* So three or four times a week, in the dead of winter, I would put on my coveralls; I'd put on my mittens; I'd put on my scarf; I'd put on my helmet; I'd put on every layer I had to, and I'd putter on my motorcycle from 24th & B all the way out here to 48th & Highway 2 in order to see the woman I loved! Now, nobody made me do that. It wasn't a rule; it wasn't required. I did that because I was crazy in love! That's basically the imagery the psalmist is using—that we have that level of passion, that level of focus, that level of determination to pursue and understand and execute wisdom in order to live our lives with great skill. Verse 9:

**"She will place on your head a garland of grace;
She will present you with a crown of beauty."**

The Hebrew word used for **crown** is not like a king's crown. It's referring to what they would have called a *victor's crown*. In other words, you get to the finish line; you win the race, and you get the victor's crown. The idea is that you pursue passionately wisdom like a lover in order that, when you get to the finish line, wisdom puts the victor's crown on your head and basically celebrates a life well lived.

Now I would guess that every single person in this room would say, "I understand; you only get one shot at life—and when I get to the finish line, I want to be able to look back with a deep sense of satisfaction and know I ran my race well." How do you do that? You passionately pursue wisdom in order to live skillfully. And the promise of verse 9 is that, if I do that, when I get to the finish line, wisdom herself will place this victor's crown on my head and say, "Well done!"

There are basically three discussions here. Some refer to them as three lectures. I don't prefer that terminology. It's verses 1 through 9, 10 through 19, and 20 to the end. So the second discussion, verse 10:

**Hear, my son, and accept my sayings,
And the years of your life will be many.
I have directed you in the way of wisdom;
I have led you in upright paths. (Vs. 10-11)**

I think it's helpful to stop and think about that statement, **I have led you**. This is the imagery of a father saying to his son, "I haven't just talked about skillful living. I have lived skillfully before you, and I am inviting you to follow my lead." There is this reminder of the sobering reality of actually living that out before your children as a parent. I think for us who are parents, the goal should be to be able to lay out every area of our lives, both private and public, and say to our children, "Here it is and I'm inviting you to follow my lead and live skillfully." It would be equally

true with anyone that you're mentoring or discipling or leading. The idea is that you are demonstrating for them how to live out these great truths from God skillfully, in a very confusing world, in such a way that they can follow. If there is anything in your life, publicly or privately, that prevents you from laying it all out in front of somebody else and saying, "Hey check it out; I'm inviting you to follow my lead," then *deal* with it! That's a really helpful way to think about it. Whatever it is that would prohibit you from doing that—*Deal with it*, in order that you might live skillfully and then teach others to live skillfully as well.

I consistently struggle in our culture with the concept of Christian celebrities. I just don't quite don't know what to do with that concept. I'm not sure God really ever intended that that's the way it would be within His church. I understand that God has used godly teachers on the radio, on television and the internet, and authors to change people's lives and to reach people all around the world. I get that...I think that's great! So maybe the best way to say it is that I still think that your primary teachers, your primary mentors and disciplers should be local. They should be people that have a level of accountability to you. I could tell you stories of well-known Christian celebrities and how they live their lives in private would gravely disappoint and dismay you. I think there's value in the person that you're listening to actually being accountable to you in terms of how that person lives out his or her life.

For me as a preacher, I'm aware of the fact that again and again when I talk about my level of passion and commitment for Patty, that every time I do that there are three girls who are now adults that sit in these seats and know the truth. And either over the years, they will become deeply cynical because I say one thing and live another, or they will respect my words because they know what actually goes on behind closed doors. I'm aware of the fact that every time I talk about leadership and how we should treat people, there are roughly a hundred employees who sit in these seats and over the years they've either become cynical because of the hypocrisy of the leadership that says one thing and lives another, or they respect these words because it's practiced both on the stage and throughout the week. There's a high level of accountability in that. I think that's good. I think that's the way it should be.

So one of the ways to process this is that you need to think about: *Who are the voices I listen to?* And you need to start by thinking: *What kind of a life do I want? What kind of a marriage do I want? What kind of a parent do I want to be? What kind of a business owner do I want to be? What kind of a life do I really want before God?* And then find those people who are actually living that way. Learn from them. Listen to them. Allow them to speak into your life. Solomon is saying to his son that if you want to live this way, follow my lead. There's a lot of sobering reality to that. Verse 12:

**When you walk, your steps will not be impeded;
And if you run, you will not stumble.
Take hold of instruction; do not let go.
Guard her, for she is your life.
Do not enter the path of the wicked
And do not proceed in the way of evil men.
Avoid it, do not pass by it;
Turn away from it and pass on.
For they cannot sleep unless they do evil;
And they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble.
For they eat the bread of wickedness
And drink the wine of violence. (Vs. 12-17)**

You have this very familiar imagery of two paths: the path of the righteous and the path of the wicked. I do think it's interesting in verse 14 that he talks about not lingering around the entrance to the path. Basically it's the idea that I really shouldn't linger around the entrance of the path, but be diligently moving down the path of righteousness. In other words, I'm not looking down the path; I'm not flirting with that path. One of the things I've learned for myself, and I've seen over the years again and again, is that most sin and temptation is relatively easy to manage as long as you don't start down the path. Once you start down the path, once you start to flirt with it, once you start to experience it, once you indulge in it, you may find that for the rest of your life it becomes a battle for you. The way to effectively deal with sin and temptation is to not even flirt with it, which is the idea of staying off the entrance to the path.

It would be my observation that, as a reaction to the fundamentalism that many of us grew up with, that in some ways the pendulum has swung too far under the umbrella of liberty—where the idea is now I have so much liberty in Christ I am free to get as close to the world as possible without stepping over the line. It's much like a high school couple that decides to get physically involved and they draw a line and say, "We'll only go that far!" But that gives them freedom to go right up to the line every time. It's only a matter of time until that line is crossed and they go further. It's the same idea that, *"I'm seeing how close to the world I can get without slipping over the line."* In my opinion, that mindset is very different from someone who has a passion for righteousness—that my commitment is the path of righteousness. *"That's the path I'm going to travel. I don't want to hover around the entrance to the other path. I don't want to look down it. I don't want to flirt with it. I want to be passionate about doing righteousness."*

The other thing I want to comment on is the usage of the term **wicked**. You see it in verse 14. We saw this in Amos; we've seen it in the Psalms, and we've seen it before in Proverbs. It's very important to understand the terminology. In the poetic literature, there is a contrast between the **righteous**—the tzedek—and the wicked. Both of those terms have to be translated in a context of community. That's part of the definition of the term. So, righteous—the tzedek—is one who values the community; values us together. And, if necessary, the righteous one will disadvantage himself or herself in order to better advantage the community.

The contrast of that, then, is the *wicked*. If we define the wicked as murders and rapists and all kinds of nasty people, then we don't see ourselves like that or around those people at all. Biblically defined, the wicked are simply those who are self-absorbed, those who are selfish, those who, day in and day out, will disadvantage the community (others) in order to advantage himself or herself. I would say that describes the overwhelming majority of people in a community these days. They live for themselves. That's what they eat; that's what they dream about. They can't even sleep because they're so caught up in their own selfish self-absorption. That's their life; it's their diet; it's everything about them. That's basically what the proverb just said. That's the danger of going down that path. Verse 18:

**But the path of the righteous—the tzedek—is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.**

The imagery is: the sun comes up in the morning; there's light, and as you go farther into the day, the sun rises and gets brighter and brighter and brighter, basically saying the more I travel down the path of righteousness, the lighter it becomes. The more I understand it, the more energy I get, the more vigorously I travel down the path. It isn't always going to be the struggle that it may feel like it is today. Verse 19:

**The way of the wicked is like darkness;
They do not know over what they stumble.**

They become so selfish, so self-absorbed, so lost in their own world that every day they **stumble** over themselves. They make a mess of things and they don't even realize it. They don't even realize what they're stumbling over anymore. Verse 20 then starts the third discussion:

**My son, give attention to my words;
Incline your ear to my sayings.
Do not let them depart from your sight;
Keep them in the midst of your heart.
For they are life to those who find them
And health to all their body. (Vs. 20-22)**

Again, in verse 22 we find the emphasis on **life**. But it's interesting that there's also emphasis on **health**. I don't think this is metaphoric; I think it's literal. It's saying that if you learn to live your life with a high degree of skill, it actually affects your physical health. If you choose to live a selfish, self-absorbed, unskillful, foolish life, it actually affects your physical health. More and more science is affirming this to be true, that our health is affected by every part—our emotion, our mental—and all of that is spiritual. It all comes together to affect our health. Verse 23:

**Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.**

When we think of **heart**, we think primarily of emotion. The Hebrew idea is that it's the center of your being. It's far more than emotion. It's your intellect, your mind, your emotion, your will; it's the core of your being. Life is basically lived from the inside out. You can't just manage behaviors. At the end of the day, it's what's inside that determines how you will live out your life. Therefore, the emphasis is on guarding the inside, because that will ultimately determine the outside which, again, includes your physical health.

Right now in our culture, it's very trendy to be very aware of what you eat—literally what you put in your mouth—to be aware of the source. Is it organic? How is it grown? I think that's fine. I think everyone needs to decide what's best for them. It may be helpful just to remind ourselves that just because *you* see it a certain way doesn't mean *everyone* has to see it that way. We don't need one more thing to get legalistic about! But I would say this. I do believe that, according to the text, it is saying that your physical health will be more affected if you're more cautious about what you put in your heart than what you put in your mouth. At the end of the day, what is going to affect even your physical health is affected more by what you put in your heart than just what you put in your mouth. He goes on: How do we guard our hearts...watch our hearts? Verse 24:

**Put away from you a deceitful mouth
And put devious speech far from you.**

So it starts with your mouth. We are people of integrity—people of truth. We're not about lies and deceit and sneaking around. What comes out of our mouth is right and true. Second of all, verse 25:

**Let your eyes look directly ahead
And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you.**

It's the imagery that we're not longing down the path of wickedness, that we're not longing to travel a different path. What my eyes look at is what I long for. So how do we guard our hearts? First of all, it's about our mouth, and being people of integrity and truth. Second of all, it's what I long for—what I actually want out of life. And thirdly, verse 26:

**Watch the path of your feet
And all your ways will be established.
Do not turn to the right nor to the left;
Turn your foot from evil.** (Vs. 26-27)

What path do I travel down? How do I guard my heart in real, practical terms? It has to do with what comes out of my mouth. It has to do with what I long for with my eyes. And it has to do with what path I travel with my feet.

Again, the emphasis of Proverbs chapter 4 is not getting into the details of this wisdom, but rather wisdom starts with *wanting* wisdom—passionately desiring wisdom—like one would passionately desire a lover. Then I seek after wisdom in order to live skillfully. The idea of the proverb is this: I start by looking for someone who is living out the life that I think God wants us to live, someone who is modeling that. And when I find that person, I listen to that person; I learn from that person. How have you taken these truths of God and lived it out in life? How can I follow you that I might live that way, in order that I might be more skillful at living, in order that I might turn around to the next generation and be able to say to them, “If you want to know how to take these great truths of God and live them out skillfully in ordinary, everyday life, just follow me,” in order that generation after generation we would raise up children of God who understand how to live this one life with a high degree of skill—that we might fulfill the purpose for which we were created.

Our Father, we celebrate that You, as the heavenly Father, have passed on truth to us as Your children so that we don't need to stumble in the darkness. But, God, this proverb also reminds us that You pass Your truths onto others in order that they might teach the next generation, and the next generation, that we learn from You; we learn from Your Word, but we also learn from one another. God, there are people in this room this morning who have modeled beautifully what it means to live with a high degree of skill, who have paved the way, who have modeled for us that we might learn, that we might turn around and teach the generation to come. Lord, may this be true. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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