

The Fear of the Lord Is the Beginning

Based on Proverbs 1:1-7 | Introduction to Wisdom: What Is It?

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction." — Proverbs 1:7

SERMON SUMMARY

This sermon launched a summer series in the book of Proverbs, marking a deliberate pivot: from the otherworldly concerns of a theology of heaven to the very this-worldly concerns of how to live well in the world God made. Proverbs doesn't ask where we are going after we die. It asks how we are going to make 35,000 decisions today.

The sermon opened with a thought experiment: a winning Powerball ticket worth \$1.8 billion in one hand, and a ski lift ticket in the other. Seems obvious — until you learn that the lift ticket leads to a fall that severs your spine and leaves you a quadriplegic. A 1978 Northwestern University study found that quadriplegics reported more happiness from small daily pleasures than lottery winners did. The point: we are not as good at knowing what will lead to flourishing as we think. We need wisdom.

What Is the Book of Proverbs?

Proverbs is the queen of Israel's wisdom literature — alongside Job, Ecclesiastes, and portions of Psalms. Its first seven verses serve as a prologue, giving us the title, literary type, author, purpose, and theology of the entire book. It is not a random collection of ancient aphorisms. It is a structured course of education in the science of life.

Proverbs 1:1-7 "The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for gaining wisdom and instruction... The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction."

Two Things Proverbs Is NOT

Proverbs Are Not Promises

The most common misreading of Proverbs is treating its statements as guaranteed covenantal promises. "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" is not a promise God has made to parents who send their children to Christian schools and lead family devotions. It is a statement of principle — describing what is generally and ultimately true, not what is necessarily always true in every case. Proverbs are less like the rainbow (a sealed covenantal promise) and more like a rain gauge (a description of what is generally there).

Proverbs Are Not Rules

They are tools. Proverbs 26 contains two consecutive proverbs that appear to contradict each other: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him" — followed immediately by "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." This is not confused writing. It is deliberate. Unlike the Ten Commandments, where "do not murder" is always binding, proverbs are situational tools. They require wisdom to apply — which is exactly why you can't replace wisdom with a rulebook.

What Wisdom Actually Is

The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokma* — a word meaning skill. In Exodus, the craftsmen who built the tabernacle had *hokma*. The sailors who navigated ships had *hokma*. Wisdom is skill: not merely intellectual, but practical and moral. It is the profitable alignment of the ways of your life with the ways of God's creation.

The sermon offered this working definition: wisdom is having the will to want what is best for your neighbor, the skill to know what that best thing actually is, and the moral courage to do it.

Behind wisdom is an understanding that the world has a structure, an order, and a rhythm — and that wise people recognize what that structure is and live in accordance with it. A wise person knows there is gravity and doesn't walk off tall buildings. A wise person knows gossip is a rock in the gears of friendship and gifts are the grease. Wisdom is the knack for living well in the world.

| **Proverbs 3:19** "By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations; by understanding he set the heavens in place."

Why We Are Bad at Wisdom (and Getting Worse)

Ancient people made approximately 2,500 decisions per day. Modern people make between 33,000 and 35,000 — thirteen times more. Every swipe of a finger, every item in a grocery store, every option on a screen is a decision. We have a more urgent need for wisdom than any previous generation, and yet wisdom has largely disappeared from our cultural aspirations.

The sermon named several substitutes we have reached for instead:

- Rules and incentives — minimum sentencing guidelines that eliminate the need for wise judgment, standardized tests that replace discerning teachers with scripts. We have outsourced wisdom to systems.
- Artificial intelligence — large language models that are brilliant with information and facts but lack common sense. The MIT study cited in the sermon found that people who used AI for a writing task used 55% less of their brains. We are getting higher grades and becoming less capable of wisdom.

C.S. Lewis saw this coming in *The Abolition of Man*: "For the wise men of old, the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality... But for magic and applied science alike, the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men." We no longer fit our lives to the pattern of God's creation. We use technology and surgery and systems to force creation to fit our wishes. This is the road not to flourishing but to foolishness.

Three Dimensions of Biblical Wisdom

1. Wisdom Is Creational

Proverbs is not a collection of life hacks. It is a notebook that echoes with the very fabric and melody of God's creation. God formed this world in wisdom, and the world — even in its broken state — cries out with that wisdom. Wise people observe that world not to change it but to fit their lives into it. Wisdom is dancing to the melody of God's creation, weaving every decision — small and large — into the fabric of God's created order. This also means wisdom is part of God's common grace: even those who don't know Christ can, through careful observation, pattern their lives in ways that fit the music of creation.

2. Wisdom Is Covenantal

The motto of the entire book stands in verse 7: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." The fear of the Lord is not terror — it is awe. It is recognizing our smallness and God's greatness. It is understanding

that he is the one who weaves the pattern into which we fit our lives. And critically, that word Lord is Yahweh — the covenant name of God — which appears 87 times in Proverbs. This is not abstract wisdom about a generic deity. It is wisdom rooted in a specific covenant relationship with the God who has named himself and given himself to his people.

Proverbs 1:7 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction."

3. Wisdom Is Christ-Centered

Proverbs is the wisdom of Solomon, king of Israel — which means it sits within the whole scope of redemptive history leading to the Messiah. Jesus grew in wisdom and stature (Luke 2). When Jesus taught, people recognized that he taught with authority and wisdom unlike any other. But he is not merely a teacher of wisdom. He is the embodiment of it. 1 Corinthians 1:24 says Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The goal of this series is not to become wiser people who make better decisions. It is to look to Jesus — the wisdom of God — who in the apparent foolishness of the cross shows us the true shape of life: not advancing our own cause or increasing our name or wealth, but giving ourselves in service to others. That is the pattern of wisdom most deeply woven into the fabric of creation because we see it in its Redeemer.

Key Takeaway

Wisdom is not a list of tips for a better life. It is the skill of living in profitable alignment with the order God has woven into his creation — rooted in an awe-filled relationship with the God of the covenant, and ultimately embodied in Jesus Christ. The fear of the Lord is not where wisdom ends. It is where it begins.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take your time. Listen well to each other. There are no wrong answers — only honest ones.

1

The sermon opened with the lottery ticket vs. the lift ticket — showing that our intuition about what leads to flourishing is often wrong. Can you think of a choice you made that looked obviously good at the time but didn't lead where you expected? Or a choice that looked risky but turned out to be the right one?

2

The sermon made a distinction between proverbs as promises versus proverbs as principles. Have you ever misread a proverb as a promise and been disappointed? How does reframing Proverbs as a description of general and ultimate truth (rather than guaranteed outcomes) change how you read it?

3

Proverbs are tools, not rules — two consecutive proverbs in chapter 26 appear to contradict each other, and that is intentional. What does it say about the nature of wisdom that you need wisdom to apply wisdom? How does that differ from simply following rules?

4

The sermon defined wisdom as "the profitable alignment of the ways of your life with the ways of God's creation" — and the modern failure of wisdom as trying to subdue creation to our wishes rather than conforming our lives to its order. Where do you see that modern failure most clearly in the culture around you? Where do you see it in yourself?

5

The MIT study found that using AI for writing tasks reduces brain usage by 55%. The sermon connected this to a broader cultural substitution of knowledge for wisdom. Where do you find yourself reaching for a substitute for wisdom — rules, technology, experts, systems — rather than developing the skill of discernment itself?

6

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." The Lord here is Yahweh — the covenant name of God. What does it mean for wisdom to be rooted not in general religious sentiment but in a specific covenant relationship with God? How does that change what wisdom looks like in practice?

7

The sermon said the goal of the summer series is not to become wiser people who make better decisions, but to look to Jesus — the wisdom of God — who shows us in the cross that the true shape of life is self-giving service, not self-advancement. How does Jesus redefine what a wise life looks like?

LIVING IT OUT

Wisdom is not a weekend project. It is a way of walking — daily, attentively, in awe of the God who made the world with wisdom and redeemed it in Christ.

In Your Inner Life

- Read Proverbs 1:1-7 slowly each morning this week. Before reading, pause and ask: am I approaching today as someone who wants to conform my life to God's order, or as someone who wants to make the world conform to my wishes? Let that question frame the day.
- The sermon noted that ancient people made 2,500 decisions per day and modern people make 33,000-35,000. Pay attention to your decision-making this week — not all decisions, but a few representative ones. What default pattern do you reach for? Rules? Intuition? Expertise? Something else? Where does the fear of the Lord actually enter?
- Sit with Proverbs 3:19 — "By wisdom the Lord laid the earth's foundations" — and ask: what in the created world around you this week reflects the wisdom of God? Let the world be a teacher, not just a backdrop.

In Your Closest Relationships

- The sermon defined wisdom as having the will to want what is best for your neighbor, the skill to know what that best thing is, and the moral courage to do it. Think of one relationship this week where all three of these are required. Where is your gap — the will, the skill, or the courage?

- The sermon noted that wisdom is both intellectual and moral — it shapes both character and thinking. Ask someone who knows you well: in my decisions, am I more often driven by careful discernment or by habit, convenience, and what others expect? Listen without defending.
- Proverbs as tools means different situations call for different wisdom. Think of a recurring relational challenge in your life — a conflict, a recurring pattern, a difficult person. Ask: am I reaching for a rule ("this is what you do"), or am I bringing genuine discernment to the specific situation in front of me?

In Your Daily Life and Work

- The sermon connected wisdom to vocation: journalists need wisdom to challenge wrong answers, not just ask right questions; to fit a story into the big story; to be accurate and tell the truth. What does your specific work or calling require in terms of wisdom — not just knowledge or skill, but discernment about how to act well?
- Identify one decision coming up in the next two weeks — small or large — that you have been approaching primarily with information-gathering or rule-following. What would it look like to bring the fear of the Lord to that decision? What would change?
- The sermon said wisdom is common grace — even those who don't know Christ can observe creation carefully and live wisely. Where this week might you learn wisdom from someone who doesn't share your faith? What does it mean to receive that as a gift from the God who wove wisdom into his world?

In Your Faith Community

- This is the first of three orientation sermons on wisdom before the series applies wisdom to specific areas of life. As you prepare for the coming weeks, write down two or three specific areas of your life where you most need wisdom right now. Bring those questions to the series.
- The sermon ended on Pentecost Sunday, connecting the Spirit to wisdom: "I keep asking that God may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (Ephesians 1:17). The Spirit does not just empower — he makes wise. Pray this week for that Spirit of wisdom for yourself, your household, and your congregation.
- The book of Proverbs emerged from a community of the wise — priests, prophets, and counselors together forming Israel. Wisdom flourishes in community. Identify one person in your church or circle who seems to you genuinely wise — not just smart or successful — and ask them this week how they approach a hard decision. Let wisdom be caught, not just taught.

A Word to Carry

We are not as good at knowing what leads to flourishing as we think. The lottery ticket looked obvious. So does wisdom — until it doesn't. The fear of the Lord is not a starting point we graduate from. It is the ground we stand on every day, for every decision, small and large. Start there.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

Wisdom is having the will to want what is best for your neighbor, the skill to know what that is, and the moral courage to do it. This week, practice all three.

This Week's Challenge: One Wise Act Toward Your Neighbor

Wisdom is not theoretical. It is the profitable alignment of a life with what is actually good. This week, make one decision that puts the good of your neighbor above your own convenience.

Step 1 — Name Your Neighbor.

Identify one specific person — a literal neighbor, a coworker, a family member, someone in your congregation — whose good you want to pursue this week. Write their name down.

Step 2 — Ask the Wisdom Question.

Don't assume you know what is best for them. Ask. Either literally — ask them what they need — or through careful observation and prayer. What does this person actually need this week? The skill of wisdom begins with looking closely before acting.

Step 3 — Do It With Moral Courage.

The sermon said wisdom requires moral courage — doing the right thing even when it is inconvenient, awkward, or costs something. Do the wise thing for this person even if it's not the easy thing. That is what distinguishes wisdom from mere strategy.

Step 4 — Offer to Pray.

If appropriate, pray with the person you served — briefly and honestly. Ask God for his wisdom for them specifically. The fear of the Lord is the beginning. Let prayer be the visible sign that your wisdom is rooted in relationship with God, not just good intentions.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share.

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share what you did and what you noticed. Wisdom grows in community — share what you are learning about it.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Pick up and begin reading one chapter per week of C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* this summer. The sermon quoted it for its diagnosis of the modern flight from wisdom toward power. It is short, challenging, and directly relevant to everything this series will cover.
- Read Proverbs 1-9 this week as preparation for the summer series — not quickly, but slowly, one chapter per day. Notice the recurring figures of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly and the father's voice addressing his son. Let the shape of the whole introduction form before the series works through it piece by piece.
- Identify someone in your life who you genuinely consider wise — not smart, not successful, but wise. Invite them for coffee or a meal this week with one specific question: "When you face a hard decision, what do you do?" Let the answer be a gift from God's common grace.

Closing Prayer Guide

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — for the gift of Proverbs, for a God who wove wisdom into the very fabric of creation, and for a Savior who is the wisdom of God made flesh.
- Confess honestly — the ways we have sought to subdue reality to our wishes rather than conform our lives to God's order; the rules and systems and technologies we have reached for instead of wisdom.
- Ask for the fear of the Lord — not dread, but awe. Ask God to make you the kind of person who is small before him and skilled in his world — someone who dances to the melody of creation rather than trying to rewrite the song.
- Pray for wisdom this week — specifically, for the decisions you named during the discussion. Bring the real choices before the God of the covenant and ask for the spirit of wisdom and revelation.

"Wisdom is dancing to the melody of God's creation — weaving a life, and every decision we make, into the fabric of God's created order."

— From This Week's Sermon