

Focus: God’s wisdom is for all and especially the least of these.

In our most recent book club book *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio, there is a scene familiar to many kids in our area the last couple weeks. The first day of school. And on that day, we meet the English teacher Mr. Browne. He greets the class by writing on the chalkboard in big black letters:

“P-R-E-C-E-P-T!”

“Okay [he says], so who can tell me what a precept is? Does anyone know?”

No one raised their hands.

Mr. Browne smiled, nodded, and turned around to write on the chalkboard again:

PRECEPTS=RULES ABOUT REALLY IMPORTANT THINGS.

His first precept was, “WHEN GIVEN THE CHOICE BETWEEN BEING RIGHT OR BEING KIND, CHOOSE KIND.”¹

Every month, he would give the students a new *precept* until over summer break he asked all the kids to submit their own. These *precepts*, “rules about really important things,” define the book.

The Bible has its own book of *precepts* or “rules about really important things,” except it’s called Proverbs. Proverbs is a nifty book. 31 chapters—so you can read one each day of the month—and is fully of witty little sayings. Traditionally said to be written by King Solomon, Proverbs is a beloved book. Often it is practical advice for the world: making money, marrying well, raising children: “Spare the rod, spoil the child?” Yep that’s from Proverbs (Pro 13:24). “Pride goeth before the fall,” too (Pro 16:18).” “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt?” Actually, that’s Lincoln (allegedly).

But occasionally the book goes beyond just *proverbs* and goes into something closer to what we may call *precepts*. We can get proverbs from all sorts of people: Lincoln, Ben Franklin, even fortune cookies! But *precepts*, those rules about really important things, those are a little something more than the daily struggle of early to bed, early to rise.

Precepts have to do with wisdom. One favorite proverb of mine is “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not to put it in a fruit salad.” In Proverbs, you will find both knowledge and wisdom, proverbs and precepts. But when it’s *wisdom*, when it’s a *precept*, it’s usually showing God’s wisdom, which turns out to be a) about really important things, and b) *different* from what we would expect, *different* from worldly so-called “wisdom” of advice on how to “win friends and influence people.”

And for the book of Proverbs, if there is one *precept* that all the other big ones flow out of, it’s Proverbs 9:10: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” That quote is really what defines this book and sets it apart from all the other fortune cookie wisdom we might find on a day-to-day basis. Why? Because “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” puts everything in the right place. It is like the edges of a jigsaw puzzle. Until you have the edges

¹ R.J. Palacio, *Wonder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 45-8.

set, you might have a lot of really nice pieces put together, but it won't make sense, it won't all fit together. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" is the one precept that organizes Christian wisdom.

And this is where there's a lot of pushback. We are uncomfortable with the language of *fear* of God, often because frankly it's been abused to depict a terrifying, bigoted God who loves nothing more than hellfire and lightning-bolts. And so there's been an attempt to say it really means "honor God." Well, I think that's partially right. But I also want to say that we *fear* all sorts of things. And one of the main things is often we fear doing or saying what we simply know is right because we're afraid of what the backlash will be. What will the neighbors say!? Fearing God seems like a negative, but it's not. Because when we care more about what God thinks than what the neighbors think, we are freed to live in a truly wise, truly right, truly just way. We are freed to stand up because it is the *Christian* thing to do, regardless of whether it is the politically correct thing to do or the easy thing to do or the American thing to do or so on. Because we know whose judgment actually matters. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Mountaintop" speech, the last one he gave the night before he was assassinated, perfectly captures this when he said, "Tonight, I'm not fearing any man."²

That's a hard truth to capture. And it may take us a lifetime to fully believe it. I know I still put too much stock in what others think or say. But, as that man Lincoln said, "God is always right." In today's very difficult selection of Proverbs, we are told "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity."

Would you not agree that over the last couple years, we have reaped more than our share of calamity? It's not politically correct to say this, but many of the reasons we have reaped calamity is not just bad luck, but it's because we don't live in the type of society Proverbs describes:

⁹Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.

²²Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;
²³for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them."

As we approach this sacred 20-year anniversary of 9/11, many of us recall the shared feeling that we were in it together. I think back also to the six weeks or so after the pandemic. Remember that? Were we *afraid*? Of course. But I have never seen such generosity, such self-sacrifice from the everyday person in my lifetime. As I saw people risking their lives to continue to maintain the foodsite, as I saw so many of you donate eggs so that the food site wouldn't run out, as I saw us stay home or wear masks for loved ones, as I saw people finally treating service industry workers as "essential" and worthy of dignity, I think I finally got a glimpse of what

² <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>

Proverbs must mean when it says, “The rich and poor have this in common that the Lord God is maker of them all.”

Folks, if you want a precept, that is it. Poor and rich, Republican and Democrat, black and white, the Lord God is maker of us all. Indeed, the counter-intuitive wisdom of the Bible tells us that those the world regards as society’s losers might have something bigger to teach us. As the apostle Paul writes, “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).”

So let us be rich. Not in money or worldly practical advice, but in the fruit of the spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).” And may our wisdom begun in the fear of the Lord end in the love of our Savior. **Amen.**