

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD Pursuing Wisdom

“How blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding.” ~ *Proverbs 3:13*

Wisdom is Bliss

According to the book of Proverbs, ignorance is not bliss. Naiveté and gullibility are not virtues to be adored but vices to be rejected. Instead, bliss—a state of blessedness and contentment—can only be experienced through the pursuit and acquisition of wisdom.

How should “wisdom” be defined? The Hebrew word for “wisdom” (חֵכֶם, *hokmāh*) emphasizes **skill—particularly skill in living**. As Jim Newheiser (*Opening Proverbs*, 19-20) states,

The essence of wisdom is skill, the ability to do a job. . . . The wisdom offered by the book of Proverbs is skill for living. . . . The goal of wisdom is that you might achieve a life of beauty and significance so that at the end of your days you will have accomplished something worthwhile and lasting.

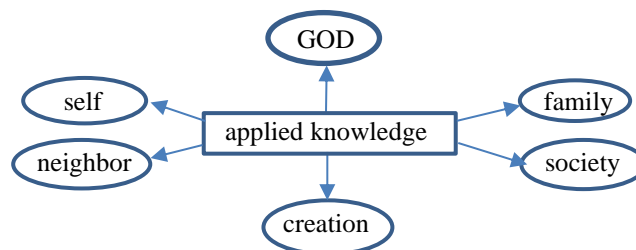
Tremper Longman (*How to Read Proverbs*, 14-15) provides another helpful definition:

Wisdom is the skill of living. It is a practical knowledge that helps one know how to act and how to speak in different situations. Wisdom entails the ability to avoid problems, and the skill to handle them when they present themselves. Wisdom also includes the ability to interpret other people’s speech and writing in order to react correctly to what they are saying to us.

Similarly, Richard Mayhue (*Practicing the Proverbs*, 42) writes,

Wisdom reflects the intent and discipline to make godly choices in a world filled with sinful distractions and detours. Wisdom represents the culmination of knowing and understanding carried to its practical and ultimate end. Wisdom involves *knowing* the facts of divine revelation in Scripture, as well as *understanding* them in the sense of comprehending God’s intention that they lead to a life of redemption and practical sanctification. *Wisdom* then engages the human intellect and will to translate this knowledge and understanding into a pattern of godly experience as the habit of one’s life.

In other words, the wisdom about which the Bible speaks originates in God and is made known through His revelation. It is inherently *practical*—not speculative, theoretical, or abstract. It cannot be relegated to a sphere of life or a day of the week. It speaks to the whole of life and to all of life’s seasons. It provides what is lacking in every man—the know-how to navigate the treacherous paths of life successfully, to the glory and pleasure of God.



In the last study (“Forsaking Folly,” 9/23/2020), we observed nine truths about foolishness. Now we will observe nine truths about the antithesis of folly—*wisdom*.

1. Wisdom originates in God alone.

Solomon teaches that man is not born innocent, nor does he become wise automatically with age. Instead, man's propensity from the very beginning is to resist wisdom, and left to his own devices he will only become more entrenched in foolish as he grows older (Prov 19:27; 22:15). Foolishness is innate to him.

Wisdom, on the other hand, is external. It is alien to man in his fallen condition, but is offered to him by God. Solomon teaches that wisdom is **supernatural**—not natural. In the words of James, it is “from above,” not from below (James 3:17).

- **2:6** – “For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding.”

It is noteworthy that Solomon does not simply say that “God” gives wisdom. He uses here (as often throughout the book) the personal name for the God of Israel, יהוה (**Yahweh, “the LORD”**), to show that wisdom comes from *Him*—not some non-descript, impersonal divine power. Moreover, Solomon states that this wisdom comes from the LORD's “**mouth**.” Solomon recognized that even though he himself was an instrument for the disclosure of this wisdom, the instructions, assertions, and warnings of that wisdom were to be treated as coming from the mouth of Yahweh Himself. It was Yahweh's special revelation.

- Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Job 28:12-28; Daniel 2:21-22; James 1:5; 3:13-17

Ultimately, the Son of God—the Word—is described as the One “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:13).

2. Wisdom is offered to all without prejudice.

Solomon personifies wisdom as a street vendor calling out to the public. “Lady Wisdom” offers her blessings not to the elite, but to those in greatest need. She calls out specifically to the “naïve ones,” to the “simple-minded,” to the “scoffers” and “fools.”

- **1:20-22** – “Wisdom shouts in the street, she lifts her voice in the square; at the head of the noisy *streets* she cries out; at the entrance of the gates in the city she utters her sayings: ‘How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing and fools hate knowledge? Turn to my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you.’”
- **8:1-3** – “Does not wisdom call, and understanding lift up her voice? On top of the heights beside the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gates, at the opening to the city, at the entrance of the doors, she cries out.”

The primary demand in her invitation is **to repent**—שוב, *shuv*, “turn back to” (1:23)—and she promises blessings to each and every one who heeds that command:

- **1:23** – “Turn to my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you.” See also 8:17.

But even though Lady Wisdom calls clearly to all, her voice is not the only one heard. In the marketplace of human life there are many competing voices. Solomon specifically arranges his instructions in the first nine chapters of Proverbs around these competing calls: (a) the call of *sinners* (1:10-17) vs. the call of *wisdom* (1:18-33); the call of *wisdom* (2:1-15) vs. the call of the *forbidden woman* (2:16-19); the call of the *adulteress* (7:6-23) vs. the call of *wisdom* (8:1-36); and the call of *wisdom* (9:1-6) vs. the call of *folly* (9:13-18). These rivaling calls appeal to the *same audience*, and sometimes even use the *same words*. But they are antithetic to true wisdom and lead down very different paths.

3. Wisdom is possible only for the humble.

Humility is the acknowledgment that the authority for knowing what you know lies outside of self:

- **11:2** – “When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom.”
- **12:15** – “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.”

A key test for the presence of humility is to examine your use of the 1st person singular pronouns (“I,” “my,” “me”). The dominant use of these pronouns in a *positive* sense suggests pride and the resistance to true wisdom. The dominant use of these pronouns in a *negative* sense suggests humility and a receptivity to wisdom. Pride is presumptuous and exaggerated self-confidence. Humility is a modest, cautious, and lowly self-assessment. See James 4:6-10.

4. Wisdom is imparted through other wise men.

Although wisdom originates in God, it is imparted through human *channels*—namely, *wise men*.

- **13:20** – “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”
- **22:17-18** – “Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your mind to my knowledge; for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, that they may be ready on your lips.”
- Prov 12:15; 13:14; 15:31; 19:20

In addition to the law of *cause-and-effect*, Solomon also emphasizes **the law of assimilation**. Both laws are essential for understanding the book of Proverbs. The law of assimilation teaches that one *assimilates* or *absorbs* the convictions, attitudes, and behaviors of those with whom he associates most closely. This influence may come in the form of friends, heroes, and favorite musicians, new pundits, social media accounts, preachers, and writers. This influence extends even to a person’s development of vocabulary, speech patterns, preferences, and opinions in life. As creatures, we are inevitably impacted by the environment of ideas and people with whom we associate.

In the same way that this assimilation can lead to disaster (Prov 13:20; 1 Cor 15:33), it can lead to successful living. God has created man to be influenced, but by the right people and toward the right goals. Ultimately, this assimilation is designed to occur in the most basic and noble form of influence: **the father-son relationship**.

- Prov 3:1; 4:1-2

5. Wisdom is acquired with difficulty.

Solomon places the responsibility to acquire wisdom squarely on the shoulders of each individual. Moreover, this pursuit is never passive. It requires painstaking effort. Finally, it is a quest that never ends.

- Prov 4:7; 9:8-9; 13:1; 15:32-33; 19:20; 19:27; 23:12

A key word in Proverbs is the term translated as “**instruction**” or “**discipline**” (מוֹסֵר, *musar*). It is a term used to refer to chastisement, training, or warning. It is especially common in the child-rearing contexts of Proverbs, and includes both verbal and corporal aspects—verbal and physical chastisement.

The one truly committed to wisdom recognizes the value of this chastisement, rebuke, and correction in their many forms. He values their long-term value above the momentary pain and shame they bring. Consequently, “A wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire counsel” (1:5).

6. Wisdom is more valuable than wealth.

Solomon teaches that the pursuit of wisdom should far exceed the pursuit of material wealth.

- Prov 3:13-15; 8:10-11, 19; 16:16; 1 Kings 3:5-15

This comparison strikes at one of the most fundamental problems of men today: **the allure of the material**. Many men affirm the value of wisdom in principle, but their daily practice shows a preoccupation with careers, possessions, vacations, material hobbies, and temporary pleasures. Solomon teaches that our “riches” should be used to acquire wisdom (“Buy truth, and do not sell it, get wisdom and instruction and understanding,” 23:23), not the other way around.

7. Wisdom manifests itself in righteousness.

Wisdom does not exist in secrecy. Those around a wise man will never be shocked to learn he is pursuing wisdom. A wise man will be recognized by his fruit: dignity, truthfulness, justice, and simplicity.

- Prov 8:6-9; James 3:13-18

8. Wisdom produces the rewards of a fulfilled life.

The law of **cause-and-effect** will once again be apparent. The one who sows wisdom will reap blessings.

- **1:33** – “But he who listens to me shall live securely and will be at ease from the dread of evil.”
- **3:13** – “How blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding.”
- Prov 2:1-22; 3:16-18; 4:7-9; 28:26; 8:32-36; 19:8; 24:3-4, 14

Solomon was not the first “Prosperity Preacher.” Rather, he recognized the immense benefits that would come—spiritually and materially—to the one who by wisdom would avoid the hard path of the fool.

9. Wisdom spreads joy to others.

Whereas foolishness creates collateral damage, the acquisition of wisdom creates the reverse—a ripple effect of expanding joy and blessing to those around the one who grows in wisdom.

- Prov 10:1; 15:20; 23:15; 23:24-25; 27:11; 29:3

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day for the rest of this year (September 2020 to December 2021).
- Read the proverbs listed under points 6, 7, 8, and 9 above. Make observations on what these proverbs teach about each of these last four characteristics of wisdom.
- Review the emphasis of all nine characteristics of wisdom. Do you find these truths about wisdom manifest in your own experience? Give explanations.
- Define “the law of assimilation.” Are you today assimilating the convictions, attitudes, and behaviors of other wise men? Describe concrete ways this is happening in your life.
- Point 5 asserts that wisdom is acquired only with great difficulty. Can you say that you are committed to that? How does that commitment show in your priorities?

This Week’s Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: Oct 7 – “Building Relationships”