

The Heart of Wisdom

Series: Proverbs, Seven Messages

by Steve Zeisler

The best example of a popular contemporary proverbialist is an advice column in the local newspaper. I've clipped an item from Ann Landers offering "Six Rules for Choosing a Husband." Consider these proverbs:

1. Find someone who laughs at the same things you laugh at. A shared sense of humor will make the good times better and the bad times less difficult.
2. If you want several children, choose a man whose skills and education will put him in the high salary category.
3. If you want a career, don't marry a man who hates his job. He will resent the time and attention that you give yours.
4. Two red flags: Does he have a hot temper, and is he hung up on his mother? These are two negatives that inevitably get worse after marriage, and both can be disastrous.
5. Don't get married because you're afraid to be alone. No wife is more alone than the one whose husband pays no attention to her.
6. No matter how wonderful his other qualities may be, do not marry a man who has hit you, threatened you, or humiliated you.

Now some of those are pretty thoughtful. There's a bit of wisdom in every one of these six words of advice as to how to choose a husband. The creation of a good marriage is a subject of interest for just about everyone.

Wisdom for Everyone

One of the things that makes the book of Proverbs such a helpful book of the Bible for us in our ministry to those who don't know the Lord is that it also touches on very real, practical issues. It puts us on the same street as the non-Christian; it talks about life as we encounter it, and we discover that not only are we ourselves helped by its wisdom, but we have something to offer those young people, neighbors or others in our lives who are interested in the things that we are. This is a book in which, as we saw last week, wisdom calls out in the streets, not in the religious community. It's a book for the world.

There's something missing, though, isn't there, in the wisdom of Ann Landers a great hole at the center of that advice. In fact, just the title of the six proverbs suggests the hole: "Six Rules for Choosing a Husband." The learner is assumed to be an individual endeavoring to find a man who will meet her needs in a marriage relationship. The idea in these six proverbs is to find the right person to make you happy. What is not addressed in the six proverbs is how to become a person who can succeed in marriage; how to trust God for healing,

forgiveness, and renewal yourself, woman or man, so that you bring something to contribute to the marriage you're entering into.

Furthermore, there is nothing said here about the mystery the Bible speaks of, that marriage is an illustration to teach us about Jesus Christ and his church. It overlooks the fact that marriage is something much more than just a human enterprise; it's a signpost to the heavens. Nothing is said in Ann Landers about that. There's no thought given to the question of how one's spiritual gifts complement those of a spouse so that they might serve God more effectively. What's missing, in summary, is all the perspective that the Bible gives for marriage. Unrecognized is the role of God overcoming loneliness by giving a man and woman to one another, or the certainty that failures and inadequacies can be a springboard for growth. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," and little of lasting value is gained without humility before the Lord.

Another observation we've made that sets the context is that the initial chapters of the book of Proverbs present a series of lessons that a father is teaching his son. A godly father is with his young son, an early adolescent, we can well imagine, and with his arm around him, is talking to him about life. That is very obviously the case as we turn to Prov.2:1, which is the second of these discourses. The father begins:

My son, if you will receive my sayings, And treasure my commandments within you, Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures....

Eventually in the maturing process we begin to think God's thoughts after him

Listen Carefully

Now this is clearly a son who is just beginning to face adult realities and to become responsible for himself. The sayings and commandments are offered as new, wisdom's treasures yet to be discovered. Now look over at Proverbs 3 for a moment. It has a different beginning to it: "My son, do not forget my teaching." Remember the things learned. We'll see when we get to Prov.3 that the image before us there is that of a grown son whose danger later in life is forgetting the things that he learned, the foundation that was put in place to begin with. But Proverbs 2 is clearly the word of a father to a young man who is about to embark on life in the real world.

The young man is to begin by being receptive to the words, the commands, the revelation that his father will present to him. His father, a godly mentor, has taken in the truths of God, understands the Scriptures, and has sensitivity to how they apply to life. It's the job of the young son, to begin with, to sit still and listen. He is to receive his father's sayings and treasure them. "Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding."

Then the son is to become active, having listened carefully and recognized in humility that he doesn't know everything yet. He is to begin to actively pursue and live out the things that he has learned. He is to cry for discernment, lift his voice for understanding, seek her as silver, search for her as for hidden treasure, and so on. He is to get involved, apply, seek out and care about the things of God.

For the second time in my life, I'm embarked on the process of teaching a child to drive. It's a unique experience. Learning to drive is a rite of passage that everybody has to go through. Most of the adults in this room have drivers' licenses, I imagine, and you remember learning to drive yourself. There is a great deal of enthusiasm built in. It's not like teaching your son how to weed the garden or something he's not at all interested in.

Driving a car is something in which you can count on interest, to begin with, because the child realizes that if the skill is gained, all kinds of opportunities open up. Doors open, freedom is gained, there are places to go, things to do, girls to impress! And it's true for many kids that, especially as they get toward age 15, they start watching you behind the wheel. And their initial sense is, "I know what the deal is. You sit on the left side instead of the right side. You put the key in. You push the pedals, and the car goes." So you need to insist on receptivity to start with. "Now sit still for a moment. I have a few things I have to tell you. First, the mechanical operation of the car is more difficult than you thought. It seems easy when someone who knows what they're doing does it, but it is a skill that I need to teach you about. But beyond mechanical operation there is also all the business of traffic, alertness, defensive driving, and varieties of road and weather conditions. I need for you, child of mine, to sit still and let me teach you for awhile."

Then, however, there has to be an engagement in the business of driving. Having listened, the child has to get behind the wheel and try his hand. That's how the father of Proverbs 2 is thinking of the moral life. He's saying, "The world is complicated, dangerous, and wonderful. There are pitfalls, and I want to tell you what's out there. Listen carefully and then learn to care about it yourself. Care about living a life that's worth while. Cry out for wisdom, search for what's really worth knowing." The process continues, then, from being a listener, to being a doer, and finally to the center of it all, in Prov.2:5:

**Then you will discern the fear of the LORD,
And discover the knowledge of God.**

Discerning Fear of the Lord

We parents hope for our children to listen to us, to step out into life, and by the grace of God, to come to that point, having cared about what's valuable, of encountering the living God himself. Now you'll notice in Prov.2:6 that it is God who goes on to teach wisdom. I want to talk about that in a minute, but verse 5 makes a very important statement about something that is prior to learning from God, and that is that we must fear him and know him as a living person. The center of things is not what God says. The center of things, the heart of wisdom, is the living God himself. Derrick Kidner, in his commentary on Proverbs, says that this verse marvelously holds together two poles, awe and intimacy, the fear of God and the knowledge of God. Knowledge suggests closeness, understanding, love, and intimacy. Fear suggests awe, respect, and reverence. The young man embarking on life who finds this God has found the center of everything. Then the process continues on in Prov.2:6:

**For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
Guarding the paths of justice, And He preserves the way of His godly ones.**

Look carefully at what's happened. The father has talked to his son and has helped him get started living life. The son has found a relationship with the living God, and now it is the mouth of the Lord, not the mouth of the father that is the teacher. Now it is God himself who is discipling the son, and not the father. I think this a wonderful insight as to what it means to be a parent. We begin the process assuming a role of great influence teaching and modeling the truth. We urge our children to receive instruction and then to spread their wings and try things on their own. The goal is to work ourselves out of a job, so that our kids are dependent on the Lord himself.

One of the phenomena of our day that strikes me every time I encounter it is young adults who are increasingly afraid of leaving home. More and more people into their late 20's and early 30's are living with their parents. They are in some way emotionally traumatized by the world that is out there. Some have tried marriage once,

and that didn't work, and now they have no confidence in themselves, and they don't know where to go. They hope for the protection of the generation who have gone before them. What we long to do is give our children a relationship with God and free them to be disciplined by the Master himself so that they can make their way in life and be for their generation representatives of the King.

The Lord's Protection

The imagery in Prov.2:7 and following is that of a journey, you'll notice. "He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice...the way of His godly ones." A walk, a path, and a way all suggest some kind of journey, getting from one place to the next. That's a good metaphor for life, isn't it? And the Lord is there in wisdom to protect the one journeying. One of his gifts is to give shielding, guarding, and protection, because there are cliffs that you can fall off of, wrong turns that you can make on this side or that side, and forks in the road where you need direction. The writer of Proverbs is very clear in 2:12,16:

**To deliver you from the way of evil, From the man who speaks perverse things...
There are bad men out there who are dangerous and who will seduce you into a path that is destructive. There are
bad women out there, too.
To deliver you from the strange woman, From the adulteress who flatters with her words....**

This journey needs the presence of God, the wisdom of God, and he becomes a shield and protector.

My wife Leslie and I were in Mexico this last week. Coming back, the journey home took us through four different airports, three different flights, two different countries, and at least two languages. It seemed to me that some of the people we talked to didn't speak either Spanish or English in a way I could recognize! That trip from where we began in Mexico back to our home was pretty complicated. If you weren't used to international travel, especially if you didn't speak either one of the languages involved in getting from where we started to where we ended up, you could find yourself a bit overwhelmed trying to discover where to go in what airport for which destination, which document to produce for what official, which X-rays to have for which baggage, which gate to go through at what time. It's a complex process getting from one terminal to another, hurrying from here to there, and anticipating all the problems. And life is like that. Life's journey is infinitely more complex than the Mexico City Airport. It requires the wisdom of God to help us on the way.

The last point I'd like to make in this section of Proverbs 2 is the teaching of verses 9 and 10. We have moved from the words of the father to engagement in trying life to discovering the fear and knowledge of God, hearing the word of God and becoming attentive to him, reading the Scriptures and praying. The last step in this maturing process, in Prov.2:9, says this:

**Then you will discern righteousness and justice
And equity and every good course.
For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul....**

Eventually in the maturing process what happens is that we begin to think the thoughts of God after him, don't we? We have learned enough and have been disciplined enough by our God that we begin to see life the way he does. It is not just a voice external to us, the Spirit of God whispering to us, but the things that God thinks become our own convictions. They enter our heart. We begin to be able to trust our judgment more and more because we have learned the hard lessons of life. Such are the people we look to for leadership and seek out for advice. Those are the people who become the fathers for the next generation.

One of the things that occasionally concerns me about modern evangelicalism is a failure to acknowledge the

place of this sort of mature wisdom. Many Christians feel as if it's more spiritual to have visions and ecstatic prophecies, some kind of miraculous intervention from God directing people one way or another, directing a church to start this or stop that. But I think that's really a sign of immaturity. The most mature individual or congregation is the one that can think, having been trained by the word of God, the way God thinks. They can look at the world they live in and see where open doors exist, help people discover their gifts and set them on their way, and can see God at work in the collective thinking. That I believe is suggested by Prov.2:9-10. "Wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul." It becomes your own.

"Do not forget"

This son has grown up beautifully before our eyes, hasn't he? He has godly parents who care enough to both instruct and urge involvement. He has come to a knowledge of the living God and then has become a learner as the Lord disciplines him. He's growing, and he has become someone who is wonderful to know, bright and thoughtful. Increasingly he thinks the way God thinks. He is somebody you'd seek out, somebody you'd like to have for your friend or your neighbor.

Now comes the second danger. We encounter it in Prov.3:1-10:

**My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your heart keep my commandments; For length of days and years of life,
And peace they will add to you.
Do not let kindness and truth leave you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart.
So you will find favor and good repute In the sight of God and man.
Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.
Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your body, And refreshment to your bones.
Honor the LORD from your wealth, And from the first of all your produce;
So your barns will be filled with plenty, And your vats will overflow with new wine.**

The goal is to work ourselves out of a job, so that our children are dependent on the Lord.

The young man has grown to maturity, and is now in his adulthood. Yet he needs to hear from his elderly father, doesn't he? At that point in his life, his father is no longer part of his daily life, but the occasional adviser; not the director, but the godly, sage, caring grandfather who comes to his son and says, "Son, remember. In the day when success leads to the tendency to forget where it came from, remember my words."

Prov.3:2 suggests that he is living a peaceful life. And the wiser the man and the wiser the woman, the more likely they are to live at peace; they anticipate problems and avoid them. They live successful lives and perhaps lengthy ones. Verse 8 talks about healing to the body, refreshment to the bones. Verse 10 speaks of gaining significant wealth and prosperity. The happier this life is, the more at ease we are, the less likely we are to pray and focus our attention back to the God who gave them all.

The father uses strong language: "Bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart" these commands, these words about the fear and knowledge of God, this business about the centrality of the Master, the Creator himself. Bind them around your neck. This is referring to some kind of leather strap that you wear as a necklace that is close to your heart, present in front of you so you're aware of it all the time. A tablet is not a piece of parchment; it's not like one of those little Post-its that you write on and stick on your refrigerator. A tablet was made of clay, stone, or something else that had to be chiseled into. It's for something you're taking very seriously; it's supposed to last. You're to chisel these truths into the tablet of your heart.

Trust in the Lord

He's urging activity on the part of this son because he's come to a point in his life where grave issues are at stake. He has a good reputation with God and man, he has everything he wanted in life, he's living long, and he's healthy and successful. He needs to chisel into the tablet of his heart the warning that it is the fear of God that is the beginning and center of everything. Proverbs 3:7 suggests the alternative doesn't it? "Do not be wise in your own eyes." That's really the warning that concerns this father.

Proverbs 3:5 is a memory verse for many of us. Perhaps you grew up in a Sunday School class or some other place where you were urged to memorize Proverbs 3:5: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." This is the great reminder: Trust in the Lord with all your heart. And make not only the positive but the negative choice, and refuse to lean on your own understanding. Do both at the same time: Trust in the Lord with all your heart and deliberately refuse to trust yourself. The word "all" is prominent in Proverbs 3:5. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, in all your ways acknowledge him. Don't allow areas of your life where God has no access. You need to give him all your heart, all your ways. This decision to place God first and not lose sight of the giver of gifts is very important.

We read the story of Joseph (Genesis 39) this morning. He's an example of the wisdom of Proverbs in many ways. He was raised by a good father, but at an early age underwent a series of tragedies. At the hands of his brothers, as you know, he was sold into slavery in Egypt, in Potiphar's house. And yet everywhere he went things came up roses for him. He was a brilliant young man, capable, handsome, a "golden boy." His activities brought riches to his master, so Potiphar kept giving him more responsibility, and everything that Joseph touched turned to gold. He was succeeding, gaining power and authority, doing well in his field of endeavor. It's exactly at that point that an offer was made, not only to have the riches of Potiphar's house, but to have the wife of Potiphar. He was being given the opportunity to supplant his master.

Those are the dangers that come along with success, always at an oblique angle, something unsuspected, if we're not well defended against them. But Joseph was very clear-headed, wasn't he? "How could I sin against God?" His master didn't deserve to have him treat him this way, but the heart of his statement to Potiphar's wife was that he couldn't sin against God. He lived his life in the presence of a God whom he respected utterly. Because of that he would not give in to her, to the point of running out of the house and leaving his cloak behind.

Honor God First

He had so deeply chiseled into his own heart the wisdom of the Lord that he didn't forget it in the midst of great success. The practical exhortation of Prov. 3:9-10 make the point in just one area of life. It's very pointed: "Honor the Lord from your wealth, and from the first of all your produce; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine." If you wouldn't have your financial success overtake you, seduce you, and keep your heart from the Lord, then give from the very first of your produce. As the first choice in what you do with material blessings, give to God's work and honor his name, as a way of reminding yourself of the lesson that the grandfather now speaks to his son.

Humble Obedience

Finally, remember the words of Jesus to the Pharisees. He said, "You pay tithes of mint and rue [the smallest seed in the garden] and every kind of garden herb...." (Luke 11:42.) The Pharisees would count out 10 cabbages, 10 carrots, 10 sunflower seeds, 10 of everything. And very meticulously, they'd take one of each batch of 10 and set it aside for the Lord's work. He also said the Pharisees broadened their phylacteries

(Matthew 23:5). The phylacteries were devices used to bind the word of God to your body your wrist or forehead or some other place. They'd take little portions of the word of God, put it in a pouch, and literally fix it to their head or arm with leather straps. But the Pharisees weren't just concerned with getting the thing attached; they did it with broad phylacteries so that everyone could see. This business of putting God first was all done for show. It was done mechanically, it was done with pride, and Jesus said it would send them to hell.

The last word I would offer us in considering Proverbs 2 and 3 is that even hearing "trust in the Lord with all your heart" and determining to do it is not enough. Even in that we can become Pharisaical if we do not proceed with humility and recognize our own capacity for failure, self-love, and sin. We must depend on Jesus and only on him for everything. This business of living life in the streets, learning the wisdom of God, has to everlastingly be attended by enough humility that we never assume that we can live it out in our own strength.

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