

WISDOM CRIES OUT

SERIES: CHOOSE WISELY



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Proverbs 1

First Message

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Proverbs 1

I'm always interested in how people answer the question, "What's the best advice you've ever received?" Marilyn Robinson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, says the most important lesson she ever received came from some teachers when she was a child: "You have to live with your mind your whole life."¹

If you have to live with your mind your whole life, what will you do with it? What will you expose it to? What will you fix it on, if you fix it on anything?

This summer, we're going to study the book of Proverbs. I suggest we expose our minds to and fix our minds on it. The book of Proverbs will help us live with our minds in a life-enhancing way. The Proverbs feature short axioms based on broad observation. We begin with an overview of the themes in Proverbs 1.

I have attended every one of my high school reunions. One of the interesting things to observe at reunions is who's doing well and who's not doing well. In some cases, it's possible to observe a certain overturning of the order of things. Some who seemed to prosper as teenagers sometimes struggle later in life. Conversely, some who seemed to struggle as teenagers prosper later in life. Is there an explanation for this?

Listen to instruction

Proverbs 1:1-6:

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

- 2 To know wisdom and instruction,
to understand words of insight,**
- 3 to receive instruction in wise dealing,
in righteousness, justice, and equity;**
- 4 to give prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth—**
- 5 Let the wise hear and increase in learning,
and the one who understands obtain
guidance,**
- 6 to understand a proverb and a saying,
the words of the wise and their riddles.**

The Proverbs, mostly written by Solomon, contain important instructions on how to live. We have the possibility to gain much from the Proverbs that will help us make our way through life. Therefore, we have much to learn from the Proverbs that is eminently practical. Solomon uses multiple words to describe what we can gain from the Proverbs. It's as if he's exhausting the language to make his appeal: wisdom, instruction, insight, wise dealing, prudence, knowledge, discretion, learning, guidance. What else do you want?

But how are we to gain from what the book offers us? We must "receive instruction." We must "hear." We must give attention to the Proverbs. We must read. We must listen. To be instructed, of course, you must listen to and assimilate instruction. Easier said than done, especially these days, for at least two reasons.

First, the Proverbs often don't reveal their treasures at first glance. They are "pithy, terse statements that invite the learner to engage, probe, and ponder to get at the deeper meaning that lies below the surface."² Therefore, to benefit from the Proverbs, we have to give them our time and attention. We must fix our minds on the Proverbs.

Second, who wants to give their time and attention to such an endeavor these days when you can be more easily and instantly engaged by the internet, social media, Netflix, video games, and the like? We have reached the point in our world where if something doesn't engage you instantly, if something requires sustained concentration, it isn't worth your time. For today, most people would rather be entertained than instructed, unless grades and degrees are attached to being instructed. We live in an age of distraction, disruption, and interruption.

One of my regrets is that I watched too much television when I was growing up. I was more interested in being entertained than instructed. Frankly, I wonder if my mind today would be in a better place if I had watched less television. I mean, did I really need to watch reruns of *Gilligan's Island*? Come to think of it, did I really need to watch *Gilligan's Island* in the first place?

Proverbs versus Snapchat

Many insiders in the tech industry today are lamenting what they have wrought.

Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook, said:

The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them, . . . was all about: ‘How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?’”

Now, Parker says of social media, “God only knows what it’s doing to our children’s brains.”³

Sandy Parakilas, who was a product manager at Uber and coordinated privacy compliance for Facebook applications, observes:

*One of the core things going on is that they [companies] have incentives to get people to use their service as much as they possibly can, so that has driven them to create a product that is built to be addictive. Facebook is a fundamentally addictive product that is designed to capture as much of your attention as possible without any regard for the consequences. Tech addiction has a negative impact on your health and on your children’s health. It enables bad actors to do new bad things, from electoral meddling to sex trafficking. It increases narcissism and people’s desire to be famous on Instagram. And all of those consequences ladder up to the business model of getting people to use the product as much as possible through addictive, intentional-design tactics, and then monetizing their users’ attention through advertising.”*⁴

Perhaps, given our consumption of media, video games, Netflix, and the like, we might want to devote a little more of our time to the Scriptures and, in this season, to the Proverbs. Which, we might ask, is a better source of wisdom: Proverbs or Snapchat?

So, are the Proverbs worth the effort? Let’s see.

Content of instruction

Proverbs 1:7:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

This passage represents the essential instruction of the Proverbs.

What does it mean to “fear” the Lord? To fear the Lord is to be captivated by him, to be in awe of him, to be overwhelmed by him—not only by his power but also by his goodness. When God’s people encounter him in the Hebrew Scriptures, their first response is fear and trembling. However, invariably, some assurance comes their way, often accompanied by a commission. When we fear the Lord, we hold the attributes of God together, both his power and his love, both his holiness and his goodness.

What does the fear of the Lord get you? In the book of Proverbs, it gets you knowledge—that is, knowledge that matters for the way you think, the way you make decisions, the way you relate, the way you live. The companion verse to Proverbs 1:7 is Proverbs 9:10: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, / and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” The kind of knowledge that the fear of the Lord gets you is wisdom for life. The most important knowledge you can acquire comes from fear of the Lord.

So, if we want wisdom for life, the most important knowledge that you can acquire, the Proverbs tell us to worship the Lord, draw near to him, and stand in awe of his greatness. This kind of knowledge is available to everyone and is completely unrelated to one’s IQ or grade-point average. There are millions of brilliant men and women in this world who despise wisdom and instruction, and Proverbs calls them “fools.” Don’t be a fool. Instead, fear the Lord.

As we fear the Lord, we recognize that he is trustworthy—that we can believe that his instructions in the Scriptures, not least the Proverbs, are for our benefit. What happens if we don’t listen to his instructions?

Consequences for not listening

Proverbs 1:10:

My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.

Proverbs 1:15-18:

**My son, do not walk in the way with them;
hold back your foot from their paths,
16 for their feet run to evil,
and they make haste to shed blood.
17 For in vain is a net spread
in the sight of any bird,**

18 but these men lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives.

Proverbs 1:29-32:

**Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the Lord,
30 would have none of my counsel
and despised all my reproof,
31 therefore they shall eat the fruit of
their way, and have their fill of their
own devices.
32 For the simple are killed by their
turning away, and the complacency of
fools destroys them**

Solomon advises us to listen to instruction—specifically, the instruction to fear the Lord. However, there are those who offer different counsel. They would “entice” us to “walk in the way with them” and ultimately to “run to evil” with them. The lure to do “it,” whatever it is, is strong when most people seem to be doing it and when those people seem to be enjoying themselves. The lure then becomes especially strong when some of those people invite you to join them. And now, of course, some of those people are enticing you through your device to, in so many words, “click on this.”

But notice what happens to these individuals. They “lie in wait for their own blood”; they “set an ambush for their own lives”; they will “eat the fruit of their way”; they will “have their fill of their own devices.” By their choices, they harm themselves. In the book of Proverbs, when you sin, you not only sin against God, you not only sin against others, you also sin against yourself. You harm yourself.

Funny-looking cigarette

When I was in college, I attended a party along with some friends. In the end, about a dozen of us were sitting around a table. Across the table, I noticed that someone was taking a long and apparently satisfying drag on a funny-looking cigarette. That individual then passed the joint to the person next to him, and that person also took a long and apparently satisfying drag. It was then that I recognized that this funny-looking cigarette was heading my way, and that I would have to make a decision what to do with it.

Sinners were enticing me to toke—I mean walk—in the way with them and ultimately to run to evil with them. Everyone—literally everyone present at the

party—was doing it, and they seemed to be very much enjoying themselves. What would you do?

So, there are consequences for not listening. Are there rewards for listening? Indeed there are.

Rewards for listening

Proverbs 1:8-10:

**Hear, my son, your father's instruction,
and forsake not your mother's teaching,
9 for they are a graceful garland for
your head
and pendants for your neck.
10 My son, if sinners entice you,
do not consent.**

Proverbs 1:20-21:

**Wisdom cries aloud in the street,
in the markets she raises her voice;
21 at the head of the noisy streets she
cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:**

Proverbs 1:33:

**"[B]ut whoever listens to me will dwell
secure and will be at ease, without dread
of disaster."**

The wisdom imparted in the Proverbs “cries aloud,” “cries out,” and “speaks” where people are: in the markets, in busy streets, and at the city gates. If sinners would entice people, wisdom cries out to be heard.

The instruction in the book of Proverbs, in this case coming from parents, is likened to a “graceful garland,” or crown, for your head and “pendants,” or necklaces, for your neck. Both crowns and necklaces are beautiful, and the instruction of the Proverbs, if heeded, will make one a beautiful, graceful person. Also, crowns and necklaces were worn by kings and princes, so the instruction of the Proverbs will also help you reign in life (Genesis 41:42, Daniel 5:29).

The wisdom of the Proverbs will help you deal with fear, because if you heed it, you will “dwell secure” and “be at ease, without dread of disaster.” Wisdom will not necessarily lessen the possibility of disaster, but it will enable you to be secure in God and trust him in the face of disaster, knowing that God is sovereign over

disaster and that he even uses disaster to advance his good purposes. Fear the Lord, and you will not need to fear anything else.

Heading my way

The funny-looking cigarette was heading my way. It reached the person to my left. After he took a long and apparently satisfying drag on the joint, he handed it to me. I took the joint in my hand and . . . passed it to the person on my right. It made it all the way around the table. Everyone partook except for me.

Why didn't I partake? I must admit, I felt awkward not to do what everyone else was doing. It wasn't as if I wasn't embarrassed. But in that moment, I was more afraid of what that joint would do to me than feelings of embarrassment. So I let it pass.

But what if you didn't let the joint pass, and what if you smoked another one and another one after that, and what if you started drinking and couldn't stop drinking? A lot of folks from our Recovery Ministry are with us this morning, and I want to say: we need you. Like the Proverbs, you have much to teach us. You have much to teach us about what sort of choices to make and the ramifications of such choices, you have much to teach us about the depth of God's love for us, and you have much to teach us about transparency in community.

In the end, the vast majority of the decisions most of us have to make have nothing to do with whether we smoke a certain kind of cigarette or not. And they add up, don't they? They contribute to the kind of person you're becoming—whether you're becoming a beautiful, graceful person who reigns in life and dwells secure or whether you eat the fruit of your own way and have the fill of your own devices.

The long view

Proverbs 1—indeed, the entire book of Proverbs—encourages us to take the long view.

Kids, this is not easy for some of you. You feel things, and you want things, and it's hard for you to see why you shouldn't follow your feelings and satisfy your wants. For most of you, God is right now addressing your inconsistent ability to say yes to the right things and no to the wrong things. How's he doing it? One word. Parents.

God has given you parents, and other trusted adults, who have lived longer and have seen the long-term implications of choices, both good and bad. Plus, unlike you, they have fully developed prefrontal cortexes, which control the executive functioning of the brain! Remember Proverbs 1:8: "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, / and forsake not your mother's teaching."

My axiom

If the Proverbs feature short axioms based on broad observation, let me make such an observation and offer such an axiom after having attended my most recent high school reunion.

I interacted both with those who knew the Lord and those who didn't know the Lord. I took note of how they were doing. I took note of who was present and who was absent and for what reasons. I even took note of who was dead and who was alive and for what reasons.

Of those who knew the Lord, one was trying to figure out how to retire early and move near a prison to pursue his passion for prison ministry, another was serving on the board of Young Life and engaging in visitation ministry, another had adopted three children from foreign countries, and yet another wrote the drama for this morning's worship service! All of them married well. They chose wisely.

So, what's my axiom? The same as Solomon's.

Fear the Lord.

Endnotes

¹ Paul Sehgal, "An Eccentric, Exasperation, Deep Mind" (*The New York Times*, February 21, 2018), C1.

² Brian Morgan, "Proverbs: A Life Well-Managed," Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino website (pbcc.org/sermons/morgan/7235.html).

³ Nola Kulwin, "The Internet Apologizes," *New York Magazine* (April 16, 2018).

⁴ Kulwin.