

FOOLPROOF: The Wisdom of Proverbs

Wisdom is Essential

Proverbs 1-2

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The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction (Prov. 1:1–7).

A thriving youth ministry and a wonderful youth pastor were gifts from God to me during my teenage years. I was raised in a home with Christian parents who lived out the gospel personally and in service to others. Sunday worship bled into our home life. Both of my parents were involved in Bible Study Fellowship, and my mom served as a teaching leader. Part of her study method was to secure audio cassettes of the best preachers in the country and listen to their sermons as we traveled. I had the privilege of a home saturated with the Word of God.

In the context of parents who loved the Lord, youth ministry served as a reinforcement. It cemented the truths that my parents were teaching me with the voices of others. No teenager thinks his parents are “cool.” Even if it’s true, they won’t admit it! But my youth leaders and youth pastors were “cooler” than most.

Between long-distance bike rides, appearances at sporting events, spontaneous runs to a convenience store before youth ministry, or a casual conversation, youth ministry was like Miracle-Gro to the roots of my faith, planted by the Spirit, and nurtured by my parents.

It was in this context that my youth pastor gave us a simple challenge: “If you do nothing else in reading the Bible, at least read a chapter in Proverbs every day.” With thirty-one chapters, it’s an easy formula: read the chapter corresponding to the day of the month. And that’s what I did through most of junior high and high school. My default reading plan was one chapter in the book of Proverbs each day.

As I read the book of Proverbs, I couldn’t believe how relevant it was to my life. It was stunning to me how individual verses spoke directly into the challenges and issues that I was facing. It was exhilarating to see that a book written thousands of years earlier walked with me into school each day.

I came to see the book of Proverbs as a life-giving book. It addressed the real issues that I faced. It warned me about the dangers of being a fool. Proverbs provided wisdom.

Foolproof

During June and July, I and some of our other pastors are going to walk you through this important book. In the first few weeks, we are going to cover the concept of wisdom. Chapters 1-9 serve as an introduction. Then we'll turn to various topics that are covered throughout chapters 10-31. These chapters are designed to be a repository of truth, but they are not organized by themes within each chapter. So we'll have to jump around. A chapter-by-chapter study of Proverbs doesn't work well.

Over the next eight Sundays, we'll talk about subjects such as foolishness, immorality, friendships, money, laziness, words, pride, and self-control. So, if you know somebody who "needs to hear these," invite them. And while you are doing that, I'm sure you'll listen for yourself as well.

Today we start our journey by looking at the first two chapters to learn why wisdom is essential.

We're going to see the (1) vision, (2) warning, (3) invitation, and (4) value of wisdom.

The Vision

As I said earlier, chapters 1-9 serve as an introduction to the concept of wisdom. And the first nine verses of chapter 1 are an introduction to the introduction.

The book begins with an identification of Solomon as the author. He wrote much of the book or collected these proverbs. Chapters 30 and 31 are attributed to a man named Agur who may have been an advisor to Solomon and to Lemuel who is identified as king, but we don't know of where.¹

You may remember that in 1 Kings 3 Solomon was allowed to ask God for anything. He appealed for wisdom—to have "...an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil..." (1 Kings 3:9). And the Lord gave it to him.

This book of the Bible is part of what is called the "wisdom literature." This would also include Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. This book is called "Proverbs," but do you know what a proverb is?

You could think of a proverb as a short, pithy statement with memorable truth. The Hebrew word is connected to the concept of a rule or governing principle. A proverb is something that, when said or quoted, you nod your head and say, "That's true. I need to remember that."

Proverbs reflects the application of truth to help us live day to day.

A proverb is different than a promise. Proverbs are true. They reflect biblical concepts. But they also reflect generalizations and probabilities.

¹ Crossway Bibles, [*The ESV Study Bible*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1186.

Let me give you an example: “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” (Prov. 3:1-2). Is this true? What about David Brainard or Jim Elliot? They died young.

Wisdom says, “Riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness” (Prov. 8:18). Is that always true? Are wise people always rich and wealthy?

One more that I’ve observed to be hurtful: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6). Does this mean if you teach your children and train them up in the way of the Lord that they will never reject Christ?

Do you see the challenge? It’s part of the reason why Proverbs, as a book of wisdom, needs to balance with other books of wisdom. Job, for instance, tells us that the righteous suffer. Or the book of Ecclesiastes says: “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (Eccles. 1:18).

So, you have to be careful with the book of Proverbs. You can’t read it or apply it like Romans, the Ten Commandments, or the Sermon on the Mount. For that reason, Proverbs is a favorite book for people who like to shut down conversations by citing Bible verses. It’s a really helpful tool, but it needs to be used correctly.

Maybe you’ve made the mistake that I’ve made many times: using a tool incorrectly. In the right context, it can be a constructive option. But used in the wrong way, an inappropriately-used tool can nearly cut your finger off! That’s the same with Proverbs.

It’s a powerful book. Take note of the words in the first four verses: wisdom, instruction, wise dealing in righteousness, justice, and equity. Proverbs isn’t just about truth; it’s about the application of truth. You see, it’s one thing to believe in justice, but it’s another thing to figure out what justice looks like.

Wisdom isn’t just knowing something; it’s knowing what’s important and how to apply it. And isn’t that the hardest part? That’s the debate we are seeing in our culture right now. Racism is wrong. Police brutality is wrong. Looting is wrong. But what do we do about it? That’s where things get challenging. The concept of truth is one thing, but it’s the application of it that we really need.

The book is written to people who are “simple,” those who are naïve, lacking intelligence, or lacking common sense (v. 4). It’s written to those who are young (v. 4). But it’s also written to those already wise (v. 5). As we are sure to see, wise people don’t come to the book of Proverbs and think, “I got this!”

In other words, everyone needs the book of Proverbs. No one possesses all the wisdom he or she needs.

Proverbs envisions a starting point and a caution: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7). The vision for this book relates to your posture towards God.

Since God is the author of all wisdom, since all truth resides with him, and since you and I are not like him, Proverbs begins with the fear of the Lord. The fountainhead of wisdom is a biblical understanding of who God is, who you are, the problem in the world, and the solution to it. This is the core message of the gospel—that God is holy, I am not, Jesus saves, and Christ is my life.

It's what God says through the Bible. And if you get this wrong, you'll never be able to rightly apply or learn biblical wisdom. In fact, verse 7 says, "...fools despise wisdom and instruction." That's what happens.

So, before we even start this book, let me ask you:

- What's your relationship with the Lord? Have you turned from your sins and toward Christ?
- What's your posture towards yourself and the Lord?
- Are you characterized by a teachable spirit?
- Do you desire wisdom?

Wisdom is essential. But it starts with the right vision.

The Warning

There's so much more here. Solomon issues a warning in verses 8-19. He wants you, the reader, to understand the stakes. Solomon's goal is not to freak you out. Rather, it is to motivate you.

Notice that verse 8 addresses "sons." This book is designed to be a repository of truths and cautions from a father and mother to their sons. Solomon appeals for a listening heart to "your father's instruction" and "your mother's teaching." He suggests that his son could be adorned with the wisdom of his parents (v. 9). In other words, there's something attractive here.

If you are a teenager, you need to apply this by recognizing that it's good to listen to your parents' instructions. No one loves you more than they do. Your parents are surely not perfect. But they have made more mistakes than you. So, listen to them.

But this doesn't just apply to teenagers. Two weeks ago, I was on a Zoom call with the high school seniors from our church. I told them that everyone is really just a junior higher inside. We are insecure, worried about cliques, and a bit rebellious. One of my observations through COVID-19 is the way societal pressure has brought out the rebellious junior higher in all of us. So, all of us need to listen to instruction!

What's the warning here? In verses 10-19, Solomon shows us how many foolish decisions happen. There's a pattern and a gravitational pull that are part of our broken world. In verse 10 it sounds like this: "If sinners entice you, do not consent."

The warning relates to a pervasive invitation to evil combined with a powerful peer pressure.

Notice the attractive temptation:

- “Come...let us lie in wait for blood...ambush the innocent” (v. 11)—a powerful plotting to prey upon the innocent.
- “Let us swallow them alive” (v. 12)—a boasting in their ability to be victorious in evil.
- “We shall fill our houses with plunder” (v. 13)—a greedy appeal for what will be gained.
- “We’ll have one purse” (v. 14)—a promise of community!

How many bad and foolish decisions in life have come from a path followed because “Everyone’s doing it” or “You don’t want to miss this one” and “It’s going to be amazing. Join us!”

Solomon’s advice is timeless and wise:

- Don’t walk in their path with them (we’ll see this advice a lot!) (v. 15)
- They run toward evil (v. 16)
- They are setting a trap for themselves (v. 17-18)
- Their pursuit will lead them toward internal destruction (v. 19)

The warning is clear. The path seems attractive at first, but it can be a situation where you gain the whole world and, yet, lose your soul.

Wisdom not only points out the right path, but it also warns about the wrong one. This is why the book of Proverbs is so critical. There’s not just something to be gained. There’s also a danger to avoid.

The Invitation

Chapter 1 continues by inviting readers to receive the invitation to embrace wisdom. In verses 20-33, wisdom is personified. Solomon wants to imagine Lady Wisdom walking among the busy activities of life making this appeal.

The previous appeal was made by a father to his son. We might assume this is in the context of the home. But now Lady Wisdom is in the streets (v. 20). Even more, she’s in the markets (v. 20). Then she’s in a noisy street and at the entrance of the city gates (v. 21).

Do you get the image? Wisdom is walking through the important intersections of life. Solomon wants us to see the broad applicability of wisdom to our lives. But he also wants us to see the tragedy and foolishness of not listening.

Wisdom then makes the following appeals:

- Wisdom laments the self-destruction of the ignorant, the scoffers, and the fools (v. 22)
- She offers and promises the opportunity to change with God’s help (v. 23)
- Wisdom mourns over the stubbornness of foolish people (vv. 24-25)
- She warns about the effects of foolishness (vv. 26-27)
- Wisdom identifies that she needs to be sought before the crisis hits (vv. 28-31)

It's a bleak picture. But I'm sure it's one with which you are familiar. Just think of the last time you said to yourself "What was I thinking?" or "Why didn't I listen?" Maybe you know someone that you warned but they refused to heed your counsel. Maybe you found yourself saying, "This didn't need to happen!" You are right! You know the heartache of watching a disaster happen that didn't need to happen. And that's why Lady Wisdom is walking through the culture and crying out to people.

It's also why the chapter ends with verses 32-33 which serve as a motivator to heed the invitation: "...whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster."

The Value

After such strong warnings, chapter 2 offers a more encouraging and winsome appeal. You should pursue wisdom because it is incredibly valuable. There are few things more important than learning to apply the truth of God to life.

In verses 1-4, Solomon suggests that wisdom should be intentionally pursued. Wisdom is something to be sought after like silver. It is to be something that we desire.

Wisdom is something God gives (vv. 5-6). It's a grace. Wisdom is a gift that reflects the character and heart of God. It's another evidence of God's kindness to us.

Why is wisdom valuable? Here are a few reasons:

- It is a shield to those who walk in integrity (v. 7)
- It guards the paths of justice (v. 8)
- It guides the steps of the saints (v. 8)
- It helps to discern what is fair and right (v. 9)
- It is delightful and helpful (v. 10)
- It protects you (v. 11)
- It delivers you from evil people (vv. 12-15)
- It rescues you from the path of sexual sin (vv. 16-19)
- It is the path of divine blessing (vv. 20-22)

Doesn't this make you want to know wisdom? Do you look around at our culture and see the need? Wisdom applies to everything. It is God's truth applied to life.

So, let me ask you a few questions:

- Where are you today in your relationship with your Creator? Do you fear the Lord? Do you know Jesus?
- What's your posture or attitude right now? Are you humble? Are you listening? Do you have a teachable spirit?
- Are you seeking wisdom? Do you want to be wise, or do you just want to be right? Do you want to be discerning, or do you just want people to agree with you? Do you want to learn from others, or do you want others to learn from you?

- How are you pursuing wisdom? Are you regularly shaping your mind and heart to God's? What are you saturating your soul with? Who in your life is helping you grow in wisdom?

This book is an essential part of God's resources to help us grow in grace. It's a book that can guide us in how to think when so much is uncertain.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge!