

WISDOM

FOR LIFE: PROVERBS

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Lakewood Press

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A Letter from the Senior Pastor

Greetings! Welcome to a new year. Over the course of 2020 we are going to be learning about biblical wisdom. We all want to live wisely and we all want to make wise decisions. We all look back on moments or events in our lives and wish we would have done things differently. At times, we all wish “we knew then what we know now.” But the real question is, “How can I know the wise thing before I do it?”

James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” God teaches us in his word that we should go to him for true wisdom. The writer of Proverbs says, if you want “to know wisdom and instruction,” then start here: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” In order to live a truly wise life, you and I must look first to God. The wisdom of God is often different than the wisdom of the world. Think about Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 1:18, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” In other words, the message of the cross of Jesus Christ is foolishness in the world’s eyes, but to Christians the message of the cross is the perfect wisdom of God. Where the world sees the death of a man, the Christian sees the depth of the love of God. Where the world sees the end of life, the Christian sees the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you want to know what true wisdom is, you must ask God. And if you want to live a truly wise life, you have to live it by God’s standards and not the world’s standards.

To live wisely before God, you must prepare yourself for how the world will push back against you. Remember what God said in 1 Peter 2:15, “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” Therefore, “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” (Proverbs 3:5–6). To be wise in God’s eyes means to worship and honor him first, and it means to look to Jesus Christ who is God’s true wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30).

Over the course of this year we are going to immerse ourselves as a church with God’s wisdom. I’m excited that this year there will be a new “element” in our study. Each week you will have an activity to do or a devotional to read and write your own notes. I write in my journals all the time. I encourage you to write in yours and make this a memorable year. It will be great to look back on what the Lord taught you over the course of this year, or even to pass along to your grandchildren one day. Also, we will be memorizing Scripture together as a church. Check out the book for the verses and follow along.

Will you join me on this journey to live wisely and honor God first? The title of our study is Wisdom 2020. Of course, 2020 is the calendar year of our study, but it is also a reminder that like 20/20 vision, true wisdom means “Seeing Life Clearly through the Lens of Scripture.”

May God bless you as we journey this year through the biblical theme of wisdom.

Dr. Tom Smiley
Senior Pastor
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Introduction

The Book of Proverbs instructs God's people in how to live wisely. The book has a broad appeal because it offers sound, practical advice on how to live in this world. Proverbs proves so practical precisely because it is richly theological. Only when life is understood rightly in relation to God can we truly live well. "The fear of the Lord," Proverbs instructs us repeatedly, "is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). Wise living starts with a proper understanding of who the Lord is. Those who live well, live in light of the Lord.

Authorship

King Solomon (r. 971-931 BC) wrote or gathered most, if not all, of the proverbs found in this book. Proverbs 1:1 describes the book as "the proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel." This accords with what the rest of Scripture teaches about him. As he became king of Israel, Solomon prayed for and received great wisdom from the Lord (1 Kings 3:1-15). Solomon's wisdom won him fame around the world, and he wrote thousands of proverbs and songs (1 Kings 4:29-34).

At the end of Solomon's life, Proverbs would not have been in the final form we have it today. King Hezekiah's men copied down many of Solomon's sayings that were added to this book (Prov. 25:1-29:27). Additionally, the authors of chapters 30 and 31, Agur and Lemuel, respectively, remain relatively unknown. Discussion exists among biblical scholars about when the final form of Proverbs came into being and who served as the final collector and editor. With the church through the ages, we receive this book as fully inspired by God, affirming that the Lord was at work in both the writing and collecting of these proverbs into the book we have today.

Nature of Proverbs

When we think of proverbs, we typically think of pithy sayings that convey a truth about life. Much of Proverbs is filled with such sayings, but the book also has several sections of longer poems that serve to provide instructions.

When reading this book, we need to remember that proverbs are not promises. Proverbs are principles. They explain what is generally true in this world. They are not, however, formulae that can be followed in order to guarantee a result. A non-biblical example of a proverb helps us understand the nature of these sayings: "Red in the morning, sailors take warning. Red at night, sailors' delight." When we hear this saying, we do not think every red sky in the morning necessarily means bad weather that day. It is generally true, but it is not an absolute.

Proverbs 26:4-5 show that we must not absolutize proverbs. That is to say, an individual proverb will not be true in every single situation.

⁴Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

⁵Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes (Prov. 26:4-5).

Side-by-side, these two proverbs demonstrate that wisdom requires proverbs to be skillfully applied in a given situation. Proverbs, thus, cannot be taken as blanket statements that are true each and every time. Rather, proverbs teach us about how to live in a manner pleasing to God in this world. Proverbs teaches its readers how to live wisely, which means living faithfully as one trusts the Lord.

Reading Proverbs Well

In light of the nature of the book of Proverbs, there are four keys we need to keep in mind in order to read this book well.

1. *Read reflectively.* Proverbs, especially the shorter sayings, are best read slowly and reflectively. You will notice as you read that these shorter proverbs are often written in two parallel phrases. The

key to discerning the proverb is to make sense of the relationship between the phrases. Sometimes the second phrase is a contrast to the first. For example, “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid” (Prov. 12:1). Other times, the second phrase serves to explain and expand on the meaning of the first statement. For example, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Prov. 18:21). To make sense of these proverbs, read slowly and ponder the connection between each phrase.

2. *Read as a whole.* Proverbs should be read together. They should not be read in isolation. The above example of Proverbs 26:4-5 makes this point abundantly clear. The advice of the whole book needs to be considered as one considers an individual proverb. In the same vein, the longer opening poems provide the context for how to understand the book. The key guiding principle from the book as a whole is “fear the Lord,” which takes us to our next key.
3. *Read faithfully.* Central to Proverbs is the belief that wise living is done in the fear of the Lord. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7). Some variation on this theme is repeated in Proverbs 9:10 and 15:33. It also appears in Psalm 111:10, and Job 28:28 declares, “The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom.” Tom Schreiner helpfully explains, “The fear of the Lord means that he is supreme in one’s life, and that all is ordered by one’s relationship with him.” We can only live wisely when we live in light of who God is and what he has done.
4. *Read in light of Jesus.* Proverbs points us to Jesus. Christ Jesus embodies wisdom (1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3; Mark 1:22). He lived a truly wise life, for in his life he completely trusted God the Father. He prayed and lived “not my will but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Not only does Christ show us the truly wise life, he empowers us to live a wise life. The risen and ascended Christ has sent the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Wisdom (Eph. 1:17)—into our hearts in order that we might trust the Lord and live in a manner pleasing to him.

Poverty & Riches: A Warning

A surface level reading of Proverbs could lead one to believe that if you are wise and live well, then God will reward you with wealth. Consider Proverbs 14:24, “The crown of the wise is their wealth. . .” If wisdom leads to riches, then the implication seems to be that the opposite is true: poverty is a result of foolish living. Reading the rest of Proverbs, however, proves such thinking to be false. Some are poor because of injustice and oppression (Prov. 11:1; 14:31). In fact, some find great wealth because they act in unjust and greedy ways (Prov. 10:2; 11:1; 22:16). The Book of Proverbs itself will not allow for simplistic answers.

Wise living does not necessarily result in wealth, nor is poverty necessarily a result of foolish behavior. We must avoid the temptation to read a single proverb in isolation, for in the context of the whole book, we start to see the complex realities of life at play. The general wisdom of Proverbs can be hampered by sin. Consider Proverbs 13:23, “The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice.” The poor person’s land would bring food to his family, but because of injustice, which is an outworking of sin, he and his family go hungry.

Not only does human nature add to the complexity of this world, but so does God. The Bible does not offer a mechanistic view of the world. God is not an impersonal force “out there” who has set the rules of the world and left us to ourselves. Rather, the Lord is a personal God who has drawn near to us. Thus, the proverbs are not rules to be manipulated or codes that we put in to get what we want out of life. Rather, the proverbs describes the way the world generally works because there exists a personal God who is sovereign over all. He remains, however, a God beyond our understanding. All the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament needs to be read as a whole, and the Book of Job reminds us that God is beyond our finding out. He has drawn near to us and revealed

himself to us, and yet he, in many ways, remains a mystery to us. We may never know his reasons for bringing poverty to some and riches to others.

To read the blessings of Proverbs well, we need to read them in the context of all of Scripture. The blessings of wisdom go far beyond wealth and material provision. “The earthly riches of Proverbs,” Tom Schreiner teaches, “point to spiritual riches in Christ—to every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3).” As we come to the New Testament, there is an escalation of the blessings promised. Wisdom leads beyond this world to God himself. True wisdom, as Proverbs shows, is to trust in the Lord, and the New Testament calls us to place our trust in the Lord made flesh Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and the hope of eternal life. Christ offers us nothing short of knowing and loving the one, true, and living God. He invites us to share in the life of the Trinity—the life that the Father, Son, and Spirit have shared from eternity past. Such blessing causes the good things in this world to fade into the background.

Proverbs calls us to be wise. When read with the rest of Scripture, the book warns us to avoid a cheap gospel that would have us substitute anything else for “the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord” (Phil. 3:8). With Paul, we count all else as rubbish. Through Proverbs we hear the call of “Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God” (1 Cor. 1:30) to embrace the true gospel that offers us every spiritual blessing—everlasting life in God (John 17:3). Heed the words of Christ and flee from any cheapening of the gospel: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matt. 6:19–20).

Trust in the Lord

Proverbs 1:1-7

- Prov. 1:1 — Discuss 1 Kings 3:1-5 and 1 Kings 4:29-34. Who was Solomon? Why was it fitting that he write a book on wisdom?
- Prov. 1:2-6 — When you think of wisdom, what comes to mind? What different words are used in these verses to describe what Proverbs is about? What do these various words and phrases teach us about the nature of wisdom?
- Prov. 1:7
 - What is the fear of the Lord?
 - Consider Prov. 9:10, Prov. 15:33, Psalm 111:10, and Job 28:28.
 - Why is the fear of the Lord the beginning of true wisdom?
 - How does this verse contrast the fear of the Lord with foolishness? Why does foolish living deny God's existence?
 - According to Proverbs 2:6, where does wisdom come from? How is that idea connected with the fear of the Lord? Based on 2:6, what is the source of true wisdom today?

Proverbs 2:1-11

- Look back over Proverbs 2:1-11. How do these verses describe what our attitude toward wisdom should be? What do they say is the benefit of wisdom?

Proverbs 3:5-6

- What does it mean to trust the Lord?
- Walk your group through T.R.U.S.T. by Scott Smith (pp. 9-11 in *The Wisdom of God*).

Proverbs 4:20-27

- Read Proverbs 4:20-27. What does this passage say about how we should approach God's Word? What does it mean to "guard your heart" and why is this important? How can we help our kids understand and apply this principle?

New Testament Connection

- Matt. 12:42 — In what way is Jesus greater than Solomon?
 - Consider his wise life (Luke 2:42, 52), his wise teaching (Matt. 13:54), and that he always trusted the Lord (Luke 22:42).
 - Consider Matt. 11:19, 1 Cor. 1:30, and Col. 2:1-3. How do these verses explain the connection between Jesus and wisdom?
- Why would it be bad news for us if Jesus merely modeled wise living for us? How is there hope for us in the person and work of Christ when it comes to wise living?
- What has Jesus done to empower us to live wisely? Look at Acts 2:32-33 for who Jesus poured out and then Ephesians 1:17 for the fact that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Wisdom.
- If true wisdom is trusting the Lord, how do we understand faith in him through the lens of the New Testament? In light of Christ, what does it mean to trust the Lord?

Proverbs & Work

Defining Work

- What do we mean when talk about “work” in Proverbs? What activities does this include?
- Consider Prov. 31:10-31. Work is more than our jobs. The book of Proverbs instruction on work can be applied to our work at a job, at school, at home, in retirement, and even how we serve at church.

Working Wisely

- Prov. 1:7 — How does fear of the Lord cause us to work wisely?
- What do these passages describe as key components of wise work?
 - Prov. 6:6-11
 - Prov. 14:30
 - Prov. 16:8, 11
 - Prov. 23:4
- What challenges to wise work does Proverbs describe?
 - Prov. 10:2
 - Prov. 11:1
 - Prov. 14:31
 - Prov. 10:4-5
 - Prov. 24:30-34
 - Prov. 12:11
 - Prov. 21:17
 - Prov. 23:19
 - Prov. 11:28
- Consider again Prov. 10:4-5. Does hard work always lead to wealth? What passages in Proverbs would caution you against a one-to-one correspondence between wise, hard work and wealth.
 - Prov. 10:2 — Some wealth comes from injustice and oppression.
 - Prov. 8:10-11, 19:1, 23:4 — There are things more important than wealth.
 - Prov. 11:28 — Wealth can become a dangerous idol. There is a flourishing in life beyond great riches. Consider also the destructiveness of envy (Prov. 14:30, 23:17-18, 24:19-20).

New Testament Connection

- Colossians 3:23-24 — What does it look like to work unto the Lord and to serve the Lord Christ in your work?
- Why is it good news for us that we can honor God even in the everydayness of life? Reflect on how Romans 12:1-2 calls us to devote our whole lives to worshipping the Lord. What would that look like for you during a typical week?
- How does Jesus us provide us with an example of a God-honoring life? How does he enable us by his grace to honor the Lord in our own work?

Planning

Value of Planning

- What do the following Proverbs say about the value of planning?
 - Prov. 6:6-11
 - Prov. 24:27
- Where have you experienced the value of planning in your own life? Has there been a time you wished you had planned more?

Limits of Planning

- Read Prov. 16:1-9
- Reflect on what these verses teach about planning:
 - 16:1 —
 - 16:2 —
 - 16:3 —
 - 16:4 —
 - 16:9 —
- How is God's total control over all things good news for us as we plan?
- How do our limitations in planning and controlling actually grow our faith?
- Are you an over- or an under-planner?
 - How can under-planning be sinful? How can over-planning be sinful?
 - Under-planner: are you masking your unwillingness to plan and to prepare in pious language to make it sound more acceptable?
 - Over-planner: are you masking your lack of trust in God with planning and preparing?
 - How is God calling us each to repent and to trust in him?

New Testament Connection

- How does the death and resurrection of Jesus remind us both that God is sovereign over all things and that he is gracious, merciful, and abounding and steadfast love?
- How can you remind yourself and those in your group of the cross this week as you are tempted toward slothfulness in preparation or fretfulness about the future?

Speech

Power of the Tongue

- Reflect on Prov. 18:21 — How have you seen this proverb to be true in your life?
- Prov. 16:24 — How have you seen kind and gracious words work powerfully in people's lives?
- Prov. 16:27-28 — How can words bring disorder and chaos to one's life?
- Prov. 18:6-8 — What danger can your words bring into your own life?

Slow to Speak

- What do these Proverbs say about the value of being slow to speak?
 - Prov. 17:27
 - Prov. 18:13
 - Prov. 19:20

Honest Speech

- What do these Proverbs say about the importance of honest speech and the danger of dishonest speech?
 - Prov. 17:7
 - Prov. 17:20
 - Prov. 19:9
 - Prov. 20:19

New Testament Connection

- Consider key New Testament teachings on speech:
 - Eph. 4:15-16 — For the church, what is the goal of speaking the truth to one another in love?
 - Eph. 4:25 — How does the work of Christ ground this command to speak the truth in love?
 - Col. 4:5-6 — How are we as followers of Jesus to speak to those who are not?
- Reflect on Gal. 5:22-24. Why is it such good news for us that these fruit of the Spirit are connected with our speech? Since they are fruit of the Spirit, what responsibility do we have to grow in these qualities? Consider Phil. 2:12-13.

Money

Wealth & Wisdom

Read the follow proverbs and discuss these questions from *The Wisdom of God*.

- Proverbs 21:6 — Are you using deception and untruth to acquire material possessions?
- Proverbs 21:13 — Is your heart open to those less fortunate than you?
- Proverbs 21:17 — Do you use an inordinate amount of your finances on personal pleasure?
- Proverbs 22:1 — If you had to choose, what would you rather have – a good name or great riches?
- Proverbs 22:2 — What is the one common denominator between the rich and the poor? What does that say to you?
- Proverbs 22:7 — Do you have personal debt? If so, do you feel enslaved by it?
- Proverbs 22:9 — Would those who know and love you best say that you are generous or stingy?
- Proverbs 22:16 — If you either oppress the poor or give to the rich, what is your motivation for doing so? What does Scripture say will be the outcome of doing so?
- Proverbs 22:26-27 — Are you a cosigner on someone else’s loan? If so, why does Scripture teach this to be an unwise practice?
- Proverbs 23:4 — Would the people who know you best say that you weary yourself to gain wealth?
- Proverbs 24:30-34 — What does this passage teach regarding the value of work to meet our material needs?

New Testament Connection

Read Phil. 4:10-19.

- Why is Paul able to handle both being in times of plenty and times of want?
- How does the Philippians’ generosity demonstrate their faith in the Lord?
- How does 4:19 comfort us?
- Is it harder for you to trust in the Lord when you have plenty or when you have little? Why?
- Where is the Lord calling you to be more generous this year?

Friendship

Proverbs 27

Discuss these proverbs with your group. What do they mean? How do they apply to our lives today?

- 27:6 — Why are the wounds of a friend good? Do you have friends who will challenge you? Or, do you surround yourself by only those who affirm your choices?
- 27:9 — To whom do you turn for “earnest counsel”? Is this wise on your part? To whom do you provide “earnest counsel”? How can you be faithfully pouring into others?
- 27:10 — What does faithfulness to your friends look like? Are you a faithful friend to those who have family who is far away (geographically or relationally)?
- 27:14 — What can we learn from this proverb about friendship? How does it apply to your life?
- 27:17 — How are you working to surround yourself with friends who follow Jesus so that you can sharpen one another? What steps do you need to take to surround yourself with such people?

New Testament Connection

Our relationship with Jesus radically reorients the rest of our human relationships. No longer are family and friends our first priority: Jesus must be (Luke 14:26). Our closest human relationships are no longer those to whom we are related or those with whom we have the most in common. Rather, we are now united as one body to those who are trusting in Jesus (Rom. 12:3-8). The body of Christ—his church—crosses all human distinctions. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28; cf. Col. 3:11). The church is made up of unnatural and unlikely friends, but we are now one because of the work of Jesus Christ.

- Eph. 4:1-7 — How are you working to maintain the unity of the Spirit in your local church? What steps can you take to promote unity? Set aside time in the coming weeks to pray for the unity of your church.
- James 2:1-7 — Do you try to avoid the “difficult” people when the church gathers? What does James say about that? What steps can you take this week to avoid showing partiality at church?

Consider with whom Jesus was friends—“a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” (Luke 7:34). Jesus spent much of his time eating and socializing with the notorious sinners of his day.

- With whom do you spend your time? Do you only associate with people like you? People who share your same “socially acceptable” sins?
- Luke 6:27-36 — “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you?” How does God’s example of love challenge us to love even the most difficult to love? Even our enemies? Consider Romans 5:6-11.
- On our own, loving the unloveable is an impossible task. How does Jesus’s love for us (even when we were unloveable!) transform us to be able to love others? What strength do we have to love even when it is difficult?