

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series on the book of Proverbs entitled “The Way of Wisdom” that will take us through the summer. If you are unfamiliar with Proverbs, it is an Old Testament book of Hebrew poetry filled with compressed statements regarding wisdom. These proverbs were all either written or collected by King Solomon, the son of King David, a king who began to reign in Israel in 970 BC. Solomon was uniquely qualified to write Proverbs. As you may know, in 1 Kings 3, God appeared to Solomon in a dream and told him to ask for whatever he wanted. In response, Solomon said in v. 9:

1 Kings 3:9 – “Give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

And in response, God said to Solomon:

1 Kings 3:12 – “I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.”

He asks for and receives from God a discerning heart, a wise and discerning mind. And as it says in 1 Kings 4:30-34:

1 Kings 4:30–34 - Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. ³¹ He was wiser than anyone else, including Ethan the Ezrahite—wiser than Heman, Kalkol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. ³² He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. ³³ He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. ³⁴ From all nations people came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

For years, I struggled to read Proverbs, because it seemed too simplistic to me. But you have to keep in mind that Proverbs are general statements about reality, not promises that cover every situation you will encounter. They are compressed statements that aren’t intended to be applied to every situation without qualification. Even in English, we know that a proverb like “Many hands make light work” is not the only word on the subject, since “Too many cooks spoil the broth.” Or contrast “Look before you leap” with “He who hesitates is lost.” They

seem to contradict, but they apply to different situations. And so it is with Proverbs.

And so, when you read a Proverb such as Proverbs 22:6 – “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it,” it is not a promise that as long as you train your child to know the Lord, they will be a Christian the rest of their lives. It is a general statement that the best way to set your child up for a future faith is to start them off moving in a Godward direction.

Having said that, let’s talk about wisdom, since Proverbs is a book about wisdom. One solid definition of wisdom is by the 20th century theologian Gerhard von Rad, who said “**Wisdom is becoming competent with regard to the realities of life.**” It is having insight, discernment, and the ability to make decisions that will bring life and not destruction to you and to others.

Wisdom is critical to life. The world speaks highly of knowledge, and with the internet you can get the answer to just about anything in a moment. But what good is it if you know how to fight unless you have the wisdom to know whether or not to use it? What good is it to gain riches if you don’t have the wisdom to know what to do with it? What good is it to know how to woo a woman or attract a man if you don’t have the wisdom to know whether or not you should actually be with that person? Knowledge is meaningless without wisdom.

Similarly, the church can be all about morality and ethics, but once again, even moral people can make incredibly bad decisions and ruin lives and churches if they do not have wisdom. For example, you may feel led by God to go live in the inner-city, to sell your wealth and minister among the poor. And that can be a moral, noble thing. But unless you have the wisdom to do it well, it will likely be a disaster. And many missionaries can testify to how short-term mission teams often do more harm than good in the ways they do their mission trips. Once again, a very moral thing to do, but if it is done without wisdom, it can do more harm than good.

Wisdom can be overlooked in the church. **After all, the majority of situations you will face in life are ones in which the rules do not apply.** What college should I go to? Should I marry this person or not? Should we have another kid? Should I retire now or in three years? How much money should I give away? Should I adopt a child or not? What career should I pick? Should we use our money to go on vacation or not? What kind of car should I drive? Should I stick with this church or not? **You soon realize that the decision you make in so many of these areas can have enormous consequences on your life.** And morality tells you nothing about

what college to go to, and all the scientific knowledge in the world can't help you decide whether or not to marry someone. The only thing that can help is wisdom.

Proverbs is a great place to go to for wisdom - practical wisdom on things like the words we speak, how we spend our time, how we handle temptation, how we use our money, and how to be a true friend. **My hope and prayer for you this summer, that you would grow in wisdom.**

So if we want to be wise, if we want to be competent with regard to the realities of life, where do we begin? Where Solomon says to begin:

Proverbs 1:1–7 - The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: ² for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; ³ for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair; ⁴ for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young— ⁵ let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance— ⁶ for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. ⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Where do we begin, according to Solomon? With the fear of the Lord.

Proverbs 9:10 - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

We start with the fear of the Lord. This is a common refrain in the Bible:

Deuteronomy 10:12–13 - And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

Job 28:28 - And he said to the human race, "The fear of the Lord—that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding."

Isaiah 33:5–6 - The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with his justice and righteousness. ⁶ He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure.

Psalm 111:10 - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.

Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 - Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind.
¹⁴ For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

We need wisdom if we want to bring life to ourselves and to others and not end up making a wreckage of things. And if we want wisdom, according to Solomon and others, we need to begin with the fear of the Lord. So what is the fear of the Lord, how does it lead to wisdom, and how do we grow in it?

It can be helpful to think along a continuum, where you want to avoid the extremes. **On the one end of the continuum is terror of the Lord.** Some of you grew up in churches where the picture you received of God is of an angry judge in the sky ready to punish you, waiting for you to mess up so he can rain down fire and brimstone on you. But the fear of the Lord is not the same as being afraid of God. Consider:

1 John 4:16–19 - And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

Romans 8:15–16 - The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba, Father.*” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

Clearly there is a difference between the fear of the Lord and a spirit of fear. As John tells us, perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. So to be afraid of God, to live in terror of His punishment, means that you have yet to truly come to know His love. **Let me be clear – if you are not saved, if you have not trusted in Jesus for your salvation, then you have every reason to have this terror of God’s punishment, and you should repent.** But if you know Jesus, then as Paul wrote, you are children of God, so you do not have to live in fear.

So on the one end of the continuum is an ungodly terror of God that drives us away from Him or causes us to live under the fear of judgment and punishment. But on the other end of the continuum is an approach to God that treats Him casually, like there is absolutely nothing to be afraid of because He is our heavenly buddy who just wants what's best for us and wouldn't dream of doing anything to displease us. This is the church that is so desperate to distance themselves from the staid formality of some churches that they overemphasize the casual nature – hey, wear your shorts, bring your coffee, God's cool. It's like Buddy Christ from the movie *Dogma*, rebranding Jesus to make him more approachable. Yet this approach forgets that God is not our buddy:

Hebrews 12:28–29 - Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,²⁹ for our “God is a consuming fire.”

We need to avoid the extremes. Somewhere in the middle is what Proverbs is referring to when it says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. What is this positive fear of the Lord?

To revere God for who He truly is, to treat Him with the honor and respect that He is due.

I think that the good fear of the Lord is a reverence for who God is. It is to treat Him with the honor and respect and awe that He is due for who He is and what He has done. It is to respect Him as **Lord**, the one we have been created to know and follow, who alone knows the way to life and salvation. It is to revere Him as **Creator**, the one who made everything, including us, and knows how it best works. It is to honor Him as **Father**, to respect Him as the **judge** to whom we will answer one day for how we have lived, and it is to worship Him as **Savior**, as the lover of our souls. It is not a fear of punishment and condemnation, because on the cross Jesus died in our place so that we might be forgiven.

Romans 5:6–8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Think again of the continuum. Because of the cross, I do not have to live in fear any more, because there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, according to Paul in Romans 8:1. But I also dare not treat Him as common, as my buddy, as some weak entity just hoping I'll spend some time with Him. May we be filled with awe and wonder at the love He has given to us.

1 John 3:1 - See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

Few writers capture this better than Brennan Manning. Listen to his words from his book *The Signature of Jesus*:

"On the night of December 13, during what began as a long and lonely hour of prayer, I heard in faith Jesus Christ say, 'For love of you I left my Father's side. I came to you who ran from me, fled me, who did not want to hear my name. For love of you I was covered with spit, punched, beaten, and affixed to the wood of the cross.'

These words are burned on my life. Whether I am in a state of grace or disgrace, elation or depression, that night of fire quietly burns on. I looked at the crucifix for a long time, figuratively saw the blood streaming from every pore of his body, and heard the cry of his wounds: 'This isn't a joke. It is not a laughing matter to me that I have loved you.' The longer I looked, the more I realized that no man has ever loved me and no one ever could love me as he did. I went out of the cave, stood on the precipice, and shouted into the darkness, 'Jesus, are you crazy? Are you out of your mind to have loved me so much?' I learned that night what a wise old man had told me years earlier: 'Only the one who has experienced it can know what the love of Jesus Christ is. Once you have experienced it, nothing else in the world will seem more beautiful or desirable.'"

How dare we enter this sanctuary and not recognize the presence of God, the love of God, the holiness of God. Do not take this as judgment, for I do not know your heart. Only you and God know your heart. But what can you do to ensure that you are entering this place in the fear of the Lord, with a proper respect, reverence, and honor for the one who created you, who died for you, who sustains your life every waking moment.

Consider these words of R.C. Sproul:

“God’s kingdom will never come where His name is not considered holy. His will is not done on earth as it is in heaven if His name is desecrated here.”

As Annie Dillard put it in *Teaching a Stone to Talk*: “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”

A couple of summers ago, I went to the Grand Canyon. You want to talk about fear. There is nothing like walking next to a chasm with no railing between you and your children to bring a holy fear. But it is not a fear that makes me run screaming. It is a proper awe and reverence that causes me to draw near to the majesty of the Canyon and to pay attention, to walk circumspectly, to treat every step with the care it deserves. That is similar to the fear of the Lord.

How does the fear of the Lord lead to wisdom?

1) We gain a proper perspective on ourselves, God, and life.

As Dan Phillips wrote in his commentary on Proverbs: It is not the case of a 6-foot tall man trying to convince himself he’s only 2 feet tall, but standing next to a giant redwood and seeing himself dwarfed by it. When we come to know our great God, we see how small we are. When we see the holiness of God, we realize how sinful we are. When we see the eternally good perspective of God, we realize how limited and warped our view of reality is.

To fear the Lord is to realize that all this time you have been fooling yourself. You thought you were independent, making your own decisions and doing what you want. But now you realize that you would not take your next breath apart from the permission of the God who reigns over everything. **Or maybe you think of it this way. You can be an athlete,** living under the illusion that you are a really talented wrestler or gymnast or soccer player. But what happens when you come up against a real professional? You are exposed as an amateur, a pretender. Your pride is destroyed. **Or what if you consider yourself a beautiful or stylish person, taking great pride in your appearance?** What happens when you run into someone truly

beautiful and stylish? Or what if you consider yourself a virtuous person, and then you meet someone who lives on pennies and gives their life in service to the least of these? What if you consider yourself a praying person and then you meet someone who spends hours a day in passionate prayer?

To fear the Lord is to gain a proper perspective on ourselves, and to live with true humility, seeing God for how great He is. We gain an eternal perspective, and so we no longer live for things that won't last forever. We know that He is sovereign, so we can trust in Him.

2) We won't be driven by the fear of others

The Bible contrasts the fear of the Lord with the fear of man, what we might call people-pleasing, peer pressure, or codependency. To fear others is to be controlled or mastered by them, to need them more than we need God. Many of us live our lives out of fear of the rejection of others or their negative evaluation, and this keeps us from wise living.

Proverbs 29:25 - Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.

Deuteronomy 31:6 – “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Instead of living in the fear of man, Jesus encourages us to fear God.

Matthew 10:28 - Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

As we grow in our fear of the Lord, our fear of others lessens.

3) Our heart's desire will be to honor Him

As we grow in our knowledge of God, as we experience His love, our reverence for Him causes our heart's motivation to more and more become to honor Him and avoid anything that would dishonor Him.

Proverbs 8:13 - To fear the LORD is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.

2 Corinthians 7:1 - Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Our obedience comes not because of fear of punishment, but because of a trust in God and a desire to honor Him with our lives and help others see how great He is. I believe that because I am saved by grace, my sins are paid for. So while I could go do whatever I want, the more I know God, the less I want to do whatever I want, and the more I want to know and honor Him.

So where do we start? How do we gain this fear of the Lord?

1) Ask Him for it

Proverbs 2:1–5 - My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, ² turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding— ³ indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, ⁴ and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, ⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

2) Strive to know Him

Proverbs 9:10 - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

This is the beginning of wisdom. And this is not just reading, but experiencing Him.

Let's end with Hebrews 12:28-29:

Hebrews 12:28–29 - Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our “God is a consuming fire.”

If you want to walk in a true fear of God that leads to wisdom, come up front and pray and let Him know that you want to know Him.