

Lesson Two: The Pursuit of Wisdom

We'll be talking about "wisdom" for the next several weeks, and here's why – thought it's something we don't talk much about in our world today, here's the reality – if you're going to avoid making an absolute mess of your life – you're going to need wisdom.

If you want to find blessing and harmony in life, you're going to need wisdom.

(I know it's common in the scientific world to talk about knowledge and research and facts, and in religious circles to talk much about morality.) And those things are important.

But actually – what we need today is something that's not talked about a lot – something that's not identical to knowledge or even moral goodness – and that's wisdom.

Here's the thing – there are many decisions that only require knowledge.

If you had the right knowledge, you could choose the right car, maybe the right medicine, the right classes to take, the right directions to get you where you wanted to go.

But – the vast majority of decisions we actually face – the rules and the facts won't help you:

Who do I marry? Who should I date? Should I move there are stay here?

Should I confront that person or hold back for now?

Should I take a risk, or play it safe?

You'll need wisdom for that.

And it's for reasons like those that Solomon says:

Blessed are those who find wisdom,
those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her
(Proverbs 3:13-15).

Wisdom is not just having the facts - the knowledge – and wisdom is not just moral goodness.

Wisdom is the ability to do the right thing in 80% of life's situations the moral rules don't address.

Why? Because in each situation, there are 3-4-5 options that are allowable that are all moral.

For example, if someone comes and says, "Well, I've got these two jobs. What does the Bible tell me to do?" Well, the Bible is filled with moral rules, and as a result both jobs would be okay. It wouldn't be a sin to take either job. Yet if you choose the wrong one, it could be a disaster. You'd be following all the moral rules, and still not know what to do in all the situations where the moral rules don't apply.

In every area of life – whether it's work, or marriage, or child rearing – we have decisions to make, and if we don't make them with wisdom, we're going to blow it all up.

And so: Wise people do the right thing when the rules don't apply

In our last study, we asked the question: How do we grow in wisdom?

Proverbs 3:5-6 – we must understand that wisdom is a PATH.

⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
⁶ in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.

Walking a path is one foot in front of the other, steady repeated action.

Listen – you’re not going to make much progress if you somersault down a path, if you sprint down a path – because you can’t keep that up.

No – it’s one foot, then the other. Steady. Sure.

And who you become – your final destiny, is basically the product of how you do the little things every day – the little choices you make, little attitudes, the things you spend your day doing, even the mundane and boring things.

Success is not in the dramatic, the big events (though we like to define a person’s life that way). It’s more about assuming certain daily practices that make one wise, certain daily disciplines.

Now – why is it important to get that?

Because the way of the world is to see wisdom, not as a path, but as a door. (Turn the latch, turn the key – and you’ll get the answer you’re looking for). But the Bible never says wisdom is like that.

No – wisdom is a path – a long, patient quest over and over.

THIS IS WHAT THE ANCIENTS UNDERSTOOD – that wisdom is attained by walking in step with God’s will – and that means conforming my will to his.

Proverbs 1:7 - The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.
(KEY VERSE OF THE BOOK)

I walk the path. I don’t get to make the rules – rather, I humble myself before him and live according to his order. (Fear is not terror, but a healthy sense or reverence and awe, understanding my place in the universe).

That’s wisdom – but the world looks for a door – why? So I bend reality to my wishes.

And what is the solution to life’s problems?

A silver bullet. A technique. (If you want to see that, look on Amazon – and you’ll see hundreds of titles, book after book in which you have:

Three steps to happiness. Five ways to overcoming stress. We look for a door – a sign. Or we say: if I can just get some peace about it. (But the heart can deceive us – right?)

That’s not the way of wisdom. The way of wisdom is to walk the path – right foot, left foot. And there are no shortcuts to that.

A steady walk – will turn you into a wise and discerning person.

We’ll begin in Chapter 1 – first let us pray.

Proverbs 1:1-2

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
for gaining wisdom and instruction;
for understanding words of insight.

The word “insight” means “knowing how things really work.”
Knowing how things really happen.

Wisdom is competence with regard to the realities of life.
Wisdom is making choices on the basis of reality, not what you think is real. The wiser you are, the more in touch with reality you are.

And so – wisdom is knowing how things really are.

Think for example – Sherlock Holmes walks into a room and it’s all a mess, and he looks around and sees it’s just a mess, but he sees clues – the little things others fail to notice. What’s a blur to others, he sees. And so wisdom is knowing how things really happen.

Wisdom is listening – not always talking. (I’ve learned – it’s hard for me to learn anything when I’m talking. I have to listen to learn.)

Who wants to go to the doctor and have her prescribe you medication until they first diagnose the problem? Wise people listen and learn.

Proverbs 3:4-5 says that if you have wisdom and insight,

**4 Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man.**

**5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding . . . (Proverbs 3:4-5)**

So here’s the question – **what does your heart trust in?**

What does your heart look to?

What is the most important thing to your heart?

**What is the thing you say, “If I have that, then I’ll be happy –
life will be secure – then I’ll know I’m somebody?”**

Whatever that is, it’s a decision you make in your heart – and everything flows from that –

- your thoughts,
the way you perceive and understand things,
the way you think, feel, and act –
how you spend your time.
what gets you upset.

Now – what does that have to do with wisdom? Everything.

So here’s the thing: **Whatever your heart has decided is its ultimate love determines all the ways in which you make choices in your life.** (PUT ON SCREEN)

Whatever is the ultimate love of your heart spins out the way you make decisions in life.

Let me give a couple of examples:

If having **money** is not just a good thing, but the ultimate thing for you – the ultimate way you feel secure and important – look at how you’re going to make your decisions.

You’re going to choose a job that doesn’t particularly fulfill you – but they’re going to make money for you.

As a result, you’re going to burn out and feel guilty faster than other people. Or you’re going to make lifestyle decisions where you overextend yourself financially in order to have this kind of lifestyle.

And then you will exploit people in order to keep it up – and you might even do dishonest things to keep it up.

All of those choices undermine your economic status – they are the most likely way to bring about your own financial collapse.

In other words – if money is the most important thing on your life, you'll make choices in life that actually lose the thing you most want.

Another example – marriage. Romance.

What if you are one of the people in the world that thinks, “Unless I'm with Mr. or Mrs. Right, I will not have a happy life – unless I marry the perfect person – it's not just good to get married, but the ultimate thing” – I'll never be happy in life.

If that's the language of your heart, here's what's going to happen.

Either you'll be too picky in choosing a mate – the person has to be just about perfect (because that person is going to make your whole life right, isn't she?) Or you'll be so desperate to get married you'll choose somebody who you really shouldn't.

And if you do get married – you'll be emotionally dependent and controlling.

If marriage is the most important thing to you – all of your choices and decisions will undermine you ever being happily married.

If children are the most important thing – that's the #1 desire of your heart – you'll either be so overprotective and controlling they will go into their teenage years trying to get out from under you, or you'll be so willing to overlook their sins and the faults they'll grow up without integrity.

If their happiness, their success, and their love of you is the main thing in your life – do you realize what's going to happen?

You'll either **over correct them/over discipline them/totally control** their lives because everything's got to be right of you

live under the illusion that life is without risk, that you have to put this complete hedge around them to save them from the mistakes in life of which you can't ultimately save them –

or else you'll **under correct them** because you can't stand it when they're mad at you – you're afraid to ever discipline them and say “no.”

All of which may destroy their lives, or at least your relationship to your children.

If your children are the most important thing in your life, all of the wisdom of your life – the basis for making choices and decisions – your time, your weekends – it will undermine the thing you most want.

If the most important thing to you, the desire of your heart – is work, you know what you're going to do? You're going to choose work over emotional and physical health maintenance. You're going to choose work over relationships, you're going to choose work over family, over friendship – in other words, you're going to make all the choices that will undermine your ability in the long run to do your work well.

Here's the thing – if anything but God is the main love of your heart – you will be a fool! Unless God is the basis for your identity, unless the love of God is the main thing that you say “If I have that then I can receive life joyfully.”

If God is more important than money, only then will you make decisions that will best help you and your family financially.

If God is more important than your children, only then will you be in a position where you'll actually make good decisions for your children.

If God is more important than who you marry, only then will you make good choices about who to marry.

Unless God is the very center of your life – not just in belief – but unless God’s love captivates your heart –

Your wisdom is foolish on its own terms – the thing you most want, the way you make choices – the thing you most want will be undermined. It will be lost.

Colossians 3:1-2:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

And so we read in Proverbs 9:10 from our reading this week:

**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**

Proverbs 9:10

Fear is an interesting thing.

Psychologists have told us very wisely for years, that you if you really understand your greatest fear - you understand what your heart most is after.

For example: if you look mainly in life for people's approval (if you're a people pleaser), your greatest fear is rejection.

But if the main thing you look for in life is power (you need power to feel significant and secure), then your greatest nightmare is not rejection, but humiliation.

So if you're a people pleaser, you don't mind being humiliated (if it makes people love you).

And so: **What your heart most desperately wants indicates what you most deeply fear.**

So if you're living for money, if you're living through your children, if you're living for your career, if you're living for your reputation, it tells what you fear.

If my heart yearns for **approval** – I fear rejection. I’m afraid of being alone.

If my heart longs for **wealth and possessions**/I work myself to death – I fear running out, not being secure, losing my reputation or respect.

If I try to order everything and everybody – I fear losing control.

BY UNDERSTANDING YOUR FEAR – YOU’LL UNDERSTAND YOUR GREATEST LOVE. (The thing you fear losing the most, tells what’s at the center of your love).

But here’s what the Proverb writer is saying:

Once God moves from being a concept to being the love of your life, the main thing your heart is desperate for –

when you move into knowing him personally – that’s when he rearranges your identity and becomes the axis of your life.

When your life revolves around him – his love for you, his beauty, his wisdom – only then do all of the other things in your life truly fall rightly into place – your money, your desires, even your suffering.

And I know I can trust my future to Him.

When I fear him, when I know his love – I no longer need the approval of man.

I no longer need wealth as security – because he’s already got me. Heaven is my home.

I don't need to worship my children – I lead them to worship Him.

I can handle suffering, because He himself suffered and reigns victoriously. HE PAVED THE WAY! There's nothing I face where he has not already been there before.

I talked with a lady recently – a new friend from another state. – and she was telling me about her first husband. She had to get married, had to get married – and she married a man (who turned out to be an alcoholic) – and “for a year,” she said, “he physically beat me. He beat me!” After a year, I had had enough. And so – I left him.” And for the next 10 years, I lived on my own – worked hard, bought a house – the whole time I was lonely of course, but there came this moment one day – after 10 years, where I prayed. I just surrendered, and I said to the Lord, “Lord, if you decide I don't need someone, help me be happy with that, help me be content with my life as it is. Lord help me walk in your ways.” She said, “Two, maybe three months later, a friend of mine sat me up on a blind date. (I had nothing to do with the selection, I had nothing to do with seeking someone out). But when I went on that date, that's where I met my husband, and we have been married for 39 years. He is my confidant– we've raised children together – he is my best friend.”

She has spent the last 30 years providing counseling services, working with abused women.

Her vocation, her marriage relationship, have all been directed by a desire to please the Lord. She even gave her brokenness to the Lord.

And so:

Who are the wise? (There are a number of terms to describe the wise and unwise in the Book of Proverbs – and it's good to be acquainted with these).

1:5 - let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance.

Those who are wise are always learning.

They learn about themselves – their strengths and weaknesses. They learn from others. They listen to wise counsel. They are “competent to the realities of life.”

They give themselves to a deep knowledge of the Scriptures. (Even Jesus based his every move on the Bible, quoting scripture to fend off the devil (Mt. 4:1-11), to face and explain his death (Mt. 27:46; Ps. 22:1).

Wise people read widely, listen to podcasts, adopt good devotional habits.

They get out of the shallows to walk in greater depths of life.

A wise woman Eleanor Roosevelt – penned these words:

Small minds discuss people

Average minds discuss events

Great minds discuss ideas

-Eleanor Roosevelt

They enjoy many things – a hobby, a particular game app - but they don't waste all their time away playing games. They are careful about what they spend their time reading and watching. They use their time wisely.

Wise people associate with wise people. They welcome accountability - having the right people in your life.

The one who walks with the wise will become wise,
but a companion of fools will suffer harm. (13:20, HCSB)

Proverbs says,

Wise people discipline their speech. (16:23)

**In the multitude of words sin is not lacking,
But he who restrains his lips is wise. (10:19, NLT)**

That's wisdom. However, there's the other side of the coin – and that's what Proverbs calls foolishness.

In English, to call someone a fool is an insult. But in Proverbs, fools are people so habitually out of touch with reality that they make life miserable for themselves and everyone around them.

Proverbs describes various forms of foolishness:

Proverbs 1:22 –

**“How long will you who are simple love your simple ways?
How long will mockers delight in mockery
and fools hate knowledge?”**

Here he talks about fools. Every sort of fool is out of touch with reality, but each kind in a different way.

Who is a fool? Someone who only cares to see things from their own perspective.

Who is a fool? **A person who only leans on his/her own temperament.**

You have a temperament, right? Have you ever taken a temperament inventory that Myers Briggs some are introverts some are extroverts some are intuitive some are more analytical

I read an article in the Atlantic Monthly that featured an interview with Jerome Kagan (who taught for many years at Harvard – he's retired now). He was a pioneer in developmental psychology (a very respected, brilliant man).

And in the article where he was being interviewed, he said that across 36 cultures - with thousands and thousands and thousands of people studied - found that when we're threatened, there's three basic ways we're neurologically wired in order to deal with problems.

1. **Some of us retreat instinctively.**
2. **Some of us attack instinctively.**
3. **Some of us stand still and wait.**

And what the psychologist said about all these temperaments is, that since we habitually and instinctively respond to situations the way we're wired (or that we've been raised or where culture has taught us).

In only a small fraction of the situations in which we find ourselves is the natural approach the right one.

If you attack when you should be retreating, if you retreat when you should be attacking, if you stand and wait and see when you should be acting - you could die.

And all of us are wired to instinctively act in a certain way in certain situations (which means we have temperaments).

You say, “Okay – so what's wrong with that?”

It means we have deep limitations, because the world doesn't have a temperament.

The world operates as it operates – regardless of how you feel about it.

Or think about it this way:

There are people – you may not like them instinctively for one reason or another. But based on your own instincts, your own judgements, you never have the full picture.

I heard a guy say something about a particular person recently – and the reasons why they don't like him. (It was a quick perception).

And then two days later, I heard someone say about the very same man, "I wouldn't have gotten mom through her time in the hospital without his support – I owe him so much."

The Proverb writer will say – making judgements, seeing reality through your own temperament and perception – is a foolish. It's not wise.

And so, if the world was perfectly fit into your temperament - the introverted approach or the extroverted approach, the speak out or the wait and listen - if the world had a temperament and you perfectly fit it, you'd be perfectly wise.

But none of us are. We are so limited.

To become a wise person means that you have to have wisdom beyond your own instincts, wisdom that comes from beyond you.

The wisdom of patience, giving people the benefit of the doubt. The posture of a listener and learner instead of a judge.

That's why it's always a fight to be wise. You're always having to fight against the normal way you do things.

But if you seek wisdom, as time goes on - if you're becoming wise - you realize "I never felt like doing it that way, but this situation calls for me to do it another way."

So notice: the Proverbs writer mentions a number of characteristics of a fool:

- You can't tell a fool what he needs to know, because he already knows everything.
- Fools have a tendency to speak before they know what they're saying or what's being discussed.

One who gives an answer before he hears, it is foolishness and shame to him (Proverbs 18:13, NASB).

To answer someone before hearing him out is both stupid and embarrassing (Proverbs 18:13, CJB)

It's unfortunate that some people think they must always speak at meetings, even when they have just arrived before listening, or have nothing to say.

So the definition of a fool with someone who only cares what he or she thinks - that's a fool.

Wisdom always is trying to see the thing through other people's eyes.

The wise person has got a company of counselors and a company of advisors and friends who are there. A wise person gets a lot of advice and takes it.

For example, do you have four or five people who look at how you spend your money? You say, "That's private." Okay, that's also foolish. If you don't, you might be very unwise in the way you spend your money. You'd be more wise if you were actually spending your money accountable to other people that you trust in community.

That's the fool. Secondly - the simple.

Proverbs 1:22 –

“**Simple**” is a word that means young naïve people who are too unrooted and unformed to make smart decisions, to discriminate between truth and falsehood.

Why? They're always going with the crowd. Caring too much what your friends think. (This is the challenge of youth and inexperience).

This kind of foolishness is gullibility.

The gullible believe anything they're told; the prudent sift and weigh every word (14:15, TM)

They are too easily led and influenced.

Like children, they are often overimpressed with the spectacular and dramatic.

They will support dictatorial leaders who promise them peace and prosperity.

They can be intellectually lazy, not wanting to ponder and think out a matter.

(That's not just a tendency of youth – it can also be the tendency of age).

Wellness exams – hard to get people to do them. Sometimes you feel better if you don't know – “which is not true.”

Wisdom says that being naïve is not wise.

The phrase “what you don't know won't hurt you,” is false, as any doctor or auto mechanic can tell you.

They are also likely to fall for get-rich-quick schemes.

Those who work their land will have abundant food,
but those who chase fantasies have no sense.
(Proverbs 12:11)

Wise people see danger coming and avoid it, but the simple ones walk right into it (22:3; 27:12). It's why we have talks with our daughters about checking out what's around them – when they go off to college, walk across campus, fill their car up with fuel.

Simple people don't learn from their mistakes but go right back to the same old mess. They often have to learn the hard way because they won't listen to wisdom.

Thirdly – the mocker.

Proverbs 1:22 –

The **mocker** is characterized by high pride that hates submitting to anyone (**Mockers are proud and haughty; they act with boundless arrogance. 21:24, NLT**).

The Bible talks about those who “sit in the company of mockers” (Psalm 1:1). It is to make cynicism and sneering a habitual response. It is to roll the eyes and dismiss someone instead of engage with them.

(And there's a danger there). Habitual mocking will harden you and poison relationships.

Today we live in a postmodern age that encourages mockery, that makes scoffing and mockery easy, and reasoned discourse difficult.

Mockers can even create problems for a whole city.

Mockers can get a whole town agitated, but the wise will calm anger (29:8, NLT). It's the words for somebody stirring up a fire or blowing on a flame to make it burn more vigorously. They stir it up.

That's why the Lord "shows favor to the humble" (3:34) which is quoted in the NT by James and Peter.

Be careful about joking and laughing about everything – it's not wise!

(I love this little verse by Regina Spektor):

No one laughs at God in a hospital
No one laughs at God in a war
No one's laughing at God
When they're starving or freezing
Or so very poor

No one laughs at God when the doctor calls
After some routine tests
No one's laughing at God
When it's gotten real late
Their kid's not back from that party yet

No one laughs at God when their airplane
Starts to uncontrollably shake
No one's laughing at God
When they see the one they love
Hand in hand with someone else
And they hope that they're mistaken

No one laughs at God
When the cops knock on their door
And they say "We got some bad news, sir"
No one's laughing at God
When there's a famine, fire, or a flood...

(song, Laughing With, by Regina Spektor)

Lastly – two additional kinds of foolish people mentioned in Proverbs:

The sluggard (or "lazy"). You see, the wise are self starters. They get up and get moving. But the sluggard makes constant excuses and is surprised when they come to poverty.

As a door swings back and forth on its hinges, so the lazy person turns over in bed. 26:14, NLT

Contrast that with Jesus, who said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working" (John 5:17).

Wise people are diligent with their work. They make the most of their opportunities and carry their share of the load.

Wise people work to influence others for the Lord.

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,
And he who wins souls is wise. (11:30, NKJV)

Lastly: **The troublemaker**.

The mark of this person is constant conflict (6:14).

Instead of diffusing tensions, the troublemaker stirs them up. They deal in half-truths and innuendo. Their body language (winking, signaling) creates a hostile situation rather than one that leads to resolution.

Troublemakers are the reasons that conflict always follows in their wake.

Proverbs 6:16,19 says that "the Lord hates . . . a person who stirs up conflict in the community."

This is someone who always feels the need to protest and complain rather than overlooking a slight or wrong.

A person's wisdom yields patience;
it is to one's glory to overlook an offense. 19:11, NLT

All it takes is one troublemaker to wreck the unity of a family, a church, a community.

Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife; quarrels and insults are ended. (22:10)

I listened to a man this week – he asked his primary physician – “What’s your success rate?” (He is considered one of the best diagnostic physicians in his city).

The doctor said, “Honestly, it’s much less than what I wish.” And he asked him why.

His response was quite straightforward: “Because the patient does not act on my recommendations.”

He said, “My doctor’s not a proud man – he really does know what’s best for his patients – but they do not take his advice and treatments seriously.”

People want a silver bullet – people are ready to accept change, until the change affects them.

And so Proverbs counsels us on what to avoid – and urges us to walk in it’s path.

The question is – Are we listening?

Ultimately – if you want to be wise, you’ll listen to Jesus – the ONLY ONE who modeled wisdom perfectly – to the point that when he spoke, the people were astonished and said, “What is this wisdom that has been given to Him?” (Mark 6:2).

You see - the only way to pull your heart away from a lesser desire, is to find a better one.

If you only say, “Those things – children, money, job – they shouldn’t be so important to me.” You’re not going to win that way.

You need a great affection – the beauty of Jesus Christ coming into the center of your heart that will melt your heart away from other things. It will heal your heart and change your heart.

Only when money is second and Jesus first will you make wise financial decisions. Only when marriage is second and Jesus is first will you make good choices as who to marry.