

"The Wealth of Wisdom"

Luke 6:32-36

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August 24, 2025

Friends, that cartoon is one of the most popular Farsides. It originally appeared on November 11, 1986. And it reminds us that the smartest people, the gifted, are not always all that smart. Folks with great intellectual capabilities, who may have accumulated a lot of knowledge, sometimes are not able to apply that knowledge in a useful way. They may not have what we often call common sense, or more significantly they may lack wisdom.

Some people seem to equate wisdom with knowledge. It is something more than that, however. My dictionary defines wisdom as good judgement, which involves applying knowledge in a useful and good way. The Bible views this as part of it, but true wisdom also includes good moral judgement and a godly perspective on life. Wisdom is a key to experiencing life as God meant it to be lived. Or as Chuck Swindoll says, *"From a biblical perspective, wisdom is the God given ability to see life with rare objectivity and handle life with rare stability."* He notes that the wise person is able to handle both the good and not so good times of life in a way that honors the Lord and brings satisfaction to one's life.

Two Old Testament books, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, are devoted almost entirely to explaining and developing this wisdom. As we have journeyed through the book of Ecclesiastes this summer, I trust we have absorbed at least some of the wisdom the Lord has for us in this book. Today, we are going to take a closer look at wisdom itself, at what it involves and how valuable it is.

Our text today is Ecclesiastes 7:15-29. If you have your Bible, you can turn there. Incidentally we will be taking a break from Ecclesiastes for a couple of months, but Lord willing, we'll resume our study of this book in November. Let's pause and pray God would use His word today, to help us grow in our thirst for wisdom and in our desire to become truly wise people.

In our text today, Solomon, in his rather unique, round about style, points out some benefits of wisdom. **Ecclesiastes 7:15 In this meaningless**

**life of mine I have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness.**

Solomon realizes life is not easy to understand, it doesn't always make sense. It requires wisdom to navigate the twists and turns we encounter. He notes three benefits of wisdom.

The first thing wisdom does is give us balance in life. **Ecclesiastes 7:16-18 Do not be over righteous, neither be overwise—Why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time? It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.**

When I first read that I thought, wait a second. How can someone be too righteous or too wise? Yet, I think I've met some of the people Solomon was talking about. They are very zealous, overzealous, for good things, and thus end up turning good things into things which are not so good. This included the man who says to a grieving mother who has just lost a child, "Isn't it wonderful that your little girl is in heaven?" Or the woman who cannot talk about the weather without quoting a Bible verse.

One characteristic of over righteousness is that it tends to flow, not out of deep convictions, but out of a desire to impress other people. Solomon says the man who fears God will avoid all extremes. The reason is that someone who truly fears the Lord develops humility and knows he is not perfect. A godly, humble person realizes that not everything he *thinks* is true, necessarily *is true*. She understands that the other person may be right because, unlike God, her knowledge is limited.

Years ago, I read a little book by John Stott, called, "Balanced Christianity." In it, he noted that many people tend to scoff at balance, because they want to believe that the things in which they are interested or involved are the only things that matter. The wise person realizes that it is not the case.

Martin Luther said that Christians are often like a drunken person who climbs on his horse and falls off on the other side, then climbs back on and falls off back to the opposite side and continues in that pattern.

My analogy is that we tend to swerve from one side of the road, trying to avoid the ditch, only to end up in the ditch on the other side. Friends, we need to stay out of those ditches, stay between the lines, and avoid the extremes.

For example, some Christians think being a faithful witness for Jesus means telling everyone you meet that they are going to hell if they don't receive Christ. Others think the best way to represent Jesus is to never say a word about Him but just be a good example by your actions. Friends, both those approaches are wrong. These people have fallen into the ditches of extremes.

A faithful and effective witness for Jesus uses both wise words and actions of kindness. When it comes to LGBTQ issues, we need to find the balance of showing love for these people, but also making it clear we don't approve of their behavior.

As Christians, we must not compromise Biblical truth. Yet, on most issues and in most controversies, a balanced approach and perspective is the most effective, most faithful to scripture, and most God honoring. True wisdom gives us a balance in life.

Second, wisdom produces strength. **Ecclesiastes 7:19 Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city.** Now, Solomon is not suggesting that the wise man can bench press 1500 pounds. He is talking about an inner emotional, spiritual strength. Wisdom is a very powerful force.

For one thing, it enables us to handle the imperfections of life. **Ecclesiastes 7:20 Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.** Friends, because of the fall in the Garden of Eden, because of sin, nothing on this planet is exactly as it should be. People, nature, and everything people and nature produce, have been corrupted.

That is a very troubling reality, especially if one is a perfectionist. Someone said a perfectionist is

one who takes great pains... and gives them to others. Actually, I believe most of us are perfectionists in some aspects of life, with some people expecting perfection in many aspects.

I personally think it would be nice if life was neat and tidy, if problems always had simple solutions, if everything was black and white and there were no gray areas. At times we are forced to choose what seems like the lesser of two evils, or to neglect something good because there are too many good options available.

In this very complicated world, wisdom enables us to know and do what is best and what honors God. Wisdom enables us to get beyond the frustration we may feel over the imperfections we see in ourselves or in the people and things around us. It helps us honor the Lord by making the best of even a bad situation. The wise person is able to make lemonade out of life's lemons.

Wisdom also gives us the strength to deal with criticism in the right way. **Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.** There's an awful lot of wisdom in that statement. Many times, it would be best if we just let something we hear go in one ear and out the other.

I don't know anyone who enjoys being criticized. If I had a choice between someone saying, "Pastor Dan, that was a wonderful sermon. You do a marvelous job," or someone saying "Pastor Dan, that sermon was horrible. Only a total idiot would believe what you said this morning." If I had a choice, 1000 times out 1000 times I would choose the compliment over the criticism.

Now, that would not necessarily be the best decision. Criticism can be helpful. Yet, you would probably choose the compliment every time as well. However, never being criticized is not an option most of us choose. So, when criticism comes it is important we handle it the right way. And wisdom helps us do that.

Sometimes, as Solomon says, it is best to just let the criticism go in one ear and out the other. The wise person realizes that some folks are just in the habit of saying negative things. An old saying

says, “When a mule kicks you, consider the source.” And though getting kicked by a mule hurts, no one loses sleep at night worrying about what the mule thinks of him. We need to learn to simply ignore some criticism because it has absolutely nothing to do with us, and everything to do with the person verbally kicking us.

At the same time, wisdom causes us to not ignore valid criticism. When someone makes a negative comment to me, it is always a good idea for me to ask: Is that true? Or is that true to some degree?

Oh yes, I usually feel defensive and am tempted to justify my actions or attitudes, but that is not a good path to take. A wise person almost always learns from the criticism of others. None of us enjoy being criticized, but we can learn much from those unpleasant words we hear. Wisdom causes us to do just that.

One important way criticism can help us is by keeping us humble. Solomon says that hearing someone curse us should be a reminder that some not so nice things have come from our lips as well.

If today someone tells me, “Pastor Dan, I think you should have been working harder on your sermon last night instead of wasting your time watching a football game.” I will be a little defensive. That person doesn’t know how many hours I put into this sermon, and I certainly think I should be able to relax a little bit on Saturday evening and watch a football game.

But when I hear that unjust criticism it is a reminder to be grateful that this individual doesn’t know about other occasions where I have indeed failed to use my time in the best way. And even if I were innocent of being slothful this past week, I should be grateful that my critic didn’t point out my pride or selfishness, sins of which I have certainly been guilty of these past seven days. I need to remember that if someone tells me that I am not perfect, he or she is right. Wisdom will help me keep that in mind.

Third, Solomon then turns to some important insights which wisdom gives. The wise person understands that, first, we lack the ability to make ourselves wise, **Ecclesiastes 7:23,24 All this I tested by wisdom and I said, “I am determined to be wise”—but this was beyond me.**

**Whatever exists is far off and most profound—who can discover it?** Yes, education, experience, and a good genetic code can help, but they are incapable of producing true wisdom.

Recognizing this fact is the first step on the path to wisdom. The person who realizes he doesn’t know everything is a lot smarter than someone who thinks he does. Socrates, the ancient Greek philosopher, was right when he said, “He is wisest who like Socrates knows that his wisdom in nothing for only the gods are wise.”

Actually, He was wrong on the last point, because there is only one true God. Over the years, the more I have learned, the more I realize I don’t know. 35 years ago, whenever someone asked me a question, I almost always gave an answer. It may not have been the right answer, but I almost always had one. Today, I more frequently respond to a question with “I don’t know. I am confident God knows the answer to that question, but I don’t.” Or I sometimes put it this way, “I am sure of two things, number 1, there is a God and number 2, I’m not Him.”

Now, don’t panic. I am not on the path to becoming some type of skeptic or post-modern relativist. I am certain that truth does exist and that absolute truth is a reality. I know God is the source of all wisdom and in His grace, God has chosen to share not all, but a sufficient amount of that truth with us. As **Proverbs 2:6 says For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.**

How does God do this? One way is through what is called common grace. This is what God makes available to all human beings, whether they are believers in Jesus or not. So, for example, an atheist scientist may discover a new drug that cures some types of cancer. Even though he won’t acknowledge it, that wisdom came from God.

Other aspects of wisdom come from reading and studying the Bible. Psalm 19:7 tells us that the law of the Lord, “makes wise the simple.” This book contains huge amounts of truth, both what I would call spiritual truth and practical truth that are ours to read and understand.

Yet, it is possible to memorize big chunks of scripture and still be a fool. That is why it is so

important to pray and ask God to instill wisdom in our minds and in our hearts, through His word and by His spirit. **James 1:5** is a great verse we need to keep in mind. **If anyone lacks wisdom he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him.**

Second insight of wisdom is that romantic relationships are often unsatisfying. **Ecclesiastes 7:26 I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare.** Solomon understands erotic or romantic love is one of the most powerful forces on earth. People are sometimes willing to give up almost anything for the sake of the one they think they love. The wise person, however, realizes that is a big mistake.

No, please don't misunderstand. Solomon is not talking about marriage here, a husband-and-wife relationship. That love consists of more than sexual attraction, is much more fulfilling and is really a wonderful gift from God.

His point is that a relationship built merely on sexual or emotional attraction, no matter how strong those feelings are, is very empty and tends to be very destructive.

Solomon's words tragically describe the path of sexual affairs that many folks in our day have taken, though I would add both men and women can be the seducer, or fall into the trap of being seduced. I have known a number of individuals, including some Christians, including even some pastors, who have chosen to sacrifice their marriages, their families, their careers because they had "fallen in love" with another person. I believe every single one of them eventually regretted their action, but by then it was too late. Solomon says, wisdom helps one avoid that terrible mistake.

Third insight that wisdom gives us is that the real problem is not out there, but in here. Inside each one of us. **Ecclesiastes 7:27-29 "Look," says the Teacher, "this is what I have discovered: 'Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things—while I was still searching but not finding—I found one upright man**

**among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. This only have I found God created mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes.'"**

Pastor Dan, how come Solomon things one out of a 1000 men is upright, but not one woman? Remember, I have learned the best response to that questions is: "I have no idea." Solomon's point is clear though. There is something wrong with us on the inside. We have turned against God or, as NLT puts Solomon's words: **Ecclesiastes 7:29 God created people to be upright, but they have each turned to follow their own downward path.**

The Apostle Paul appears to have this verse in mind when he writes **Romans 3:10-12 "There is no one righteous, not even one: there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away..., there is no one who does good, not even one."** In our day many folks, even some Christians, have a much more optimistic view of human nature than Solomon or Paul does. "Deep down inside we are basically good," right? It is important to realize that the Bible is not saying everyone is as bad as they could be. Everyone doesn't lie, swear, steal and cheat all the time.

Rather, the Bible teaches that even the folks who never do those things still have a big problem, because they want to do things their own way rather than God's. Our nature is to rebel against God's authority. Only by God's grace and with the help of His Spirit are we able to become people who are more interested in honoring the Lord than we are in serving ourselves. A wise person realizes that.

Though many folks are often shocked by the dishonesty, cruelty, and selfishness that pervades our world, we as Christians should not be. We know that apart from God, each of us is following what downward path. Wisdom enables us to see that when we wonder what is wrong with the world the correct answer is: I am. Thus, if I am going to work on solving the world's problems, the best place to start is right here, with me.

Solomon's purpose in our text has been to help us realize how important and valuable wisdom is. Maybe the Lord has spoken to you today through

one particular point I have made. If so, you need to respond to that.

However, I think growing in wisdom is a goal each of us should have. As we said before, God is the source of that wisdom, and we need to pray and ask the Lord to help us become truly wiser. My encouragement to you today is to make that a priority. Instead of focusing on becoming wealthier or healthier or having more fun, or getting more rest, devote some time and energy to becoming wiser.

Because wisdom is a lot more valuable than many things which fill our lives. As the Lord tells us in **Proverbs 3:13-15 Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.**