

Wisdom for ALL

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Well, I want to start by just thanking those who sent in their favorite proverb. I hope you enjoyed doing it, and the rest of us, I think we all enjoyed watching.

Many are quite familiar, but there were one or two rather surprising ones, and hopefully we might be able to dig into some of them over the next few weeks. Well, I didn't do a video myself, but here's my favorite proverb on the next slide, and it says this, it is the glory of God to conceal a matter, to search out a matter, is the glory of kings, Proverbs 25, verse 2.

I won't say any more, but if you are keen to know why, then you can ask me later. Now, most of us enjoy good proverbs, don't we? The clever ones put a smile on our face, like the one from Sandra, about the vinegar on wounds and singing to the sad, the heavy-hearted.

But others, the profound ones, managed to summarize rather deep insights in just a single sentence. But proverbs, I think, reveal our fascination, or dare I even say our obsession, with wisdom.

I think that's why we have so-called lifestyle gurus, who can make a living or killing, even by being experts in it.

[1 : 29] The popularity of TED Talks is a case in point. I think if you tune in for the first time, you would think that these are talks by experts on a technical subject, or expertise.

But most of them end up sounding like wisdom lectures, don't they? People try to reveal this or that secret to success in life, and people lap them up.

People who listen, lap them up. And I have to say, too, that as a pastor, many pastoral conversations that I have are about wisdom. For example, how to approach relationships or marriage, what decisions to make regarding work or study, how to resolve conflict.

We all desire wisdom, don't we? Well, over the next few weeks, that will be our focus. And we want to use the book of Proverbs to help inform us on what wisdom looks like.

Now, obviously, Proverbs with 31 big chapters, we don't have the time to cover each and every saying in the book. But fortunately, unlike other books in the Bible, Proverbs is actually one where you can make a lot of sense of without having to read it from the very first chapter and verse to the very last.

[2 : 51] And while many associate Proverbs with pithy sayings, like the ones that were in the videos, there's more to Proverbs than that. You see, the first nine chapters are actually longer discourses.

They're more like lectures, ancient TED Talks, if you like. Some are from a father to his son. Others are by wisdom herself.

It's only when you get to chapter 10 that you find the shorter and short sayings or the Proverbs proper. So on the next slide, just let me give you a rather broad outline of Proverbs so that you get the hang of it, even though we might not be going through it.

It's not really that contentious, really, because Proverbs itself actually divides intentionally. The writers have divided the book intentionally into these segments.

So chapter 1 to 9 is the preamble or prologue. Here we understand the nature and character of wisdom. We're given the general principles of how wisdom works, how you acquire it, what you do with it, that sort of thing.

[3 : 58] Then from chapter 10 onwards, the individual Proverbs begin. And we have a collection of these. Most likely what's happened is that the first collection, which is the longest, gets compiled first, and then you have the others that are added to it over time.

So in the first collection, what you notice is that each proverb is a couplet. It always contrasts what is wise with what is foolish. The second collection is a group of 30 sayings of the wise.

And we know this because Proverbs chapter 22 and verse 20, which is on the next slide, says this exactly. Have I not written 30 sayings for you? Sayings of counsel and knowledge.

Scholars have found that these 30 sayings are very similar to some of the ones in Egypt. And so it may be that the Israelites decided to make them their own.

Or it could be vice versa. Don't know. Then there's another collection of further sayings of the wise, which is so headed. On the next slide, these also are the sayings of the wise, chapter 24 and verse 23.

[5 : 07] And then the fourth collection is headed in Proverbs chapter 25 and verse 1. Proverbs of Solomon compiled by the men of Hezekiah, king of Judah.

So Hezekiah comes after Solomon in his reign. And so my guess here is that they found more Proverbs during his reign and decided, more Proverbs of Solomon that is, and thought that it was worth collating and putting it into this book of Proverbs as a separate collection.

And then finally, in chapters 30 and 31, we have a collection from two non-Israelite sources. Eger, I think, who is perhaps a king, and then King Lemuel and his mother.

I'm not sure whether it's the mother who wrote it or the king who wrote it, but anyway, together they've had the last chapter dedicated to them. So that's the book of Proverbs in a nutshell.

But as I said, we'll be looking at Proverbs thematically rather than sequentially. Tonight, though, we'll just start with the first seven verses because they set the scene for us.

[6 : 20] So let's begin in verse 1 where we read, The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel, for gaining wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair.

Now this is as clear a purpose statement as you can get, can't you, for the book. The mention of Proverbs here in the first sentence, as I said earlier, isn't just a reference to those pithy sayings, but to all 31 chapters, including the longer discourses at the start.

And yes, I think when it was first compiled, perhaps all the Proverbs were Solomon's, even though the ones added later may not have been. But I think they thought, no, no point having to update the first verse because people get that it were later collections.

So let's dive a little deeper into the purpose itself because we see how the pursuit of wisdom involves actually two steps. First, in verse 2, there is the gaining of wisdom and understanding.

This is actually a couplet. It's the first couplet that we see. It's a task, isn't it, in thinking and understanding. That's what wisdom is about. To learn and to gain insight into life.

[7 : 43] So it's the exercise of the mind. Now sometimes we hear people say that they have no interest in this first step. So we hear people say, oh look, just tell me what to do.

I haven't got the time or energy to try and think about it. But really, that's not learning wisdom, is it? Because wisdom involves not just knowing what to do, but also understanding why.

It means reflecting on what's happening, understanding what the underlying issues and motivations are, and then forming judgments about the truth of that situation.

And as humans, we need wisdom, because humans and life were complicated, aren't we? And that's why I think you'll find that the book of Proverbs isn't laid out like a manual, where there's a catalog or an index, you know, and there's a prescriptive answer to every question in life, you know.

You want answer to X? Well, turn to page 42 and follow the instructions. Simple. No, it doesn't work like that, does it? Yes, I know you may have noticed that the word instruction is used here in the purpose statement, but this word here doesn't mean like the word that you use when it comes to your Achaia furniture, does it?

[9 : 07] You know, where you have a set of instructions, you open the page, you follow step 1 to 8, and even then, I still get it wrong, but if you did that, you'll get a complete set of furniture.

Rather, instruction here is more about the principles or the general observations that you need to understand to guide you in your decision making. It doesn't make the decisions for you.

You then need to actually apply them thoughtfully, given the situation and the people you're dealing with. And so, for example, what might be right for a young person may not be appropriate for someone older, or what might be right for a person this time around might not be for another time later on.

So, to grow in wisdom, therefore, requires us to use judgment and to exercise discernment. The facts don't always fall neatly into place.

There are judgments and fine decision making to be made. Now, I said it was a two-step process because having used our minds to think, the second aspect of wisdom then is to put it into action.

[10 : 22] A wise person doesn't just know right from wrong. He or she also does what's right. And that's the couplet we now find in verse 3. Having received instruction in prudent behavior, we do what is right and just and fair.

Now, we might all think this is common sense and it mostly is, but I have to confess that there are times when I know what's right and yet I still don't do it.

And so, that's folly, isn't it, for me? Jesus himself says the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount right at the end, which I've got the verse on the next slide.

He says, Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. Conversely, the fool, the fool actually isn't the one who doesn't know Jesus' words.

No, the fool is the one who hears them but doesn't put them into practice. And I suspect we've met people like that. They always talk so confidently of what they think is right all the time, but then you ask them to put it into action, to follow through and they never do it, do they?

[11 : 41] As we always often say, they only know how to talk big. They don't walk the talk. And what are people's conclusions after a while of these people?

Well, they think they're fools, aren't they? Only, I think, people normally use more colorful language, which I wouldn't tonight. And so, gaining wisdom is a two-step process, which takes time because your head knowledge has to be tested.

It has to be put into practice and then slowly, as you put it into practice, it becomes habit. And so, I just want to encourage some of the younger ones in our church, by which I mean anyone under 40, not to be impatient over this process.

Each of us will grow in wisdom at our own pace. Because in God's wisdom, we go through different experiences, don't we? And so, we acquire different aspects of wisdom at different rates.

For example, if your life has been filled with lots of trials, and you've witnessed much grief and loss in your life, then you're likely to have greater wisdom into how to comfort and empathize with others.

[13 : 00] or if you grew up in a loving family, where your parents modeled godly wisdom, then you can probably foster healthy relationships more naturally.

Now, it's not to say that if you missed out on one or the other, that you'll never become wise in that way, but you just might get there in a different way, or at a different time, or a different pace, as it were.

But regardless of what you've gone through, growing in wisdom will take time. So I want to encourage you to just be patient and to be humble.

And ironically, having this attitude is a mark of wisdom in itself, isn't it? Not actually prove that you lack wisdom, but you do have wisdom. So there's really no need, I know that sometimes as young people, there's really no need to always try and prove how good you are, or how quickly you are growing, or becoming wise.

I used to have some graduates where I used to work in financial services, these investment banker types, and many of them wanted to know at their first performance review, just after their probation ended, the first thing they wanted to know was when will they get promoted.

[14 : 22] And I used to say, you know, just focus on doing your job well, and the managers will recognize your quality and promote you accordingly.

But of course, I mean, some of them got impatient and they went to a competitor who somehow got duped and offered them a better paying job. And that was even before they've completed their training.

They think they've already done it, and so they've moved on. Now, please don't get me wrong, it's not like I'm picking just on the young, because this is also true for those of us who are older, isn't it?

For as we now look to the next two verses, we learn that the pursuit of wisdom is for all people. So if the first point, which is on the side, verses 1 to 3 is about the aim and purpose of wisdom, then verses 4 to 6 gives us the beneficiaries of wisdom.

Here, in verse 4, the Proverbs of Solomon are, as we read, for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young. Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

[15 : 39] So I hope you noticed there the full spectrum of those who benefit from wisdom. Again, the verses work as couplets, so the first couplet there is the simple and the young, and these often overlap, don't they, as a group or two groups that overlap.

Then there are the wise and the discerning, and again, both these words often refer to similar types of people. But the point is, whether you're young or old, simple or wise, the book of Proverbs and the pursuit of wisdom is still of relevance to you.

Wisdom, or the gaining of wisdom, is a lifelong process that doesn't end. The simple and the young know that they still need wisdom, because they can see that there's a lot they still don't know.

But for the wise, their danger is to become arrogant and lazy, because they think that they know it all already. But that shouldn't be, should it?

It's not to say that the wise don't know right from wrong. Often, you do get to a point where you recognize for what it is, and you know how to steer clear of it.

[16 : 49] So, for example, I know that I don't have to listen to any advice that's given to me. It's easy sometimes to be able to tell bad advice from good advice.

But no, even though I may be able to recognize that, being wise means realizing that there's still things that I don't know, that actually we can't know everything.

And that even if we didn't know everything, we can't practice everything perfectly. So, we actually do fall short of God's standards anyway. And so, we can keep growing, can't we?

And we need to be open to keep growing in wisdom, even though we may be wise relative to others. We need to grow in wisdom prayerfully, intentionally, and humbly.

now, each week in the lockdown period so far, I've been meeting with a few St. John's ladies over the phone. One of them is actually in her 90s, and this week we were actually reading this very passage, and she shared that even at her age, she still looks to grow in wisdom every day.

[18 : 02] She still keeps wanting to gain an insight to live well before God. I don't know about what you think, but that's such a wonderful attitude, isn't it?

Hopefully, if I get to her age, what I'll be is like her instead of becoming a grumpy old man. I wonder whether you put the same high value on wisdom.

Whether you're a new Christian or not, young or old, how intentional are you to grow in wisdom? I have to say most people do desire wisdom, don't they?

As I said in the introduction, but often I observe that it's simply a means to an end. So, they might think, I really want to do well in my career, so how can I be wise or perhaps shrewd so that I can fast track my promotion, like those investment banking types that used to work with me?

Or, how can I gain wisdom with friendships so that I can be the most popular person in the room? Or, how can I find a group of persons I can be comfortable with and therefore not feel so insecure all the time?

[19 : 14] Now, there's nothing wrong with these aims, but the difference is, when we desire wisdom for its own sake, we do it without an agenda.

We're open to where God's wisdom will guide us, even if it means undermining our agenda in the first place. wisdom, that's what it means to truly pursue wisdom, isn't it?

Because it includes shining the torch of wisdom on our own agenda and assumptions in the first place. Well, if that's your desire, then that's what the book of Proverbs, and indeed that's what the whole Bible offers.

Those who are truly wise, allow God, allows God, and His word, to scrutinize all aspects of their lives.

They're willing even to put their own desires and goals under the microscope of God's wisdom. So hopefully you're prepared for that. You're not just interested in wisdom to serve your own purpose, but actually you're interested in wisdom to serve God's purpose.

[20 : 24] because that's where the intro to Proverbs lands in verse 7, which is our last verse. And this is actually the key verse, if not of the whole book, then certainly for this passage as well.

You see, up to now, nothing in the verses we've looked at before is explicitly Christian, is it? Verses 1 to 6 could have been written by an atheist, couldn't it?

A secular self-help guru, even. But verse 7 is the one that makes all the difference because it states, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Now, let's unpack this. First, I think, don't be too concerned by the word knowledge as opposed to wisdom. Some people do make a distinction saying, you know, knowledge is about theory whereas wisdom is about application.

But as we heard Bevan share his favorite verse earlier in that video, Proverbs 9, verse 10 says this exactly, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, not knowledge there.

[21 : 33] So I think there's no big difference whether it's knowledge or wisdom, theory or application, or begin with the fear of the Lord. Second, this verse is again another couplet, isn't it?

As with most of Hebrew poetry. And so the contrast here is between fools and those who fear the Lord. I think what the verse is implying is that those who fear the Lord are wise.

So last week, if you're here and we're looking at the Psalms, Psalm 103 said God's love is with those who fear him. And now in Proverbs we get God's wisdom is with those who fear him.

And so the simple and the wise aren't opposites are they? Rather both the simple and the wise if they fear the Lord are on the road to wisdom.

Fools on the other hand, that is those who don't fear the Lord as a deliberate choice, they are opposite to the wise. And they might even be really smart, like brainy smart.

[22 : 45] wisdom isn't about how smart you are, what the condition of your brain is, or the quality of your brain matter is. Rather, it's what the condition of your heart is, I think.

And so my third point in the outline is actually a question on the slide there. We had at the very start the title Wisdom for All, but really, if you read this verse, is it really wisdom for all?

You see, wisdom is available for all, but it's not necessarily attained or acquired by all, is it? The difference is in your heart.

Are you someone who fears the Lord, someone who reveres Him for who He is, and therefore submits to Him and His wisdom? And so the choice really is between fear, that is, the rightful fear of the Lord, serving and honoring Him, it's a good fear, is the difference between fear or folly.

The choice is, fear the Lord, or you're a fool. Now, that's a rather provocative statement, and immediately some of you may object and ask, what about all these other wise people in the past, you know, famous people who aren't Christians?

[24 : 08] What about some of my relatives who my respect? But they don't believe in Jesus. Well, let me just clarify, I think when the Bible uses the word fool, it's not, as I said earlier, referring to smart versus silly people.

Rather, it refers to those people who know God and yet reject Him. And so Psalm 14, verse 1, for example, says, the fool says in his heart, there is no God.

All these, the Psalms and Proverbs, all these verses are written to people who belong to God's people in the Old Testament. These are the people who should know but refuse to obey God or submit to Him.

So I would say that those people who haven't heard about Christianity or they have conscientious objections, even as they initially hear them, I wouldn't use the word fools to describe them, particularly in our society where this word has a derogatory connotation.

It's not meant to be used as an insult for people like that. And yet, I think the Bible does distinguish between those people who know God and those who don't.

[25 : 26] And so even the people that I mentioned earlier who aren't Christians, who are nevertheless wise and have a certain type of wisdom, and I have to say I do admire and respect some of them, some of them I used to work for and things like that.

But ultimately it's not the wisdom that the book of Proverbs aspires for us. If I could give you an example, it's a bit like the difference between flying a plane in a flight simulator versus a real plane.

I've got two of those pictures on the slide. We've seen these training simulators, haven't we? They're so realistic that pilots train in them. The image on the right shows just how realistic that cockpit is.

And the simulation is so real that the pilots, as they're going in in that little capsule, they feel the air turbulence and the bumpiness of the tarmac as they land and as they fly, just as though they were in a real plane.

It really is lifelike, isn't it? It mimics the actual experience of flying a plane. But the thing is, no matter how realistic it is, it's not the same, is it?

[26 : 39] Because when these two pilots step out of their capsule or their cockpit, they haven't landed at Heathrow Airport, have they? They're still stuck in some hangar somewhere in Melbourne.

And that's the difference between earthly wisdom, which we do see in some wise unbelievers, and true godly wisdom. because the thing with godly wisdom is that it's founded on a right and real relationship with God.

And out of that relationship, God actually gives us access to His mind, as it were, by His Spirit. We're not mimicking wisdom, as it were. This is God's wisdom that we're getting.

And so we gain understanding and insight for life, but not only just for life, but actually we gain understanding and insight for our relationship with God.

Earthly wisdom may simulate and mimic wisdom as it relates to relationships and things to do with things on earth, but there isn't a real relationship with God that underpins it.

[27 : 45] And that's why in verse 7, the writer says that wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. Revering God as Lord is the right starting point for seeing and understanding the world the way God does.

But more than that, it's the starting point for understanding and seeing God for who He is. And so that's my open invitation to all of us over the next few weeks.

Whether you're young and simple or wise and discerning, will you come with me as we grow in wisdom by studying Proverbs? Perhaps something practical you could do is to start reading Proverbs during the week as part of your Bible reading.

And then as you come and you gather each Sunday, you'll have some concrete Proverbs in mind as you read. Because if that's what we do, then let me encourage you that this endeavor is going to be fruitful, absolutely fruitful, because our reading from James tonight encouraged us with this promise.

You see, when we ask God for wisdom, this is something that God actually desires to give to us. He's not going to hold back. Look at the verses on the slide. Here is God's promise.

[29 : 08] If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But there is a condition, isn't there?

And this is what it is. But when you ask, you must believe. Fear of the Lord. You must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. In other words, we need to ask with the single-minded aim to act and live according to that wisdom, God.

We need to second-guessing God and wondering, is that really right, God? No, trusting and believing in what He says, and doing it, because we fear Him and revere Him.

And we obey Him because we trust that what He says is right. And not only right, but that it is actually good for us. So let's pray and ask God for that wisdom, shall we?

[30 : 15] Father, we ask that You will give us generously this promise that You've given to us, the wisdom that we need for life. We ask this by faith.

We ask this with a willingness to obey when You reveal Your truth to us. Humble us so that we may grow in this truly godly wisdom and help us to live it out rightly before You and with others in our lives.

So Father, we ask that You might bless us as a church over the coming weeks as we sit under Your Word in Proverbs. All of this we ask in Jesus' name, the one who is all-wise, in Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.