

Wisdom for Living: What is wisdom?

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- [0 : 00] As we stand, may we pray. Lord, we ask you to open your word to our hearts and to open our hearts to your word through Christ our Lord.
- Amen. Well, good morning, friends. As you see, I am here as preacher for the first of the August series of sermons.
- I am preaching to order. I have been given a title, What is Wisdom? A topic, which the title expresses.
- A task to introduce to us the book of Proverbs. And a text, the first seven verses of the first chapter of the book of Proverbs.
- Now, I think I shall be wise to assume that none of us is very well acquainted with the book of Proverbs.
- [1 : 16] If I do you wrong by making that assumption, I apologize in advance. But experience tells me that it's much more likely to be true than false.
- So, I'm going to begin just by asking you to look through those first seven verses of the book. And I comment very briefly on the ground they cover.
- The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. That's verse one. David's legacy was the son's.
- Solomon's legacy is Proverbs. And we should note right at the start that in the Bible, the word proverb has a broader meaning than it ordinarily has in English.
- In English, a saying isn't a proverb unless there's something striking about the form of expression. You know, like a stitch in time saves nine and a fool and his money are soon parted.
- [2 : 35] Those ways of saying things have a sort of snap in them. And so, they constitute the saying, a proverb, in the precise English sense.
- But in the Bible, and all the way through this book, which we're beginning to look into, a proverb is simply a wise word.
- And that's the broad sense in which this book deals with the reality of life, which is its theme.
- Wise words about life in all its angles, perspectives, problems, and so forth. Verses two through four begin to spell that out.
- You could head them. The purpose of wise words. Well, what is the purpose of wise words?
- [3 : 48] To give another two English words to stand in their place. The purpose of wise words is good sense.
- That's what we're being told here, with a pretty wide range of words used to rub the point in. To know wisdom and instruction.
- To understand words of insight. To receive instruction in wise dealing. In righteousness, justice, and equity. Okay.

Okay. Then, the purpose of wise words is for necessary learning. Humble learning.

Needful learning. And then, we go on to verses five and six. The prophet of wise words.

[4 : 49] Let the wise hear and increase in learning. And the one who understands obtain guidance. To understand the proverb and the saying.

The words of the wise and their riddles. There you have a picture. Quickly drawn. Wisdom of the wise person as one who keeps learning.

Never allows him or herself to suppose that we know everything we need to know. Wisdom is constantly enlarging our understanding.

That's our grip on things. Wisdom is constantly enlarging our sense of the right way to go. In life.

And that's all brought together, I think, in verse seven. Which is a kind of motto, actually, for the whole book. And it tells us two things.

[5 : 57] The first is the point of entry into wisdom. The fear of the Lord, it says, is the beginning of knowledge.

Well, yes. But knowledge is a word that's already been used to express the substance of wisdom. And there are places in the Old Testament where the words, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom are used just like that.

Clearly, if we're going to keep learning things that we need to know throughout life, a certain humility regarding the point that we've reached so far, and an openness to discover that we don't yet know it all, those are very necessary qualities.

And Solomon, I think we may fairly say, is rubbing it in here. He says, the point of entry into the ongoing growth, which is labeled wisdom, is the fear of the Lord.

More about that in just a moment. The second half of the verse parallels that by focusing on the point of not entry into wisdom and more wisdom, but the point of exclusion from wisdom all along the line.

[7 : 37] And just as humility belongs to the point of entry into wisdom, so pride produces exclusion from wisdom.

Pride is the mindset which tells us, in a very comforting and, what shall I say, neck-rubbing way, don't worry, you know it all, or at least you know as much as you need to know, you're doing all right.

You've no need to learn anymore. The whole book of Proverbs, actually, is going to go after that person with a purpose of exposing what it calls the folly of that person.

The fool is opposed to the wise man throughout the book, and the portrait of the fool is drawn just as vividly as the portrait of the wise man, which means that Solomon, putting this book together, was acutely aware that it's very, very easy to be a fool, even in the moment when you think you're being wise.

So let's all take warning at the outset of the book that this is the sort of instruction that we're going to find in it. Two things I want to talk about a little more fully, and the first is the essence of wisdom.

[9 : 19] In the Bible, wisdom's a theological word, and wisdom exists only where there's a proper relationship with God.

In the middle of the Old Testament, there are a set of books dealing with aspects of devotion and godliness.

That's a word we don't very often use, but it's the word that fits here. Aspects of devotion and godliness, which the faithful follower of God, the faithful covenanter with God in the covenant that he has with his people, need to focus.

And the best thing I've ever seen said about them was said by Oswald Chambers, and he said it like this. The Psalms teach you how to praise.

The Proverbs teach you how to behave. The Song of Solomon teaches you how to love. The Book of Job teaches you how to suffer.

[10 : 42] And the Book of Ecclesiastes, wait for it, teaches us how to enjoy. Well, that, I think, is supreme wisdom, honestly.

I've never met anything wiser said about the five books of the wisdom literature than that. But now, we have before us here a pitfall in this secular world of ours, which is going off the track spiritually, as we know, at just about every point.

We don't talk, actually, much about wisdom. We talk about values. But when you look at the things that our modern world values and encourages us to value, they don't quite correspond to what we've been talking about so far.

What does the world value and speak of as wisdom? Oh, cleverness and skill.

Power to perform. Being a virtuoso on the stage as an actor or on the stage again as a pianist or being a virtuoso in the...

[12 : 22] The word I want has just gone from me. When you get to my age, brothers and sisters, you'll find that that often happens. So don't do that if you can avoid it.

No, what? The stadium is the word I wanted. Cleverness is thought of as performance in the stadium like we've been watching in the Commonwealth Games this last week.

Some magnificent performances. Clever, yes, to the last degree. But, would you call them wisdom? They make for fame.

Yes, we've watched famous athletes doing their thing and becoming more famous. But fame isn't quite the same as wisdom. So, we have to be careful here and redefine wisdom in relation to all of that to make sure that we're not caught in these self-aggrandizing attitudes which then we call wisdom and kid ourselves that that's what they've given us.

No. Wisdom has to do with a relationship to God which reflects our awareness right from the start that we were created to live our lives for God and with God and that this life is best thought of as all the way through the Bible it is as a journey.

[14 : 15] and on a journey the important thing is that you stick to the right path and don't allow yourself to be misled onto the wrong one.

And that's a matter of the decisions that we make and keep on making as long as life lasts. Let me say this in another way.

If we ask what constitutes the life that God's given us to live well one can classify its contents under three headings.

There are relationships to start with. Life is relationships. And there are priorities which we set ourselves things that we want to do and believe that it's good that we should want to do them.

And then thirdly there are quite simply our reactions to the things any number of things about which day to day we're called to react because well they just come to us they are part of the reality of life and they demand some sort of decisions from us.

[15 : 51] And in all the decisions we make and all the commitments that we enter into well we have to remember and this is biblical biblical to the last degree we have to remember that every action has consequences.

That's something that the world happily forgets these days but Christians need to remember it indeed every human being needs to remember it because it's true and it's inescapable.

Actions have consequences and one of the marks of the truly wise person is that he or she recognizes that and thinks about the consequences of actions before committing ourselves.

So we do try to look before we leap and we see the unwisdom of leaping before we look as so many people do in so many matters these days.

Well I'm laboring the point because it's so very important I don't think I need to labor it further because as soon as it's said surely we realize yes of course this is truth this is wisdom and now that we've said that we can say something further about wisdom namely that its very nature is ongoing learning or as we say ongoing growth in understanding and prudence and the qualities that make a life into a good life and a better life and the best life.

[17 : 46] A wise preacher of the generation in which I was brought up a man named Martin Lloyd Jones preached a sermon published as a tract the title of the tract said everything about life that I'm trying to say now.

Three words life's preparatory school that was the vision of life that he wanted to project in his sermon and that is the vision of life putting it in contemporary terms of course that the Bible seeks to project when it talks about wisdom.

You grow, you advance, you learn, and so you become wise. And so I think I've said enough to make the point that wisdom is a matter of seeing and going the right way and seeing and going the right way is a matter of looking for the right way at each point each day of our lives.

And when we become Christians, disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, sinners who go to him asking for forgiveness and restoration, adopted children of God who now recognize that our business is to honor our royal father and glorify him every way we can, well, with all that, we realize, as we need to realize, that wisdom is indeed preparation for something.

This life is preparation for something, and there is a glory beyond which is much more important than anything in this world, apart indeed from the saving ministry of the Lord Jesus.

[20 : 02] And it's for us to tune into that and stay with it. And that is the essence of wisdom, brothers and sisters, for you and me. And then the other thing that I want to say a word about before I finish, we were introduced to it quickly in my review of the seven verses that I was given to work with, the entry point of wisdom, the way in.

There's a kind of drumbeat message about this, as I said, I'm saying again for emphasis now, in a number of places in the Old Testament, which we haven't time to look up, but there were several of them, we are told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of knowledge, the beginning of the whole process of getting life right, which is what we're thinking about right now.

question, what does it mean when it talks about the fear of the Lord? I suppose that the first thing that comes to mind when we hear that word fear nowadays is panic, fright, alarm.

Well, yes, that's the secular association of the word fear, it's true. But in the Bible, regularly, the fear of the Lord, fear of God, about which the Bible has so much to say, is made clear to us as a matter of awe, and reverence, and submission, a natural response, actually, to our creator, who is great and good, coming from the heart of one like you and me, who knows themselves to be small, and as yet, very far from being as good as we should be.

Cranmer, as you would expect, got this right. Before the end of this service, indeed, straight after I finished preaching, we shall be giving thanks to God in our prayers, for all his servants departed this life in thy faith and fear.

[22 : 56] Cranmer's wisdom was to link faith and fear in that phrase so that we wouldn't get the wrong idea about fear and would get the right one.

Fear is, I say it again, awe and reverence for the Lord and submission to him, which is basic to the reality of wisdom.

and that comes when faith in Christ takes over and starts to shape our life. And in New Testament Christianity, we should note, because I have no more to explain now, this is just something to meditate on after the service, we should note that two things first of all, the Lord Jesus Christ himself is called wisdom in a number of places.

And that is, it's obvious, isn't it? Because he leads us, his disciples, into the way of wisdom as we've been sketching it out.

Christ's lightness is also called lightness is also called wisdom.

[24 : 28] There are several places where that is, that is reality. The one that was read to us in our second lesson is particularly striking, I think.

it's James talking about wisdom. Actually, we had a sermon at St. John's about this not very long ago. Verse 13 of James chapter 3 asks, who is wise and understanding among you?

By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. Wonderful phrase that, merits a whole sermon. And then in verse 17, the wisdom from above, the wisdom that God gives, the wisdom that constitutes real spiritual growth and advance, is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

does that remind you of what Paul says about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter 5? Fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and so on.

Yes, both these verses point to the reality of Christ-likeness likeness in the lives of Christ's disciples.

[26 : 08] And that's how it's meant to be. And that's how wisdom expresses itself in meekness, in goodness, in prudence, and all these other qualities that have been named.

Well, I have to stop here. Little as I want to, frankly, there's so much more to be said, but pull the threads together. Let me put it as questions to all our consciences.

Do we realize that being a Christian means, at the heart of it, pursuing and practicing wisdom?

As we've begun to analyze it, do we realize that pursuing and practicing wisdom is another name for the personal discipleship to the Lord Jesus, to which, in conversion, we are called?

Do we realize, further, that we are responding to a call to embrace wisdom, when we respond to the summons, that we shall hear very shortly in our communion liturgy, either do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins and are in love and charity with your neighbors and intend to lead the new life, the new life.

[27 : 49] That's right, the Canadian book for once is able to improve on Cranmer, who wrote a new life. A new life is good, the new life is better.

And so to take on the new life, and so forth, I'll leave it there.

I'll leave it there. I'll leave it there. I'll leave it there.