

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Proverbs: Wisdom
Proverbs 1:1-7**

Who of you has ever been in a situation where you did not know what to do? Should you move or not? Should you go to this school or that school? What about this relationship? How can you possibly expect me to know how to raise children? What should I say at this part of the conversation? At each of these times when you don't know what to do, what you possibly need is information—but probably not. You don't need information, instead you need wisdom. We are going to talk about wisdom this summer and we are going to see if God might help you to come to Labor Day a wiser person that you are right now.

We believe that God speaks to us through His Word, so I would ask everybody to pull out either the Bible you brought with you or one of the Bibles in the pews, and turn, please, to the Table of Contents right at the beginning. If we believe that God wants us to be wiser and that some of the answers are in this Book, we ought to realize that in the Old Testament, that is the top part, that God teaches people in basically three ways. God speaks three different ways in the Old Testament. When I was in school, we had to memorize the Books of the Old Testament. I am terrible at memorization. Can't do it. Can't remember my own name, much less your name, much less the Books of the Bible, so I found one of these mnemonic devices that would help me remember at least the groups of the Old Testament. It was 5, 12, 5, 5, 12. That makes no sense at all until you look at the Table of Contents. The first section of the Old Testament is the first way that God teaches. He uses the priests and leaders to teach the law and life of Israel. The first 5 Books are the law, the way that Israel was formed, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In the next 12 Books of the Bible, the priests gathered together all the history of Israel. So we have 5 Books of the law, 12 Books of history, and the next section, the next five Books are the Wisdom Books. That is what we are going to look at today, the Books of Wisdom.

The priests and leaders wrote about the law and the history. The last part of the Old Testament was written by the prophets. You see them, right? Five major prophets and the 12 minor prophets. But the very middle section was written by the poets. It is important to realize that these 5 Books are about wisdom and they were written by poets, not just to make things rhyme but to use imagery and put things together so that they can be remembered.

We are going to look at Proverbs, the third of the Wisdom Books. The Wisdom Books start with Job, then the Psalms, and then the Proverbs. This summer we are going to look at the Proverbs as a way that God would teach us wisdom. As I said, the Book of Proverbs is Hebrew poetry. It has its own style. It does not sound much like rap but I wonder if the Proverbs were going to be written today, what they would sound like. They probably would be very short, for instance, no more than 140 characters. They would come up all the time in different ways and you would have to decide which ones are good and which ones are bad. If the Proverbs are Tweets, they might sound like Twitter. We have found some of the best of Twitter and here is the first.

- Bruno says, “George Zimmer fired as CEO of Men’s Warehouse. He’s going to like the way he looks in sweatpants. I guarantee it.”
- Shirley: “My iPhone just autocorrected *everyone* to *wartime*. I’m not entirely sure what that means but I’m pretty sure we’re all going to die.”
- The third one, Rich Phenow, 5 million Tweets: “I’m hesitant to use the word *genius*, but I just answered the last five questions on Sesame Street correctly.”
- Wayne: “Before Twitter I used to be stupid in the privacy of my own mind.”
- The next one is somebody called King Solomon at wiseguy.com: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

I’d like us to consider the Proverbs as Tweets, short ways that pack big messages. Turn if you would to Proverbs, the first chapter, something like page 944, somewhere in there. Proverbs, chapter 1 will give us a start. We’re going to put it up on the screen. Before the author of Proverbs gets to all the Tweets, he wants to tell us what he is about. Here’s how he starts.

1 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

So, right at the start we know who the author is, King Solomon, David’s son, the wisest king in antiquity. He says the proverbs are

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;

Now this next part, if it is not already underlined in your Bible, would you please take out a little pencil and underline a couple of things. I want you to do this so the next person who reads this will know who the Book of Proverbs is written to because it has specific audiences. It says it is,

4 for giving prudence to those who are simple,

So underline or circle the word simple.

knowledge and discretion to the young

Underline young. As a matter of fact, people believe that the Book of Proverbs is a series of proverbs collected over a couple hundred years, primarily by the kings and their courts, to instruct young noblemen. That will actually explain a lot of the stuff about money and sexuality if you see the target of this as young men of power. “Knowledge and discretion to the young.” Then it says,

5 let the wise listen

So underline wise. Proverbs is also for the wise. Let the wise listen

and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance

Discerning is probably another word for the wise.

6 for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

That's the definition of a proverb by the way. Proverbs are "the sayings and riddles of the wise."

7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,

We'll talk about that later, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,

but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

So another target of the Book of Proverbs is fools. Underline or circle fools. You've got four of the five audiences of the Book of Proverbs right there in those first seven verses. The simple, not stupid, they just haven't been instructed yet. The young, who are huge targets. The wise because one of the marks of the wise is, they keep on learning. And the fools, who resist instruction. That's four. The fifth target is the mockers or the scoffers or the evil. Underline that. They are actually antagonistic. The fools say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," and then don't do it. The mockers, the scoffers, the evil, are opposed to the wisdom of God. All five of those are the audiences for wisdom.

Let's take a second this first week and define what wisdom is. Wisdom is not having a 200 IQ. Wisdom is not knowing all the answers in the encyclopedia. Wisdom is not information. Instead, wisdom is a skill for living, not what you know in your head but what you do in your heart. Wisdom is the ability to discern and make right choices. That's wisdom. It is not information. It is application. Not how much you know but how much you *do*.

I came to the difference between knowledge and wisdom a couple of years ago. Many of you in this service know the Sit family. Gene Sit was an usher here forever as well as a brilliant investment person. Sit Investment Associates was his baby. Over the decades we had this friendship that grew and so we would play tennis and golf. One time several years ago, we were playing tennis and in the locker room afterwards, I said, "Gene, I'm thinking about buying a house. The kids are out of high school. We'd like to move." Gene goes, "Oh, that's a great idea because I believe this is the top of the housing bubble. If you just wait a little while, prices are going to go down, so the key is, sell your house now. Wait till the prices go down, and you will do very well. This is a great time to buy."

All I heard was "This is a great time to buy," so I put the house on the market, and we looked for houses. The market was still pretty hot at that time, and we found this beautiful little home in St. Louis Park. Even though it was more than we wanted to spend, we figured we would do well on our house, so we bought it. The realtor said, "You know, the market is slowing down a little and it could take two or three months to sell your house" so we discounted for that and thought, "Even if we lose thirty or forty thousand dollars, we'll still be okay. We'll be ahead of the game." We bought the house and I could not understand why Gene Sit was not smiling at me anymore. We owned two houses for two months, then three months, then six months, then 12 months, then 18 months. In the end, we didn't so much sell the first house as we gave it away. "Enjoy it! And all of our equity with it. You just have a good time now." I've got to tell you, that was a

painful, painful joke for us but we did sell the house. Many people, many of you, had to actually walk away from a house.

That is the difference between knowledge and wisdom. I had knowledge but my desire overcame my knowledge, and I did not act wisely. There is a gain to acting wisely, and there is a price to be paid for acting foolishly. The oldest of us and the youngest of us God wants to help. We all make choices. Every day you make choices. You make choices about with whom you will be friends. Perhaps the most important choice many of you make is who you will let into your life to affect you or infect you, up or down. We make choices every day, not just about where we work, that's just part of it, but really, *how* we work. That's a much bigger part of it. Not just whether we will go to school. That's a choice. But what we will *do* at school. That's a choice.

You make a choice about the words that you use in conversation. Words can build up and words can kill. We choose. You make choices about how you spend money—or don't, how you save money— or don't. You make choices about sexuality, and I'm not just talking about whom you are sleeping with. I'm talking about that we live in a sex-soaked society. How do you respond to that? We make choices we think will make us happy or not. As we said before, perhaps the biggest place we make choices is when we are raising children or grandchildren or helping our parents as they get to places where they have to make hard choices. Don't you hunger to make better choices? I want to make good choices. I want my children to make great choices to become good choicemakers. That's wisdom.

The kids at The Table tonight are doing this same series through the summer and so we were meeting together because even though I'm preaching tonight, they are going to do most of the series. One of them said, "Jesus doesn't really talk about this idea of wisdom or the Proverbs, does He?" I said, "Well, let's look at that for a second. What is Jesus' biggest teaching time? It is the Sermon on the Mount. How does the Sermon on the Mount end in Matthew, chapter 7?" Listen to these words. Jesus says,

24 "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. **25** The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. **26** But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. **27** The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

The good Jewish boy, Jesus, knew His Proverbs about wise and foolish people and the choices they made and the houses they built. Wisdom is a way to stop the house of your life from crashing. Let me say that again. Wisdom is a way to stop the house of your life from crashing. This is literally, I believe, a life and death issue. Is that worth 10 or 11 weeks during the summer? I think so.

Each week that we do this, we want to do a couple of things a little bit differently. Each week that we preach on this idea of wisdom, we are going to have two constants. The first of these is, we want to tell you up front exactly what we want you to know and what we want you to do. When we prepare our sermons for the team, about 10 days in advance, we have to tell the rest of the worship team what we want them to know and what I want them to do, so the musicians can prepare the right music, so we can help with the children's sermon, all that kind of stuff.

What I want you to know today is how to define wisdom and why it's important. What I want you to do with this is not to go home and say, "That was a nice sermon." I want you to do this: I want you to commit to reading at least one proverb a week and seeing how you can apply it. That's why as you leave today, you will get our study booklet. I'd love you to do at least one proverb a week. I'd love you to do one every other day. Don't try to do one a day. You won't be able to keep up. Every other day. A proverb and then an application. So every week we are going to tell you, this is your *know*, this is your *do*.

The other thing we are going to do is to say, "You know, reading the Bible is hard by yourself. It really is. It's a confusing book. So as we look at the Book of Proverbs, each week we want to give you just one little principle that doesn't take long but will help make the book more understandable. The Bible seems filled with contradictions. "The end will come before I die," says Jesus. "I don't know when the end is going to come." Is that a contradiction? In the Book of Proverbs, it says, for instance, in chapter 26, verse 4,

4 Do not answer fools

In verse 5, it says,

5 Answer fools

Well, what's happening here? Is that a contradiction? Can you answer a fool and not answer a fool? Yes! They are both true. What it is important to realize about the Proverbs is that **they are a collection of sayings over time for different circumstances**. In one time, it is important to answer the fool or bad things will happen. In another setting, it is important *not* to answer the fool or bad things will happen. Different circumstances call for different responses. That's part of wisdom.

You know this implicitly. The reason I know you do is, how many of you have ever been to a Thanksgiving dinner? Raise your hands. You've been to a Thanksgiving dinner somewhere, sometime. Okay. Before the dinner, it's chaos in the kitchen, right? People are running all around. They are whipping the potatoes and sniffing the turkey. All of a sudden, you hear Grandma's voice, "Come on, come on, people." She says, "Too many cooks spoil the broth." In other words, "Get out of my kitchen." So you all go out. After you have stuffed yourselves so you will never eat again and are lying in front of the TV, going "Ohhhhhh," ready to watch the football game, the fifth football game of the day, you hear clattering in the kitchen. You are wondering what is going on, and Grandma comes to the doorway. She is all alone cleaning up in the kitchen and she turns to you and says, "Many hands make for light work." Different settings, different applications of wisdom. We all know that. So we have to understand what the setting is.

Proverbs are not universals. They are generally true principles that depend on the right time and the right circumstances. Let me close this part by just saying that I'd like to give you **four ways that you could become wise this summer**. I don't suggest that you do all four. You might be smart to write them down, but these are four ways that through reading the Proverbs you might become wiser on Labor Day than you are right now. Four ways as we study together how one becomes wise. Let me start with this. No one left to themselves ever arrives at wisdom. Left to yourself, you don't become wise. We are born proud and defensive. That can make us negative

and whiney, suspicious and unsatisfied, squandering our opportunities in life. No one drifts into wisdom because wisdom is always against the current. You do not drift into wisdom. You have to go against the current. It is unusual to be wise, it is not common, so four lessons.

The first one that I would say is that people who become wise **learn from the wise**.

23 The hearts of the wise make their mouths prudent, and their lips promote instruction.
[Proverbs 16:23]

In other words, when you get around wise people, you will become wiser. I say *wise people* because too many of us confuse being wise with books or blogs or things we see on TV, but relationships are how wisdom rubs off best. Wise people, not just wise sayings. I've got to tell you, and I think that this is really important, wisdom rubs off. There is a huge danger for many of you in this congregation that you will never become wise because you do not read anything you disagree with. You don't watch any TV you don't already like. You don't listen to many people who have answers that make your blood boil. You will never become wise. You will only become confirmed in your prejudices. You must learn from the wise so let me just ask you if you are writing this down, learn from the wise, who is that for you? This summer figure out who that is for you. It's better if it's more than one person, but who is that for you?

No. 2, the second way people become wise is they **observe life**.

32 I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: [Proverbs 24:32]

A lot of people just go through life and they are as dumb at the end of sixth grade as they were at the start of first grade. Or they are as dumb at the end of their fifties as they were at the start of their thirties. People who are wise are learning from life. It's like the mouse that sees a hole, and a bunch of mice going into the hole, and says, "A lot of people go into that hole and then I hear a snap and I never see them again. Let's send Harry in there." "I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw:" The wise do not follow the herd. They watch. That also, by the way, limits the number of people who will be wise. Most people like to follow the crowd.

No. 3, **wisdom comes from experience, especially mistakes**. Much of the Book of Proverbs is going to be about discipline and experience for the righteous, even the righteous, even the wise,

16 for though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again, but the wicked stumble when calamity strikes. [Proverbs 24:16]

Everybody makes mistakes. The righteous fall seven times and rise again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity. C. S. Lewis said it a different way. "Pain is wasted on pagans. They will not learn." How do you make good decisions? You learn from bad decisions. The story is told again and again and again in different settings of a guy who shoots up the corporate ladder and finally makes a bad decision and loses 10 million dollars for the firm. He spends the whole weekend knowing that he has to start looking for another job. He comes into the office on Monday and his boss hears him out as he stumbles through his explanation of how he lost the

money. His boss chews him out thoroughly, shows him all the different places he messed up, and finally the young man says, "So is that it?" The boss says, "Are you kidding me? I just invested 10 million dollars in your education. You can't leave now." Is pain wasted on you? One of the things that make a difference between wise people and fools is that the wise are humble and learn from their mistakes.

The fourth way that people learn to be as wise as Solomon, isn't that interesting, learn the wisdom of Solomon from the Proverbs, the fourth way they learn is the same way that Solomon learned wisdom. They **ask God**. At the beginning of Solomon's reign, found in 1st Kings, it says that David dies and after some squabble, Solomon is named King. He is a young man and God appears to him and says, "I loved your father so what would you like? I'll give you anything you ask for." This is not a *genie*. This is God saying, "I'll give you anything you ask for." Solomon says, "Well, I'm young and I don't know what to do. God, would You teach me how to be wise so that I can lead these people well?" God says, "Good answer! Because you didn't ask for wealth, I'll give you wealth. You didn't ask for fame, so I'll give you fame. You didn't ask for health, so I'll give you health. You didn't ask for power, so I'll give you power. Because you asked for wisdom, all this other stuff trails in its wake." Solomon starts out wise because he asks God.

I would ask you to ask God. Not just ask God how to get you out of this mess you got yourself into. Don't just ask God for the answers to the riddle. Ask God to make you a wiser person in what you are going through because wisdom is not for the rich. Wisdom is not for the important. Wisdom is not for the people who stand up front or for the smartest kid in the class. God wants all of His children to be wise. Listen to another good Jewish boy who had learned the Proverbs. James, Jesus' brother, said this,

5 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. [James 1:5]

In other words, if you say, "God, I'm so stupid," God is not going to say, "Boy, are you stupid." God is going to say, "Let Me help." Ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. Next chapter [in the Book of James], who are the wise ones? Let them show their wisdom by their lives, by good deeds done in the humility, that word again, the humility that comes from wisdom. Then in chapter three, James describes what wisdom looks like in a person's life,

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Wouldn't you like somebody to talk about you that way? Whether you are the fastest kid in class, whether you are the oldest person in the building, whether you are the person who is just about to get a promotion, whether you are the person who is just about to lose your job, wouldn't you like people to talk about you like that? It can happen and it can happen this summer by the grace of God. All of us are on a path. All of us are going somewhere. Some of you are stuck on the path. Some of you are lost. Some of you feel like you are trapped. Some of you are going faster and faster and faster and have no clue where you are going. We are all on a path and at the end, it is not just a place that we come to. It's the person we are *becoming* on the path. Simple or young, wise, foolish, or a scoffer. The choice is ours. I ask you, join us.

Lord Jesus, You said that You would make the people who asked to be wise, wiser. Just the preparation for this series has whetted my appetite. I don't want to be more clever. I don't want to be smarter. I want to be wiser. When people look at me, I want them to see someone who is peaceloving and considerate, who is filled with mercy, who has good fruit in his life, who treats everybody the same, who is wise and sincere. I ask that for my sisters and brothers here. A lot of them are really smart. I pray that You will use information to get application, that You will make us not wiseguys, but children of wisdom. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.