

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Proverbs: Advisers
Proverbs 24:6 & 11**

We are spending the summer talking about wisdom. The Book of Proverbs says that in the end, there are only three kinds of people. There are fools, who don't know their right hands from their left, there are the evil, who know the difference between good and evil and choose to do the evil or allow the evil, and then there are the wise. In the end, you are becoming one of these people, wise or foolish or evil. Wisdom at the very least has to include the ability to make better decisions than you used to make. Wisdom is the ability to make and execute better decisions. Decisions are important.

How many of you have come across something in your lives that required a decision and you thought about it and made the decision and it was a mistake and there were consequences for that mistake? How many of you have ever thought about something and made a mistake anyway? How many are sitting next to somebody who is seriously deluded because they did not raise their hand? They make decisions and they make mistakes that have consequences. We get the answer wrong on a test and it gets us into a different class. We make a mistake in a relationship that breaks someone's heart. We buy the wrong house or sell at the wrong time. We take the wrong job or we lose the right job. We get a tattoo. We get different parts of our bodies pierced. We live with those choices for a long, long time. We are sure that the latest hair treatment will work and so we make the mistake. Mistakes have consequences. How do you make better decisions?

We have talked about this several times, saying we believe that God wants us to be able to make better decisions. I am offering you what I believe is a Biblical model of how to make better decisions and The candles that were to be my illustration are gone! That was a bad decision somebody made and now there are consequences. So, imagine with me that there are four candles right here.

The first of the candles is the *circumstances* we find ourselves in, the gifts that God has brought into our lives. When you line up all four of the candles in a row, they form a straight line to the right decision. The key is getting all four candles going in the same direction. I'm 61 years old. I could never jump more than 13 inches high. It is not God's will that I should become a part of the National Basketball Association. Circumstances and gifts have made that clear. Sometimes circumstances tell you how make a good choice.

The second of the candles lines up with the first. It says it's not about your gifts or your circumstances. It's about *God's Word* to you. Mark Twain said, "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that get me in trouble, it's the parts that I do understand." Those of us who believe that God gives wisdom through Scriptures, look to the parts of the Bible that we do

understand for guidance. They provide a lamp under our feet on the path.

The third candle that we want to line up in a row is the *counsel of Godly people*. One of the ways that we get in trouble is trying to do it all by ourselves. Finding God's will involves coming together as a body and listening to people whom we trust, who bring different perspectives. Letting God speak through all of us.

That that opens up to the fourth candle, the *quiet voice of God's Holy Spirit*. I do believe that God speaks to us through circumstances, through Scripture, through other people, but God also speaks to us internally. I think we have to be careful with that because so often what happens when it is just that interior voice is, I'm asking God to bless my plans so they need to line up, especially with Scripture.

Today I would like to concentrate on one of those four candles to help you make better decisions. The third of those candles was wise counsel from other people. I think this is of life or death importance. You cannot make the best decisions in your life alone. Period. God did not design life to be lived that way. The Book of Proverbs, chapter 11,

14 For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers.

Chapter 24,

6 Surely you need guidance to wage war, and victory is won through many advisers.

Then further on in chapter 24, those who are wise,

11 Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter.

Sometimes the counsel of others is literally the difference between life and death. Are you this morning surrounded by wise counselors? Are you one yourself? This is a simple, basic rule for wisdom and yet, I think it's often ignored. I think we are a bunch of people who don't so much look for counsel as we look for people who will agree with us. Counsel is listening to people who are neutral and don't have your answer in mind before you begin the conversation.

I've listed four ways that I think that other people (not you, of course) use for the reasons they don't listen to other counsel. Which one seems to fit people whom you know? First, I believe most people don't seek counsel because they presume that they are right. They are close in to the situation. They are smart, and they are too proud to ask for help. Anybody know somebody who is too proud to ask for help? Just raise your hand. Proverbs says,

12 There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death [Proverbs 14:12, 16:25].

Do you see a person wise in their own eyes? There's more hope for a fool than for them. There's more hope for a fool than for people who say, "I'm right. I don't need to ask." I believe the second reason most of us don't ask for counsel is because we are afraid of what the answer will be and because we don't want to hear any negatives. We don't want to hear any criticism.

Proverbs says,

2 Fools find no pleasure in understanding [what others think] but delight in airing their own opinions [Proverbs 18:2].

That interface, that dialogue, with other different opinions can make us feel wrong. I think the third reason that many of us don't seek counsel is because it takes too long. We are an impatient, microwave, Instagram people. Wisdom takes time. Proverbs again,

29 Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly [Proverbs 14:29].

5 The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty [Proverbs 21:5].

But we are impatient. The last reason I think that *other* folks don't ask for counsel is because they are already committed to what they are going to do. They have already started down that road, and it would be too humbling to turn back. There is a section in Proverbs 6 that talks about somebody who has made a loan to a bad person.

1 My son **2** if you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth,

Proverbs says, "Go and humble yourself, my son, to free yourself." Do you recognize somebody else in these four characteristics? More important, do you recognize yourself? *They* is we. *We* is you. There are four ways to look at this. You think you are always right. You don't like to hear the negative. You're too impatient to take the time. It's hard to turn around and reverse course. How many of you would say that one of these things stops you from seeking wise counsel?

There's a joke that men never ask for directions. It's not a joke; it's a law of nature, but in life, not asking for directions is no joke. What you most need for good counsel is humility. The recognition that I am not in control of the world, that I don't know everything, that I need help, is one of the first marks of wisdom. Wisdom is having the humility to admit that I need help.

I started to follow Jesus just as I went away to college. I had already committed to going to a state school, and I walked onto the football team. Through a combination of other people dropping out of school or failing their classes or getting hurt, I went from being the No. 12 wide receiver to being No. 2 and starting the last two games of my freshman year, the highlight of my athletic career, by the way. I was feeling great. I knew that the coach had finally noticed me and spelled my name right as he started calling me Crosby instead of Cosby. I started and did okay.

This coach was determined to take us from NAIA Division 1 to Division 1 Big-Time Football. One of the things that he did was to make his defensive backs and wide receivers play badminton with him. You laugh, but badminton is a phenomenal game. Great hand-eye, incredible endurance, just a terrific game, and he was a great badminton player.

So he had all of us playing with him. I am playing with him in the dead of the winter, end of January, just one-on-one. We are like the only ones in the gym. It's 10 o'clock and he has let us into the gym because it was the only time we could play. I whupped him! Life is good. We sit

down, and he is gasping. I made team. "How're you doing, coach?" "Crosby, I want to talk to you about next year." I go, "Yessss!" thinking scholarship. He goes, "Crosby, I've got to tell you this. You are never going to start another game as long as I am coach." This was not how I had seen the conversation going. "Crosby, you're too small. You're too slow. You don't really like to hit people. You can catch the ball, but you'll never get the ball." And these were my strengths. He said, "Crosby, what you really ought to do is transfer to a small school and get a real education. You're not going to get an education here playing football. That's a job here." He said, "I could keep you on the squad for four years but, Crosby, you're never going *play* again. Want to play another game of badminton?" "No thanks, coach." So that was a hard conversation.

Four days later I applied to a couple of small schools. I went to Wheaton College and really grew as a Christian. I did not graduate *summa cum laude* because I went to a school where I was no longer one of the fastest kids in the class. I was in the middle of the pack. I did not graduate *summa cum laude*. I graduated soon come Lordy, and yet I developed the ability to think, a gift from a wise counselor who said the hard thing at the right time. That's counsel, and it cannot happen without humility. What do I need to receive wise counsel? I need humility, not humiliation, humility.

What I look for in a counselor is just as important because the world according to the Old Testament is filled with people who want to give advice. Everybody wants to give me advice. Everybody has an opinion, don't they? "When everything is coming your way, you're probably in the wrong lane." "Always keep your words soft and sweet in case you have to eat them." Not my favorite. "Never put both feet in your mouth at the same time because you won't have a leg to stand on." I need wisdom, not fortune cookies.

Who remembers the author of the Book of Proverbs? King Solomon, the wisest person in the world, right? Who remembers King Solomon's father? King David. Who remembers Solomon's son? Nobody knows. That's my point. The wisest man in the world produced sons who were not wise because they picked the wrong counselors. Listen to the story. It's in 1st Kings, chapter 12.

When King Solomon died, his throne passed to his son Rehoboam. The people approached Rehoboam, saying they needed relief from the high taxes his father, Solomon, had imposed during his reign to build the Temple and run the kingdom. "We needed that but we don't need it any more." Rehoboam told them to come back in three days. "I need time to think about this." So they leave and Rehoboam goes to his father's advisors. Good start. Older men that the wisest man in the world trusted for good advice. Solomon's advisors tell the young king to listen to the people.

7 They replied, "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants."

"You do this for them and you own them." Rehoboam doesn't like that answer.

8 But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. **9** He asked them, "What is your advice?"

The young men who had grown up with him told him to tell the people,

10 . . . 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. **11** My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.'

When the people came back three days later, that was what Rehoboam told them and as a result he lost more than half of his kingdom. None of his descendants ever got it back again. From that day on, the ten tribes of the north, Israel, deserted him and he was left with two little provinces. All advice is not good advice. Pick your counselors wisely because actions have consequences.

The Book of Proverbs not only says, "Get good counsel," it shows how it can happen. Proverbs gives you the **marks of a good counselor** and says the first and foremost mark of someone that you want to give you advice is that **they have a life that you want as well as words that you need**. In other words, they are not just talking about it, they are living it. If Warren Buffett were a street person, it would be highly unlikely that anyone would care about his advice. It is what he has done that validates his advice. The mark of a good counselor is not only the life they live but the fact that they will live that life with you. I gain greatly from reading books. I love to go to conferences. I'm a freak about listening to wiser people. That's different from counsel. Counsel comes when someone like that knows me. A relationship makes for a better counselor.

The first church I ever joined after I started following Jesus was several years after I became a Christian, had graduated from college and was out in Colorado. I stumbled into First Presbyterian Church of Boulder because somebody had said, "You ought to hear this guy." This guy was Dr. Bob Oerter. He was a little bit of a hippy dippy. He was a double Ph.D. and would quote the Rolling Stones, yes, they were alive back then, and Shakespeare in the same sentence. More than that, he knew the Bible backward and forward. More than that, he loved the poor. More than that, he loved Jesus. I was hooked and for two years, I sat there and learned to love Presbyterian worship. I learned to love the organ. I learned that God's Word could change people's lives.

I came to a place at the end of those two years where I needed to decide where to go back to graduate school. I had applied to law schools and been accepted at them and to seminaries and been accepted at them. I went to Bob and said, "Could we have a cup of coffee?" and he said, "No, come on, let's go to the Good Earth." I remember that we went to the Good Earth in the morning at 7:30 and didn't leave until almost 10 o'clock. "Tell me what you have," he said, and then he gave advice. He said, "John, law school or seminary is a big choice." I've got to tell you I have two brothers I make jokes about. They are both wonderful attorneys. They do very well. They bring justice. But Bob said, "You go to law school, and you'll become a great attorney. You'll make all kinds of money. You'll do just great. You'll be a strong Christian and help your church, but you'll never go to seminary. You like money too much." I didn't like that part of the conversation. He said, "You like being in charge too much." Then he said, "But if you go to seminary and it doesn't work out, you will be a better lawyer and you will be a better follower of Jesus." Thirty-five years later, Bob Oerter gave me counsel that changed my life because he lived the kind of life that validated the wise words, and he knew me. Choose a counselor like that.

When you look for that counselor, look for somebody who listens, somebody who has listening ears. There are lots of people willing to tell you what they think. Lots of people willing to give advice. Look for somebody who will listen long enough so you feel like they really understand. By the way, that's why people go to Rich Phenow because Rich is a great counselor. He listens and listens hard and listens well and asks great questions. I listen for about five minutes and say, "Okay, I've got it covered. Here's what you do." I'm not a great counselor. He is because he listens with his head and with his heart.

In the same way, I want **somebody who will speak tough love**. Good counselors have the willingness to speak hard truth instead of just confirming my bias. I'm not giving away anything, but maybe ten or eleven years ago, Laura and I went through a rough patch here. Not publicly, but we were thinking that this was probably the time to leave. There was a lot of pain involved. We went down to Florida and called two people who are our mentors. They have given us wise advice throughout our whole marriage. I went through it in front of Gordon and I won't tell you I led him down the road, but I said, "and then this happened," "and then this happened," and "don't you think this makes sense" and "don't you think we need to do that" and "don't you think that this is the only course open to us?" There was a long pause at the other end of the conversation. Then Gail speaks up for both her and Gordon and says, "John, we love you guys but we feel like this would be the biggest mistake of your life. You would be leaving for the wrong reasons. People who leave for the wrong reasons arrive with the wrong reasons. You need to see what God wants to do at Christ Presbyterian Church and *then* see if God wants to do something else." I was like, "Would you put Gordon on the phone." I needed to hear that and I didn't want to hear that. Tough love. Tough love is **rooted in the priority of the Kingdom of Heaven and in the Scriptures**.

¹ Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, ² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night [Psalm 1:1-2].

Make sure that your counselors know that God speaks. The last mark I would offer is, **if you want good counsel, get more than one**. Wherever possible, get more than one. While we weigh the counsel of others, in the end it is our responsibility, not theirs, to make the right decision. It is we who will be judged and not they. God offers us wisdom *through* them but not necessarily through their answers.

I've told this story before but Laura had the idea that she wanted to invest money in a specific stock so that we could support a water project in Africa. She went to three wise people who had been very successful in the market and asked them. She talked most to the last person who had done extremely well and he advised her, "I'd keep what you have, but if I were going to get a stock," that was the only part she heard, "if I were going to get a stock, I would get something that pays a dividend and is going to be here for the long haul. If it has a setback, it will come back." Laura said, "Great. I'll get that. I'll get 500 of them." It was BP, British Petroleum, three weeks before the Gulf happened. It was BP that went from, oh, I don't know, 47 to 13, something like that. BP is not back yet. It is not the counselor's fault. It was our responsibility. But that's just money. That's just things. You need wisdom about things far more important than money, about the kind of person that you are supposed to be becoming because we become the decisions that we make. Let me say that again. We become the decisions we make.

Let me ask you to do this. We have talked about wisdom and counsel. I'd like it quiet now for this. I just don't want anybody to be embarrassed. I'd love it if you would close your eyes for a minute. Just close your eyes so nobody is looking at anybody else. What I'd like to ask you are three questions. The first, do you have a wise person or people you can trust to give you their best advice? If you have that kind of person, when they come to mind, just raise your hand. Okay, about half of us. That's great. Those of you who just raised your hand, thank them. Don't call them. Don't send them an email. Write them a note. Thank them for the influence that they have had on your life.

The second question, how many of you have asked for counsel in the last six months in ways that have changed a decision you were going to make, that have changed what you were going to do? Raise your hands, would you please? About a third of us. Bless you.

Third question, based on God's admonition to us all, what should you be asking for wisdom about? Can you think of something for which you need Godly advice? When something like that comes to your mind, just raise your hand.

Okay, put your hands down. Let's close with this. We are here together in part because of the way God speaks to us, the way that God gives us wisdom together better than when we are all by ourselves. Part of our becoming a community is that we hold the same things in common. Last year we said that we want to be a community that is all about Jesus' Greatest Commandment. Jesus was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?"

29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **30** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' **31** The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" [Mark 12:29-31].

As we try to live that kind of life, we want to commit ourselves to remember that again and again and again, but we don't want to stop there. We want to say, how does that play out? Heather [Heather Hood, Minister of Worship and Music] and I have put together a little covenant. A covenant is something where you say, "Yes, this may not be the way I live but this is the way I would like to live. I covenant to try this, to be this kind of person." I would like to ask the community to rise and we will put the covenant up on the screen. Let's do this one phrase at a time. If you would like to join us, whether you are in this community or a visitor, just follow along a line at a time. Together:

We covenant together, God helping us, to love the Lord with all our hearts, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to serve one another in humble, tangible ways, to encourage and forgive one another, to bear one another's burdens, to seek Godly wisdom and support His trusted advisors, to submit to correction by those we let close enough to know us so we might honor Christ in both word and action that God's Kingdom would come and God's will be done.

Lord Jesus, You have heard the desire of our hearts. None of us lives as well as we talk, but this morning we have been reminded that to be wise is to make good choices. To make good choices, we need help from You and those You put in our lives. I pray that You will do that here, that some of us who are older might see that he is talking about me, that I need to become a trusted advisor and pour into the lives of the younger. And

some of you, some of us, Lord God, need to identify someone we can trust with real life, and then we need to humble ourselves and ask for help. Bless us in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit we pray. And all God's children said,

(All:) 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.