

The Beginning of Wisdom

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Proverbs 1:1-7

This morning is the first installment in our summer sermon series. For the rest of the summer, we will be studying the Bible's wisdom literature and seeing what the Holy Spirit has to teach us from these books. Before we get into today's text, I want to spend some time thinking about what Biblical wisdom is. So, what is Biblical wisdom? Let's answer that question 2 ways. Let's look at how biblical wisdom is different than laws and rules – which you also find in the Bible. And let's look at how Biblical wisdom is different than knowledge.

Wisdom is different than Biblical laws. There are lots of laws in the Bible. The Bible teaches us God's moral law and tells us not to break it. The ten commandments are an example of these kinds of moral rules. Wisdom is different than God's law; it's not in conflict with the law, but it's different. You could say wisdom is built on top of God's laws and rules. Because there are lots of places in life where simply knowing God's laws, simply knowing God's rules will not be enough. Tim Keller said this: For 80% of life's situations, the moral rules are of limited help.

Maybe that sounds like a radical statement but it's not. There are all kinds of really important decisions in life for which simply knowing the Bible's moral law is not enough. Say, you are dating this guy, and you've been dating almost a year and he's a really nice guy, but you're not sure. Some days he seems like he's the one; some days you wonder why you're together. And after a year you are trying to decide; do we keep going out or should we break up. The law is not going to tell you what to do here. Neither of these things is a sin. Breaking up isn't a sin. Staying together isn't a sin. So, if you're in that situation, how do you know what to do? What you need in that situation is wisdom, the ability to weigh all the factors, all the pros and cons and make a wise decision.

So many of life's decisions have this character. If you're deciding whether or not to go to college, if you are deciding which college to attend, if you are deciding what your major should be, these decisions need more than the moral law. These decisions require wisdom. These decisions are embedded in a huge web of considerations: your temperament, your family, your financial situation, your romantic attachments, your friendships, your faith commitments, your hobbies, your passions, your long-term goals. Wisdom is the ability to see all these factors clearly, to weigh them properly and then find the way forward. Our passage uses the words 'prudence' and 'insight' to describe skills that are part of wisdom. When you are making a decision, insight is the ability to see all the factors in your decision. Prudence is the ability to give each factor its proper weight.

So, wisdom is different than law. Wisdom is also different than knowledge. Wisdom is applied knowledge. Wisdom is know-how. Wisdom is not knowledge of godliness taught in a sermon; wisdom is not godliness taught in a classroom; wisdom is godliness lived out in the streets. When I learned to swim, many years ago, I remember that our swimming teacher first taught us our strokes on the pool deck. We would lie there and practice our frog kick together and she would guide us to make sure we were doing it right. That was great and helpful, but it was no substitute for getting in the pool and actually doing the frog kick. For every human task you learn by doing you can't possibly learn in a classroom, in abstraction. Wisdom is full-body learning. It's not just knowledge in your head; it's knowledge in your emotions and in your intuitions. It's muscle memory and habit.

And if that's what wisdom is, then it's no wonder the teacher of proverbs values it so highly. Because this full-bodied knowledge, this knowledge that can make good choices at the key decision points in life, this knowledge that can help us speak the right words in moments of crisis, this knowledge that has an instinctive sense of how to work with all kinds of people, this ability to keep everything in proper balance and proper perspective, this is what we want in this life! This is what we need in this life! It's no wonder that Proverbs 3

says that “wisdom is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare to her.”

Today as we start our summer series, we begin our study of wisdom in the place where our text says wisdom begins. Where does wisdom start? What is the root of this applied knowledge? Verse 7 tells us: it begins with the fear of the Lord. That’s not just something verse 7 tells us; that’s a concept repeated multiple times in the Bible. Proverbs 9:10 – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Psalm 111 – the fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.” Job 28:28 – “The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom.”

What does that mean? Why is the fear of the Lord the beginning? Why would wisdom be founded in fear!? Isn’t fear a bad thing? How many times does the Bible tell us do not be afraid?! So many times. It’s the most common command in the Bible. The Bible gives us lots of commands. It tells us lots of things we should and should not do. The most common command of all is “Do Not be afraid!” It is in the Bible more than 300 times. And then there is that famous passage in 1 John 4 which says, “There is no fear in love. Perfect love drives out fear.” So, on the one hand, God is saying ‘Don’t be afraid! Fear is bad!’ but on the other hand, we are told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. How do we understand this?

To understand this, we have to understand that fear is like the wind. A gentle summer breeze is a wind. A hurricane is also a wind. They are both called ‘wind,’ we use the same word for them, but they are very different things. It’s the same with fear. There are two different kinds of fear, and even though we use the same word for them, they are very different things. As different as a breeze and a hurricane.

What are these two kinds of fear? The medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas helps us make the distinction. He distinguishes between filial fear and punishment-based fear. For our purposes let’s call them fear based on punishment and fear based on affection. So: punishment fear and affection fear.

Fear based on punishment is when you are afraid of someone because of what they could do to you if you crossed them or got on their bad side. People in Russia during the 40’s were afraid of Joseph Stalin because if you crossed him, he would kill you. There are lots of people in this world who don’t like their job very much, but they still work hard at it because they need the money and they’re afraid of getting fired. That’s punishment-based fear. At some point in our lives, we’ve all done things, or failed to do things based on this kind of fear.

When verse 7 talks about the fear of the Lord, that’s not the kind of fear it’s talking about. There is another kind of fear based on affection. What kind of fear is that? Well, here’s an example. When I was in college and seminary, I wrote a lot of papers. So many papers on so many subjects. Some of these papers were written for classes I didn’t care much about and for professors that I didn’t care that much about. They weren’t bad professors. They were fine, but I wasn’t jazzed about them. For those classes and those professors, I still tried to write a good paper. I tried to turn in something decent. Why? Because I was afraid of a bad grade. Another example of punishment-based fear.

But in seminary there was one professor who I really admired. I loved his classes. I learned so much from him. I remember the first paper I had to write for him in his class; I worked so hard on that paper – much harder than on any of those other papers for other classes. I did way more research. I labored over the writing – I tried to write with poetic eloquence. Why? Because I was afraid of letting him down. I was afraid of disappointing him. I wanted to please him! I wanted to show that I loved his class! I wanted to hear him say, “Well done.” That’s fear too, but it is so different. There is affection at the bottom of this fear. This fear is driven by positive feelings, not negative ones.

When the Bible tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, it’s talking about that second kind of fear. When Proverbs begins by telling you the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, it’s saying that wisdom begins with a deep love for the character of God, a deep love for the goodness of God, a deep love for the people God has put around you, a deep love for the works of God, a deep love for the ways of God. That’s the beginning of wisdom. It is not the fear of his punishment; it’s a deep love for God and his ways.

Now, maybe you are saying, 'Hold on Peter! Doesn't God sometimes threaten to punish people because of their sin!?' Yes. He absolutely does that. There are plenty of Bible passages that warn about how God will punish evildoers, and that punishment is real. But when we obey God and when we follow Jesus, God does not want fear of punishment to be the root of that obedience. God uses punishment to help us stay on the path, but it's not the heart of his program.

Parents sometimes punish their children and they should – it's an important ad hoc measure in crisis situations. But no good parent wants fear of punishment to be the root of the relationship with their child. A parent child relationship where punishment-based fear is the root of the child's obedience is a toxic relationship. But if a child obeys because she's afraid of letting her parents down, if a child is afraid of disappointing her parents because she loves them so much, if a child has a deep desire to please her parents, that's probably a good thing. The fear of the Lord that leads to wisdom is rooted in a deep love for God and all his things. It's rooted in a deep desire to hear the God whom we love say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

When you look at the fear of the Lord this way it helps you see that actually, the fear of the Lord is rooted in grace. If the fear of the Lord is a deep love for his works and his ways and his goodness, what is the most wonderful of his works for us? What is the most miraculous of his ways? What is the deepest picture of his goodness? It's Jesus coming to earth to share our life, it's Jesus dying on the cross for us while we were still sinners, it's Jesus rising from the grave to show us that there is nothing on earth that will keep him from accomplishing his purposes for us. It's the grace of God through Jesus Christ my Lord that makes me love him and makes me want to follow him and model my life after him. I don't want to let him down. He's been so good to me and I'm afraid of letting him down. My fear of the Lord is centered on his grace.

Incidentally, thinking about this has finally helped me understand Psalm 130:4. Psalm 130:4 says about God, "with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared." That verse has always confused me. Why would anyone be afraid of someone who forgives? If you think of fear only as fear of punishment, verse 4 makes no sense. But when you think of fear as fear of disappointing someone for whom you have affection, then it makes perfect sense, because it is God's forgiving nature that makes us love him so much.

When you read through the Proverbs, it can seem to be a big collection of random advice. Like something you might find in an advice column - an ancient version of Helpful Hints from Heloise. And you can treat it that way. You could be an atheist or a pagan and use this wisdom to improve your life and accomplish your goals. You could use some of these proverbs to grow your brand, grow your business, and get rich. There's advice in here that, if you follow it, will help you be more successful even if you are not a believer.

But it won't bring you life. At the beginning of Proverbs, we learn that all this advice, all this wisdom only finds its true effect when it takes place as part of a loving vibrant relationship with the God of the universe who is the source of all wisdom. If you practice this wisdom before the face of God, if you practice this wisdom in relationship with Jesus Christ, if you practice this wisdom with his Holy Spirit in your heart, if you practice this wisdom in the company of his covenant people, then wisdom isn't just useful; it is a fountain of life that will bring healing to your soul and renewal to the world.

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