

Sermon for Sunday, October 23, 2011
Dr. Dan Doriani
“Wisdom”
Proverbs 8

1. Context and the need for wisdom

We tend to read Proverbs a certain way – alone at home, morning or evening, reading the Bible alone, searching for a nugget of wisdom and prayer. That's good, but I want to propose a deeper way. First, we want to read Proverbs in the context of all Scripture. Second, we want to read in community.

The Lord provides his wisdom, the Proverbs, to his people, a community that knows Him. The proverbs are a guide to Israel, who already knows God and his law. Israel knows God the redeemer, the holy God who also gives them laws:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, how I... brought you to myself... Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation... Hear, O Israel.. the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.

Moses said this 500 years before Solomon finished Proverbs. By that time, people knew something vital: The law doesn't cover all moral decisions. To follow God, to live well in this world, we also need skill in applying the law to all of life's situations.

For example, the law says "You shall not kill." Good. It also says, "If a farmer has a bull and it gores someone, the bull has to slain, so it doesn't kill anyone." We think "Ok, so 'You shall not kill' also means 'Do all you can to preserve life!'"

Later, Jesus said, "The law says 'Do not murder' but anyone who is angry with his brother is liable to judgment." We think "Ok, so 'You shall not kill' also means 'No hatred.'" Paul even says "If possible, live peaceably with everyone." We think - Ok, but how do I do that? When I hear this, I think of someone who refuses to talk to me now. I've tried and gotten nowhere. What can I do?

That question is the heart of the disciple's quest for **wisdom**: How do I accomplish godly goals? How do I preserve life? Live at peace? Make peace?

Some years ago, I walked through a door and practically stepped on top of two friends who were standing in the hallway arguing. What should I do? Intervene? Let them work it out? Parents ask the same questions when their children bark and squabble.

Jesus says "Blessed are the peacemakers," so maybe we should intervene. But Proverbs says "He who meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears" (Revised Standard Version vs. 26:17. That gives me a helpful Question: "Is this my quarrel?" If not, I should let them work it out. If it is my affair somehow, then I should get involved. That doesn't tell me what to do, but it helps me address the situation.

To sum up so far, to live wisely, we need several things. We need God's law, the basic rules. But the rules themselves show that they don't spell out everything. We need judgment – wisdom - and a desire to carry out the law!

In all my experience, when there is a desire to make peace, several people consider, pray and work together for it, sharing their views, their wisdom. Now remember what we said earlier: We **tend** to read Proverbs **alone**, looking for principles or nuggets of wisdom for the day. But Proverbs 8 reminds us of something we know, but forget: wisdom is communal.

So if we want to make peace, we have to think "Is this our affair? Should we own this? Or someone else?" If it's ours, how and when shall we address it? Is there hope? "Do not reprove a scoffer or he will hate you" (9:10). When people hate the truth, "keep silent" says Amos 5:8-13. But if we do speak, we have to say it at the right time, in the right setting. An apt or well-timed word "is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Prov 25:11) Surely we consider that **together**.

Surely we pursue wisdom together. Solomon's spoke his wisdom to his son. Over and over he says "Hear, my son, your father's instruction... My son, receive my words" (2:1). But Solomon doesn't just address one son. He says "Listen, my **sons**... pay attention and gain understanding... My sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways" (4:1, 8:32, cf. 5:7, 7:24).

So the proverbs are for a community, seeking wisdom together, not just individually. We can create a just and wise society. So in Proverbs 8:1-3, wisdom calls out at the crossroads, at the city gates, so the people can listen together.

The value of wisdom

Solomon knows there are competing voices. Solomon tells his son in chapter 1, sinners will entice you" (1:10). **Thieves** say "We will fill our houses with plunder. The **adulteress woman** speaks in Proverbs 7 "I was looking for you! My bed is ready... Come, let's drink deep of love till morning" (7:15-19).

But lady wisdom calls out in chapter 8, "Hear for I will say noble [worthy] things." What wisdom says what right, true, just, and faultless, by law (8:6-10). But more, wisdom continues, "Choose my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is better than jewels, and **nothing you desire** can compare with her" (8:10-11). Wisdom is more valuable than gold, jewels or anything else we desire.

Wisdom **is better** than fame, wealth, power, looks or success **because** wisdom teaches us how to enjoy the good and endure the bad that come our way. There are people with talent, charisma, credentials, skills, but they never achieve much; they don't have wisdom to harness their skills.

Some do achieve, but they are no happier, because they don't know how to enjoy it. They think they're entitled to everything, so instead of enjoying it, they grumble when things drop off a little. Or they make the wrong friends – shallow and misguided, lacking judgment. So the success doesn't do them any good.

Very few people ever **achieve** the **life circumstances** they want: the wealth, job, family, health. Fewer still **keep** their bliss. Even if we reach the top, we can't stay there forever. We fall, and before we fall, we can live in *fear of falling*. So we need wisdom to enjoy riches, fame and power.

But wisdom can teach us how to be content if we have less. Proverbs 15:16-17 says: "Better a little [little wealth, possessions] with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil. Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred." And "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice" 16:8. Why? Because wisdom gives ability to enjoy what we have.

2. The nature of wisdom

So we have seen the value of wisdom and we have seen that wisdom comes in the context of knowledge of God, in the parameters of his law. We also find and practice wisdom in community. But we still haven't defined wisdom. What is it?

Our passage – like Proverbs as a whole – piles up positive terms that extol wisdom and knowledge. See Proverbs 8:10-12: Take my *instruction* – it's better than silver. My *knowledge* is better than gold. Proverbs 8:12: "I, **wisdom**, dwell together with prudence; I find knowledge and discretion."

These words each have a distinct definitions. **Knowledge** (8:10) covers the facts. **Understanding** (8:1) is know-how, practical, applied thought. **Discretion** (8:12) is the ability to make plans. **Prudence**/shrewdness (8:12) is tactical cleverness. Knowing how things really work. **Insight** (8:14) is the ability to distinguish good and bad, right and wrong, to see through things. **Prudence** (1:3) is good sense, wise behavior.

A short biography of Eric Clapton illustrates. Clapton set out to be a blues guitarist. Very skilled, he was noticed in good bands as teenager. When he was about 20 his group, The Yardbirds had a big hit. Producers wanted to make him into a pop star. He was not a pop star but preferred serious Blues. He quit that and formed the group, Cream. They were wildly popular. He quit that group, too, and formed another band, Blind Faith. Too popular again, he went solo. Growing stale, he then went acoustic. Knowledge of music, but also self-understanding and discretion – as professional musician at least – helped him to make wise plans. His wisdom in resisting pop music translated into a longer, probably *more* successful career in end.

These terms are distinct, yet they come in a heap. They stand together and run together for the greater point. One needs knowledge *and* the ability to apply it. We plan and maintain constructive relationships so we can do good together. Bruce Waltke, great evangelical scholar, defined wisdom *as skill in the arts of living*. Wisdom puts knowledge to good use, for a long time.

So Solomon piles up virtues - wisdom, knowledge, insight, prudence. In 8:14 Solomon adds, **strength**. And "By me, kings reign" (8:15). So wisdom teaches how things work and *what to do* about it. ¹Through wisdom, we become competent with regard to the realities of life. **How things are, how things happen and what to do about it**. So...

For some decisions all you need is **knowledge**. Shall I refinance my house? Run the numbers and you'll know.

For some decisions, all you need is the law and the character to follow it. A man is going to Six Flags. He plans to lie about his children's ages so he can save money. If he's claiming that his son is eleven and the lad has facial hair, shrewdness will tell you "That won't work." But suppose he is thirteen but short. The law says "What is there to decide? This is lying and theft."

But for a vast number of cases, maybe most cases, the moral rules and the facts will not, by themselves, lead to the right action. Now, it's essential to have character and we must know the rules. But we need to size things up too.

We need wisdom for issues large and small. Am I in the right career? Headed the right direction? Or do I need to adjust? Should I take this job offer? Should I pursue a relationship with this person? Shall I take this trip? It will be great, but my schedule has no margin.

Again suppose you love someone, but they have a clear character flaw. Are you the one to address it? Or someone else? If you, when? How, so they'll listen? The right word at the wrong **time, spoken the wrong way** brings disaster. **Wisdom knows what to say, and when and how** to say it. A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver (25:11). There is a time to weep and to mourn (Eccles 3:1, 4) Speak at that time, so they will listen and mourn.

Here's a case study or story about wisdom: King David had a proud, vain son, Absalom. David indulged him. Absalom repaid him by stealing the affection of the people. He recruited many

¹ Von Rad, Wisdom in Israel

courtiers and he staged a coup (2 Sam 15.1-14). When David heard, he fled Jerusalem, with many loyalists joining him, to save his own life and to prevent the bloodshed of civil war (15:15-30).

Two men of the court were especially important to David. Ahithophel, David's wisest advisor, joined Absalom's rebellion. The Bible says, "Now in those days the counsel which Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the oracle of God" (16:23). That's how David, Absalom, everyone, valued Ahithophel's counsel.

Knowing this, David had already prayed, "Lord, turn Ahithophel's counsel to foolishness" (15:31). He prayed, then he acted. David's Second, great advisor, Hushai, stayed true. Yet when Hushai joined David, David sent him back to Jerusalem, to Absalom, saying, Pretend you're loyal to *him*. And **do what you can** to frustrate or thwart the counsel of Ahithophel (15:31-35).

So Hushai was there, with Ahithophel, when Absalom asked his counselors what to do. Ahithophel said, "Take a modest force, 12,000, and strike tonight, while David is weary and weak, while his allies are scattered. Strike the king only. Kill him and his death will bring all the people to you, without bloodshed." Everyone said, "That's right" (17:1-5).

Still, Absalom wanted to consult Hushai too. Hushai knew Ahithophel was right, so he had to make it look bad. Hushai was very wise, so he appealed to Absalom's weaknesses, which were two. He was fearful and he was vain.

Since Absalom was **fearful**, Hushai said, "Your father is an experienced fighter. He is surrounded by his mighty men. They are enraged, ready to fight. But David knows guerrilla warfare. He'll hide – Saul never caught him, although he tried for years – so you won't find him. But his men will fight and they will kill some of your men. Then a rumor will spread that they slaughtered your forces." Your allies will panic, "For all Israel knows [David] is a mighty man." So he appealed to Absalom's fear.

He also appealed to Absalom's **vanity**. Hushai continued, "No surgical strike for you! Assemble a vast, invincible army. Warriors like the sand of the sea. Lead them into battle yourself. Crush all who stand with him." In his vanity, Absalom bought it. When Ahithophel heard that the rebel Absalom had rejected his counsel, he went home and hanged himself. What just happened? (17:11-14, 23).

Clearly David and Hushai were wise because they understood Absalom's weakness. He had the army and momentum, but he didn't know how to lead. He didn't even know how to listen to his counselors. He was vain and fearful. They exploited that knowledge of people like Absalom to preserve life.

Behind all this, Absalom had no fear of God. Proverbs says "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the fountain of life" 1:7, 9:10, 14:27. Absalom was a handsome schemer who had no fear God, no character, no interest in the law, which says "Honor your father and mother." Since his whole scheme was wicked, it was also foolish

Ahithophel had shrewdness – clever tactics – but no fear of God directed him either. When he realized that Absalom had rejected his counsel, he foresaw the failure of the rebellion. He killed himself because he believed his death was sure. He had no respect for God. If he had, he would have repented.

This story illustrates the **character** of wisdom. Wisdom is **more than obedience and virtue, but never less**. Evil plan, pursued cleverly, are still foolish. The wise have knowledge and character **and** shrewd insight.

This is important information, but you might find it disheartening. You thought all you needed was knowledge and virtue. Now you learn – there's more. But I have good news – if you want to gain wisdom, you can get started.

3. The way to gain wisdom

First, our friend James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (1:5). The Lord gladly, generously answers the godly prayer for wisdom. But the request for wisdom is like the request for food: We must **ask and act**. If we pray "Give us this daily bread" we expect God to help, but we know we must **work** too. It is the same with wisdom. We should **ask and work** to gain wisdom. How?

Solomon says: Listen to the right voices. Heed the right influences. Travel with the right posse. The **right voices**. Over and over Solomon tells his son "Listen to me" (5.7, 7.24, 8.32). Accept my words, store up my commands" (1.8, 2.1, 3.1, 4.1, 5.1).

As we saw, Solomon knows there are competing voices. **Thieves** say " throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse" of plunder (1.13-14). The speech of the **adulteress** drips with honey. I was looking for you! My bed is ready" (7.15-19). Solomon says don't listen, don't follow them.

Instead, **travel with the right posse**. Choose your companions wisely! Proverbs says "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm" (13:20). To **walk** with the wise means to follow their path, their pattern of life. Consider their way of life and imitate it (1 Cor 4.16-17).

I meet annually with a group of about fifteen wise and godly Christian leaders. They begin the day with Scripture and prayer. Several pause at noon to examine themselves and to repent of sin as necessary. It's so good to walk with them. But there is one who is wiser than all – Jesus, our wisdom.

Jesus our wisdom 8:15-30

Proverbs is poetry; Proverbs 8 features the poetic device of personification. Wisdom is a noble, passionate woman. She stands at the city gate crying out, "O simple ones, learn prudence. Hear, for I will speak noble things" (8:5-6). Wisdom speaks passionately, emphatically, in the first person, making claims: "I dwell with prudence. I have wisdom and strength... By me, princes rule. I love those who love me" (8:12-21).

Then comes a fresh claim. Wisdom says she was there, with God, when he created the world. "The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work... at the first, at the beginning of the earth was beside him. I was beside him, like a master workman and I was daily his delight." (8:22-30). This is remarkable for two reasons. First, this is an entirely different account of creation.

Pagan myths of the time said this world came into being as a result of **strife, chaos**. The gods of water, earth, light and fertility fought each other. That gods that prevailed made creation out of the carnage of battle, even bodies of defeated gods. So strife and disorder is fundamental to the world.

Proverbs says, "No creation came from order, even from personal love, honor and collaboration." That's why science works – creation is orderly, not chaotic. It's why we can find wisdom – people act in predictable ways. If an architect ignores the laws of force and gravity, his buildings will collapse. If you and I violate the laws of relationship, those relationships will collapse. God's world is orderly. That's why we long for wisdom and it's why we **can find it**.

Again, you might find this disheartening. To make it in this world, I need knowledge – OK. And I need virtue or character to live by moral rules. OK, I learned that in business ethics. But there's more – I need to look around, listen to wise people and accumulate insight and discretion.

More, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." What does that mean? How do I gain the fear of the Lord. Fear of the Lord is awe and respect and faith and faithfulness to relationships. If you don't know about that yet, I want to say one more thing.

In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified – as a poetic device. And the message is "Listen to me, keep my ways." In a later book, Ecclesiastes, also personifies wisdom, which says "Come to me, you who desire me... Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with my help will not sin". OK, so learn, obey and live. Now you're thinking again "This is hard."

So, one more word: Matthew, John and Paul all say that wisdom personified is more than a rhetorical device. Wisdom is a person – Jesus.

Wisdom was with God from the beginning. Jesus was present from before the beginning. John 1:1 In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. Colossians 1 agrees "By him all things were created. In him all things hold together; everything is coherent – comprehensible, whole.

One more way, above all, Jesus speaks with the very voice of wisdom in Matthew 11. Just wisdom said come to me, but Jesus says "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Not come to me, learn and do. Come to me. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Now if you know Jesus' teaching – take up your cross and follow me, deny yourself, love your enemies – You many think "This is easy? Light?" Here is how. Jesus is the wisdom of God speaking to us, teaching us. But he is also the wisdom of God **for** us.

At the end of Proverbs 8, wisdom says "Whoever finds me finds life" (8:31). John begins "In him was life and the life was the light of men." Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life." And he explains how he gives life: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." So Jesus does more than present the demands of wisdom. He is wisdom, and when we fail to live wisely or well, he gives his life, for ours.

One of the great gifts of my life: Knowing people who embody godly virtue. They don't have it, they are it. Friends who are singular in Joy, in Humility, in Truthfulness, in Repentance, in Generosity. Virtue in the flesh.

Friends, we should **seek wisdom**, no doubt. Seek it in the parameters laid down by law and character. Keep our eyes open to the way God's world works. Pursue godliness and wisdom and pray for it. But this is the beauty of the gospel: Wisdom incarnate is also pursuing us.