

“The Beginning of Wisdom”

Proverbs 1:1-7

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In her well-loved poem “The Summer Day,” Mary Oliver closes with this searing, pointed question: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”ⁱ It is the question facing all of us, whether we’re aware of it or not. In the end, most of us *don’t* “plan” what we’ll do with our “one wild and precious life.”

It’s not that we’re lazy. We spend loads of time working and volunteering, loads of energy managing our finances, loads of care on people we love, our family and friends and even anonymous neighbors in need. But most of us ... most of us don’t take time to ask the basic question, “What is the end-goal of my life?” “What would a successful life look like?” “How do I know that I’ve reached it?”

That, in fact, is the starting-point for the book of Proverbs: asking the big question of what a life well-lived looks like. Once we get beyond basic survival, then what? Once we have the privilege of not worrying about whether we have enough to eat – as millions of people do – how can we be good stewards of that privilege? Or to echo last week’s 4th of July festivities, once we’re blessed with life and liberty, then what does the pursuit of happiness look like?

The world has no shortage of answers. Wealth has always been high on the list; often we talk about “net worth” without bothering to add its qualifier, “*financial* net worth,” as if life’s intrinsic value can be measured in dollar signs or, if you’re especially cautious, gold bullion. But financial wealth is not the only option. Pleasure has always had its followers. In Jesus’ day, it was the Epicureans who advocated savoring life with the senses, and, at the extreme, the Hedonists who extolled carnal excess. I think of the Epicureans when I watch the Food Channel, and the Hedonists when I see TV ads for Casinos, complete with lavish shopping, sultry gals, hot guys, and, of course, exciting games. Or maybe it’s sports- achievement we live for – certainly, the expectations for our kids’ soccer, football, baseball, or swim-team schedules far exceeds our expectations for their time volunteering, coming to church, or even studying. It hasn’t always been that way; it is a choice we’ve made.

Then there’s my personal sin: academic competition for myself and, by extension, for my kid. On Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, I shared David Brooks’ citation of Harvard research. When 10,000 Jr. Hi kids were asked whether parents cared more about their grades or being kind, 80% said “grades.”ⁱⁱ I keep returning to it, because it’s made me shudder: I wonder what my daughter would have said.

“So,” to echo Mary Oliver, “tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” And how do you hope the next generation will answer?

Not surprisingly, there’s a good portion of the Bible that ponders that question – a whole section called “wisdom literature.” Old Testament books like Proverbs and Psalms, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are included, and portions of the New Testament too, of course, including Jesus’ teaching, much of Paul’s letters, and the book of James. In the weeks ahead, we’ll explore what it means to live life wisely – plan-fully – intentionally. Let’s start today, with a reading from the first chapter of Proverbs.

Proverbs 1:1-7

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

² For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,

³ for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;

⁴ to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—

⁵ let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,

⁶ to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.

⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

There’s no question what the priority of life is in the book of Proverbs, is there? In seven short verses, we’re inundated with synonyms extolling wisdom: learning, instruction, understanding, insight, shrewdness, knowledge, prudence, discernment ... on top of the five times the word “wise” or “wisdom” is used.

The setting is a household: the hopes and instruction of a parent to a child. The very next verse reads, “Hear, my child, your father’s instruction, and do not reject your mother’s teaching.” The reader – young or old, male or female – is asked to take on the role of a child listening to the parent’s counsel. This is no accident, since the family is often the place where identity is formed, where we learn our basic moral values, our aspirations, hopes and dreams.ⁱⁱⁱ

And the parent in Proverbs is all-too-aware that there are plenty of other options the world has to offer. Alternatives dot the landscape of this book: folly

and wickedness, violence and greed, and even penultimate options like beauty and pleasure, wealth and fame.

Above all, Proverbs implores us, with the urgency of a parent sending their child off to school, above all else the world beckons you to embrace, above all other goals for your “one wild and precious life,” seek wisdom. Not fame. Not wealth. Not beauty. Not pleasure. Seek wisdom. With all the discipline your will can muster, all the receptivity your heart can open, all the obedience your ego can summon, all the desire your yearning can evoke, pursue *wisdom*.

So how do we do it? How do we bend and shape our wills to put wisdom ahead of everything else ... especially when life is so busy; especially when we live in a world with a million and one siren-songs of distraction? Fortunately – blessedly -Proverbs offers us some very practical advice. Let’s look at three of its lessons.

First, wisdom begins with “the fear of God” – the *awe* of God. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,” it says in its opening verses. And it’s true: not because God needs our attention and glory! No, one of the greatest gifts faith offers us is the freedom to set down our egos and put them in perspective. I hate to break it to you, but contrary to popular opinion – especially among us in Lake Forest – we are *not* the center of the universe. The sun does not rise and set on our command. The rain does not come and go as we please. We do not create light out of darkness or even grow money on trees. We are human. We are not God.

But the more power and authority we have, the harder it is to embrace our human limitations. I’ve mentioned a few times Daniel Kahneman’s book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. A Nobel-prize winner in Economics, Kahneman’s research is in social psychology. His work has helped the economic community grapple with some of our basic psychological wiring that can trip us up. Take intuition: we’re wired for survival to trust our intuition – we smell fire or gas in the house, and, without thinking, we grab our loved ones and run. But intuition is far, far *less* helpful when it comes to complex decisions. The more we *presume* we know the answers in complex arenas, the more prone to error we are. Let me say it again: the more we *presume* we know the answers in complex arenas, the more prone to error we are. And – here’s the kicker - the more power or wealth we have, the more we presume we know all the answers!^{iv}

How do we avoid mistakes? Kahneman says the number one way to avoid those mistakes is to pause, to reflect, to slow down. To remember we are fallible. To remember we are human.^v And, I would add, to remember that we are not God.

The fear of the Lord, the awe of the Lord, sets us free. Jesus knew this – it’s what he taught, and it’s how he lived his life. As I’ve told you so often, one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture is from Philippians 2 – which was said at our wedding. It says:

“Have *this* mind among yourselves: the mind that was in Christ Jesus, who ... did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, and being found in human form, humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:5-8).

Jesus – the embodiment of wisdom –urges us to have this mind: this attitude of humility before God, obedience to God, which may to the world’s eyes look like it leads to death. But through Christ, we know where this attitude ultimately leads: not to humiliation, but to joy; not to shame, but to glory; not to death, but to everlasting life. Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord *because* awe before God, humility before God, will *set us free*.

The second lesson Proverbs teaches us is this: if we really want to be wise, we need to recognize that we’ll have to learn the same lessons over and over again. In fact, the book of Proverbs repeats the same sayings multiple times. Scholars used to think it was just bad editing. Now they understand that the repetition is intentional. It’s a model for life: we repeat the same mistakes, we learn the same lessons, not once but multiple times.

I used to think that learning – that wisdom – was linear. You start here, and you learn this, then you move on to the next thing and the next thing and the next thing. But I’ve come to believe it doesn’t work that way. Life is more like a spiral: we keep moving forward in time, but we find ourselves visiting the same places, the same lessons, again and again.

Perhaps at three we learned not to hit somebody because they might hit back. Maybe we learn it again when we’re in Jr. High – when we gossip and somebody “hits back” by spreading rumors about us. Then we learn it again when we want to slug our co-worker who takes all the credit for the project we’ve slaved over ... only this time, maybe we have better self-control. And we learn it again when our own kid does something extraordinarily stupid, like hitting a friend, and we want to throttle them. But by now we’ve learned, and instead, after we calm down, we sit

down and try to teach them that bit of wisdom we've acquired the hard way. Social psychologists have confirmed this: they call it "recognition primed decision."^{vi}

Wisdom doesn't happen overnight. It isn't acquired like a shiny new iPhone or even a college degree. Wisdom comes bit by bit, often in spite of ourselves. But if we're fortunate – and disciplined – and pay attention – it might just start to "take." And bit by bit, as we grow wiser, we'll grow *more* receptive to "advice, reproof, and instruction." We'll be *more* open to correction, as Proverbs says, than to "rely on our own insight" (3:5).

So ... wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, and putting our egos in perspective. And wisdom accumulates over time, with lessons learned not once but over and over again. And finally, Proverbs tells us, wisdom helps us choose the right tool for the right time. Which is rarely easy to do.

This has got to be one of the quirkiest things about Proverbs: once you get to chapter 10, the sayings are piled together willy-nilly, in almost arbitrary order. As scholar Christine Yoder puts it, once you get to chapter 10,

"No longer is the [parent] in evident control No longer do proverbs occur hand-in-glove with longer instructions Instead, sayings follow one after the other, in no apparent order of priority This seemingly indiscriminate arrangement is disorienting, and abruptly shifts responsibility for making sense of proverbs from the [parent] to the readers – those with whom, given the book's aim to form wise people, responsibility must ultimately reside."^{vii}

In other words, there comes a time when *we* have to decide what lesson to lean on when. *We* have to decide what tool to use for which problem. *We* have to decide which truth to assign to which challenge. It isn't easy. And it is the only way we grow. Even – and especially – when there are two competing truths that might apply.

I *love* this about the book of Proverbs: the acknowledgment that two seemingly contradictory things can both be true. At times in Proverbs, wealth is an unqualified good (e.g., 10:15, 22; 14:20; 22:4, 7); ... at times, wealth is a liability (e.g., 11:4, 28).. At times, poverty is attributed to laziness (e.g., 6:10-11; 10:4; 20:13); at other times, poverty is the result of others' violence, extortion or deceit (e.g., 11:1, 16; 13:23; 21:6). In Yoder's words, "wisdom does not afford only one perspective on wealth or poverty ... or, for that matter, most anything."^{viii} The most blatant

example is Proverbs 26:4-5, in which two incompatible sayings appear back-to-back:

“Do *not* answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself.”

Then, immediately comes this proverb:

“*Answer* fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes.”

So which is it? Answer fools, or don’t answer them? The answer, according to Proverbs, is *it depends*. At times, speaking up is the right thing to do; at other times, keeping your mouth shut is the right answer. And wisdom ...carefully, thoughtfully acquired wisdom is the only way we come to know which answer works at which time ... when to answer fools, so as not to reinforce them, and when not to answer fools, ignoring them instead.

“The moral world is complicated,” Yoder says, and so it is. The sages behind the book of Proverbs know this. The sages intentionally

“put [us] in a position where no single response, no one proverb or perspective, can always work By doing so, they point [us] to a reality larger than the proverbs in question: the moral self inevitably holds views that are in conflict with one another and applies those views depending on the immediate circumstances. [We] cannot avoid ... sorting through contradictions [in real life].”^{ix}

This is the nature of *mature* moral wisdom: knowing what applies when.

- To know whether “you’re never too old to learn” or “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” fits the time.
- To know whether “out of sight, out of mind” applies, or “absence makes the heart grow fonder” fits the time.
- To know whether “the more the merrier” is right for this moment, or whether “too many cooks spoil the broth” fits the time.
- To know whether “nothing ventured, nothing gained” should apply, or “better safe than sorry” fits the time.^x

Sometimes wisdom has a universal answer – like “love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.” But sometimes, wisdom presses us to choose, and in choosing, presses us to seek the will of God – for *this* moment, for *this* circumstance, for such a time as *this*.

Toward the end of our series on wisdom, we'll explore this more, when we come to the words of Ecclesiastes:

³For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ...

¹¹God has made everything suitable for its time

¹⁴God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.

Isn't that the point, in the end? That all should stand in awe before God?

“Tell me, what will you do with your one wild and precious life?” In the end, wisdom is never fully accomplished or achieved. There's no scorecard to laminate, no diploma to frame, no trust fund to hand on to your grateful progeny. But if we want to be good stewards of our priceless gifts, of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness, of our “one wild and precious life,” then wisdom is the best bet we will ever make. Or as it says in Proverbs 3:

“Happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding,

For her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold.

She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. ...

She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.”

(Prov. 3:13-15, 18)

Those who hold wisdom fast ... they are called *happy*. Amen.

ⁱ Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day” from *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), <https://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html>

ⁱⁱ David Brooks in presentation Wednesday, May 6, 2015 at the Chicago Council of Global Affairs; see also *The Road to Character* (NY: Random House, 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ Christine Roy Yoder, “Forming ‘Fearers of Yahweh’: Repetition and Contradiction as Pedagogy in Proverbs, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, p. 3.

^{iv} Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), pp. 135, 219-220, 417.

^v Daniel Kahneman, pp. 234-240, 417.

^{vi} See Gary Klein’s research on firefighters, cited in Kahneman, pp. 236f.

^{vii} Yoder, p. 4.

^{viii} Yoder, p. 10.

^{ix} Yoder, pp. 11-12.

^x Yoder, footnote, p. 12