

**Series Theme:** The useful and important teachings in Proverbs

**Title:** Wisdom

**Date delivered:** April 8, 2018

**Preacher:** Rev. Joyce Donigian

**Synopsis:** Godly wisdom is the kind of wisdom we need to deal with today's world.

**Summary:** Proverbs is somewhat difficult to study since many of the important teachings are scattered throughout the book. However, these teachings can be organized under several themes. To introduce this method of study, we focus our first sermon on the concept of wisdom. We compare worldly wisdom to godly wisdom. We show that godly wisdom has a wider meaning in that it includes knowledge, understanding, and discernment along with guidance from God. Because of our hurried lifestyles, we often can choose earthly wisdom over godly wisdom. Studying the book of Proverbs can help us rely on godly wisdom rather than worldly wisdom.

**THE FIRST SCRIPTURE LESSON:** Proverbs 1:1-7

**THE SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON:** Matthew 7:1-5, 24-27

**MEMORY VERSE: But wisdom is shown to be right by the lives of those who follow it.**  
Luke 7:35

**Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.**

Have you ever heard something like this?

The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

Don't judge a book by its cover.

Strike while the iron is hot.

Too many cooks spoil the broth.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

These all sound pretty familiar to us – and we likely could explain their meaning to someone new to our language. In fact, I found these in a list of 50 sayings on a website for Spanish-speakers to learn some of the intricacies of English. These short sayings have been around forever, and they remain popular because they are a way of saying a lot in just a short phrase.

Here are some other sayings that might not be as familiar to us:

**Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.**

## Proverbs 3:5

**Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.** Proverbs 22:6

**The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.** Proverbs 1:7

**As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.** Proverbs 27:17

**A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.** Proverbs 17:22

Here, too, are truisms that say a lot in just a few words. We may have heard or read some or all of these sometime in our lives, but I think I can say for all of us that they aren't as familiar as the first set. You probably have guessed that these bits of advice are all from the OT book of Proverbs. And Pastor Doug and I are going to spend a few weeks looking at how we can better understand these sayings.

Why in the world would we want to study Proverbs, a part of the Bible that has the reputation for being one of the least studied books in the Bible? Admittedly, this collection of wise sayings doesn't have the advantage of telling us a story like those OT books where we learn about Adam and Noah and Moses and Joseph and Abraham and David. The book of Proverbs is not like the gospels where we learn about Jesus through stories and parables. And they don't address specific issues within the church like Paul's letters do. Instead, the book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings, not to be read quickly in large chunks, but rather, they should be taken more slowly, pondered, savored, considered. In many ways Proverbs is unique in the Bible.

Many, if not most of these proverbs, were written by Solomon, King David's son – one of the wisest men who ever lived. The rest were written by other wise men and collected by Solomon. It took much wisdom to write and collect these writings. By studying these wise sayings, we can gain wisdom ourselves. Solomon's wisdom came from God. Remember the story from 1 Kings – Solomon had a dream in which God asked him what he wanted. Solomon replied that he desired wisdom to govern his people. Because he asked for wisdom rather than long life or riches, God was pleased and so fulfilled Solomon's request.

Proverbs is not only a book full of wise sayings, sayings that are to be used in everyday life, the book is also a gospel book. Jesus studied these proverbs and taught from them. In Proverbs there is good news for all of us – grace for sinners, hope for failures, wisdom for idiots.

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1:30 that:

**“the gospel says that Jesus is wisdom from God.”**

Proverbs uses a Hebrew word to describe people. The word is *peti*. It is often translated as “simple,” “naïve,” or “ignorant.” It may be that we aren’t too happy to be told that we are simple, naïve, and ignorant. But think of it this way – the Bible wasn’t written for perfect people. The Bible was written for us. Proverbs are not just pretty words for faultless people; rather they are to be used by us in our daily living.

The book of Proverbs is part of the biblical wisdom literature along with Job and Ecclesiastes. Wisdom is different from knowledge. Knowledge is useful for passing tests or changing a tire or baking a cake. This is the know-how kind of knowledge. Wisdom is different. Instead, wisdom is the quality of having knowledge, yes, but also experience and good judgment play a role. It is the soundness of an action or decision in applying this knowledge, experience, and good judgment. So wisdom is much broader than knowledge alone. Wisdom, part knowledge, part experience, part judgment, part guidance from God, is that characteristic that can guide us throughout all of life’s ups and downs.

It has been said that we live in a time and place where wisdom, the kind spoken of in Proverbs is in short supply.

The situation today is:

Lots of knowledge, but little understanding.

Lots of means, but little meaning.

Lots of know-how, but little know-why.

Lots of sight, but little insight.

What is wisdom? And how does it differ from its close cousins – knowledge, understanding, and discernment? Knowledge comes from the ability to see, to hear, and to learn through experience. Knowledge is intellectual.

Understanding is insight into the nature of a thing, a deeper level of knowing. For example, I know that a computer works with a binary code of 0’s and 1’s, but I don’t understand how a computer works.

Discernment is the ability to distinguish one thing from another and often involves feelings about right and wrong. The discerning person not only distinguishes one thing from another but will normally also make a moral judgment as to which is best. Wisdom goes beyond knowledge, understanding, and discernment. Wisdom is that which allows us to exercise sound judgment in order to choose a proper course of action.

Here’s a story that highlights the difference between knowledge and wisdom:

*A woman was working as a nurse in a busy emergency room. They had a regular visitor, Billy, a cute two-year-old with freckles and tousled blond hair. For a year Billy had been in and out of the ER with what the doctors diagnosed as asthma.*

*The source of the illness was a mystery to the medical staff. Billy hadn't had asthma as an infant, there wasn't a family history of asthma, and there weren't obvious signs of allergies that would cause it. But the symptoms were asthmatic. Sometimes the staff treated Billy and sent him home; other times he would end up in the pediatrics ICU because his breathing was so labored.*

*This continued for about a year, and the staff grew fond of Billy. He came yet another day with breathing difficulties, and one of the medical interns decided, on a lark, to look up Billy's nose. He found a black jelly bean that Billy's brother had put there a year before. What came out with the jelly bean wasn't pretty.*

*The trained ER staff had treated Billy for the wrong condition for almost a year. It took an intern to go beyond medical knowledge and consider alternative causes for Billy's condition. That could be characterized as wisdom. When you're working in the ER, properly diagnosing a problem can be the difference between life and death.*

The difference between knowledge and wisdom can have dreadful consequences in other areas of our lives. For example, many of the people in prison today are very knowledgeable people, knowledgeable in the ways of the world – how to steal, how to defraud, how to take advantage of others. But wisdom – knowledge without judgement, knowledge without guidance from God – does not lead to satisfying life, the kind of life that the writers of Proverbs desire for us.

In Proverbs 1:2 we read that the purpose of the proverbs is:

**“to teach people wisdom and discipline.”**

Did you notice the two concepts – wisdom and discipline? They belong together, and both were central to the thinking of these OT writers, however they are distinctly counter-cultural in our society. We don't speak much about wisdom in our contemporary world. We do value people who are “smart,” earning prestigious academic degrees for themselves and delighting in high test scores for their children.

Another thing to consider, what if we are living the good life – good job, nice house, great

family – but lack wisdom? If we don't have the discerning part of wisdom, we can harm our friends and family, even with the best of intentions. If we have courage but not wisdom, we can make terribly rash mistakes. Even in sharing the Gospel, if we have the truth of the gospel but not wisdom, we can turn people off, scare them with our tactics. Even technology cannot make up for wisdom. We can use all of the best and most modern ways of communication, but without wisdom, we may be communicating the wrong message.

There are two kinds of wisdom commonly talked about today. First there is “worldly wisdom.” This type of wisdom focuses on our pride, on getting ahead, and makes losing unthinkable. Then there is the “wisdom from above” – wisdom from God – that changes us, helps us see ways to improve ourselves, and by doing so, we are better able to serve God. Our dilemma often is – in which kind of wisdom will we trust?

I don't need to tell you that for most of us our lives today are chaotic, filled with constant stop-start-stop-start short-attention-span mental habits. We want quick answers, the sooner the better. It is often too time-consuming to consider which type of wisdom we are using. Because of our multi-faceted, busy, complicated lives, many people today are satisfied with sound bite news clips, book reviews, or quick texts or Facebook postings rather than reading a newspaper or magazine or book or actually taking time to talk with friends and family. We have Twitter-feel fragments of news and only a surface understanding of most things. We just don't seem to have the time to go deeper, and through it all we are trying to patch together some kind of life that is satisfying, worth living. This is difficult. But the problem is not just that we are fidgety and distracted; it's that our information, however much we have, is no basis for a life, that is, if we are using worldly wisdom.

There is no way to get away from all this, even when we try to relax in front of the TV or computer screen. Daily we are bombarded with ads for must-have products and must-see programs. More worldly wisdom. There is a noticeable consistency to the mock-wisdom ads produced by Hollywood and Madison Avenue: all of them uphold one or more of the core values sacred to our society: personal uniqueness, freedom from limits, freedom from fear, power for the individual in all areas of our lives.

The question that underlies the whole collection of biblical proverbs is one that gets a lot of attention in our own society and also within the church: How do we form a healthy character for ourselves and for our church? You have probably all heard the advice – when life gets tough, go shopping. Probably few in our community are so crass as to accept this simplistic answer offered by our consumer culture, that salvation is by shopping alone. Many more have accepted, implicitly at least, another common conclusion.

Just go to any bookstore or online and discover the numerous self-help books available. This proliferation leads us to believe that we can become most healthy and happy by working on ourselves alone, privately, with no outside help. But Proverbs has a different answer: that we can become our best selves not alone, but only in community, through the demanding discipline of listening to others. The view that our best self is formed in response to wise criticism involves being part of a community that is filled with mutual trust and commitment to one another.

Proverbs makes its distinctive contribution to Christianity with its detailed picture of what the practice of wisdom looks like in the course of ordinary human experience – or sometimes, the extraordinary experience of ordinary people like ourselves.

We have begun this journey together. Let us continue together to learn what Proverbs can teach us. Let us pray.

Holy and merciful God, we thank You that You have not given us up to our own devices. You have given us many helps for our earthly journey. Help us study and learn, ponder and question, read and reread those passages in scripture that You have given us. Help us to allow ourselves to trust others enough to share our journey with them and to hear wise counsel for them. We thank You most of all for sending Your Son to us, to teach us, to guide us, to save us, to give us eternal life. For these and all things we give You thanks. In Your Son's precious name, amen.