

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Proverbs 1:1-7, “The Gateway to Wisdom”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/9/2023**

Over the summer, I’m going to be focusing on the book of Proverbs.  
Now I do have some vacation weeks thrown in there along the way  
and guest preachers will do their own thing.  
But when I’m preaching, it will be focused on Proverbs.

Why Proverbs? Proverbs offers us a perspective on life and living  
that is incredibly needed in our world today.  
Here’s a story that has helped me understand the depth of this book.

Bruce Waltke is a wonderful, humble man who was a professor of mine at  
Regent College in Vancouver, BC.

He always introduces himself as a servant to the church  
and those he teaches.

But his humility can hide how brilliant he is. He has doctorates  
from both Dallas Theological Seminary and Harvard University.

He was on the translation committee  
for the NASB the NIV and the TNIV.

He’s written numerous commentaries and scholarly works.  
One of the sharpest people around.

Back in 1979 (when I was 2),  
he was approached by a publishing company  
to do a commentary on the book of Proverbs.  
He agreed. But after spending some time working through the book,  
he realized...it was too profound for him. He couldn’t master it.  
He would need more time.  
All told, it ended up taking Bruce Waltke,  
one of the sharpest scholars on the planet,  
over 25 years to complete his commentary on Proverbs.  
That showed me how deep this book is.

Not only that, but when I heard Bruce tell that story,  
I realized the way I had always read Proverbs was not very helpful.  
I like to read Proverbs as though it’s the Bible’s fast-food court for wisdom.  
I just pop in, read a couple proverbs, and pop out. Wisdom gained.

Since I can tell you're intrigued, I'll demonstrate how this system works:

I start off by choosing a Proverb of my liking.

I just let my eyes land somewhere on the page and start reading.

Oh look, Proverbs 11:13!

**"A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret."**

And then I think, "Oh. Well that's pretty obvious. Next."

Then I flip to another one...Proverbs 12:27,

**"The lazy man does not roast his game,  
but the diligent man prizes his possessions."**

And then I think, "Hu? What the heck does that mean?"

I thought I wasn't supposed to prize my possessions? Oh well. Next."

Then I flip to another one...ah, Proverbs 15:1,

**"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."**

And that's when I think, "Yeah. That's a cool one.

'A gentle answer turns away wrath.'

I'm gonna have to remember that one."

And then I'm done: Wisdom gained.

To summarize my findings, I came away with:

- "Pretty obvious."
- "What does that mean?"
- And, "That's a cool one."

Those three responses sum up

pretty much all I ever got out of Proverbs before I studied under Bruce.

Is anybody else with me on this? But what else are you supposed to do?

It doesn't make any sense to read like 50 of them at once

because they don't hold together.

Pretty soon you have no idea what you're even reading.

And *that* is precisely why Proverbs is a neglected book.

And yet, I don't know if there is any book of the Bible

more relevant to the current issues facing humanity.

Think about it: Proverbs deals with issues like marriage relationships,

parenting children, dealing with our sexuality,

proper economic practices, business ethics

and caring for our neighbors.

Do you think we might need the book of Proverbs?

Do you think we could benefit not just from knowledge,  
but from wisdom?

Is it possible that God could do something through small communities  
of people who submit themselves to living wisely?

We have to start by getting our heads around what wisdom is.

Here's my working definition of wisdom: Wisdom is skill for living.

A person who is wise has mastery over the everyday problems of life.

That's wisdom. It includes knowledge, but it's not mere knowledge.

Bruce Waltke described this dynamic by saying,

"There's no distinction between knowing about wisdom  
and experiencing it existentially."

It's like you can't say you understand bicycles unless you  
have learned to ride one. You might be able to know facts about them,  
but you don't really know about bikes until you have ridden one  
(and fallen off a few times). That's what wisdom is like.

That's an important thing for us to get our heads around.

Wisdom is skill for living,  
and this is the book God has given the church  
to pass wisdom from one generation to the next.

The second thing we have to get our heads around,  
is that despite the practical emphasis of the book,  
Proverbs is not a how-to book.

That's so counter-intuitive, isn't it?

I'll say it again: Proverbs is *not* a how-to book.

It's a character developing book.

In this regard, Waltke says,

"Unless our character is developed by the Spirit of God,  
the Proverbs will mock us." They will mock us.

What he means is that this is a book of wisdom  
that is the product of an entire way of life.

If we try to step into a single line of that wisdom  
without also adopting the way of life it assumes, then we have no chance.

A person can't just go out and suddenly "be wise"  
because they have a couple proverbs in their pocket.  
The passage we're looking at today is the preamble of the book.  
These first 7 verses describe the *purpose* of all that follows  
and they are written by Solomon the son of King David.

Verse 2 says, **"For gaining wisdom and instruction,  
for understanding words of insight."**

Wisdom, instruction, and understanding. What do they all have in common?  
These are all things that pertain to the interior person.

Verse 3 then turns to a person's outward behavior,  
**"for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,  
doing what is right and just and fair."**

From the start we see that Proverbs offer us wisdom  
that addresses the whole person.  
When we come to this book we receive  
insight that shapes our inner character  
so that our outward behavior will be conformed  
to what is right and just and fair.

Solomon gives us three words here, right and just and fair,  
because it's not enough to be right.

You can be right in what you do, you can be within the law, but not be just.  
You can be right in what you think, have your theology all lined up,  
but not be fair in how you live.

The three words together—right, and just, and fair—give us a fuller picture  
than if he had said, "for doing what is right."

The proverbs are for the whole person,  
our interior life and our outward behavior.

**If we're going to talk about wisdom, who gets to be wise?**

Who gets to be wise? Can just anyone have wisdom?  
Or is being wise a genetic gift like athleticism or intelligence?  
Or do you need to have special connections  
to the sages of the world in order to receive their instruction?

Is being wise all about who you know?

Other ancient near-eastern texts that are similar to the proverbs  
are addressed to royalty or to officers in the military.

The wisdom they offered *was* only for a few.

But Solomon, and the Holy Spirit through Solomon,  
makes it clear that the wisdom he shares is *not* only for the elite.

Verse four says they are **“for giving prudence to those who are simple,  
knowledge and discretion to the young.”**

Who are these simple people?

To be simple is not a good thing in this book.

A simple person in Hebrew is someone who is gullible.

The word means “to be open to everything.”

The simple person has no filter no ability to discern right from wrong,  
they are open to everything.

But even a person like that isn't without hope.

These proverbs are intended to bring discernment for the simple.

Isn't that great to hear?

The second group mentioned is the young.

If you are young (or are living life with young people)  
and haven't accumulated much skill for life,  
the Proverbs can instruct you.

Young people seeking maturity can sit at the feet of the great sages of Israel  
and learn from them.

In fact much of the book is addressed to a young person  
who is being spoken to by their father.

Then there's a third group.

Verse five says the proverbs are also for the wise  
to listen and add to their learning.

So this is really a book for everyone, if you're a wise adult  
or a simple adult or if you're young  
or if you're somewhere in between, this book is for you.

That's good news. The wisdom of the Living God  
revealed to the sages of Israel is available for everyone.

But there is one prerequisite: You have to seek it.

If you are young or if you are simple,  
you have to make a decision to join the wise.

You have to make a decision to put your life on that pathway.

Otherwise, you will remain lost in the world, open to everything,  
swayed by every influence that comes your way.

John Bunyan wrote a classic allegorical story called Pilgrim's Progress.  
Anybody know when? The year 1677.

Three editions were printed within the first year,  
demonstrating that this book was an instant classic  
in literature and within the church.

In the Pilgrim's Progress, the main character, Christian,  
discovers that he has a burden on him that he wants to be rid of.

He's instructed by a person named Evangelist  
to find a narrow gate and go through it.

Crossing through this gate will lead him

on the path to the place where his burden will be lifted. But as

soon as Christian sets out toward the gate,

his family begins to weep that he's leaving them,

and then his neighbors begin to mock him,

and then he gets stuck in the Slough of Despond.

But! a person named Help...helps him out of it.

Many other people step in to distract him from entering this gate,

they all invite him to find relief for his burden somewhere else,

like the village of Morality.

But then he again runs into Evangelist.

Here's part of their conversation:

**EVAN Why are you here Christian? said he which words Christian knew not how to answer, so at present he stood speechless before him. Then said Evangelist, "Aren't you the man that I found crying outside the walls of the City of Destruction?" CHR Yes dear Sir I am the man EVAN Did not I direct you the way to the little wicket gate? CHR Yes**

**dear Sir said Christian. EVAN How is it then that you are so quickly turned aside for you are now out of the way?"**

Evangelist knows that if Christian does not go through that narrow gate,  
he will never find relief for his burdens.

The city of Morality and the Vanity Fair  
aren't going to get it done.

He must go through the gate if he will have his burden relieved.

Verse 7 is like the narrow gate of the book of Proverbs.

We either pass through this gate, and continue on our way toward wisdom,  
or we will be continually beaten back in our search for wisdom.

Structurally, verse seven stands apart.

The author, Solomon, draws attention to it,  
because he intended it to be a kind of passageway  
into the rest of the book.

The verses prior to verse 7 describe the purpose of this collection  
in one long sentence: for gaining wisdom, for receiving instruction,  
for giving prudence, for understanding proverbs and parables. The  
verse *following* verse 7 begins the first long passage of instruction  
in the book, a conversation between father and son.

Verse 7 itself is set apart. The reason is because Solomon  
wants us to know that this verse is the key to the entire book.

So what is it that verse 7 tells us?

What is this gate we must pass through?

**“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,  
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”**

There is an emotional aspect to the fear of the Lord.

This is that sense of reverence and awe

that is due to God because God is so beyond us

that a kind of “fear” is an appropriate response.

Really it's a combination of humility, respect, and trust.

If we fear God, we exhibit humility, respect, and trust before God.

If we want to be people of wisdom, we have to go through this gate.  
We have to decide if we will humble ourselves  
before God himself and before the revelation of God in scripture.  
Bruce Waltke says, “What the alphabet is to reading,  
what notes are to reading music,  
and what numerals are to mathematics,  
the fear of the Lord is to attaining  
the revealed knowledge of this book.”

Have you entered through this gate already?  
If so, I would love to hear about what your journey has been like.

If not, what is preventing you from walking through the gate,  
submitting yourself to the Lord’s instruction and pursuing wisdom?  
Is it a secret desire? Is it fear? Is it being preoccupied with all your plans?  
Is it a sense that you’ve already attained all the wisdom you need?  
Whatever it is, God will help you set it aside.  
The first step to wisdom is choosing to walk among the wise.