

**June 30**  
**Proverbs 1:1-19**

“Wisdom”

This next sermon series is based on some of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament: Job, some of the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. These texts don't get read much in church and except maybe for Job, they are almost never preached from. But for this week and the next four the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes will be both read and preach from.

I want to start with word wisdom. We are surrounded by countless data sources. But data is not yet knowledge. Until you can organize your data and begin to make sense of it, you don't yet know anything. Data is not yet knowledge, and knowledge is not yet wisdom. You can know all kinds of facts. But until you're able to organize and process and relate those facts to real life and perhaps put those facts into a cohesive narrative and know which ones apply to which situation, you don't yet have wisdom. In our world, data is alm instantaneous; wisdom takes time.

Wisdom takes time, testing, experience, and observation. For example, one of the things I find interesting about common sense sayings is that when you begin to make a list of all of them, you discover that more than a few are contradictory. So, when you see that something is out of kilter and needs attention, which is it? A stitch in time saves nine? Or haste makes waste? Just knowing the folk aphorisms doesn't help you. Wisdom is knowing, sensing which of those aphorisms applies.

Wisdom literature in the ancient Near East aims to instruct us on how to live a good, worthwhile life. This is not the same as an easy life or a wealthy life but a good life. We have the same kind of literature today. You can find it in the self-help section of Amazon, of which there are 228,059 entries under categories like Stress Management, Personal Transformation, Success, Memory Improvement, Motivational, and Happiness. Some of these books are about getting what you want, some are about getting rich, and some are about self-discipline and self-improvement. By the way, there are 1,128,788 books under Religion & Spirituality, a unfortunately high number of which are about getting what you want or getting rich. Then again, there are absolutely wonderful titles like *God Loves Ugly: & Love Makes Beautiful*. The very title makes me want to check that book out.

All this isn't a bad context for listening to the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs will have its share of folk aphorisms. Proverbs takes a very positive attitude toward the wisdom it conveys. After three weeks of Proverbs we're going to hear from the Book of Ecclesiastes, which takes a very different view of things, proclaiming that “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.”

The instruction Proverbs delivers is the tried and true. This stuff works—*most* of the time. It works because God's world is mostly trustworthy. But as Ecclesiastes will remind us, there is also randomness in God's world, and while living wisely produces better results, we do not control what happens. Influence, yes; control, no. Eat lots of fruits and vegetables, and your chances of getting cancer go down; but they don't disappear.

What we heard read from Proverbs today was its introduction, its attempt to get us to start thinking about what wisdom is and from where it comes. And we heard two key verses. Verse three makes it clear that this is not your typical self-help book. It's not a book whose purpose is to help you get what you want or get rich or be happy. Rather, Proverbs is written, "for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity." The writer of Proverbs is pretty sure that when we live righteously, justly and fairly, we will have all the riches we need and be pretty darn content. Another way to put this is that Proverbs isn't trying to help us *feel* better; it's trying to help us *be* better because as we grow in righteousness, justice, and equity, how we feel about ourselves and our lives will work out just fine. Another way to put this is that greed is the exact opposite of wisdom.

The second key verse is one you probably know by heart. It's verse seven, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." "Fear" means a couple of different things in the Bible. In the New Testament fear may be the proper response when you find yourself confronted by God's holiness, but to those who are fearful God or God's angel almost always says, "Fear not." God doesn't really want us to be afraid of him. God wants to be our Abba, our father, our loving daddy, not shrink away from him in fear.

In the Old Testament fear means something a little different. The idea is less about emotion than it is about our attitude toward and how we approach God, God's authority, and God's goodness. Rolf Jacobson puts it this way. Fear of the LORD is knowing that we are ultimately, completely dependent upon God.

I think of it this way: I'm not really afraid of God. My model comes from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. In that movie God yells at King Arthur and his knights and says, "Stop groveling!" And yet, when I die, no matter how powerful or rich or independent I have been, I will be completely powerless and totally in the hands of God and totally at the mercy of God's grace. And because I have a loving relationship with God I'm perfectly OK with that. I trust God's promises.

And I trust in God's wisdom. It's a strange wisdom in which power is made perfect in the weakness of the cross. It's because of the cross of Jesus that I trust God and God's wisdom and try to live according to it.