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Proverbs: Words of Wisdom

I. The Lord Gives Wisdom

Proverbs 2:1-15

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When I was eleven years old, we moved from one neighborhood to another in the same town. While the physical distance was less than half a mile, the social disruption was nonetheless significant. My childhood neighborhood was filled with friends I had grown up with, from families with shared values. In fact, about half our street all belonged to the same church as my family. But this new neighborhood was different. While it had young people my age, some of them were rather rougher than I was used to – especially one boy, the ringleader of the neighborhood, who lived a few doors down. He was a couple of years older than most of us, and to fit into the neighborhood social order basically required getting on his good side – which I tried to do. But the things he thought were fun were things I was not used to doing, or particularly comfortable doing. Nothing criminal, just the sort of things I knew I probably wasn't supposed to be doing.

Which is how it came to pass that, one day, he and I and a few of the other boys were out under the orange tree in my backyard picking up rotten oranges from the ground and flinging them over the roof of my house in the general direction of the street out front. I suppose the object was to hit a passing car, as the driver wouldn't be able to tell where the rotten orange on their windshield had come from. Anyway, as we were doing this, we heard a group of the neighborhood teenaged girls passing by on the sidewalk out in front of my house – a target even better than cars! We all reared back and threw our rotten oranges, but one at a time so we could tell who and when we had a hit. Everyone missed – except me. We could hear the sound of my blind throw landing squarely on the head of one of the girls. I was immediately a hero, taking my place in the neighborhood boy's hall of fame.

But when we came out from behind the house to survey our victory, we found the girl sitting on the sidewalk sobbing, with her friends huddled around her alternately comforting her and cursing us – even threatening that greatest of all retributions, that they were going to tell our parents what we had been doing. Which only made the other boys laugh even harder. But – and I remember this so clearly – suddenly it wasn't funny to me anymore. Not so much because of the threat to tell our parents, but because just suddenly I knew what we were doing really was not very funny – that it was actually kind of mean. And that I shouldn't be doing things like this. That I hadn't been raised to act like this. How many times had my mother told me that even if everyone else was jumping off a cliff, I was supposed to have enough sense not to jump off with them? How many times had I recited the Cub Scout Law which, among other things, says that a scout is “helpful, friendly, courteous, and kind”? How many times had I sat through Sunday School learning the second greatest lesson of them all – that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves?

And here I was defying everything I had been taught, everything my parents' had raised me to be, everything I knew about the sort of person I was supposed to be.

I don't want to make this sound precociously heroic, because it wasn't. But I do look back on that moment and can see that it was for me a moment of moral awakening. And I didn't hang around with the neighborhood boys so much after that. But it was a moral awakening also because I began to understand, in an eleven-year-old way, that the choices we make really are very important to the person we become, that they can really have larger and longer consequences. From that day on, I felt like I began to understand – again, in an eleven-year-old way – exactly what our passage from Proverbs is telling us this morning: that there are ways of life which are good and lead to good ends; and that there are ways of life which are not so good and which can take us down another path altogether. And that one must continuously be on guard about which path one is travelling. For this, says Proverbs, is to possess wisdom:

*Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path;
for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
discretion will watch over you,
understanding will guard you,
delivering you from the way of evil,
from men of perverted speech,
who forsake the paths of uprightness
to walk in the ways of darkness . . .*

Wisdom is name Proverbs gives to the knowledge of how best to live under God's heaven, and to the art of being able to put that knowledge into practice.

But our passage from Proverbs goes on to tell us a few more things about Wisdom – this knowledge about how best to live and about the art of putting that knowledge into practice – a few more things which run against the grain of much of our contemporary understandings of such matters. First of all, our passage tells us that there is, in truth, only one right way to live – and that all other ways to live are wrong. And that sort of either/or, black and white thinking doesn't sit real well with our more open-minded, lots of gray areas, to each his own, you do you and I'll do me modern mindset. We tend to think that there are many paths all leading to the same basic destination. But Proverbs – indeed, the Bible as a whole – speaks differently. There is only one path which is the way of wisdom. Only one path which is right and best and true. And only one path which will, in the end, lead us into life as opposed to death. “*I am the way . . .*” says Jesus, and “*No one comes to the Father except through me.*”¹

In other words, while “you do you and I'll do me” is fine when it comes to unimportant matters – I mean, if you want to go out and dye your hair Clemson orange and purple, then I say go right ahead: Go ahead dude, you do you! But when it comes to the things which really matter – the things which make for a life good and true, the things which lead us on a path which can transcend even death – well, then, there is only way to live. Only one path to follow.

And where do we find this one way, one path? Well, that is the second thing which rubs against the grain of our modern sensibilities. It is not something we get to forge for ourselves, shape according to our own desires, chart out according to our own inner light. In fact, what it requires of us, first and foremost, is the surrender of all that, and submission to the light and leading of Another. Surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and submission to the Word He has spoken to us. *“I am the truth,”* says Jesus, and *“No one comes to the Father except through me.”*² For the only place wisdom is to be found, the only way to come to know the right way, the right path which leads to life and not to death, is found in Him:

*For the Lord gives wisdom;
 from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
 he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
 he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
 guarding the paths of justice
 and watching over the way of his saints.
 Then you will understand righteousness and justice
 and equity, every good path;
 for wisdom will come into your heart,
 and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.*

If we want to find the right path, the one path which leads to a good life here and an eternal life in the world to come, then we are going to have to bind our free-agent hearts and minds by surrendering and submitting them to the only One who knows that path; to the only One who can give us, establish us, in that wisdom.

Which leads then to a third thing this passage from Proverbs says about wisdom which runs against the grain of our contemporary sensibilities: which is that God and the way of God cannot be something we pursue casually, on the side – something we attend to only once we have accomplished what we consider to be our “real” business in life. Rather, if we want to find the one right path, receive the true divine wisdom, our surrender and submission to Christ and to His Word must become for us the central purpose of our living, the main event, the core daily business which shapes everything else that we do, comes before everything else that we do, is worked out in the course of how we do everything else. For Jesus also said, *“I am the life,”* and *“No one comes to the Father except through me.”*³ Meaning our relationship with Him is **the** most important matter, **the** most important work, **the** most important item our daily to-do list – if we are ever to possess the good life, the best life, which only He can impart:

*My son, if you receive my words
 and treasure up my commandments with you,
 making your ear attentive to wisdom
 and inclining your heart to understanding;
 yes, if you call out for insight
 and raise your voice for understanding,
 if you seek it like silver
 and search for it as for hidden treasures,
 then you will understand the fear of the Lord*

and find the knowledge of God.

“If you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures . . .” Which is simply the same thing as something else Jesus said: *“Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.”*⁴

To possess wisdom. To live wisdom. To gain a deep understanding of what our lives are really for and how to live them in a way which both brings blessing upon ourselves and also gives blessing to others. Being able to know which way to go, which way to turn, what to choose, what things to hold on to and what things to let go of when life turns chaotic and the future is foggy. To have the fullness of this life which comes from God, the know the fullness of the meaning and joy God intended for us to find in life. To be able to look back in our latter days with the deep satisfaction of knowing, in our heart of hearts, that we did not waste our lives. Wisdom – that is wisdom. To be able to live that sort of life, that quality of life. Do we not want that? Do we not want a life like that? Shall we not, then, seek it out like silver, like buried treasure? Shall we not, then, seek first the Kingdom of God – seek first that One who really is the Way and the Truth and the Life?

*For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
guarding the paths of justice
and watching over the way of his saints.*

Is that not a life, the life, worth living – instead of all our blundering about in darkness and confusion?

Mark Buchanan, a pastor and wonderful writer on the Christian life, tells of participating in a two-year leadership program for pastors with a group of twenty-six others. He says that were about halfway through this program when the time came to showcase their preaching skills before one another – everybody delivering a five-minute sermon and then receiving comments, suggestions, and criticism on how to preach better. Buchanan says he was dreading this. In fact that he had a sleepless night on the night before they were to do this – rehearsing his sermon again and again, worried over how the group would respond, not wanting to be found wanting in front of his peers. It was a feeling, he adds, which was probably shared by the other twenty-six as well. He writes:

Morning came, and we assembled. The instructor had assigned us our places in the lineup. I was seventeenth. We began. My peers were good. Intimidatingly so. Witty, earnest, heartfelt, balancing with acrobatic agility, substance with showmanship. When my turn came, my confidence was bruised, but I did all right. Everyone said so.

Steve was, I think, number twenty-two. Unlike most of us, he was not a seasoned speaker, not back then, anyhow. Preaching wasn't his day job. He walked up to the front, and we could see he

was shaking. When he turned around, his eyes were wide with fear. "I'm scared," he said.

"It's okay, Steve," we said. "It's just us."

Steve told the story from Luke's Gospel, about the woman who was bleeding for twelve years and who, bankrupt from medical bills, ready to give up, threaded her way through a teeming crowd to touch the hem of Jesus' robe. She managed that, then melted away into the crowd. But Jesus knew. He stopped – even though he was in a hurry, trying to get to Jairus' house before his daughter succumbed to her illness – and drew the woman out. That one touch, deliberate, desperate, faith-filled, did what years of doctors' nostrums and platitudes failed to do: healed her.

Steve told the story, no embellishments, no dramatic flair. He might just have read it. Still, when he finished, we were silent. Something holy had taken place. We were, at the very least, caught up in the wonder of that long-ago moment, that fearful, hopeful woman touching Jesus and walking away with health brimming in every part of her. Twelve years of bleeding, all the mess and cost and stench and weariness of it, gone in an instant.

We were supposed to critique one another, but no one wanted to do this with Steve. We sat in stone stillness. In the room's quietness, we heard weeping. We all turned, and saw that it was Wendy, the administrator. She had been taping our speeches, but now she sat catching tears in her hands. The instructor asked if she was okay. "Yes," she said. "Yes."

She calmed herself, and then told us what had happened.

"For four months, I have been in constant pain. I have been to my doctor several times. She sent me to see specialists. They ordered test after test. None could tell me what's wrong. My husband and I have been frustrated and afraid. We told no one. I thought I'd have to live with this the rest of my life."

Wendy started to weep again.

"But when Steve started to speak, Jesus came and healed me."

We applauded. We congratulated Wendy. We congratulated Steve. We thanked God.

But I also sat there ashamed. I had been so anxious to impress everyone else, to best everyone else, there was no room left in my striving for Jesus. It took Steve, in weakness, in fear and trembling, for God to come in power.

That night, I couldn't sleep again. This time, though, it was a different thought that kept me awake: I want more, God. I want more of you.

And I think he said, I want that for you, too.⁵

That's what Wisdom, finally, is really all about. And deep down in our bones, is that not what we want also? Life, and that abundantly. "*For the Lord gives wisdom.*"

¹ John 14:6.

² John 14:6.

³ John 14:6.

⁴ Matthew 6:33.

⁵ Mark Buchanan, Hidden in Plain Sight (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), pp. 10-11.