

Thursday Morning Bible Study: Proverbs

Life In God's World For Dummies

1. The Importance of Being Wise / The Getting of Wisdom

Wisdom is not selling well. A few years ago Noel Due wrote a book on wisdom and sent it off to potential publishers, Consistently the feedback he got said that the book was good—but could he change the title? Apparently booksellers find it hard to move books that have the word “wisdom” in their titles. People just won't buy them.

It seems strange that something so needed is so uninteresting or unattractive in our current culture. And wisdom certainly is needed. We live in a complex world, with many demands in so many ways, at personal levels, and in family, society, nation and world. But it seems like becoming wise is not on our “bucket list”—being entertained is a much higher priority! In 1985 Neil Postman wrote a book called *Amusing Ourselves To Death*, a critique of the impact of the entertainment industry on our getting of knowledge, especially as, through television, news and entertainment were more and more blended. He wrote before the internet was a “big thing.” I wonder what he would say now of the place of Twitter and Facebook in our popular culture.

I recently read an article in *The Spectator* by a British social commentator, Douglas Murray. He was writing about the US Presidential debates. Here is some of what he had to say:

At the end of Sunday night's US presidential debate, the moderators snuck in a final question from a slightly shell shocked looking member of the audience. After an hour and a half of brutal, bitter exchanges, a man asked Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump if they could think of ‘one positive thing that you respect in one another’. In the resulting pause and exhalation it felt as though the country had seen itself in a mirror and realised it looked hideous... [T]here is something especially noxious happening on American prime time.

If there is a central cause, it is the triumph of entertainment over politics. Long an American temptation, this season it has finally won through. In part because everybody had been enjoying themselves so much that they failed to notice that the nation was losing...

Why would anyone behave like this? The reason, alas, is straightforward. This is how you get noticed in the great political entertainment business. Such people, like pundits and politicians up and down America, are auditioning for prime time. Though people often talk about political polarisation in America, they rarely mention the incentive for exacerbating it. In politics and in punditry, nuance and consensus don't sell. Plumbing ever lower depths most certainly does.

Though the American media pretend to abhor the politics now on show, they are its progenitor. In a competition for viewers and readers, they have spent years turning political debate into ratings chasing bun fights. Fortunes have been made along the way. But they have turned America into a country where politics has become showbusiness for nasty people.

For the networks and media, the increasing polarisation and void are desirable: a necessary part of business. The worse the better. These bosses have encouraged the

transformation of politics into WWF wrestling: a fake ‘sport’ in which participants and observers seem complicit — except some poor saps mistake it for real life...

The public, for whom all this is being laid on, are understandably caught and conflicted. They both love it and hate it...”

Wisdom is so desperately needed that God has given us in the Scriptures a whole section of the OT that is devoted to “wisdom”—and it is probably the section that is preached and taught least from the OT, which itself is the two thirds of the bible that is also very rarely preached on! And when you get to the NT, and especially to Paul’s epistles, you see that he knew the urgency and importance of our getting wisdom. He constantly prayed to God that the churches he wrote to would become wise.

Eph. 1:17—I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of *wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.*

Phil. 1:9-11—And this is my prayer: that your *love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless* until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Col. 1:9-10 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with *the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.* And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God...

Now, wisdom (particularly in the OT) is essentially *what makes a person skilful at life in God’s world where the powers of grace and life and those of sin and death are at work in complex ways.* It really *is* a very complex world, and without wisdom people do great damage to themselves, to each other, and to the creation. Wisdom enables a person to negotiate this complex world in a way that does good personally, and also familially and socially. “Everyone is on a path. Everyone is going somewhere. When we feel stuck, even when we feel trapped, the truth is, we are still in motion. Life is a journey, and the end of it all is not just a *place* but also a *condition.* We are *becoming* the end of our journey, wise or foolish, and every moment takes us closer there.¹

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom teaching that begins, in the first nine chapters, with a “hard sell” for wisdom. Getting wisdom even in Solomon’s day was not necessarily the first item on anyone’s priority list. But wisdom is not an added extra for the special, a kind of bonus to make life that little bit more special. Getting wisdom is urged and commanded; it is said to be more valuable than anything else, such that we would exert every effort to attain it.

Prov. 2:1-5 My son, if you *accept* my words and *store up* my commands within you, *turning your ear* to wisdom and *applying your heart* to understanding, and if you *call out* for insight and *cry aloud* for understanding, and if you *look for it* as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.

Wisdom is actually the thing that moves us towards richer and fuller life and away from death. Don’t get wisdom and you will be a sucker for folly... and that always leads to harm and death. (**Prov. 9:6**—Leave your simple ways and *live*, and walk in the way of insight. **9:11**—For by me [Lady Wisdom speaking] your days will be multiplied and years will be added to your life. Also, **3:1-4** Cf. the destiny of

¹ Ortlund, Proverbs: Wisdom That Works, p. 15

following folly in **9:18**—He does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.) And if you have been foolish and suffered, Proverbs tells us that starting on the road of wisdom is actually the way towards healing and renewal—**Prov. 3:7-8**. Proverbs is then essentially a *gospel book*, that promises God’s renewing and healing work in our lives.

This leads us to why it is that wisdom is not so readily on our shopping list for life. Basically it is that we just don’t want it. In Proverbs there are various categories of human beings, not just the wise and the foolish. The “basic” category, the state in which all humanity is born is that of *peti*, or the naïve or ignorant. No child (even Jesus) is born wise: wisdom is only gained over time. In fact, all children (apart from Jesus) are not simply naïve, but has the complicating factor, that *folly is bound up in their hearts* (Prov. 22:15.) We don’t come as clean slates into this world, but we come with an *inbuilt propensity to reject the wisdom of God that leads to life*, and instead a readiness to follow the ways of foolishness. This has been so ever since the first couple refused the wisdom of God and sought their own wisdom—leading us to be foolish and blind. We all begin as dummies in God’s world.

What happens to the naïve, the *peti* who consistently refuse wisdom? Over time they become what is called *scoffers*. They are essentially absorbed by their own view of things, and are very dismissive of anyone who differs with them. They are typified by mocking, criticism and a refusal to actually listen to what another person is saying. (Pretty much a good description of our post-modern, Facebook world today! We are in a world where people seek the echo-chamber of their own opinions.) Now, the scoffer might be considered sophisticated, very clever, and very funny. But scoffers are actually destructive to common life and good and peaceful relationships. What the scoffers will find is that as they progress they don’t merely mock other people, but finally consider themselves above even God’s law. These are the *fools*—they are essentially autonomous. God, His law and His glory are of no interest to them.

The frightening reality is that the fool (like the naïve and the scoffer) can actually be a *religious* person. They have the outward form of religion (being at worship, naming God etc) but the reality of God and His law makes no practical impact on their decision making. If the Law and their decisions line-up, that is more happy coincidence than faithfulness to, love for, and awe of God. And if God’s law ever calls into question their decided path, it is clear for the fool what must go—it’s my way or the highway, and God’s law can hit the road, Jack. And “It won’t go well for them” is the message of Proverbs. For the fool, the end is finally death and judgment.

Wisdom begins with the fear of the LORD. The law is the undergirding of wisdom. So, wisdom, whilst it is about skillfulness in life, is not simply *pragmatic* but essentially *moral*. Life is moral. Everyday it matters what we do. All we do is before God. The fool avoids the moral claim of life. Wisdom recognises that our lives have one audience that matters—and it is not the court of public opinion. Wisdom begins by hearing the Law of God and living consistently with it. Fools who, in their supposed wisdom, replace the word of God with their own opinion have already abandoned the fear of the Lord. To fear of the Lord is to hear His word, receive it as His word, believe Him to forgive our failure with regard to His word, love Him for His grace and then to do His word. And that is where wisdom begins to grow.

But wisdom will need to do more than that. The law is like the boundaries of the field of our lives. We must not stray outside those boundaries. But within the field there are many complexities for which there is no simple command one way or another. The

law cannot solve these complexities. And so wisdom, that begins with the law of God must build on that, and it does this by meditation on that law, and also on experience of life in God's creation. And we'll see more of that next time.

