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Wisdom or Foolishness - Proverbs

This morning we are going to look at the book of Proverbs and particularly 4 proverbs scattered out amongst Chapters 16, 17, and 18, which were our E100 reading this past Friday.

I love the book of Proverbs and prefer to refer to it as the **Fortune Cookie Book**.

The book of Proverbs has been traditionally attributed to Solomon, who as we read earlier in the E100 (1 Kings 3) is the son of David and the man that was told by God that he could have anything he wanted. Solomon asked for wisdom or a **“discerning heart to govern [God’s] people and to distinguish between right and wrong.”** Most scholars don’t think it is likely that Solomon wrote the entire book, but he definitely at least wrote part of it and may have had a lot to do with most of it.

I call the book of Proverbs the Fortune Cookie Book because it is really just a **bunch of short sayings that may or may not be connected to the others around them**. But although they may not be connected to the other Proverbs around them, they are all tied together as a whole with a united purpose.

The Proverbs cite both positive and negative rules of life. They clarify right and wrong conduct in a whole host of different situations. But their ultimate aim is to apply the principles of Israel’s covenant faith to everyday attitudes, activities, and relationships.

Proverbs teaches from the beginning that the starting place in obtaining wisdom is **“the fear of the Lord.”** (1:7) This is not a let’s run and hide from the big scary God type of fear, but a deep reverence and appreciation for the glory, majesty, power and authority that God has. It is a healthy fear of someone that you know loves you, but that could also smash you with their thumb if they really wanted. Wisdom begins with this healthy “fear of God” and moves out into the whole range of life.

The primary goal of Proverbs is to spell out in a memorable and concise way just what it means to be a follower of God in daily life. Proverbs is as practical as it gets.

I think wisdom is something we all aspire to in some way. We have wonderful images of the super-wise in our minds. They are usually grey-haired and don't say much, but when they do it is deeply insightful. What I find fascinating though is that we generally recognize that there is some intangible quality to wisdom. That at its root is something much deeper than book knowledge. **You see this in the movies.** The wisest of people are deeply spiritual in some sense or they are magical and mysterious. There is an odd sense that true wisdom does not originate in this world, but comes from somewhere outside of it.

One piece of wisdom that has gotten a lot of press this past week is that of Warren Buffett. Perhaps the greatest American investor ever, Buffett released his yearly update letter to shareholders. Every year he writes a letter to his shareholders about how their companies are performing and then just random other bits of information about his vision and principles for investing. Investors and those interested in investing all over the world read the letter not only because it is laid back and personal, but because they want to know and understand Warren Buffett's keys to success. They dream of being like him and making decisions as successfully as he has.

Proverbs is really about the keys to success in many ways. But the success is not in career or bank account balance, but success in living life rightly before God, which endures far beyond the other stuff we like to be successful at.

I have selected 4 proverbs from the chapters that we read on Friday to focus on what it means to be wise before God. Let's go ahead and **read them.**

Starting with Proverbs 16:16 we see just how valuable wisdom is in the eyes of God. And wisdom in the Proverbs seems to be used interchangeably with other terms such as understanding and knowledge.

Knowledge is a tricky word though, because in our culture we have naturally equated knowledge with certain levels of academic attainment. You have knowledge, for instance, if you have amassed a particular volume of facts in your brain.

The Bible sets up a few helpful contrasts though. In the Bible there is a "wisdom" of this world and there is a "wisdom" of God. There is a "knowledge" recognizable and notable in this world and then there is the

“wisdom” that comes only from above. We use the same terms, but we are speaking of radically different things.

In Proverbs 2 it says, **“For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”** The source of the wisdom that we want is in God alone. The other knowledge and wisdom might be useful on earth from time to time, but it is not what is to be most highly valued in the church.

At the end of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he fleshes out the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world further. He says, **“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? . . . the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. . . Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”**

What we are seeking after as people that want to know God is a wisdom that connects us with God’s purposes. And it is this deep wisdom that goes beyond the pieces of paper with our names on them, or the credentials we carry, or even our proclivity to beat all our friends at Trivial Pursuit. It is a deep understanding that enables us to choose between right and wrong and to live life comfortably within the will of God.

Proverbs 16:16 tells us that when we have this godly type of wisdom and understanding it is far more valuable than the most valuable things of this world. It is more valuable than gold and silver.

In the 1840’s – 1850’s in our country people raced across the country to find gold in hopes of getting rich. In this comparison, pointing out the great value we put on silver and gold, there is a sense that God is calling us to recognize with similar passions the urgency in gaining the understanding and wisdom of God.

I showed you a short commercial for Tootsie Pops that first aired in the 1970’s. It is the quest of a boy to find out how many licks it takes to get to the center of a tootsie pop. Luckily, our very own Purdue

University dedicated hours of its engineering students to come up with the answer. They engineered a licking machine modeled after the human tongue to find out how many licks it took and came up with an average of 364 licks per Tootsie Pop. When 20 engineering students tried the experiment without the machine and just their tongue they averaged 252 licks. I would really like to know if they put “was able to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop in 252 licks” on their resumes.

The point I think the commercial makes, however silly, is that we all have questions about life and meaning and theology that seem to go unanswered because no one knows where to turn for the answers. The boy in the commercial goes from animal to animal without success. We some times go from self-help books to junk food to more school to spiritual gurus to Hollywood to countless others things and never get an answer to our deep yearnings for understanding.

I think we intrinsically recognize too that these answers don't just come from where we would expect. If you notice in all those Hollywood wise people that we looked at earlier . . . they are not in the fancy clothes, driving the expensive cars, with the fat wallets, with impressive credentials . . . they are exteriorly simple and unassuming.

We want to believe that true wisdom does not require money and years of schooling . . . and God affirms this is the case. But while all of those things may not be required, a relationship with the God of wisdom is. If God is the source of wisdom as we have already said, it is only obtainable through a relationship with that source.

So if we understand that true understanding and wisdom have their source in God and that they are more valuable than anything within our grasp, what exactly is the form that wisdom takes in our lives.

One way of understanding what wisdom actually is - is related to how we process the various emotions that we feel at different times in our lives. Emotions just happen in us. Some of us may have suppressed our emotions or ignored them, but they exist in us as indicators of our reaction to outward events. If someone talks about us behind our backs, then we feel sadness or anger. If we just saw one of our kids do really well at something, then we feel joy and happiness. And so on.

God has emotions too. In the Old Testament we have already observed God as being pleased and loving and as jealous and angry. God feels in a similar way that we do. In fact, part of what demonstrates in us that we were created in God's image is that we have emotions and feel like God does.

So we were designed to experience emotions. But when we experience an emotion we are then given a choice of what to do with it. How to react based upon it. There is a sense that the emotion itself is neutral, whether it is a good or bad emotion, but our reaction to the emotion can be constructive or destructive. From a biblical perspective, wisdom leads to constructive feelings and foolishness leads to destructive feelings.

One author says, "The pleasantness of our emotions depends entirely on the nature of the events that take place in our lives; the constructiveness of our emotions depends entirely on the wisdom with which we view the event in our lives."

Proverbs 17:27 points out that godly wisdom demonstrates itself in our lives in two choices: using words with restraint and being even-tempered.

This morning we clearly can't flesh out fully what wisdom is, but I want to use our four Proverbs to explain the basics of wisdom.

We obviously don't mind pleasant feelings, but our tendency is to escape unpleasant feelings with no regard for whether they are constructive or destructive. For instance, when a troublesome emotion surfaces in our awareness, we often look for a way not to feel it: perhaps a quick prayer or reciting a favorite verse, sometimes physical exercise or a sweet snack or a TV show or a distracting fantasy (sexual ones are often effective). Instead of processing our feelings, whether good or bad, and determining a course of action based upon them we often run into them or away from them. The Bible calls this foolishness. Blown here and there based upon how we feel at a particular time.

The problem with foolishness is that fools do not take the time to properly handle emotions. Both "using words with restraint" and being "even-tempered" are examples of proper processing of emotions.

The problem is that our deceitful hearts convince us that we should hide strong emotions (particularly rage) which, if recognized and properly handled, could lead to life-changing repentance. If we ignore the emotion, we lose the potential profit of self-examination.

For many Christians, denial has become a habit. This is foolishness. Chronic denial as a means of coping leads to a stiffness and rigidity that may for a time masquerade as emotional stability. But spiritual maturity must not be measured in terms of emotional evenness.

Control is the optimum term. Our goal is not to be emotionally neutral and non-feeling or numb. **Our goal is to choose to channel our emotions in productive ways. Wisdom is reacting to our feelings in ways that further God's purposes in our lives and the lives of others.** Being "even-tempered" simply means that we are not controlled by our emotions and quick to demonstrate anger, but that we move forward in a focused manner. We are careful in what we say.

Proverbs 18:2 points out that a fool is not interested in understanding, but only in their own opinions.

Often the biggest obstacle in our lives to obtaining Godly wisdom is pride and arrogance. We are not interested in really understanding God, others and ourselves, but in just sticking to what we think. Understanding is hard work.

We see this most clearly in our relationships with others. In fact, our relationships with others is often a fantastic indicator of how our relationship with God is going. Those that struggle significantly in understanding others, often struggle in truly understanding themselves and God.

Understanding is not highly valued in our culture today of sound bytes and headlines. It is easier to say someone is "evil" or a "liar" than it is to understand them and then to disagree with particular decisions or choices that they make. Understanding is hard work.

Think of the arguments we have. I say to Dana, "You never take out the trash." She says, "You never clean the toilets." And then we have a fight over how these things never happen. All I can think about is how frustrating it is the trash is always left out and all she can think about is how frustrating it is that the toilets are always dirty. And we go back and forth. But understanding takes the accusatory "you" out of

the conversation and I try to understand why she does not take out the trash. It turns out that it is really hard going outside while the kids are running around inside, and that the smell makes her nauseous, and that she hates getting her hands dirty . . . And I can understand that . . . and none of those things are an issue for me . . . I understand her . . .

Proverbs 18:13 connects this process with listening and not answering too quickly.

Most of us think of ourselves as better listeners than we really are. The essence of good listening is empathy, which can be achieved only by suspending our preoccupation with ourselves and entering into the experience of the other person. A lot of people are good at being silent when we talk.

“Genuine listening means suspending memory, desire, and judgment – and, for a few moments at least, existing for the other person.”

When listening is genuine, the emphasis is on the speaker, not the listener.

The reality is that if wisdom only comes from God, which we believe is true, then we cannot get it apart from God. So when we only are interested in ensuring that others hear our opinions and that we have it all figured out or that we don't need anyone else's help . . . then we have a difficult time understanding what it means to be wholly dependent upon God. As a result we employ various strategies to protect ourselves.

A commitment to self-protection rooted in foolish thinking has the power to corrupt every emotion, whether pleasant or unpleasant, and make them all destructive. A commitment to trust the Lord deeply with the core of our being can turn every emotion, even the most painful, into constructive avenues for more fully pursuing God.

Spiritual maturity or having godly wisdom is less about “feeling” a certain way than it is about handling emotions in an effective manner. Stepping outside of our own agenda, our own fears of failure and inadequacy and into God's story.

The process of maturing in wisdom is of course precisely that: a process. Growth in believing God and seeing life from His perspective is a lifelong process that slowly transforms destructive emotions into constructive ones.

Once acknowledged, constructive emotions are cause for rejoicing and strengthened determination to go on; and destructive emotions should stimulate self-examination to uncover the foolishness behind them.

Our quest for wisdom is ultimately guided by three sources of input: the Spirit of God, the Word of God and the people of God.

When the Scriptures give no clear instruction to govern specific choices, then the principle is always to do what is loving. Loving action is behavior motivated by a desire to promote godliness in another, not to protect oneself.

The ideal soil for character growth is rich community.

“The richest opportunities for character growth will never occur without experiencing the terrible reality of total dependency. The beginnings of noble character take shape when an image-bearer clings to God in the midst of exposed pain and forsakes self-protective maneuverings. . . Knowing God is shattering, transforming, crippling, renewing, devastating, strengthening – but knowing god is life. Apart from God, life must be distorted to be endured.”

Give out Tootsie Pops.

Enter the journey towards wisdom.

Sources Consulted:

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Nichols, Michael P. The Lost Art of Listening. New York: The Guilford Press, 1995.