

Title: Wisdom to Flourish
Text: Proverbs 3:5-6
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One of my favorite parts of the Christmas story is the visit of the so-called three wise men to pay homage to the newly born Jesus some time after his birth. Eventually bring their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus and worship him.

There has been some conjecture as to how the story may have been different if it was three wise women rather than men who visited Jesus and his parents. Here is what some have suggested:

Three wise women would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought disposable nappies as gifts!

Today we start a new series called Uncommon Wisdom. Through January we will be exploring just some of the practical insight found in the book of Proverbs.

Wisdom is one of the most valuable commodities we can obtain. Proverbs says:

Wisdom is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her.
(Proverbs 8:11)

Life is full of a confusing array of choices to make and crossroads to navigate. How do we make the most of our relationships? How do we best manage our finances? How do we make our work meaningful? How do we handle conflict? There are endless questions that demand answers. The truth is we can never have enough wisdom; it is essential to a healthy and fulfilled life.

In its introductory chapters, the book of Proverbs articulates the need for wisdom in life:

Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding.
(Proverbs 4:7)

The book of Proverbs is found in the Old Testament. It is 31 chapters long and the author is said to be Solomon.

Solomon was King David's son. After David's death he became king. One night God appeared to Solomon in a dream and said to him ask me for whatever you need. Just think how you might respond to that offer...

Solomon responds to God by asking for a wise and discerning heart.

God grants him his desire, and out of the abundance of his heart, God gives Solomon not only wisdom, but untold riches and honor as well. This is what the Bible says:

God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore...He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five.
(1 Kings 4:29,32)

Solomon's wisdom was so famous the bible tells us that people would travel hundreds of miles to seek his counsel and advice.

The remarkable Wisdom of Solomon was collected in part in the book of Proverbs. It is a book inspired by his spiritual intelligence and insight.

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This wisdom is mainly recorded in the form of short saying we call proverbs.

A proverb is a simple and often repeated saying that expresses a truth based on common sense or practical experience.

A proverb is a short sentence based on long experience.

Proverbs are not limited to those we find in the bible. They are found across most cultures and times in history. Here are some examples of proverbs – simple saying that expresses a truth – from our day and culture:

Middle age is when broadness of the mind and narrowness of the waist change places.

Junk is something you throw away three weeks before you need it.

Hospitality is making your guests feel at home, even if you wish they were.

Experience is a wonderful thing. It enables you to recognise a mistake when you make it again.

Over the coming month we will be diving into the incredibly helpful, practical and insightful teaching of Proverbs on issues like marriage and relationships, parenting and grand parenting and work and retirement.

This week we are going to reflect on the importance of pursuing such wisdom in the first place. Perhaps the best known passage in the whole book of Proverbs is this one:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.
(Proverbs 3:5-6)

I want to break down this passage to the four key phrases. The first is:

TRUST (the Lord with all your heart)

A few weeks ago Andrew Hartwig spoke at 12two on the theme of work. He made the really insightful observation that it is common place in our culture to talk of life in parts. So our Life is made up of our work life, our family life, our financial life, our sex life, our church life and so on...

We approach each of these parts of life differently, and even sometimes try to keep them separate. But life is not like that. It is also a concept of life that is foreign to the bible.

Proverbs says to trust in God with all our heart.

Again, when we think of the heart we often think of feelings, of romantic emotions.

The ancient Hebrews had a much fuller understanding of the heart. For them, the heart was the governing centre of all of life. The heart embodied a person's identity. The heart represented a person's personality; including all their physical, intellectual and spiritual characteristics.

So to trust Yahweh, to trust God with all our heart is to trust God with all of our life. Let me say that again; to trust God with all of our heart is to trust God with all of our life – every part without exception. There is no part of our life, no second hat we breathe that God is not acutely interested in.

God wants us to trust him with our finances, with our family, with our sexuality, as we work, as we rest, as we sleep, as we wake...

The ancient Celtic Christians from Scotland, Ireland and Wales knew faith that touched every part of life. Their prayers reflected this:

God to enfold me,
God to surround me,
God in my speaking,
God in my thinking.

God in my sleeping,
God in my waking,
God in my watching,
God in my hoping.

God in my life,
God in my lips,
God in my hands,
God in my heart.

God in my sufficing,
God in my slumber
God in mine ever living soul,
God in mine eternity.

Trust the Lord with all of your heart, with all and every part of life.

The second phrase is lean not on your own understanding.

LEARN

In my humble opinion this is the greatest invention so far in the 21st century. It is a sat nav device. This little gadget has saved marriages! But even this miracle of the 21st century can lead to bad choices.

In July this year a family were travelling from Brisbane to Perth in their Nissan Navara towing a camping trailer behind. Near Wilcannia in the west of NSW their Sat Nav told them to leave the highway onto the Darling River road. And so they did. They were a bit worried when they saw the signs saying the road was closed due to flooding, but they continued on. The lovely lady on the Sat Nav had told them to. Eventually they became hopelessly bogged. They rang the police who eventually arranged for their ute and trailer to be pulled out of the bog three days later.

Information is not necessarily knowledge and knowledge is not necessarily wisdom.

Walter Wangerin has said that:

Wisdom is none other than the ability to listen.
(Walter Wangerin)

The question is who should we listen to? This family who were hopelessly and comically bogged listened to the lovely Sat Nav lady and look where that left them!

Never have we had so much information at our fingertips as we do now. We have information in abundance, but it seems little true wisdom. There are so many voices we could listen to as we navigate life. Which is the voice that will lead us safely home?

The source of the wisdom we need to thrive in life is found only in God. The Apostle Paul writes in Corinthians:

The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.
(1 Corinthians 3:19)

Much of the so-called wisdom we could listen to will lead us into all sorts of bogs and dead ends.

Paul goes on to say that Jesus Christ embodies the power and the Wisdom of God.

To gain true wisdom we must know Jesus Christ. We must be in relationship with him and be walking with him daily. We will gain all the wisdom we need through a living, growing and prayerful relationship with Jesus. Dwight Moody has said:

The Christian on his knees sees more than the philosopher on tiptoe.
(D. L Moody)

One of the liberating things about getting older is the more I discover, the more I discover what I don't know; the more I learn, the more I find gaps in my knowledge. For me, life is an unfolding mystery that God is leading me through. John Wesley puts it this way:

When I was young I was sure of everything; in a few years, having been mistaken a thousand times, I was not half so sure of most things as I was before; at present, I am hardly sure of anything but what God has revealed to me.
(John Wesley)

If I lean only into my own understanding I miss most of that God can offer me in this life. Leaning into my own understanding alone would be like viewing life through a portable black and white TV full of static and white noise. Life guided by God's wisdom is live in all of its high definition, surround sound, wide-screen brilliance.

Lean not on your own understanding, and finally, in all your ways submit to him.

SUBMIT

Author and Pastor Craig Groeshcel states that churches are full of what he calls 'Christian Atheist'.

That sounds like an oxymoron – what does he mean?

He says that Christian atheists are people who say they believe in God but live as if he doesn't exist.

Here is a curly question: Are you a Christian Atheist?

The letter of Titus says this of such people:

They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him.
(Titus 1:16a)

The fact is we have been told everything we need to do in order to live the life God longs for us. Blaise Pascal put it this way:

All the good proverbs have been written; it only remains to put them into practice.

(Blaise Pascal)

As we enter 2011 I want to suggest two ways we can submit to God.

The first is to commit to **study** God's word.

Proverbs says:

Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
(Proverbs 30:5)

The psalmist says:

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.
(Psalm 119:105)

Yesterday I finished the NT in 90 journey – our 90 day reading plan that took us through the whole New Testament. It took me a week later than it should have. Every day I have read, every day without exception – God has shown me new things from his word, or reminded me of old things that I have forgotten. I have been fed, nourished sustained, challenged and encouraged. So what's next?

In early March we will be launching a new Bible reading program, but before that here is a January challenge for you. Why not read one chapter of the book of Proverbs each day. There are 31 chapters; one for each day.

Survey after survey demonstrates that the single most important spiritual discipline that fosters spiritual growth is daily bible reading. So, in 2011, for God's sake read God's word! For your own soul's sake read the bible regularly.

If you feel stuck in a spiritual rut, the best way out of it is to open this book and prayerfully read. And God will speak.

I cannot read your bible for you. God cannot read your bible for you. Only you can.

The second way we can submit our ways to God is with our finances; by regularly setting apart a proportion of our income for the work of God. Proverbs says:

Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.
(Proverbs 3:9-10)

If Jesus is Lord of anything in our life, he is Lord of everything including our finances. Perhaps there is no greater test of our profession of faith than in how we use our finances.

As we enter 2011 are you committed to giving God the first and the best of your wealth?

Are you going to give to the work of God proportionally, sacrificially, generously and cheerfully?

Yesterday I went online to change the amount that Sue and I direct debit to the church as our tithe. We do it January each year as that is when our salaries change. It is one of the most sacred tasks I perform each year.

Honour the Lord with your wealth with the firstfruits of all your crops.

Through December we asked you to make such a commitment through this pledge card. On it you anonymously detail what you believe God is calling you to give in tithes and offerings and to our Vision 1000 church planting fund.

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We have been blessed by those of you who have responded. A surprising number of you have not pledged. You may have forgotten to in the Christmas rush, or you may still be considering what you will give. Or you may have fallen for the lie, convinced yourself even, that what you do with your money doesn't matter to God.

In all your ways submit to him. The fact is there is a little bit of the Christian Atheist in all of us. GK Chesterton puts it far better than me:

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.
(GK Chesterton)

Our world does not need any more half-baked, namby-pamby, anaemic, wish-washy, lukewarm apologetic Christianity. Our world does not need any more Christian Atheists.

Our world desperately needs men and women who take God at his word, who trust him with all of their heart – all of their life, who listen only for the voice of God and who daily submit their lives to God.

So as we step into 2011, with God's help and in God's strength, I am committing again to follow him wherever he leads. Will you join me?

As we step together, God promises us that he will make our paths straight.

Let me be clear about what this does not mean.

If we trust God with our heart, of we submit our lives to him this does not mean we will healthy, wealthy and happy. God does not promise he will make us comfortable, popular or thin.

God promises us straight paths. God promises us a sense of meaning and purpose in life that we cannot experience apart from him. God promises that in the ups and downs of life, in all of its changing circumstances, all of lives joy and sadness – laughter and tears – we can live as more than conquerors through Christ who strengthens us.

Eugene Peterson puts it beautifully:

The Christian life is going to God. In going to God, Christians travel the same ground that everyone else walks on, breathe the same air, drink the same water, shop in the same stores, read the same newspapers, are citizens under the same government, pay the same prices for groceries and gasoline, fear the same dangers, are subject to the same pressures, get the same distresses, are buried in the same ground.

The difference is that each step we walk, each breath we breathe, we know we are preserved by God, we know we are accompanied by God, we know we are ruled by God.

(Eugene Peterson)

The Christian life is that straight path that leads to God.

This life, a life immersed in and informed by God's wisdom begins with trusting God with our heart.

Charles Blondin was a famous nineteenth century French acrobat. He began tightrope waling at the age of 5 and was proficient at it by the time he became an adult. It became his life ambition to tightrope across the Niagara Falls in northern America. In 1859 he made his first crossing on a 1300 foot long rope three inches in diameter. The trip took him twenty minutes.

Once he made his first journey across the falls there was no holding him back. He did it again and again to the rapturous applause of the thousands who gathered to watch him. He became famous for pushing a wheelbarrow across, on one occasion holding cooking equipment. He got half way across and used the cooking gear to make an omelette which he then lowered by rope into one of the tourist boats below.

There is a story told of Blondin that on one day after he had crossed the falls pushing a wheelbarrow he asked the gathered crowd if they believed he could do it again. They yelled and screamed and applauded yes. 'You can do it Blondin!'

He stepped it up. He said, 'do you believe I can push that barrow with a man inside it?' The crowd went nuts! 'Yes, yes, yes – you can do it Blondin!'

Then he asked the fateful question. 'Who will volunteer for me then?'

In life it is easy for us to stand on the sidelines and spectate. But God has not designed us to be spectators, but participants in the adventure of this life.

As surely as I stand here, Jesus is also present and asking us these questions:

Who will trust me with not just part of their life, but all of it?

In a world full of voices, who will listen to my voice alone?

Who will submit all their ways to me?

Who will allow me to accompany them through all the dangers, toils and snares of this life on the straight path that leads to eternity with God?

In his book *Thoughts in Solitude*, Thomas Merton wrote fifteen lines that have become known as "the Merton Prayer":
Concluding Prayer (Thomas Merton)

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.