March 29/30, 2014

The Need for Wisdom

Skillful Living
Proverbs 1
Pastor Bryan Clark

(Dramatic Recitation)
These are the Proverbs of Solomon, David's Son, King of Israel. Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge but fools despise wisdom and discipline. Wisdom calls to the crowds along the main streets, to those gathered in front of the city gate. "How long will you who are simple insist on being simple-minded? How long will you fools hate knowledge? Come and listen to my counsel. I will share my heart with you and make you wise." Simpletons will turn away from me to death. The fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge but fools despise wisdom and discipline. Wisdom cries out in the public square. "How long you who are simple? I called you so often but you wouldn't come. I reached out to you but you paid no attention. You ignored my advice and rejected the correction I offered." Simpletons turn away from me to death. Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge but fools despise wisdom and discipline. "My child, if sinners entice you, turn your back on them. They may say, 'Come and join us; let's hide and kill someone. Just for fun let's ambush the innocent. Think of all the great things we'll get. We'll fill our houses with all the stuff we take.' My child, don't go along with them. Stay far from their paths. They rush to commit evil deeds and they hurry to commit murder." If a bird sees a trap being set, it knows to stay away. But these people, these people are setting an ambush for themselves. They are trying to get themselves killed. Wisdom shouts in the streets. "I called to you so often but you wouldn't come. You ignored my advice. So I will laugh when you are in trouble." Simpletons turn away from me to death for they hated knowledge and chose not to fear the Lord. But all who listen to me will live in peace, untroubled by fear of harm...But all who listen to me will live in peace, untroubled by fear of harm...But all who listen to me will live in peace, untroubled by fear of harm. Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge...Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge. But fools despise wisdom and discipline. Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge...fear of the Lord.

A little over two decades ago I read an article by the journalist Peggy Noonan and, at the end of that article which was about culture and values and what seemed to be changing, she said something that has stuck with me over these years. She ended the article by saying, "What you applaud, you encourage. Be careful what you celebrate." I've thought about that over the years. What do we as a culture, as a society, celebrate? It's seems to me over the last several years we as a society have come to celebrate foolishness. We applaud foolishness. We seem to be celebrating dysfunction. As a matter of fact I can't imagine a category of people in our culture more dysfunctional than our celebrities, and what is a celebrity by definition? It's someone we celebrate. As a matter of fact if you become so dysfunctional, we'll put you on television and we'll make a show about you and we'll pay you millions of dollars because, apparently, as a society we're highly entertained by dysfunction. But I would suggest to you that some of us aren't that entertained by it because every week our job is to pick up the pieces and the disasters and the pains and the hurts that define people's lives because of the foolishness and the dysfunction of the culture in which we live.

Nobody gets up in the morning and says, "I think I'll ruin my life today". Yet every day thousands

of people do just that. But what if there was a better way to live? What if there was a way to live life with the highest of degree of skill? Think of it this way: You only have one life. There are no do-overs. Wouldn't you then want to live this one life with the highest degree of skill? What if, in living with skill, the longings, the hopes, the dreams of your soul were actually realized? Would you be interested in that?

That's what we want to talk about the next three weeks—today and the next two weeks. We're going to rummage through the book of Proverbs to do that. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 1. We're going to do the first three chapters—1 this week and then 2 and 3. Proverbs on one hand is a very simple, easy to understand book. As a matter of fact people that read through their Bible get lost in Leviticus, go in the tanker in Numbers but they finally hit Proverbs and it's like, "Finally, something makes sense". I understand that they are pithy little sayings that are fairly understandable but it's also true that there is tremendous depth and complexity to the book of Proverbs. It's also a very difficult book to teach because of the way it's put together. Reading through Proverbs, getting the little pithy sayings, and saying, "I understand Proverbs," would be like learning the C scale on an instrument and saying, “I have mastered the instrument”. There's a whole lot more to Proverbs than just that.

Now two things you might find helpful. One is Proverbs seems like just a random collection of sayings and to some degree that is true. But I think there is a reason for that. I think the idea of how it's put together is to communicate that life isn't compartmentalized, but rather all these things come together to define life. If you have a problem with your temper, you also have a problem with lust; you also have a problem with your mouth; you also have a problem with your money. All these topics are mixed together to say one thing bleeds into another. It's all interrelated, so Proverbs is organized that way. The second helpful thing to understand is that Proverbs moves in what I might refer to as cycles. So you go through what seems like this random discussion about a number of topics, and then it kind of cycles around, and it does that again, and then it cycles and it does that again. Each cycle adds more depth, more understanding, more discovery. As you cycle through the book of Proverbs, each of these different issues gains more and more depth. That's basically the way I think the book of Proverbs is organized. For our discussion I'm just going to use some random verses out of Chapter 1.

> **The proverbs of Solomon the Son of David, king of Israel.** (*NASB, Proverbs 1:1)

Solomon is not the only author. We would say he is the primary author. What is the purpose of Proverbs? Verse 2:

> **To know wisdom and instruction**.

The word **know** is important to understand—*know or knowledge*—in the book of Proverbs. It does not mean *information that's in your head*. We have a concept that's actually taken from the Greek educational system that there is such a thing as *head knowledge*. I may *know something in my head* doesn't mean I necessarily live that way. The Hebrew educational model had no category for head knowledge. If you know it, you live it and, if you don't live it, you don't know it—which I think is the correct model. So the idea of *knowledge or knowing* in Proverbs carries more the idea of *experience*. This is something you know and you know it to the degree you experience it. You actually live this way. So when he says **to know wisdom** it means we live with wisdom.

So what is wisdom? Wisdom can seem like one of those words that's so abstract it's hard to figure

out what exactly do we mean? The term is really not that abstract. It's a Hebrew word that basically means *a skill*. When you read back through the Old Testament and they describe the craftsmen who were building the temple, they are described as those with great skill. It's this word—those with great wisdom. So in the book of Proverbs wisdom is the ability to live life with great skill, like an artist really.

The second word is to know wisdom **and instruction**. Instruction carries the idea of training, the idea of discipline, the idea of correction. Maybe the best imagery would be the imagery of a coach. A coach teaches; a coach disciplines; a coach trains; a coach corrects. So it's kind of a moral coach. It's the idea of living life with skill and having this moral coach to help us do that—to discern or to sort out the sayings of understanding—in other words to figure out what's true and what's not true amidst the hundreds and thousands of voices in our culture telling you how to live. How do you sort that out? Well that's what the book of Proverbs is here to help you with. Verse 3:

To receive instruction in wise behavior...in skillful living**,**
It's defined in verse 3 with three words,
Righteousness, and justice and equity.

These three words are words that we're fairly familiar with if you were here in our study of the book of Amos. The word **righteousness** is the Hebrew word *tzedek***.** It's used to define a righteous person. A righteous person is basically one who is willing to disadvantage himself in order to advantage the community. A righteous person understands this isn't just about me and my needs and what I can get but rather we, together, have a commitment to the greater good. When righteousness is not followed, the community begins to break down. Society suffers. The wicked in Proverbs would simply be defined as those who disadvantage the community in order to advantage themselves and when that happens, society, culture, community begin to disintegrate. So skillful living involves righteousness.

The second one is **justice**. It's the Hebrew word *mispat*. It basically means to give someone their due—which includes both reward and punishment without respect to race, to socioeconomic status, to gender, to anything like that. It's just desiring to be just whether it's in the marketplace, the court systems or your family. It's seeking to be just, regardless of any of those other factors.

The third word **equity** is very similar to justice. It's basically a word that would mean to be true or to be level. If you imagine putting a level on something, trying to get the bubble right in the middle—that's the word equity. It carries the idea of fairness in how I treat my employees, in how I treat my neighbors, in how I treat members of my family. Whatever my opportunity is, I seek to treat people fairly. So *righteousness, justice and equity* are the behaviors that define skillful living. When those behaviors are followed, not only is my life better but the community around me is better; the culture is better; the society is better. Verse 4

To give prudence or sense to the naïve, [I want to define that term in just a second here.]
To the youth knowledge and discretion,

Again **knowledge** is the experience of living this out and **discretion** of sorting out what's true and what's not true. The word **youth** there—I really like this Hebrew word because youth is referring to anyone from infancy all the way up until you're an elder. So people my age, we're among the youth. You've got to like that; it's most of us. Verse 5:

A wise man will hear and increase in learning,
And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,
To understand a proverb and a figure,
The words of the wise and their riddles. (Vs. 5-6)

Simply stated that's just saying that to live skillfully, to be counted among the wise, you must be teachable. You must be willing to listen and to learn. That becomes more critical when we understand the definition of the fool. Verse 7 is really the anchor; it's the foundation of the book of Proverbs.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Fear is a respect, a sense of awe. In the context of Proverbs fear carries the idea of God *knows*; God is the *teacher*; God knows the *truth*; God is the *definer* of what is right and wrong. Therefore I listen to Him; I learn from Him; I submit to that. That's what it means here in Proverbs. **The fear of the Lord is the beginning**. Beginning does not mean chronologically as much as it means it's the foundation stone. It's not like something I start with and I leave behind but it's the foundation upon which all wisdom is built.

The fool—and I'll define the word fool more in just a minute but simply stated this Hebrew word for fool is used over and over again in Proverbs and it simply means a "*Know-it-all*" —someone who doesn't need to learn. "I don't need to be instructed; I don't need to listen to what God has to say; I know it all." The Know-it-all **despises wisdom and instruction**. They don't need wisdom and instruction—they know it all. So the person who desires to live with skill first must believe that God knows it all and that God is the author of the wisdom that we need to live with skill. So I become a learner. I want to know what He has to say. The fool says, "I don't need that—I know it all."

Let me put Verse 7 in a simple context that makes it easier to understand. Since we are in the middle of March Madness let me use a basketball illustration. Let's imagine that there was a dream basketball camp that involved all of the coaching staffs from the most elite basketball programs. So you can pick the teams—the Kansas, the Louisville, the Duke, the North Carolina—whoever you think is among the elite. All of those coaching staffs come together to offer one dream basketball camp and you are a 16-year-old basketball player and you are invited to the camp. The wise person— the wise basketball player—goes with the understanding, "I am 16 years old and these are the finest minds in all of college basketball." I go with humility and a teachable spirit that they can teach me so much to develop my skills and make me better. The 16-year-old fool says, "I don't need to hear what they have to say. I am 16 years old and I know it all. The only reason I'm going to this dream basketball camp is I'm going to strut my stuff." We would say that 16-year-old is a fool. That's the idea of verse 7. Are you a Know-it-all or do you believe there is one who can offer you wisdom and truth that will help you live with great skill?

Starting in verse 8 he kind of goes on to this discussion about the outflow of your choices. I want to pick it up in verse 17. It would come with the question, "How foolish are the foolish?" The answer is, "Even a bird gets it. Even a bird gets it but the foolish do not." Verse 17:

Indeed, it is useless to spread the *baited* net
In the sight of any bird;

In other words the imagery is it's foolish to set a bird trap while the bird is watching because even a bird gets it. I'm not going there. Verse 18:

> **But they**, the fools, **lie in wait for their own blood;**
> **They ambush their own lives.**

Meaning they set a trap, and then they step in their own trap and **they ambush their own lives**. I would suggest to you life is complicated enough without ambushing your own life. I think the world in which we live has become extremely confusing. I have a heart for these young people that are trying to sort this out and figure it out. It's very complex. It's very confusing. You have hundreds, thousands of voices telling you what's right and wrong and what's good and bad and telling you how to live, and they are supposed to sort this out and make good choices. There was a time in society where it seemed like all of us as adults were on the same page. We had a general sense of morality, a general sense of what's right and wrong. Parents and schools and businesses and government—we were all on the same page. We were all working together. But those days are long gone. Now those environments are filled with competing voices. It's very difficult for these young people to sort out what's true. It's complex enough without ambushing your own life which is what the text is saying. Verse 20:

> **Wisdom shouts in the street,**
> **She lifts her voice in the square;**
> **At the head of the noisy *streets* she cries out;**
> **At the entrance of the gates in the city, she utters her sayings:**
> **"How long, O naïve ones, will you love being simple-minded?**
> **And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing**
> **And fools hate knowledge?"** (Vs. 20-22)

Wisdom is personified as if wisdom is a street preacher and wisdom goes to the streets. Basically what's described there would be every area of culture. We would say wisdom goes to the streets; wisdom goes to the schools; wisdom goes to the universities; wisdom goes to the marketplace; wisdom goes to the government; wisdom goes to families; wisdom goes to churches and cries out, "How long will you keep acting so foolish and live with the consequences?"

And then in verse 22 she describes three different categories of fools. The first one is the **naïve**. It's the same one mentioned in verse 4. They love being naïve; they love being simple-minded. It's a Hebrew word meaning to be simple-minded, to be gullible—one that doesn't really think about much of anything, one who is easily persuaded, one who basically will believe anything to be true. It is the fruit of this nonsense called *relativism*. Once I've convinced myself that there is no such thing as absolute truth, then anything can be true, and so I simply choose to believe what I want to be true. But the fact of the matter is that that doesn't make it true, and you end up ambushing your own life by that foolishness.

The second category is the **scoffers**. They actually delight themselves in scoffing. The scoffer is another term that is used throughout the book of Proverbs in these cycles. A scoffer is a mocker; it is one who is driven by anger and bitterness. A scoffer is one who scorches anybody in his or her path. Proverbs goes on in the cycle to describe a scoffer as one who, every time he opens his mouth, he burns everyone in the room. Flames come out of his mouth. The scoffer really doesn't care about the facts; the scoffer doesn't care about the truth. The scoffer doesn't care about the community or

the culture or the society or even his best friend. He will do what is necessary to advantage himself, including scorching those around him. It is driven by an anger and a bitterness that is rooted deep inside. They actually delight in the damage they do.

The third category is the **fool**. This is the word that's used in verse 7—the "Know-it-all". This is the one who doesn't need anyone to tell him or her what to do. "I don't need you to tell me; I don't want you to criticize me. I don't want you to judge me; I don't want you to correct me because I know it all." When it says the **fools hate knowledge,** again, let's define our term correctly. It's not information. What they don't like is this knowledge that is experience. In other words the Know-it-all says, "You don't need to tell me; I know it all," and yet the evidence of his or her life is that everything is breaking down. This is the experience. This is the reality. "Listen, Mr. Know-it-all, it's not working," but he says, "I hate that; I don't care about experience. I don't care about the evidence; I don't care about the facts. I don't need you to tell me what to do, I know it all. Verse 23 is wisdom's cry, "It's never too late to become skillful."

"**Turn to my reproof,**
Behold I will pour out my spirit on you;
I will make my words known to you."

It's as simple as this: God, in His grace and mercy, has made His wisdom available. He has a treasure chest full of what you and I need to know to live skillfully, and again and again and again wisdom cries in the street, "Just listen to me before it's too late".

Starting in verse 24 down to verse 32 it's basically the consequence if you choose not to. Wisdom is personified and wisdom is said to laugh at the calamity of the fools. Now it's not saying that God is laughing; it's saying that wisdom is laughing. The idea is that wisdom warns again and again and again but when the fool chooses not to listen, the fool sets a trap and then steps in his own trap—ambushes his own life—and wisdom mocks that. Wisdom is constantly there saying, "That is so foolish; it is so ridiculous. Why would you do that?" That's the basic idea of the discussion that follows. I think verse 29 well captures our current culture:

"Because they hated knowledge,
And did not choose the fear of the Lord."

I don't think there's any doubt as a culture, as a society, we have forgotten God. We have concluded we don't need God's voice. We know it all. I would suggest to you that we, as a nation, are well down the path of becoming a secular nation because of a gross misunderstanding of the constitution and a desire to get God out of every public arena. We want God out of the schools; we want God out of the universities; we want God out of government; we want God out of the neighborhood. We want God out of every social discussion. Christians are not asking for the government to have the state religion be Christianity. Christians are not asking to create a theocracy. We would just like God's voice in the discussion but we have concluded that there is no such a thing as neutrality. We have to be neutral in the schools; we have be to neutral in the universities; we have to be neutral in the marketplace; we have to be neutral in the social discussions. But I would suggest to you that neutrality is a myth. There is no such thing as neutrality. Once you have eliminated God and His voice the only thing left is to be my own god which is the religion of secularism. As long as we embrace secularism as our national religion, there is no chance for righteousness; there is no chance for justice; there is no chance for equity. It not only breaks down my life individually, it breaks down my family; it breaks down my neighborhood; it breaks down my community; it breaks down

our society; it breaks down our culture because every single person will advantage themselves by disadvantaging the community, and a culture can not survive that. The fruit of that is everywhere around us. Verse 33 ends by reminding us that there is a better way.

> "**But he who listens to me shall live securely,**
> **And will be at ease from the dread of evil."**

I just want to close with a couple of comments. I think all of us are aware that within our universe there are what we refer to as *natural laws*. We understand there is such a thing as gravity. I'm not going to the top of a building and jump off. There is such a thing as a need for oxygen to breathe, food to eat, water to drink, rest for my body. These are natural laws and whether or not you're a relativist or not you still, at the end of the day, acknowledge this is true. I have never known a relativist to go to the top of a building and jump because, at the end of the day, deep in his or her gut there's a reality there is a law here, and no matter what I believe, the law wins.

It is equally true that our universe has other laws. We would call them *moral laws*, *social laws*, *spiritual laws* and they are just as true and they are just as binding. When you choose to ignore them the consequences are equally disastrous as when you choose to ignore the law of gravity. We as a culture are suffering the effects of thinking we can beat the system—that, because I'm a relativist, I can go to the top of a building and convince myself I can fly and jump off. Guess what? Whether you're a relativist or not, true truth wins and you plummet to your death. Moral laws, social laws, spiritual laws—the simple-minded naïve fool may come along and say, "There's no such thing as truth; there are no moral laws." But just because that person chooses to believe whatever he or she wants to believe doesn't mean that what that person believes is true. Belief doesn't make it true. Just because the scoffer comes along and scoffs and makes fun of what's true and right doesn't mean it's not true and right. And just because the Know-it-all fool claims to know it all doesn't mean that fool knows it all. At the end of the day every one of us makes a choice as to whether or not we think God knows. After thousands of years of God offering His treasure chest of wisdom, there is overwhelming evidence that God knows the right way for individuals, cultures and societies. You can choose to believe that or you can choose to be a fool. But listen to me now: "You cannot beat the system."

> *Our Father, we're thankful that You love us so much You tell us the truth. Lord, we live in a culture that simply denies laws that you have put into this world—*moral *laws, laws that govern society, laws that define spirituality. We live in a culture where we think we know better and, God, we live with the effects of that foolishness everyday. Lord, my prayer would be for every one of us here this morning, that we would not live the fool but we would live our lives with the highest degree of skill which begins by acknowledging that You and You alone are right. Lord, may this be so in each of our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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