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Wisdom Calls

Skillful Living

Proverbs 8:1-36

Pastor Bryan Clark

I think whether you're a conservative or a liberal, whether you're a Democrat or a Republican, whether you're black or white, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're old or young, I think we can all come together and agree that we have some serious concerns about what's happening in our culture today, which then moves us to the question: Then what is the solution? Some people might think the solution is we need more laws, but it seems to me we already have laws that prohibit most of the bad behavior that's destroying our culture. Our theology tells us that the law has no ability to change the human heart. Laws can manage behavior, but it never really fixes the problem. It's kind of like having a hole in your boat. Laws are like scooping the water out. It kind of manages the problem, but it never really gets to the core issue.

I think some people think that the solution is coming this November. All we have to do is elect somebody different; then all the problems will be solved. But it's important to realize government never has been and never will be the solution. Government matters. Government is important. We need to respect that, but government doesn't have the power to change a human life. We're asking government to do something it can't do. It cannot fix the problems that plague us, so we're left with the question: What is the solution?

I would suggest to you that biblically the solution is we need wisdom. Wisdom rightly defined, simply defined, is skillful living. What we've lost as a culture is our ability to live life skillfully in such a way that everyone in the community flourishes, and that's what we want to talk about today and over the next six weeks from the book of Proverbs. So if you have a Bible, turn with us to the book of Proverbs. Over the last couple of years, we've kind of been chipping away at it and we've gone through chapter 7. We'll get six more chapters done this summer. Proverbs is impossible to organize and outline. It's not Samuel; it's not Ephesians. It feels much more random, so we're just kind of taking the big themes and trying to work our way through it.

In chapter 7 we had the voice of the adulteress. Sexual sin is personified. She's a woman in the streets, and through her lies and her seduction, she calls people into her way of life and then ultimately destroys them and brings forth death. So if you think of that lady's voice in chapter 7, it is contrasted in chapter 8 with Lady Wisdom. You have another voice in the streets that is also calling out for people to listen, but rather than leading to destruction and death, she offers life. Chapter 8 is very similar to chapter 1. It is Lady Wisdom calling, crying, pleading for people to listen, so chapter 8 really isn't offering the wisdom. It's Lady Wisdom pleading for people to listen to wisdom that is offered in other places in the proverbs and, of course, throughout the Scriptures. Verse 1:

> **Does not wisdom call,**
> **And understanding lift up her voice?** (*NASB, Proverbs 8:1)

Some of these terms that are repeated again and again and again in Proverbs get kind of confusing. **Wisdom** we're defining as *skillful living* - it's kind of the category heading. And then these other terms fit underneath wisdom as to exactly how that is accomplished. The word translated

understanding is a word that's repeated again and again and again in the book of Proverbs. The basic idea is it's someone that understands how things work and specifically how things work together. Wisdom, properly defined, is never just about me. It's never about, "How do I get *my* life together?" It's never about me and what I want. Wisdom always has this sense of *us*. It's, "How do *we* live skillfully so all of us flourish together?" So understanding carries this idea of, "How do things work together?"

So think of it in a very concrete illustration. Imagine a mechanic looking at a car engine that is in pieces on the garage floor. He has understanding because he knows how all the pieces go together, and he knows how the engine works. He knows how to make it flourish. So that's the idea of skillful living, of understanding the way God intended it to be so that all the pieces work together for everyone to flourish. Where does she cry? Verse 2:

> **On top of the heights beside the way,**
> **Where the paths meet, she takes her stand;**
> **Beside the gates, at the opening to the city,**
> **At the entrance of the doors, she cries out:** (Vs. 2-3)

Now this is very interesting because most culture-watchers would say somewhere in the '60s we fundamentally changed as a nation; we turned a different path, and we have been moving closer and closer to becoming a secular nation. In essence what we said is we don't want to hear Lady Wisdom, so we don't want her in the government...in the schools...in the neighborhoods...in the educational centers...in the city centers. As a matter of fact, we'd like Lady Wisdom to stay where she belongs. If she wants to talk in church, that's okay, but she shouldn't really talk outside of that boundary. Somehow we've understood the separation of church and state to mean Lady Wisdom should be quiet everywhere but in church.

But Lady Wisdom disagrees with this. The description is she goes out first of all to **the heights beside the way**. Basically it's talking about the cultural center. Typically in an ancient city there was a high point. That's usually where the temple or something that was considered to be the cultural center was built. So Lady Wisdom goes to the cultural center and cries out, pleads with people, "Please listen to me. I have what you're looking for." **Where the paths meet** is just the idea of the major roads which were few and far between. Where they would intersect became the place of commerce. If you had something to trade, something to sell or you wanted to buy something, you went to these intersections because that's where everybody set up shop. We would say in today's language the *marketplace*. She goes into the marketplace and pleads for people to listen. Verse 3: ...**beside the gates, at the opening to the city.** That would be government, and it would be the judicial system. Government and justice was carried out there, so she's going into the place of government; she's going into the place of justice and pleading for people to listen to what she has to say. Verse 4:

> **"To you, O men, I call,**
> **And my voice is to the sons of men."**

There are two Hebrew words for men. The first one is gender-specific—males. In an ancient city, men were the leaders of the city, so we would say in modern language the first appeal is to leaders: leaders in the city, the marketplace, in government. The second Hebrew word translated men is generic; it's humankind, so then the proclamation extends to everyone. Verse 5:

"O naive ones, understand prudence;" (Vs. 5a)

We've talked about this before; Proverbs uses several different Hebrew words to describe different types of fools. This one is translated **naive ones**, simple ones. It's not talking about someone that lacks intelligence. It's talking about someone that is untaught, that just simply doesn't know better, and because of that this person is gullible, much like a child who just hasn't been taught the ways of life. This would be the person that listens to everything on the internet...thinks it's true; that listens to everything on the radio...thinks it's true; listens to everything in the educational system...thinks it's true; watches the Science Channel and the Discovery Channel and the History Channel...thinks that's all true; listens to the nightly news...thinks it's all true. They're just gullible. Whatever a politician says, that's true. They're easily led astray; they just don't really know.

What Lady Wisdom says is, **"O naive ones, understand prudence."** That Hebrew word translated **prudence** is a word that means to know how things really are—to cut through all of the voices, all of the lies, all of the spins, all of the deception, to cut through all the clutter of the culture and remembering the Bible describes the enemy as a liar. The culture is filled with lies and so there has to be a way to cut through the clutter and understand this is the way things really are.

Now stop and think about it. If we're serious about actually restoring things back to the way they should be, there are two things that are necessary. First of all you have to understand how things work, how God intended them to be. This is what we're aiming at. And then you have to understand how things really are today. Those are necessary in beginning to figure out, "How do we get from where we are to where we want to be?" And that's what Lady Wisdom is offering. In the second half of verse 5, she says:

"And, O fools, understand wisdom."

This word translated **fools** is the second category in the proverbs for fools, and it means basically someone who is a know-it-all, someone who's always right. Everybody else is confused except for him. Everybody else is deceived except for her. She knows it all. He knows it all. It doesn't matter what the facts are. It doesn't matter what the evidence is. "I really don't want to hear what Lady Wisdom has to say. I already know it all," and the proverbs says if that's you, you're a fool. You don't know it all. You need to listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say. Verse 6:

"Listen, for I will speak noble things;" (Vs. 6a)

Noble means valid; it means reality. People can say whatever they want, but at the end of the day our lives bump into reality, and reality always wins. What Lady Wisdom is claiming is, "What I am offering is noble; it's right; it's valid; it's true. You can count on it."

"Listen, for I will speak noble things;
And the opening of my lips *will reveal* right things.
"For my mouth will utter truth;
And wickedness is an abomination to my lips.
"All the utterances of my mouth are in righteousness;
There is nothing crooked or perverted in them." (Vs. 6-8)

In verse 8 that word **righteousness** is a really important word in the proverbs. It's the Hebrew word *tzadik*. It's used sometimes to describe a person, a righteous person, sometimes more of a concept,

but it's basically this idea of what creates *shalom*, this idea of a mutual flourishing among us. Whether you're talking about a marriage, a family, at work, in a community or a nation, the idea of a *tzadik* always carries the idea that it's about us together, not me individually. A *tzadik* is someone who is willing to disadvantage himself or herself in order to advantage the greater community.

Consistently the Hebrew word used for the wicked in the proverbs is the opposite of that. It's someone who will, if necessary, disadvantage the community if it somehow advantages me. Now part of the residue of a postmodern culture is that we believe in the autonomous self. In other words I am an island unto myself and so it's all about *me*. It's about what makes *me* happy; it's about what gives *me* pleasure; it's about what *I* want. We've decided there aren't absolute truths. Truth is what I want it to be. There isn't absolute morality. Morality is what I want it to be, so I'm kind of my own little world unto myself. That belief system leads people to consistently disadvantage the community in order to advantage myself.

Now think of it on a micro level. If you have two people in a marriage who are determined to disadvantage the other in order to advantage themselves, there is no chance for that marriage to flourish. The very essence of what makes a marriage work is to say that I am willing to die to myself in order to serve my partner. I will disadvantage myself in order to advantage us together. So broaden that out to a family, to a community, to a nation. The only way a nation can thrive is when it's filled with citizens who say that what matters to me is that we together flourish, and at times I will disadvantage myself in order to advantage the greater community. This word is used consistently over and over again in the proverbs. Verse 9:

> **"They are all straightforward to him who understands,**
> **And right to those who find knowledge.**
> **"Take my instruction and not silver,**
> **And knowledge rather than choicest gold.**
> **"For wisdom is better than jewels;**
> **And all desirable things cannot compare with her."** (Vs. 9-11)

So Lady Wisdom says, "I'm more valuable than gold...than silver...than jewels. I'm more valuable than pleasure, than anything that you desire." Why is that? It's because without wisdom, without the capacity to live skillfully, none of the other stuff will satisfy. I know people that have lots of gold and silver and jewels, but they lack wisdom. Their lives are miserable. Their lives don't work. Their marriages don't work; their parenting doesn't work; their relationships don't work. Life doesn't work for them. No matter how much money or stuff you have, it doesn't make your marriage work; it doesn't make a rebellious child come home; it doesn't make the cancer go away; it doesn't cure the depression and anxiety in the middle of the night. At the end of the day, if you don't have wisdom, nothing else is going to work. I know people that have very little, but what they have is wisdom, and they are happy and they are satisfied and they live for the things that matter. They wouldn't trade what they have for anything. Verse 12:

> **"I, wisdom, dwell with prudence,**
> **And I find knowledge *and* discretion."**

So wisdom dwells with, lives with **prudence**. We already defined that term. It means to understand or to see things as they really are. The term **knowledge** is another one of those terms that repeats itself over and over and over again in the proverbs. Knowledge is not information. It's not facts. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew educational system had virtually no category for what we refer to as

head knowledge. Our Western educational system is taken from the Greek model, and the Greek model is very cognitive. If you can recite information back, if you can put it on a test, if you can regurgitate information, then you're considered to know it.

The Hebrew educational model is very different from that. Basically the idea was if you don't live it out, you don't know it. They had no category for head knowledge. If you don't live it, you don't know it. So the idea of knowledge captures that. It's the idea of, "Okay, if I have understanding, which means I know the way things work together, I know this is the way it was supposed to be for mutual flourishing, I understand the way things actually are, then I have the ability to take that and actually implement it to make something happen and to do it, the text says, with **discretion**."

This Hebrew word translated **discretion** means to be shrewd...to be wily...to be clever. Maybe in today's language we would say *street smart*. Now often those terms have a negative connotation, but in much of the proverbs they don't. It's the idea that you're skilled at this, that you understand the way things should be, the way things really are, what needs to happen to change that, but you have to be skillful, wily and clever to get the job done. You can't just go down on the street corner and yell at people. You can't just have strong, angry political opinions and think something's going to change. We have to be more sophisticated, more skillful, clever, and figure out a way to come together where everyone flourishes. Verse 13:

"The fear of the LORD is to hate evil;
Pride and arrogance and the evil way
And the perverted mouth, I hate."

The perverted mouth is literally a lying tongue. **Hate** is a term of contrast. Because Lady Wisdom is all about what's true, Lady Wisdom is totally opposed to a lying tongue. Now again, part of the residue of a postmodern culture is we have diminished truth. We've sought to convince ourselves there is no absolute truth. Therefore, truth is relative, and truth loses its value. Truth can be whatever you need it to be. So part of the fruit of that is then we have minimized lying. Lying doesn't bother us as a culture anymore. Because we have no value for truth, then lying doesn't really offend us.

I am continually shocked by how many Christians seem to be unaffected by the level of lies told by people in our culture. Somehow we have to get back to the fact that the One that we have within us—the very Spirit of God—*is* truth. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the *Truth*, and the Life." If the very One with whom we have a passionate love relationship with is Truth Himself, then we should be deeply offended by a lying tongue. Whether it's our children, somebody we work with, a spouse, or a leader, we should be deeply offended by those who lie to us. Can any marriage survive if a husband and wife lie to one another? Can any real parent/child relationship flourish if they lie to one another? Can any business really flourish if the leaders lie to one another? So, as a nation there's no way we will ever restore our communities back to communities where everyone flourishes together until our leaders stop lying to us. This has to matter to us as Christians, and that's what Lady Wisdom says. "I completely oppose a lying tongue." Verse 14:

"Counsel is mine and sound wisdom;
I am understanding, power is mine.
"By me kings reign,
And rulers decree justice." (Vs. 14-15)

So Lady Wisdom is going to the gate, and she's talking to the leaders, the kings. How do kings create a kingdom where everyone mutually flourishes? The answer is they listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say. The word translated **justice** is our word *tzadik* again. How do we together flourish? The word **decree**—the English translation can be a little bit misleading—does not mean to talk about justice. It means to actually implement justice and get it done. It's a very strong term. We have a consistent pattern in our nation of leaders on both sides of the aisle getting behind a microphone and saying the right things, but that's not what the word **decree** means. The word **decree** means stop talking about it and get it done. Leaders don't talk, don't point fingers. Leaders get the job done, and what the text is saying is if the kings would listen to Lady Wisdom they would understand how to actually get the job done. Verse 16:

"By me princes rule, and nobles,
All who judge rightly."

Rightly again is our word *tzadik*, so it includes all of us. How do we all come together and make this happen? By listening to Lady Wisdom! Verse 17:

"I love those who love me;
And those who diligently seek me will find me."

It's a very interesting verse, but Lady Wisdom is saying, "I'm not asking you to pick up a book and read it and pull up a few proverbs. I'm asking you to have a love affair with me." Lady Wisdom is a lady, and she is saying, "Come and love me, and I will love you." We're reminded at the end of the day, wisdom isn't just information in a book. It is personified in the person of Jesus. As we've been reminded this morning, it is this love affair with Jesus, the very wisdom of God Himself living within us in a real and powerful way, made possible by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Wisdom starts with a love affair with the One who is wisdom personified.

"Riches and honor are with me,
Enduring wealth and righteousness.
"My fruit is better than gold, even pure gold,
And my yield *better* than choicest silver.
"I walk in the way of righteousness,
In the midst of the paths of justice,
To endow those who love me with wealth,
That I may fill their treasuries." (Vs. 18-21)

Basically Lady Wisdom is saying, "If you love me and pursue me and listen to me, I will help you create communities where everyone flourishes." If you love money, if you love stuff, if you love yourself, there is no way to ever get there—we will simply cannibalize ourselves. But if rather you love Lady Wisdom, she'll give you what you need for your communities to flourish. You'll have justice; you'll have wealth; you'll have what you long for as a community. It's the fruit; it's the result of pursuing Lady Wisdom.

Starting in verse 22 through verse 31—I'm not going to read that for the sake of time—it's a fairly familiar part of Proverbs, but what Lady Wisdom is saying is, "I have been there from the beginning. I was there when everything was created. I was there when everything was put in place." In verse 30 she refers to herself as the **master craftsman**. "I am the master craftsman that was there that put the universe in place." Now stop and think about what is being said here. Lady Wisdom is

saying, "I've been there from the beginning. That's why I know how things should work together. I was the master craftsman behind Eden and Paradise, and because of that I understand how things really are, and I understand the way back."

Now think about the universe. The universe is not random...not chaotic...not unsophisticated. Just the opposite! It is remarkably organized, designed and put together. Most of what we take for granted on a daily basis is possible because of the predictability of the way the universe has been made. There's no way it randomly happened. It was put together by intelligence and design. That's obvious. Because of that there are laws established in this context by Lady Wisdom. So take, for example, the law of gravity. The law of gravity is the way the master craftsman designed it to be. Lady Wisdom is saying, "I was there from the beginning. I made that."

So think of what this chapter is saying. Imagine there are a group of kindergarteners, and there are adults that are teaching them, "There is no such thing as physical laws. We live in a postmodern culture with no absolute laws. It's whatever you want it to be. So, kids, you need to understand there's really no such thing as gravity. That's just something somebody has perpetuated in order to push some agenda. It's really not true. You're free to believe what you want to believe, so you can go to the top of the building and jump off, and believe you can fly. The people that put forth the law of gravity are trying to limit your fun and your pleasure, but if you can rise above that and believe that you can fly, then jump off the building and you will fly." Imagine your kindergartener believes that and finds his or her way up to the top of the building, and imagine that there are adults who are cheerleading saying, "Jump! Jump! There's no such law of gravity. Jump!" But there is also Lady Wisdom saying, crying, pleading, "Don't jump! I was there from the beginning. I'm the master craftsman who put the law of gravity in place. I know how it works. I know how things really are. I know what's true. If you don't listen to me, you will fall to your death." That's basically what chapter 8 is about. It's Lady Wisdom saying, "I've been there from the beginning. I know how it works. I know what's true, and I'm pleading with you to listen to me or you will suffer the consequences."

Now we understand there are physical laws, but we need to equally understand that there are also moral laws, social laws and spiritual laws. There are laws that Lady Wisdom has put into the master plan to create a culture where people made in the image of God can flourish together. But if you violate the moral laws, if you violate the social laws, if you violate the spiritual laws, it will be to your own peril and the people around you. Eventually it will all fall apart. So that's the essence of what she's saying. "I've been there from the beginning. I put it all together. I know how it works. I'm asking you to listen to me." Verse 32:

> **"Now therefore, *O* sons, listen to me,**
> **For blessed** (that's the Hebrew word happy) **are they who keep my ways.**
> **"Heed instruction and be wise,**
> **And do not neglect *it*.**
> **"Blessed** (or happy) **is the man who listens to me,**
> **Watching daily at my gates,**
> **Waiting at my doorposts."** (Vs. 32-34)

This is again an imagery of a lover. Saying this isn't someone who's sitting down listening to Mom or Dad give another lecture, rolling their eyes like, "I've heard this a hundred times before." This is like a passionate lover that each day goes to her door and knocks at her door and can't wait for Lady Wisdom to come out in order to listen and to learn and to understand what she has to say.

"For he who finds me finds life
And obtains favor from the LORD.
"But he who sins against me injures himself;
All those who hate me love death." (Vs. 35-36)

This isn't just talking about dying, death in the sense it's the loss of life. It's the loss of that which makes life worth living. I would suggest to you that most of our culture is stuck in verse 36. We are experiencing the consequences of our unwillingness to listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say, and it's all coming unraveled. I don't expect the unbelieving world to listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say. That means if anything's going to change, it must start with us and our willingness to listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say. How can we be shrewd? How can we be clever? How can we be street smart?

What if we had marriages that were thriving...families that were thriving...relationships that were thriving...businesses that were thriving? What if it spilled out, and we had a community that's thriving, and people started to wonder: What's making them thrive?

Answer: We're listening to Lady Wisdom, and Lady Wisdom is helping us understand how we can mutually thrive together. It will never start out there. It has to start in here, and it has to start with you. Will you listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say?

Our Father, we celebrate that You have not left us to grope in the darkness, somehow try to figure out how to make our way in a confusing world, that You've actually personified wisdom in Jesus, the eternal Son of God, and placed His Spirit within us to give us what we need to live skillfully everyday if we will just listen. God, give us soft, receptive hearts to listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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