

## “Listen, My Children”

Proverbs 1.1-16

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“Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction; don’t neglect your mother’s teaching.” (Proverbs 1.8) So begin the Proverbs of Solomon. We’re told that Solomon spoke *three thousand* proverbs, and there’s a whole book of the Bible devoted to them. There’s some debate as to whether these were written by Solomon or written in honor of Solomon; either way, they reflect that portion of his reign when he truly *was* wise, before his heart went astray, before he did all those things we heard about last week that were definitely not wise. These proverbs are from the “glory days” of his reign.

There’s a simple message here, in the opening chapters of Proverbs, that’s repeated over and over again. “My son, accept my words and store up my commands. Turn your ear toward wisdom, and stretch your mind toward understanding.” (Proverbs 2:1-2) “My son, don’t forget my instruction. Let your heart guard my commands, because they will help you live a long time and provide you with well-being.” (Proverbs 3:1-2) “Hear, children, fatherly instruction; pay attention to gain understanding.” (Proverbs 4:1) “Listen, my son, and take in my speech, then the years of your life will be many.” (Proverbs 4:10) “My son, keep your father’s command; don’t abandon your mother’s instruction.” (Proverbs 6:20) Over and over again, the same message is repeated, in different words: *listen to the wisdom that your parents are trying to teach you*. All the repetition might make us wonder: *why?* Why does it matter if we listen to their teachings? Why does it matter if we gain wisdom? What’s so special about wisdom, anyway? What’s the *worst* that could happen to us if we decide not to follow?

The first thing that needs to be said is that not everything a mom or a dad might say to a child is wise. Right? There are some parents who are not very wise, parents who don’t have strong morals themselves, parents who don’t care if their children go astray. Just because somebody is a parent doesn’t make them *right* all the time. Even parents with the best of intentions sometimes screw up. Right? I mean, if you don’t believe me, go ask those young men sitting in the back pew! *Parents aren’t perfect*. Which is why, if a child questions something a parent says to them, the parent’s response should not simply be, “because I told you so.” The book of Proverbs repeatedly invites a child to listen to the instruction of their father and the teachings of their mother, but the reason *not* because, “I’m your parent.” The reason is because the parents have *learned* some things that the child might yet not know. They’ve acquired some *wisdom*. The book of Proverbs lays out two paths: the path of wisdom, and the path of folly. One of the most important jobs of a parent is to teach their child the path of wisdom. “Listen, my child, not because I’m your parent, but because I want to teach you wisdom.”

Why is learning wisdom such a good thing? The answer is right in the opening verses of this book. The purpose of the proverbs is “to teach wisdom and discipline, to help one understand wise sayings. They provide insightful instruction, which is righteous, just, and full of integrity.” (Proverbs 1:2-3) There are some qualities, some attitudes, that one can develop in life, that come from learning wisdom. Righteousness. Fairness. Integrity. These are *good* qualities, qualities that we need to *pursue* in life, to better ourselves *and* to better the world around us. There are all sorts of things that we should try to *avoid* in life, but life isn’t just about a long list of “thou shalt not’s”; life is about *growing, maturing, learning to act responsibly, in all areas of life, living with integrity, being fair and honest in all your dealings; acting uprightly.* Or, to put it another way, *becoming more and more like Jesus.* He was the only sinless person who lived on this earth, and we can grow to become more and more like him. One of the ways we do that is by acquiring wisdom, and then seeking to *apply* it in our daily lives.

Not everyone wants to do that. Some people, intentionally or not, choose the way of folly. There are some people who are cruel. Mean. They bully people at school. They steal things, they lie, they cheat on tests, they take advantage of other people. Sometimes they even *kill* other people. A lot of the bad things we hear about in the news are stories of people who have chosen the way of folly, rather than the way of wisdom. They’ve hurt other people, and they’ve hurt themselves, and now the whole world knows about it. The question, really, is whether they will learn better ways. In our country, right now, there are more than 2.3 million people in prison or in jail. That’s about 1 out of every 110 people. *That’s a lot of people behind bars!* A lot of people who have chosen the way of folly instead of the way of wisdom. And those are just the ones who have been caught, for really bad crimes. There are all sorts of others who have been caught for lesser crimes and had to pay a fine, or who simply haven’t been caught, or who have done things that aren’t technically *illegal* ... but still weren’t very *wise*. Some things will land you in jail – I know a guy who went out driving with some friends after a party, and they were all drunk, and the car crashed, and one of his friends *died*, and he not only had to live with his guilt, but he went to jail. Other things might not land you in jail, but they can still cause you harm. About 40% of all the cancer cases you hear about could probably have been avoided. My grandfather smoked, and he died of lung cancer. Liver cancer is sometimes a direct result of drinking too much alcohol. Even simple things like too much *soda pop* can cause your body tremendous harm and increase your risk of developing cancer. What you put in your body, what you *do* with your body, *makes a difference* to your overall quality of life – the way you will live, and the way you might die.

Our choices matter. This is the message that Proverbs keeps hammering, over and over again. And poor choices can have disastrous results. “Hold on to instruction; don’t slack off; protect it, for it is your life.” (Proverbs 4:13) “Focus your eyes straight ahead; keep your gaze on what is in front of you. Watch your feet on the way, and all your paths will be secure.” (Proverbs 4:25-26) “Listen to instruction, and be wise.” (Proverbs 8:33) “Happy are those who listen to me,” says the voice of wisdom; “those who find me find life.” (Proverbs 8:34, 35) Our choices *matter*. What this book is trying to tell us is that if you want a good life, you’ll strive to make the *wise* choice, every time.

I didn’t always do that. There were times I hurt myself because of the choices I made. There were things I did long ago that to this day I still regret. Choices I made as a child, choices I made as a young adult, even some choices I made as an adult. I didn’t always follow the voice of wisdom.

I stole a toy from a store once when I was a kid. My mom discovered it when we were in the car. She made me go back into the store and give it to the clerk and tell her what I had done. There was another time I stole matchbox car from a friend's house. I figured, he's got a lot. He's not going to notice that this *one* car is missing. It looked *really* cool. I slipped it in my pocket and took it home – and then I felt so guilty I never played with it. I think it also cost me a friendship.

There was a time when I and a bunch of other students in my class cheated on a test. We were doing a unit on the Presidents of the United States. There was a big poster in the front of the room, with portraits of all the presidents, and their names, in order. We had to memorize all the names, in order. On the day of the test, the poster was still hanging there. The names were small enough you couldn't really see them from your desk ... but right under the poster was the *pencil sharpener*. I don't know that I've *ever* seen so many pencils break in such a short amount of time! Including mine. That story's kind of funny, 'cause there were a lot of us who took advantage of that situation, but I can recall at least two other times when I cheated on a test – because I hadn't studied well enough – *and* I can recall two times when I attempted to “doctor” my report card before I took it home to show my parents. I remember *all* these things. And I'm not proud of them. Your choices, your regrets, *stay with you*. One of my biggest regrets from when I was in elementary school was when I really hurt a kid in my grade, because his skin color was different than mine and my friends, and I was more interested in trying to impress my friends than doing what was right. I knew the *instant* I did it that it was wrong, and I've lived with that regret ever since. There were other choices I made later on – middle school, high school, college, adulthood – that weren't wise, times when I chose the path of folly. Most of them were relatively harmless, in the eyes of the world. But every single one of them hurt *me*. Every single one of them disappointed *God*. Every single one of them led to regret, and wishing I could undo what I had done, and knowing that I couldn't. Once you cross that line, once you make that mistake, once you do that deed, *you can't go back*. None of us has a time-turner, like Hermione Granger. We can never completely undo what we have done. We have to live with the consequences.

One of the greatest ironies in the Bible is that if *Solomon himself* had lived by the proverbs that bear his name, he wouldn't have fallen. There are explicit teachings here about *temptation*, about *desire*, about *snares* that a lot of men and women fall into, that he didn't follow. And it cost him, dearly.

The point of the book of Proverbs is to say, “Look. There are some mistakes you can make that will cost you. There are things you just shouldn't do, shouldn't try, shouldn't experiment with. You will be confronted with *lots* of choices in life. I want to teach you how to make *wise* choices, all the time.” And why? So you can please your parents? Not really. To please God? To some extent. But really, more than anything else, *to give you a better life*. *You're the one who has to live your life*. You're the one who has to live with the consequences of your actions. Some of us have been there. We've made mistakes we wish we hadn't. We can't undo them. There's no going back. There's just ... going forward.

So my invitation to you, my friends, young and old ... is to pursue wisdom. Not *worldly* wisdom – cause that's messed up, and we're going to talk about that some more down the line – but *godly* wisdom. The wisdom that comes from *above*. The wisdom that cares ... about *you*. About *your* life.

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