

THE WISEST ATTITUDE OF ALL

PROVERBS 1:7

I understand that in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition people will lift up their ornate, gold-clad Bibles during the worship service as the priest chants a single word: “Wisdom! Wisdom! Wisdom!” That’s about the best one word description of the Bible you’ll ever get. Wisdom! Today I begin a new message series I’m calling “How to Live Wisely and Well.” We’re going to look at eight of the dominant themes found in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Because of vacations, an all church emphasis in September and other events, this series is going to kind of weave its way through two Sundays each in the months of July, August, October and November.

If you like down to earth, practical truth that you can use every day of your life in many different situations and circumstances, you’re going to enjoy this series. There are two important truths about the book of Proverbs that you need to keep in mind. First, the book assumes that life experience is one way that God reveals His truth into your life. You know that God has revealed Himself in the Bible. He’s also revealed Himself in creation and nature. He’s revealed Himself in the words and life of Jesus supremely. But God also reveals His truth through the everyday experiences of life and living.

Second, the book of Proverbs tells you how to live after you’ve become a follower of Jesus. It doesn’t tell you how to become a Christian. Obviously, it was written hundreds of years before Jesus lived so it doesn’t mention Him per se. Instead, it describes how you ought to live on the basis of who God is and what God has done for you in general. Someone could read Proverbs and easily get the mistaken idea that you can become a Christian just by acting wisely, by being moral in your behavior, by acting as a good neighbor or being honest in your business. But, of course, you know that a person can only become a follower of Jesus by grace alone. That happens when you put your faith and trust in what Jesus did for you at the cross and the empty tomb. Once you’ve entered into that eternal relationship, the Bible as a whole wants your everyday behavior to reflect that personal decision. That’s what Proverbs is all about – how to live wisely and well in this world as someone who is already a follower of Jesus.

Now, today, I want to explore with you an attitude of heart and mind that’s absolutely essential to living life wisely and well. If you want to be truly successful in all areas of your life, you will need to adopt and maintain a certain kind of attitude your whole life long. Let’s define that attitude just now.

THE ATTITUDE DEFINED (Proverbs 1:7)

This is really the foundation to understanding not only the book of Proverbs but the entire Bible as well. So there it is – “the fear of the Lord.” But what does that really mean? It doesn’t mean living in terror of God. The fear of the Lord means a loving and obedient respect for God that permeates all your thinking about life,

all your actions in life and all your feelings about life. Fearing the Lord is about offering God loving and obedient respect. It involves the kind of love a child naturally offers his mom or dad. But it also includes obedient respect because you love God and you know that He holds you accountable for the way you live your life. Fearing the Lord means acknowledging deep down in your bones that this is God's world and He's set up life to run by certain guidelines. When you live by those guidelines, your life goes pretty well. When you refuse to live by those guidelines, your life goes downhill in a hurry. This attitude is essential if you want to live wisely and well every day. A wise person just fears the Lord. He or she offers God loving and obedient respect every day and that's revealed primarily in your lifestyle.

I like one definition of fearing the Lord very much. It's "awe that leads to action." Because you love and respect God, every moment of time is the Lord's time. Because you love and respect God, every person you relate to is treated with integrity and kindness. Because you love and respect God, every duty is the Lord's command. Because you love and respect God, every blessing in life is His gift. We're talking about an attitude towards life and living that gives you a whole new perspective on life. It's God's perspective, not just your own.

Fearing the Lord is here described as "the beginning of knowledge." Now that means two things. If you want to live life wisely and well, you must begin with the right attitude: fearing the Lord. But that word "beginning" also refers to the main part or portion of something. In other words, the biggest part, the main portion, or the most significant aspect of being wise is to offer the Lord loving and obedient respect day in and day out. Solomon, Israel's third king, is credited with authoring most of the book of Proverbs, but he also wrote another book in the Old Testament called Ecclesiastes. Now, Solomon was a guy who had it all in life and did it all. His conclusion? "Everything you were taught can be put into a few words: Respect and obey God! This is what life is all about." (Ecclesiastes 12:13 CEV)

Throughout the book of Proverbs, the opposite of the wise person is called "the fool." What's a fool? Is it a person with a low IQ... or someone deprived of a good education... or someone who lacks positive role models in life? Not at all! The fool is any person – no matter how educated, intelligent or sophisticated – for whom fearing the Lord is just the last thing to ever enter his or her mind. There are a few philosophical atheists out there – people who will argue against the existence of any god. But there are many practical atheists – people who say they believe in God but who live as if He doesn't exist. Practical atheists can even be regularly attending members of a local church! While they believe God exists, they neither love God nor have any desire to obey Him. If you don't love or obey God, you don't fear Him in the biblical sense of that word. That's why I can say on the basis of God's Word that even though you might have several educational degrees, be intellectually brilliant or be highly successful in business, if you don't fear the Lord you are a fool. The Bible says, "The fool says in his

heart, 'There is no God....'" (Psalm 53:1 ESV) On the other hand, you can be very average intellectually and possess very few skills that make you unique. But if you fear the Lord, you are wise.

Here's something else that's important to remember about being a fool based on the second half of that verse. Most fools won't tell you that they despise God. That's just sounds bad! What they despise are His rules and guidelines for life and living. "But fools despise wisdom and discipline" – says the last half of Proverbs 1:7. Maybe the clearest example of this fact in our culture is our attitudes towards sexuality. Because of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, we hear a lot about "safe sex." But most people aren't interested in God's definition of "safe sex." He's very clear about it. The only safe sex is an exclusive relationship between a man and a woman in marriage. Doesn't it seem like every week here lately, another governor or senator or high profile person admits to adultery? One would think that when people see the embarrassment, the devastation to your family and the destruction to your life that adultery brings, it would become a rare event. Instead, adultery seems to be growing. Similarly, you can find any number of intellectually bright people who say, "Quick! Hand out condoms! Teenagers can't control themselves. Teaching them the value of abstinence will never work." Some years ago now a school district in Colorado began handing out free condoms to high school students. They were surprised – shocked! – when teenage pregnancies actually increased. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but..." – what do fools do? – "fools despise wisdom and discipline." When you despise God's rules, you despise God Himself.

People who love God can fall into this trap. King David was called a man after God's own heart. But that didn't prevent him from committing adultery with a woman named Bathsheba and arranging for her husband to be conveniently killed in battle. When the prophet Nathan confronted David about his sin, here's what God said to David, "... 'you have despised me by taking Uriah's wife to be your own.'" (2 Samuel 12:10 NLT) You despised ME! Who's "me"? God! When you reject God's rules for life and living, you reject God. You can say that you believe in God and love God. You can come to church and sing hymns and choruses. But if you find it inconvenient to conform your attitudes, your behavior and your lifestyle to His ways, the Bible has one word for you or me: "Fool."

H.G. Wells, the famous author, wrote a story about an Episcopalian bishop. It could have been about any pastor from any denomination. This bishop liked to say pious things to other people. When troubled people came to him for advice, he loved to say in just the right tone of voice, "Have you prayed about it?" He thought this a particularly searching and effective technique. The bishop himself prayed little; his life was a wonderfully neat package. But one day life tumbled in on him and he felt overwhelmed. It occurred to the self-important bishop that perhaps he should heed his own advice. Yes, he would pray about it! So, one Saturday afternoon he entered his church's sanctuary, went to the front, knelt on the crimson rug and folded his hands in prayer. He said, "O God - " and was

suddenly interrupted by a Voice. It was crisp and businesslike. “Well, what is it?” The next day when people came to church, they found the bishop sprawled face down on the crimson rug. When they turned him over, they discovered he was dead. Lines of horror were etched on his face. What was the point of Wells’ story? There are people who talk a lot about God who would be scared to death quite literally if they actually encountered Him. Fearing the Lord. Let’s move on just now to understand how this attitude works in everyday life.

THE ATTITUDE UNDERSTOOD (Proverbs 2:6, 19:20-21, 21:30, 14:2, 14:12, 15:33, 16:6, 28:14)

When you fear the Lord, you acknowledge certain realities. “For the LORD grants wisdom! From his mouth come knowledge and understanding.” (Proverbs 2:6 NLT) God is the author and source of any all true wisdom in life. Elsewhere in the Bible we find these words, “If any of you need wisdom, you should ask God, and it will be given to you. God is generous and won’t correct you for asking.” (James 1:5 CEV) Some people think everything in life is black or white. Others think nothing is black or white – just different shades of gray. Both are wrong. When you approach God with loving and obedient respect, you get His perspective on life’s decisions and choices. Not everything in life is black or white. On many occasions you do have to seek God’s guidance, direction and wisdom. Just remember that any and all true wisdom is found in God alone. When you fear the Lord, you recognize that He’s the source of all true wisdom.

Look at these verses. “Pay attention to advice and accept correction, so you can live sensibly. We may make a lot of plans, but the LORD will do what he has decided.... No matter how much you know or what plans you make, you can’t defeat the LORD.” (Proverbs 19:20-21, 21:30 CEV) To fear the Lord means you recognize that God ultimately controls everything in all of life. That includes your life and mine. This is God’s universe and He runs it His way. If you don’t agree with God, so what? There’s nothing that can thwart Him or get the better of Him in the end. So, if you insist on living by your own rules, you will continually find yourself at odds with this all knowing, all powerful God who controls everything. Fools have a constant spiritual headache! They keep running into this brick wall like reality of God and how He’s made His universe to operate.

I read about a baseball umpire named Babe Pirelli who called games during the time Babe Ruth played baseball. Once when Babe Pirelli called Babe Ruth out on strikes, Ruth argued with him, “There’s 40,000 people here who know that last one was a ball, you tomato head.” Pirelli answered, “Maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts.” Babe Ruth made the mistake of thinking that the more people who believe something, the more true it becomes. It doesn’t matter if everyone on the planet disagrees with God, only His opinion matters. When you fear the Lord, you know that and you live that out.

When you fear the Lord, it shows up in your behavior. For instance, you live with increasing integrity. “By living right, you show that you respect the LORD; by being deceitful, you show that you despise him.... You may think you are on the right road and still end up dead.” (Proverbs 14:2, 12 CEV) When you fear the Lord, you don’t come to church to get that holy feeling and then live any way you please the rest of the week. No, living right means seeking integrity in all your actions and words. You’ve heard the expression, “What you see is what you get.” That should be true of every Christian in a good sense! The fool is deceitful – always trying to be something he’s not or trying to convince others that she’s something other than what she is. Integrity isn’t perfection. We all sin, fall short and blow it on occasion. Sometimes it’s in how you handle your own sin that you get a chance to show integrity. Do you confess it or excuse it? Do you ask for forgiveness or defend yourself? Do you get up and start living for the Lord again or wallow in spiritual defeat? “If we truly love God, our sins will be forgiven; if we show him respect, we will keep away from sin.” (Proverbs 16:6 CEV) If your heart is set on obeying God, it’s reasonable to expect that you will sin less as you grow in your love for God. Doesn’t that make sense?

When you fear the Lord, you live with increasing humility. “Showing respect to the LORD will make you wise, and being humble will bring honor to you.” (Proverbs 15:33 CEV) You are never wiser than when you realize you are never the source of wisdom. That takes humility. For just that reason, truly wise people seek the counsel and advice of godly people because they recognize the Lord can speak through them. Also, when you fear the Lord, you live with increasing tenderness. “Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.” (Proverbs 28:14 NIV) Having a tender, soft heart towards God at all times is another way to fear Him. A hard hearted person stubbornly refuses either to let God into his life or to give Him His rightful place in her life. When you truly love and respect the Lord, the Holy Spirit is able to find in you a tenderness, a readiness and an eager desire to please the Lord in everything. Fearing the Lord. You would do well to define that attitude, understand that attitude and, finally, to value that attitude.

THE ATTITUDE VALUED (Proverbs 15:16, 19:23, 29:25, 14:26, 14:27, 22:4)

“Better to have little, with fear for the LORD, than to have great treasure and inner turmoil.” (Proverbs 15:16 NLT) The Bible doesn’t condemn financial wealth in and of itself. But if you ever have to make a choice between being rich and fearing the Lord, it’s better ultimately to fear the Lord every time. Fearing the Lord is that valuable. Nothing else has as much value. Nothing is more important than following Jesus and living the kind of life that pleases Him: not money, not health, not success, not prestige – nothing. Maybe that’s one reason why God allows some very difficult things to come into our lives from time to time. Why? To underline for us that there’s nothing more important than to fear Him.

Why is this attitude of fearing the Lord so valuable? When you fear Him, you have contentment. “The fear of the LORD leads to life: Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.” (Proverbs 19:23 NIV) When you fear the Lord, you realize that all of your basic needs are met and that God will not let you miss out on anything that would contribute to your well being. That word “rest” in that verse means to “pass the night.” People who fear the Lord sleep well because they know that their deepest needs have been met already and will continue to be met. God has provided, is providing and will provide.

Why is this attitude of fearing the Lord so valuable? When you fear the Lord, you fear nothing else. You have a true sense of safety. “Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the LORD means safety.... Those who fear the LORD are secure; he will be a refuge for their children.” (Proverbs 29:25, 14:26 NLT) Sure, you’re going to have problems and troubles in life even when you’re following Jesus closely. That verse suggests that there will be times we need a fortress. Oswald Chambers expressed it well, “The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else.” My friend, if you trust in yourself, if you trust in others, if you trust in your financial portfolio, if you trust in your government, if you trust in your military, you are going to be disillusioned to say the least. When you fear the Lord, you put your ultimate trust in the Lord and in the Lord alone.

Why is this attitude of fearing the Lord so valuable? When you fear the Lord, you end up living the fullest life possible. “Fear of the LORD is a life-giving fountain; it offers escape from the snares of death.... True humility and fear of the LORD lead to riches, honor, and long life.” (Proverbs 14:27, 22:4 NLT) The best possible life is the life dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ. The most rewarding life of all is the one lived everyday for God’s praise and glory. Fearing the Lord is what gives life to life. The only life worth living is the one that fears the Lord.

For years, the opening of ABC's *The Wide World of Sports* illustrated "the agony of defeat" through the painful ending of an attempted ski jump. The skier appeared in good form as he headed down the slope, but then, for no apparent reason, he tumbled head-over-heels off the side of the jump and bounced off the supporting structure. Let's watch it just now and pay careful attention to the first skier. What viewers didn't know was that he chose to fall. Why? As he explained later, the jump surface had become too fast, and midway down the ramp he realized that if he completed the jump, he would land on the level ground, beyond the safe landing zone, which could have been fatal. As it was, the skier suffered no more than a headache from the tumble. The fear of the slope, the fear of flying too high, and the fear of the fall led him to change course. Fear led to life. “Fear of the LORD is a life-giving fountain; it offers escape from the snares of death.” My friend, if you want to live wisely and well, I have a word from God Himself to you. Fear the Lord.