

# 1. The Character of True Wisdom

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well friends, I don't know whether you've been reading or studying the book of Proverbs recently, but our plan, God willing, is to have six Sunday evenings now in the book of Proverbs, which will take us up to about the end of November.

Now the value of the book of Proverbs today is that it gives the Christian instruction in how to live wisely. You might think from the title of the book, Proverbs, that it could be a bit of a lightweight amongst the books of the Bible.

And I say that because typically the proverbs that we use in our own everyday conversation and speech with each other often have a bit of a humorous twist to them. For example, too many cooks spoil the broth.

Now that conjures up a kind of cartoon picture in our minds of an overpopulated kitchen with everybody wearing a chef's hat. And it's faintly amusing, though it makes a good point.

And the book of Proverbs has plenty of amusing touches in it. For example, how about this one from chapter 26? Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like a man who grabs a passing dog by the ears.

[ 1 : 14 ] Isn't that a great proverb? Well how about this one, also from chapter 26? As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed.

So brother, could be sister, but I suspect brother, if you were still hinged to your bed at 11 o'clock this morning, unless you were poorly, then you are a sluggard.

Now these humorous touches might make us think that the book of Proverbs is a little bit of comic relief in amongst the heavyweights of the Old Testament.

But it is no such thing. It is a heavyweight. The humor there and the sharp edges of various Proverbs serve a very serious purpose, and that is to teach us how to live life in a wise and godly fashion.

And we need to know that. Years ago, in the days when Billy Graham, the American evangelist, used to visit Britain regularly, I used to go and hear him whenever I could at one of those big football stadium meetings.

[ 2 : 19 ] And I once heard Billy Graham say, this would be 25 years ago probably, I was very struck by it. Here was this well-known, fine preacher. He said, it has been my constant practice for many years to read a chapter of the book of Proverbs every day of my life.

I thought to myself, really? Why? And he went on to explain that on the first day of each calendar month, he would read chapter 1. On the second day, he would read chapter 2. And as you probably know, Proverbs has 31 chapters.

So you get through the whole book in a 31-day month. So that meant that Billy Graham was reading the whole of the book of Proverbs 12 times every year. I thought to myself, why does a man so advanced in the Christian life need to do that?

And I think I understand better now why he would have done that. I think the answer that he would have given is that he needed ongoing training in living the godly life, right the way through life, as we all do.

It's not as though any of us get to the age of, let's say, 25, and then says, I'm grown up now, so I can graduate from the Glasgow Godliness Training School.

[ 3 : 29 ] No. If we live to be 95, we will still need the instruction of the book of Proverbs, because every day throughout our lives, we shall be tempted to make unwise and ungodly choices.

Well, now my title for tonight is The Character of True Wisdom. Proverbs is all about wisdom. So here's my title, The Character of True Wisdom. I want us to look first at the introductory seven verses of the book.

We will look at the second part of the chapter as well, but we'll start with verses one to seven. Now, these first seven verses here are quite unusual because they lay out for us so clearly the purpose of this Bible book.

Now, we don't have that clear laying out of purpose in most Bible books. Most Bible books plunge you straight into the main course without giving you any kind of appetizer. And you have to work out what the book is all about as you work your way through it.

But here, King Solomon, the author, tells us immediately what the purpose of his book is. And it is, let me read again from verse two. Here's the purpose of the book.

[ 4 : 38 ] To know wisdom and instruction. To understand words of insight. To receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice and equity. To give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth.

So we have wisdom, instruction, insight, prudence, knowledge, discretion. Now, friends, there's a very hefty challenge, even in those first four verses, before we look any further.

Because Solomon is implying here that any person who reads on beyond verse four is acknowledging that he or she is not wise. If I look at verses two, three and four, and I realize that I want to read on, I'm confessing, in effect, that I'm an ignoramus.

It's as though I'm saying, thank you, dear brother King Solomon, your book is exactly tailored to my needs. I'm an ignoramus, which is why I need wisdom. I'm unlearned, which is why I need instruction.

I'm blind, which is why I need insight. I'm simple, so I need knowledge. And I'm naive. I'm a too short planks case, which is why I need discretion.

[ 5 : 49 ] But if, on the other hand, I were to shut Solomon's book, after reading those first four verses, I would really be saying to him, thank you, King Solomon, for all your hard work, but really I don't need it.

I'm quite a clever fellow, really. I wasn't born yesterday. I've been around the block a few times. I've learned to live by my wits. I've attended the University of Life. I really don't think that a king who lived 3,000 years ago can teach a lot to a modern fellow like me.

Now the truth is that if I took that kind of line with the book of Proverbs, I'd not only be a fool, I might in the end prove not to be even a Christian at all.

Now I've got three main headings this evening. And here's the first. True wisdom is embedded in the fear of the Lord. Here's verse 7, which is really the motto verse for the whole book.

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

[ 6 : 59 ] Now let's notice how this motto verse begins and ends. It begins with the fear of the Lord and it ends with instruction, which means teaching about personal discipline and right behaviour.

And we need both the fear of the Lord and instruction in godly behaviour if we're not to come unstuck in the Christian life. If we had the fear of the Lord just by itself, without the need for instruction in behaviour, we might easily end up as starry-eyed new-agers, new-age people. We might say, for example, I stand in awe of nature and the great intelligence that lies behind it, that made it. I go outside. I look with loving and wondering eyes at the sun and the moon and stars, the ancient rocks and hills, the trees and the swamps, the wild deer, tigers, leopards, jellyfish, poodles.

I am awed and I am wowed by these things. What an awesome creator to have made them all. But how I organise my personal life, my business affairs, for example, my money, my marriage, my friendships, my leisure time, that's entirely my own concern.

Now that would be awe and wonder without ethics. Now turn it the other way around. Think of ethics without the fear of the Lord. That is quickly going to end us up in legalism, as though the faith of the Bible could simply be reduced to a set of rules for personal behaviour.

[ 8 : 38 ] That's equally absurd. The Bible always holds together our worship and reverence and fear of the Lord with the Lord's ethical standards.

In fact, it is because the Lord is who he is that the Bible teaches us to behave as it does. Right living, living under the instruction and discipline of the Lord, that is directly founded in the awesome character of God himself.

The two things must be held together. Now of course we need to ask the question, what is meant by the fear of the Lord? I'm always a bit suspicious when I hear a Christian say, and I've said this

myself in the past, but I'm suspicious of it, if I hear a Christian say that fear doesn't really mean fear. It just means reverence and awe. Well, my question is, if Solomon meant reverence and awe, why did he write fear? He could have used words like reverence and awe, but no, he spoke of the fear of the Lord.

Let me just work at this for a moment. On the one hand, the Bible often exists, and you'll know this, that the Lord is to be feared. It's Old Testament teaching, and equally, it is New Testament teaching.

[ 9 : 55 ] So we mustn't dumb it down. It's there. But on the other hand, the God who is to be feared often says to those who serve him, fear not.

So how are we to understand these two things? It seems a bit like a puzzle, but I don't think it is really. God is to be feared because he is the creator.

He has made the universe with unimaginable power and skill. But he's also to be feared because he is the judge of all men, and he has the power to destroy and condemn those who refuse to submit to him and to Christ.

This is why Jesus says, I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. I will warn you whom to fear.

Fear him who, after he is killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. So I think we can express it like this.

[ 10 : 59 ] God is to be feared because he is the judge who has power to cast into hell those who refuse to bow to him. But, once we have turned to Christ in repentance and faith, it's then that he says to us, don't be afraid.

Why? Because Christ has borne the penalty of our sins himself. Christ sets us free from the fear of death and punishment. He has died our death, he has taken our punishment in our place.

So the Christian is no longer fearful of death and hell. But at another level, we certainly do still need to fear him. We need to tremble at the idea of displeasing him or grieving him.

We are to tremble, as Isaiah puts it, we are to tremble at his words because his words are of everlasting urgency. So the Christian is no longer afraid of the judgment or condemnation of God, but he is afraid of the displeasure of God and of the sadness that he can bring to God's heart if he disobeys the Father's will.

And in Proverbs chapter 1 verse 7, it's this kind of fear which is the soil in which true wisdom and knowledge will grow. We need to be people who take the Lord ultimately seriously.

[ 12 : 19 ] We don't trifle with him. We know that his purpose is to transform our lives, to lead us from folly to wisdom, to remake us, to train us in righteousness.

And it's as we take him with that ultimate seriousness that knowledge begins and wisdom grows. And it's the fear of the Lord where it all begins.

Now what is this wisdom? It's perhaps helpful to think of it at two different levels. First, it's the wisdom that God displayed as he created the universe and everything at the beginning.

It's the wisdom, if you like, that underlies all reality. Just turn on a few pages to Proverbs chapter 8. Proverbs chapter 8 and verse 22.

Now this is part of a famous passage in which Solomon portrays wisdom as a generous woman. You might call her lady wisdom or the bountiful lady wisdom.

[ 13 : 22 ] And she's describing herself and her functions here. Let me read from verse 22 in chapter 8. The Lord possessed me, wisdom, at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

Ages ago I was set up at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth. When there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills I was brought forth.

Before he had made the earth with its fields or the first dust of the world. So wisdom here is part of God's astonishing creative mind.

The mind which lies behind the fashioning of Jupiter and Saturn and the Milky Way. Professor Stephen Hawking as you probably know is an avowed agnostic.

But I want to read a short quotation from his work, his brief history of time that he wrote in 1988 where he was grappling at one point with the question of whether there is any meaning to the universe at all.

[ 14 : 29 ] It's a very modern question. Is there any meaning to life or to the universe? And in this little quotation Hawking is talking about the mathematical equations which have been formulated to

describe the universe as we observe it.

So that's the reference to equations that you'll hear in a moment. The mathematical equations formulated to describe what we see. So here's what he writes. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?

The usual approach of science of constructing a mathematical model cannot answer the questions of why there should be a universe for the model to describe.

Why does the universe go to the bother of existing? Isn't that interesting? He is this avowed agnostic and yet he's probing with his mind and his questions push him to the very borders of admitting that there must be a God or at least a creative intelligence of some kind.

Now according to Solomon it's the wisdom of God that brought into being the amazing delicately balanced structures that make up our universe. so there's the first thing the wisdom of God in Proverbs is God's wisdom shown in the creation but secondly Proverbs teaches men and women and young people and children who fear the Lord how to live.

[ 15 : 59 ] This wisdom is wisdom very practical in how to live. I wonder if anybody has ever said to you get a life it's a pretty nasty thing to have said to you isn't it? But the fact is that Proverbs will teach us like nothing else how to get a life.

Going back to chapter 1 look at chapter 1 verse 3 wise dealing wouldn't you like to know how to deal wisely with all the situations and people that you come up against?

Wise dealing righteousness justice equity and looking on prudence and knowledge and discretion learning guidance if you meet anybody who has all these different qualities you have met a very happy and very useful person a person whose life is steady strong delightful God centred and able to love and support other people wouldn't you give an arm and a leg to know how to live life like that?

Well friends you don't have to give an arm and a leg all you have to do is to read this book of Proverbs and put it into practice now that's certainly challenging but it's not beyond the reach of any person who loves and fears the Lord so that's the wisdom of God as Proverbs speaks of it yes his wisdom employed in the creation of the universe at the beginning but then this wisdom practical wisdom that he graciously gives to his trusting people and as verse 7 insists it is in the fear of the Lord that this true wisdom wisdom is embedded and begins to grow now second true wisdom is for the simple the young and the wise but not for the fool it's for the simple the young and the wise but not the fool I want us to look at those four categories briefly first of all we have the simple who appear in verse 4 where I quote to give prudence to the simple now that word translated simple really means gullible or easily led or easily influenced you know the way that perhaps in a youth group or at a school a teacher might say oh Jimmy so and so he's a nice lad he's 16 but he's easily led that's the simple person of verse 4 easily led but this simple or gullible person is not a lost cause because look at verse 4 if he fears the

Lord he will be given prudence which is a growing sense of how to handle himself and other people wisely later on in the book in chapter 9 lady wisdom is pictured calling aloud in the public streets inviting people to her banquet and in chapter 9 she says whoever is simple let him turn in here meaning into her house to enjoy her banquet but a few verses later in chapter 9 a different woman the noisy brash lady folly is also calling people and summoning them to her banquet in her house and she says whoever is simple let him turn in here so the simple person the gullible easily led here's an invitation from two different quarters shall I turn my ear to the voice of wisdom or shall I go the way of folly now haven't we all been there in that position torn between wise advice and foolish advice well chapter 1 verse 4 promises prudence to the simple person who is prepared to walk in the fear of the Lord next and we're still in verse 4 we have the youth now we

[ 19 : 43 ] I won't ask who falls into that category here we get a lot of odd hands going up wouldn't we we tend to think of the youth today as being the teenager in our culture but in old testament times the term would often take you well into your twenties and perhaps even into your thirties as well and you'll know that much of the book of proverbs is explicitly written to a young man so look at chapter 1 verse 8 hear my son your father's instruction or chapter 2 verse 1 my son if you receive my words and if you look at the beginning of chapters 3 4 5 6 and 7 you'll see they all begin in much the same way so proverbs clearly tells us that it's a life coaching manual for young people it's the kind of thing that Tron youth I guess should regularly have on their teaching program so let me suggest that if you're approximately in the age group of between 10 and 30 proverbs is a wonderful source of coaching or training in how to live life it will tell you all you need to know about how to

handle money how to handle relationships and not least those with the opposite sex how to get on with people how to avoid getting into serious trouble how to speak and how not to speak how to be a leader and how to find the right sort of person to marry and proverbs will also teach your parents about the importance of instructing you rather than leaving all your upbringing and teaching in the hands of your school teachers or others at church look for example at chapter 1 verse 8 hear my son your father's instruction and forsake not your mother's teaching so the implication here is that mothers and fathers will be doing their job of teaching so mothers and fathers there are quite a few of them here tonight

I'm sure we have a responsibility to teach our children the ways of the Lord if we don't teach them to live in the fear of the Lord our children's minds inevitably will be shaped by television soap operas by hallow magazine and by the values of Simon Cowell look at verse 4 knowledge and discretion to the youth knowledge of how to live well and how to live wisely discretion that's the ability to distinguish between wise and foolish paths I sometimes look back on my own teenage years with a vague sense of horror at the foolish things that I did and I'm so grateful that the Lord reached his long arm into the grime and slime of my young life and rescued me from it so let me say boys and girls young men and young women get proverbs into your bloodstream and you will be happy and godly this is the recipe for the happy godly life now the wise verse 5

I won't ask you to put your hands up if you fall into that category but look at verse 5 let the wise hear and increase in learning and the one who understands obtain guidance now you might say but isn't the wise person a bit like a four pint milk carton which is already full of four pints of milk you can't fit any more in can you if it's already full well that is not Solomon's teaching here Solomon is teaching that one of the marks of biblical wisdom is that the wise person is hungry for more so verse 5 he hears and he increases in learning in other words he grows wiser now if you're a young Christian you've only been a believer perhaps for a few years you might look at some of the Christians here who are much older than yourself and you might say to yourself surely their capacity to learn new things must have seized up by now certainly by the time they got to 40 or 50 but it's not the case it isn't I can tell you they're not so hot at the hundred meter dash as they were when they were a lot younger but praise

God God has made us so that we can keep on increasing in wisdom throughout life and if you look throughout the whole of the book of proverbs you find that these are the characteristics of wise people who live in the fear of the Lord they're not wise in their own eyes or their own opinion it's the fool who thinks that he knows it all they're teachable they're still teachable in old age they store up what they learn about God and they put it into practice they listen to instruction they accept commands and they welcome reproof welcome reproof and from verse 5 here they live their life under the guidance of God in other words because they're learning wisdom from God they are being guided by him they know how to pick their way through the difficult paths of life how to stay on solid ground and not to fall into the pits and quagmires and when we look at that phrase in verse 5 at the end of verse 5 obtaining guidance it has nothing to do with reading tea leaves in a teacup or reading your horoscope or getting gypsy rose lee that old fraud to read the palm of your hand and tell you that you're about to meet a significant person it's not that sort of guidance at all the wise people who hear and increase in learning are guided by the wisdom and the learning that they get from god that's how they obtain guidance they learn from the lord from the bible from the book of proverbs how to make wise decisions and profitable choices so they're not guided by random irresponsible forces outside themselves like gypsy rose lee they take responsibility for their own decisions and they're equipped to make good decisions because they have been learning over the years from the lord himself so let's long to grow in our ability to hear and increase in learning so we have good news we have great encouragement here for the simple for the young and for the wise but not for the fool who makes his first appearance in the book of proverbs not his last by any means but he makes his first appearance here in verse seven now in a sense the whole of the book of proverbs turns on the contrast between wisdom and folly or between the wise person and the fool and I used to make a basic mistake when I read the book of proverbs and that mistake was to think that every last person everyone that I knew was either wise or a fool either a hundred percent wise or a complete fool but surely what king solomon is saying to us is that there are wise ways of behaving and there are foolish ways of behaving and in this book he lays before us many examples of both so to read the book of proverbs is to be confronted by hundreds of choices between wise behavior and foolish behavior and any christian person looking back over their life will say that while

sometimes they did make wise choices there have been plenty of moments when they behaved foolishly and made foolish choices in other words nobody is one hundred percent wise even the most well tried and well tested christians can behave badly and we have a very painful example of this in the life of king solomon himself who lived much of his life very wisely but then ended his years in folly because he began to welcome idolatry into the heart of the kingdom of israel solomon's unhappy example stands as a warning to aging christians which is anybody over the age of forty what is folly then what is folly verse seven tells us that fools this is the heart of folly fools despise wisdom and instruction now folly and wisdom in the book of proverbs it's never a matter of intelligence it's not a matter of iq it's all to do with the attitude of the heart towards god so the fool may be a very brainy person he may be a professor but according to verse seven he despises the wisdom and instruction that comes from god in other words he shuts his bible and keeps it shut because he doesn't want to submit to the discipline of the christian life and he may say well yes i used to read the bible when i was young but i've grown out of all that i prefer to work out the meaning of my life on my own thank you very much so to all intents and purposes the fool however intelligent he is is a denier of god in fact the psalms put it very bluntly when they say the fool says in his heart there is no god that's the fool he shuts his heart to god and to true wisdom and he sets off with a smile and a light heart on the road that leads to death but he doesn't know that it leads there so this brings me to my third and last point and that is that true wisdom has to be chosen this is really the thrust of the rest of chapter one after verse seven the rest of chapter one and you'll see this in its two main sections here it introduces us to two powerful influences which are both competing for the allegiance of the young man to whom proverbs is addressed this first influence is a gang of violent thugs who say to our young man in verse 11 come with us and what are they proposing well the next few verses tell us very clearly armed robbery and murder let's lie in wait for blood they say let's ambush the innocent this is highway robbery stick turpin stuff what is the purpose of it well look at verse 13 it is personal enrichment precious goods plunder silver and gold money money lovely money and so in verse 14 they say throw in your lot among us and we'll share the purse but just look at the father's advice in verse 10 my son if sinners entice you do not consent have the courage to say no and verse 15 my son do not walk in the way with them hold back your foot from their paths why?

[ 30 : 42 ] well the father goes on to explain look at verse 18 these thugs these men think that others will die but actually says Solomon it's their own blood that will be spilt it's their own lives that will be ambushed by their behaviour verse 19 such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain it takes away the life of its possessors those who die are the people who indulge in it so this violent gang they're the first people to ask the young man for his allegiance but his father says to him my son don't verse 10 do not consent verse 15 do not walk in the way with them now the second competitor competitor for the lad's allegiance is lady wisdom and she cries out in verse 22 how long oh simple ones will you love being simple how long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge and then comes this gracious invitation to the simple and the scoffer and the fool look at verse 23 if you turn if you turn round at my reproof in other words if you do a u-turn if you turn through 180 degrees at my reproof

I will bless you immeasurably I will pour out my spirit to you I'll make my words known to you in other words your lives will be transformed you will become wise people no longer simple or scoffers or fools but then let's notice that in verse 24 and right down to the bottom of the page there wisdom sadly spells out what happens to those who refuse to listen to her look at some of these words verse 26 calamity and terror verse 27 distress and anguish verse 32 death and destruction so the point is being made that true wisdom has to be chosen proverbs is not only about wisdom and folly it's about the choice that each of us has to make between wisdom and folly so I want to ask a question gently but clearly as if I'm speaking to each individual here now are you facing some moral choice some difficult moral choice at the moment and are you conscious of being pulled in two opposite directions

I'm not talking about the sort of choice where there are simply practicalities involved should we live in this house or in that house should I take this job or that job I'm talking about moral choices where we know perfectly well that one way of behaving is wrong in the sight of God and the other is wise and godly if you're in that position friend don't do the wrong thing because the consequences this is what chapter 1 is saying can be disastrous verse 10 if sinners entice you do not consent verse 15 hold back your foot from their paths brother or sister so much is at stake in the moral choices that

face us our life is at stake our future we set precedence for our own lives if I make a foolish and sinful decision today I'm much more likely to make another foolish and sinful decision tomorrow but if I set myself the precedent of a godly and wise decision today even if it costs me dearly I'm much more likely to listen to wisdom tomorrow and to the Lord himself but just look at the blessings that come to those who do listen to God's wisdom you see Lady Wisdom she sounds this long warning from verse 24 right the way through to verse 32 but verse 32 is not her last word just look again at verse 33 but but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread of disaster without fears for tomorrow isn't that what you want it's certainly what I want I'd be a fool not to want that but this is a promise it's an assurance from God about the life of real blessing if we will listen to his wisdom and develop lifelong habits of listening and obeying it means in the words of verse 33 that we shall dwell secure we shall be at ease and we shall be unafraid let's bow our heads and we'll pray together how kind you are our dear God for showing us these things and we think of so many

Christian friends and loved ones that we have known who have walked in the way of wisdom who though they have sometimes made wrong decisions have decided deep in the heart of their lives to serve and love you and they've known your blessing they've known what it has been to live without fear to dwell secure and to be at ease in their hearts even if their lives have been difficult on the surface we know that this is the way of your holy people our dear father to listen to your voice and to learn to live in your manner and so we pray dear father because we know that so much hangs on this we pray that you'll help each one of us to learn to make these right decisions as we listen to your words as we try to work out what it means to live the godly life so we pray that you'll help us and train us and fashion us into men and women and young people who are after your own heart and we ask all these things in Jesus name amen