

Wisdom: A Family Tradition

Proverbs 4:1-9

Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight, ² for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching. ³ When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, ⁴ he taught me and said to me, "Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live. ⁵ Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. ⁶ Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. ⁷ The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight. ⁸ Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. ⁹ She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown."

Notice that verse 1 begins, "Hear, O sons." You will remember that these calls to gain the son's attention mark out each next lecture or admonition that the father gives his son. So in these verses we have the next lecture, admonition #3, from this father to his son – marked off again by the familiar call for his son to "hear." This instance is unique only in that it is addressed to his "sons" (plural), whereas previously, and again in the next admonition beginning in verse 10, he addresses his "son" (singular).

"Hear" very often means more than just *hear* or *listen* – not just in Hebrew but in English and, I suspect, most every language. When a father admonishes his son and tells the child how he will behave from here forward, he will often ask him at the end, "Do you hear me?" He's not asking his son if his eardrums are in working order. He's telling the child he must *obey* – he must *hear and then act accordingly* (cf. Matt. 13:9, 43; 17:5; 18:15-16; etc.).

That seems to be the sense here. In all these lectures he calls his son to "hear," and it's pretty clear that he is not just telling him to turn off the iPod and pull the earbuds out of his ears. He's calling the son to *pay careful attention* and make very sure to *hear and take heed and follow the instruction* he is giving. Verse 2 parallels verse 1 in this respect. Notice the various phrases used to stress the same idea: "*Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive ... do not forsake my teaching.*"

Notice that again he includes a motivational clause: "Hear, O sons, a father's instruction, and be attentive, *that you may gain insight, ² for I give you good precepts*; do not forsake my teaching." First we have the purpose clause, "that you may gain insight." "Insight" (generally) is one of his synonyms for wisdom, stressing the idea of discernment. "Listen to me! Take heed!" Why? "So that you may gain insight." Then he adds an explanation: "for I give you good precepts." His teaching is "good" – both in itself and in its consequences. This teaching is reliable. It's profitable. You can bank on it. You want this – this is the stuff to live by, the stuff that makes life successful.

Now I've titled this lesson, "Wisdom: A Family Tradition," because that's how the sage himself describes it. Notice how in verses 3-4 he appeals to his own family heritage:

³ When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother, ⁴ he taught me and said to me, “Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.”

Reading between the lines here you can't miss a beautiful family scene. Verse 3 expresses touchingly just how all parents feel about has felt about their children. “When I was a son with my father, tender, the only one in the sight of my mother.” That is, “I was young once too, and my parents felt toward me like I feel toward you now. The affection was deep, and they loved me like I was their only child – “the only one in the sight of my mother.” And my dad was concerned for me just as I am concerned for you, and so he was careful to teach me wisdom.

Then you'll notice that the quotation marks in verse 4 are not closed until the end of verse 9. Verses 4–9 are a restatement of the admonition his father gave him when he was a boy. “What I'm teaching you now is what Grandpa taught me: ‘Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live.’” The obvious implication, of course, is that that instruction proved good for him – it has given him success – and so now he wants to pass along this good counsel to his own son. “This is what your family has lived by, and it has proven good.” It's really a beautiful scene – passing along a godly heritage, teaching the next generation how to live successfully under God. “Grandpa lived by this wisdom. I have lived by it. Now I want you to live by it also.”

Notice in verse 4 how he capsulizes his father's (that is, the grandfather's) instruction: “Let your heart hold fast to my words; keep my commandments, and live.” Notice especially that last part: “keep my commandments, and live.”

My dad used to have fun with this verse. He'd tell us, “Keep my commandments, and live” – the obvious implication being that if we did *not* keep his commandments we would not live! Well, he was kidding, of course. And (sorry, Dad!) that wasn't quite the thought the sage here is trying to get across. Rather, it's what we've seen since our first study in this series: the call is not to “live and learn” – live and then learn by hard experience. The offer is to *learn so that* he may live – do it right the first time, live without regret, live successfully under God.

So wisdom is a family tradition this father wants deeply to continue in the next generation.

Now not all traditions are worth keeping. As G.K. Chesterton remarked, “tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead.” An old jingle that I've always liked puts it more bluntly: “Custom, which all mankind to slavery brings – that dull excuse for doing stupid things.” And many a church as died for an unwillingness to break tradition. I've often said that the last seven words of a dying church are, “We've never done it that way before!” The fact is that breaking a bad tradition is a good idea. Some things deserve to be forgotten.

But when something “we've always done” has proven itself to be useful and helpful – something that enriches life – that's a tradition worth keeping. And that's what the father here is pressing. “You see how we live. You see the marriage your mom and I have? You see the relationship we enjoy? You see our home, our joy? You see how our lives are not marked by regret and self-

destructive choices? All this is the direct consequence of the wisdom your grandfather taught me when I was young, and now you must learn it also.”

We’ve seen all through these studies that the father has a great heart for his son and wants desperately for him to see the value of wisdom for his own sake. He’s all about capturing his son’s heart, not just directing his behavior. He wants not just for his son to do what he is told in an external sense but to imbibe and internalize this teaching himself.

That was in fact the concern his own father had for him. Notice how he summarizes Grandpa’s teaching in verses 4-6:

⁴ he [that is, your grandfather] taught me and said to me, “Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live. ⁵ Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. ⁶ Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you.”

Notice the repeated emphasis:

- Verse 4: *Hold fast* to my words – not just in your memory bank but in *your heart*, that inner part of you that makes you *you*.
- *Keep* my commandments – guard them, protect them so that you can live.
- Verse 5: *Get wisdom; get insight* – make this your life pursuit. The word “get” here is the common word translated “buy” or “purchase” (see also v. 7). The idea is that wisdom is worth any expense, any effort – at all costs, get wisdom.
- *Do not forget* and *do not turn away* from the words of my mouth – value this wisdom, and live by it always.
- Verse 6: *Do not forsake her* but rather *love her*. Why? Because she will protect you from foolish choices and regrets.

Notice by the way that he’s warning his son about the *unreliability* of his own heart. “You will think you don’t need to pay such careful attention to this, but trust me – you do! You will think at times that you know better, but trust me – you don’t. You must treasure this teaching knowing that this is what will make life successful and blessed.”

Verse 7, then, is the very heart of this exhortation: “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.” The idea here is *not*, “While you are getting all you get, be sure to get wisdom too!” – as though wisdom were just one of many life pursuits. No, he is speaking in exclusive terms. “Wisdom is of such value – it is so vital, so necessary for life – that you must make it your supreme pursuit. Sell off everything you have for it if you must. No price is too high. This is more valuable than anything – yes, more valuable than *everything* else. Get wisdom. At all costs, get wisdom.” The NIV captures the sense well: “Though it cost you all you have, get understanding.” In fact, Derek Kidner suggests that the Hebrew here is likely a blunt way of saying: “What it takes is not brains or opportunity, but decision. Do you want it? Come and get it.” *Resolve* to get wisdom at all costs.

What the grandfather wanted for his son, and now what this father wants for his son, is a *heart* for wisdom – a heart that recognizes the value of wisdom and prizes it accordingly. And as far as he is able he is trying to reach his son’s heart.

Notice the way he puts it at the beginning of verse 8: “Prize her highly.” If you have the NIV you’ll notice a different translation: “Cherish her.” The meaning Hebrew verb here is uncertain – it means either to “esteem” (hence, the ESV “prize her highly”) or to “caress” or “cuddle,” which the NIV smooths out to “cherish.” But if that is the correct meaning, then he’s talking again about *affections*. We might not ordinarily speak of “cuddling” or “caressing” wisdom, but the metaphor directs the heart to a deep appreciation of wisdom. Please hear me – you must *want* wisdom.

Well then, just what is it that makes wisdom worthy of such devoted attention and unrelenting pursuit? Why is it more valuable than everything else? What makes it so worthy of my affection?

That is the question the father is eager to answer in verses 8-9. He wraps up this admonition with another motivational clause – restating again the value of wisdom.

⁸ Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. ⁹ She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

It’s the kind of language we saw in the first lecture, in 1:8-9 – the necklace and crown, metaphors of distinction and honor. The idea again is that imbibing this wisdom will pay off for you. You will prosper and be better off for following this teaching. You will distinguish yourself, and you will be happy for it. “My dad taught me – and it has proven true, and now I’m teaching you – that the wisdom of God really does lead to a blessed life.” It leads to good decisions and good choices, choices that bring blessing and joy and that avoid regret.

It is what we saw in 3:13-18:

¹³ Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, ¹⁴ for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her. ¹⁶ Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. ¹⁷ Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. ¹⁸ She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed.

That is to say, not all the money in the world can buy what wisdom gives you for free if you will just listen and take heed.

We’ve all heard it all our lives, that money can buy a house, but it can’t buy a home – that money can buy food, but it can’t buy love and tender fellowship around the table. I suppose it is those whose homes are not marked by love that know this best. Wisdom can steer us to avoid those kinds of regrets, and it can create a loving home and fulfilling relationships. God our Creator does not tell us to go live and learn from hard experience. He tells us up front how we can go about life in a way that brings contentment and blessing and joy. Not all the money, not all the fame, not all the diplomas and degrees – nothing in the world can give you what the wisdom of God offers freely.

And so, wisdom must be #1. “Get wisdom.”

And so the father says, “Listen to me, son. My dad taught me – it has proven true. Please hear me – for your own sake adopt this wisdom as your own. Prize it. Treasure it. Cherish it. Commit yourself to it. Turn off the TV and the cell phone and the iPad, and spend time pursuing wisdom. And as you do (v. 9), you will find that it was worth the effort. “She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.” What folly to ignore such an offer.

Reflections

Now again let’s back away and see the big picture. What is this passage teaching us?

First, as we’ve seen since chapter 1, it has something important to say to parents, especially parents with children still at home. What a marvelous scene this passage is. The father in tender concern for his son guiding him to live wisely and successfully under God. Parents, if you love your children, teach them wisdom. Teach them what wisdom is. Teach them the source of wisdom. Teach them the value of wisdom. Press them with all you have to internalize and treasure wisdom. Model for them the joy of living according to God’s wisdom. Go for their hearts and steer their appetites to the Creator who alone can tell us how to live successfully. Teach them as far as you are able to treasure wisdom.

And of course wisdom is not valuable for children only. This is for all of us. For all of us it holds out this wonderful prospect – “Come, learn and live.” No one can direct us to live successfully as God can. What fools we would be to neglect his Word.

More fundamentally, as I’ve just alluded, this passage has something to say about the value of Scripture. It is driving us to learn God’s Word and anchor our minds in it. The Bible throughout holds out this wonderful prospect – that its counsel, coming as it does from God himself, is both true and profitable, providing reliable and infallible guidance for successful living under God. It is, after all, “breathed out by God” himself. It is his Word written. And precisely because it is his Word, it is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2Tim. 3:16-17). Here is a book that boasts great things – infallible guidance for life and eternity. What a treasure! And if we recognize this treasure, we will give ourselves to reading it, learning it, meditating on it, and memorizing it.

And once again we must notice, as we’ve seen throughout this series, that ultimately this passage directs us to Wisdom Incarnate himself – Jesus Christ. What is the wisdom we are to pursue? It is Jesus, the one in whom are hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). The one who took responsibility for all our foolishness and all the consequences of it, and offered himself to God in our place, paying the penalty of our sin. The one who now renews our minds and our hearts and restores us to himself, enabling us now to pursue wisdom. The one whose yoke leads us in the paths of righteousness to God’s honor and our own good. A wise father does not point his son to some generic kind of wisdom that the world has to offer; a wise father points his son to Christ, to whom wisdom itself leads us and in whom wisdom is found.

This passage is a marvelous model of Christian parenting. If your parents led you in the way of wisdom and pointed you to Christ, be very diligent to pass that tradition on to the next

generation. If you don't have this tradition behind you, then start it now. Show your children the great privilege of having a Word from God. Show them the joy and value of living under Christ as his disciples. "Get wisdom. And whatever you get, get insight." Sell off all you have if you must, but get wisdom. "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?" For the sake of your children's temporal and eternal well-being, point them to Christ. Show them that the very wisest thing they can ever do is bow before the Lord Jesus and submit to his yoke.

If we can read verse 7 again, this time with New Testament glasses, it reads something like this: "The beginning of wisdom is this: Get Jesus, and whatever you get, get Jesus. Take his yoke and learn from him." Here, in Christ, is success and joy and life eternal.

This blog post first appeared on [Credo Magazine](#), Spring 2020.