

# Sermon 2, To Know the Discipline of Wisdom, Proverbs 1:1-6

**Proposition:** Wisdom is a discipline for the body, for the mind, and for the whole person.

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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Proverbs, uniquely among the books of the Bible, spells out its purpose in the first six verses. John is the only other book that tells us its purpose, but that is in two verses. Solomon here lists the things that Proverbs will do if you give yourself to studying it. Notice, if you would, that these purposes of the book are promises, not commands. Quite simply, if you submit to Proverbs, you will learn the discipline of wisdom. Wisdom is a discipline for the body, the mind, and the whole person, and if you give yourself to it you will receive its benefits.

### **I. Proverbs' Single Author, v. 1**

The book begins with its title and author. Indeed, in the ancient era those things could not reliably be transmitted through formatting. So if you wanted your book's title and author to be known, you generally had to put them at the beginning, which is exactly what Solomon did here. The book is called "The Proverbs of," which in English has been shortened down to "Proverbs." We can learn three important things from this title.

### **A. The Book Consists of Proverbs**

First, and maybe most obvious, is that the book consists of proverbs — short, sharp sayings that are designed to stick in the mind through their rare combination of sound and sense. In that regard, of course, Proverbs is a translator’s nightmare, because the combination of sound and meaning is what makes proverbs work and what makes them so memorable. “A stitch in time saves nine” is perhaps one of the most obvious English examples of this. To say “Proper foresight saves a lot of work” means roughly the same thing, but the rhyme is lost and with it most of the memorable nature of the proverb. The concreteness of the original has also been lost and replaced with a vague abstraction. “Proper foresight” doesn’t seem nearly as compelling as a stitch put into the fabric at the right time.

This is why many of the Proverbs of Solomon are so hard to remember. Their original combination of sound and meaning has been destroyed by the translation process, and though the meaning survives, its obvious memorable and oral quality is no longer present.

Aside from that, though, it is clear that the book is made up of Proverbs. You can dip into it almost anywhere and quickly find a short saying that encapsulates a morsel of wisdom. If you feed your mind with enough of these morsels of wisdom, and strengthen your digestion by fearing God, then you will eventually attain to the wisdom the book teaches.

### **B. Its Main Author/Compiler is Solomon**

But not only is the book a book of Proverbs. It is a book by Solomon, son of David. Solomon ruled Israel from 966-926 B.C. He was the greatest king of Israel. We looked at his life in detail in the first 11 chapters of Kings about a year and a half ago in the evening service; if you want to know more about Solomon, I encourage you to listen to those sermons.

Solomon was a great man, a wise man, indeed the wisest man who ever lived. God appeared to him in a dream and asked him what he wanted, and he asked for wisdom. God granted it to him. Part of Solomon’s wisdom was his missionary spirit. He did a lot for Israel — no question about it. He built the Temple, and in so doing he was a type of Messiah, the true temple-builder. His reign was a golden age in which Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea and during which they ate and drank and were happy. He had a Gentile build the temple because he wanted the good news to spread to those who lived beyond Israel’s borders. He wanted to witness to those who were not Israelites about the greatness of Israel’s God. At the dedication of the Temple, he made a big deal out of the truth that this Temple was to be a house of prayer for all nations, and he specifically prayed that God would hear the prayers of foreigners and strangers. Solomon’s missionary spirit, though, is best seen in his books. He wrote three of them, and none of them is specifically and distinctively Israelite. Rather, the three genres he chose — wisdom, love poetry, and philosophy — are universal. Many cultures don’t have a book like Deuteronomy, but virtually all cultures have wisdom sayings and love poetry and most have some kind of philosophical tradition too. Solomon wanted to reach people where they lived, and so he wrote the Songs of Songs, the book of Ecclesiastes, and the book of Proverbs. This book is an outreach book, a book that comes to world offering something the world wants — knowledge,

wisdom, cunning, shrewdness — and then explaining that those things can only be had if you walk in the fear of Yahweh. Solomon is trying to bring people to Israel's God by setting before them the bounty of wisdom that He offers.

So when we read this book, we have to remember that its human author/compiler is King Solomon. These are not ivory-tower precepts, in other words. These are the words of a man who was very experienced in statecraft and in marriage and thus presumably in child-raising too (although the Bible only mentions one child from him, his son Rehoboam). We're not listening to the words of someone who says "I heard this idea somewhere and it might be good." We're listening to someone who says, "I have tried absolutely everything I talk about. I know it by experience, and so you can believe me when I say that I know what I'm talking about."

### **C. Its Immediate Context Is Ancient Israel**

The book's immediate context, then, is Ancient Israel. That is where it is written, and that is where it is set. Yet the vast majority of what it teaches is for every place and every culture; indeed, the book only mentions "Israel" one time and "covenant" one time. It does use God's covenant name Yahweh, though, because Yahweh is the God of the whole earth and not just of Israel.

So this book comes to us from Ancient Israel, but it is for us today. It is the work of King Solomon, his contribution toward sharing the good news of wisdom with the world at large.

## **II. Proverbs' Double Purpose, vv. 2-6**

So that's the title. What is the content? What is this book for?

### **A. To Teach You the Lived Discipline of Wisdom, vv. 2a, 3-5**

Well, the first verset of this prologue explains that the Proverbs exists to teach you the lived discipline of wisdom.

#### **1. Wisdom Is a Discipline, vv. 2a, 3a**

Most translations say "To know wisdom and instruction." But the word translated "instruction" is the same word used in Isaiah 53:5, "the chastisement of our peace was upon Him." Thus, its primary meaning is "chastening, correction, discipline." Wisdom is a discipline, something that requires and demands concentrated effort, even a certain amount of pain and suffering. We talk about the discipline of chemistry or engineering, meaning that you will never succeed in those fields without applying yourself diligently to the material. Well, wisdom too is a discipline, and one to which you must give yourself wholeheartedly if you would succeed. Proverbs is for learning wisdom and the discipline required to truly possess it. Indeed, the next verse tells us that the book exists to help in learning the discipline of wisdom, or in absorbing the discipline of insight. The book disciplines for wise dealing — that is, it provides the framework of external discipline which will allow you to learn such wisdom.

In other words, wisdom is not something that can be acquired in an armchair. Wisdom is not something that can be absorbed by simply letting words pass in front of your eyes or hit your eardrums. Wisdom is a discipline, and you will never learn it without treating it as such. Just as

you cannot get military discipline without drilling, so you cannot get wisdom without repeated practice.

## **2. Wisdom Disciplines You to do what is Right, Just, and Fair, v. 3b**

Well, if you have the discipline necessary to pursue wisdom, if you accept the discipline that results in wise dealing, what will that produce in your life? It will teach you do what is right, just, and fair. The first of these is usually translated “righteousness,” and it refers to maintaining the right order in which everything is where it’s supposed to be doing what it’s supposed to do. You too will be where you’re supposed to be and do what you’re supposed to do if you accept the discipline of wisdom. Justice is the restoration of that right order when it’s violated. This means that if you gain wisdom, then you will be able to restore order to places that lack it. Indeed, our life on earth can never simply be a righteous life; it must also be a just one, because we will frequently discover that the order of the world has been disturbed and that we need to put it right. Finally, of course, wisdom teaches you fairness or equity or rectitude — that is, actions that are upright in every sense. Equity is that area of action that is not covered by human law, actions which cannot be prosecuted but that still make a difference between whether you are a good person or a bad person, a good spouse or a bad one, a person whom people trust or a person whom they fear and loathe. It is not illegal to give one of your children a new car and give the other one a used bicycle, but it is not particularly equitable.

If you have wisdom, then, you will have righteousness, justice, and equity in your daily life. These things are the result of wisdom; a fool cannot dispense them to the people around him.

## **3. Wisdom Imparts Cunning and Shrewdness, v. 4**

Furthermore, wisdom imparts cunning and shrewdness to those who do not naturally have such things — the inexperienced and the young.

Brothers and sisters, we American Christians are big on what is right and just and fair. We are especially good at what’s fair, even as our culture around us is. Income inequality is thought by many people to be one of the crying sins of our age because it’s not fair!

But the qualities of v. 4 are qualities that, quite frankly, we American Christians have no time or inclination for. You can see it in our Bible translations. Your Bible almost certainly says something like “prudence” and “discretion” — the kind of virtuous qualities you associate with grandmothers and the wives of ambassadors! But the Hebrew words are far more morally ambiguous. Indeed, the serpent was more “arum” than every beast of the field. You can translate that “prudent” if you want, for it is the word so translated here in Prov. 1:4. But prudence in the serpent’s hands was not one of the four classical virtues. Not at all. The word is much closer in sense to the English word *cunning*. Were you, growing up as a nice Christian young person in a nice conservative church, taught that cunning was a desirable attribute? I wasn’t. And brothers and sisters, we can see the results all around. We evangelicals are consistently outmaneuvered in the culture wars. We lose institution after institution to the liberals, while the liberals almost never lose an institution to us. Our lack of cunning is overwhelming. We are nice, not cunning.

But in the book of Proverbs, cunning, along with all other intellectual skills, is the proper possession of the wise! If you read this book carefully, in a disciplined fashion, it will teach you the cunning that you need, even if you are completely naive and simple-minded. That is the promise here. That is one of the stated purposes of the book of Proverbs.

Not only does this book give cunning; it also gives shrewdness. Once again, in your Bible you are more likely to see the word “discretion.” That word is much closer to the meaning than “prudence” is to *arum*. Basically, it refers to the ability to keep your plans secret. You can call that discretion, if you like — i.e., the ability to plan discreetly. But I think the word “shrewdness” captures a bit more of what’s in the picture, but it seems that these plans are not only concealed but also rather effective. Jesus Himself commanded His people to be as “shrewd” as serpents. He picked up on this theme in Proverbs, in other words!

But what about the fact that cunning and shrewdness aren’t very “nice”? Well, brothers and sisters, you will not find either the word or the concept of niceness in the Bible. God never tells us to be nice. But He does tell us to be cunning and shrewd — not in the service of sin, or in the service of our own way, but in the service of righteousness, justice, and equity.

Solomon saw no friction between cunning and shrewdness on the one hand and righteousness, justice, and fairness on the other. He believed that both were part of the wise man’s life.

Again, brothers and sisters, this prologue is a list of promises. It explains what the book is for and what it will accomplish in those who submit themselves to it in a disciplined way. It does not say “Be shrewd” and “be cunning.” It says, “Study this book and you will learn cunning and shrewdness.” That’s a pretty amazing promise.

#### **4. Wisdom Benefits Everyone, vv. 4-5**

The book next specifies the audience who will benefit from the discipline of wisdom.

##### **a) Callow Naïfs, v. 4**

The first group of audience that Solomon is addressing is the callow and the naive, the simple and the young. “Simple” can sound a bit like “mentally underdeveloped.” But it’s not referring to some kind of disabling condition; the word is referring to those who are uncommitted, who are inexperienced. I like the translation “callow”. This book is for those who just fell off the cabbage truck! It is for the naive, those who are gullible, who simply believe everything they are told. I remember one of my sister’s friends who had recently learned to drive coming into our house one day and announcing “The check engine light is on.” My dad, who had been a car dealer and semi-professional mechanic for decades, said to her, “Well, did you check the engine to see if it’s still there?”

“No!” she exclaimed in genuine — yes, genuine — consternation. “I’ll go do that right away!” From the front window, we watched her dash out to the car and pop the hood, then carefully scan the area under the hood. She soon came back in, relief flooding her face, and declared, “Yep, it’s still there.”

Brothers and sisters, Proverbs is for people like that. Proverbs is for the callow and naive, those who have no idea what the check engine light means. The wisdom contained in this book will benefit you. You might still get pranked in subjects you know nothing about, but this book is designed to give you the wisdom and insight and shrewdness to succeed in the world. This is a book that contains more street smarts than book learning, for those who have the discipline of wisdom to understand it.

### **b) The Wise and Understanding, v. 5**

Yet this book is not only for beginners. Solomon wants the wise to hear as well, and to grow in their understanding of what's happening. No one is so wise that he cannot learn yet more wisdom. And so, if you are a father in the faith who has walked with Christ for eighty years, you have much to learn from this book too. If you hear carefully, you too will increase in learning and insight. Don't think "I know what the check engine light means. I've been around the block a few times. I wasn't born yesterday. And so I doubt that Proverbs has much for a fellow like me!" Solomon declares that it does. Like the rest of Scripture, it is good for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training everyone — even the highly trained.

### **B. To Teach you to understand Words of Understanding, vv. 2b, 6**

Well, in addition to the discipline of wisdom, Proverbs also is of use to the mind. It helps you understand words of understanding. This, brothers and sisters, is part of the human condition. You and I can hear someone who understands speak about a topic without understanding that topic ourselves. It can be described and explained to us carefully, but we might lack the mental capacities or the educational background to process it. In other words, just because the words are words of understanding doesn't mean that we will understand them! And so, the second purpose of this book is to teach you to understand words of understanding. Again, this does not mean that if you study Proverbs you will then be able to go subscribe to the *Journal of Quantum Physics* and understand all of its articles. The point is not that you will necessarily grow in your ability to understand technical fields, but rather that you will grow in your ability to understand *wisdom*. Someone can give wise counsel to you and you may not even understand it. But if you carefully study Proverbs while applying yourself to the discipline of wisdom and making sure to walk in the fear of God, you will be able to understand the wise words that are spoken to you.

#### **1. To know wisdom is to know the words of this book, v. 2 (cf. 4:5-6)**

It is important to see that to know wisdom is to know the words of this book. Notice how knowing wisdom is put in parallel with understanding words of understanding. Do you want to know wisdom? Know this book! Indeed, the parallel to our relationship with God is very clear here. Do you want to know Christ? Then you need to know the Bible. The Bible is where you can find Him. The same is true of wisdom. Do you want to experientially know wisdom? Then seek her in the wisdom books, for they are where you can find her.

#### **2. To know wisdom is to understand proverbs, sayings, and riddles**

Since knowing wisdom means knowing wise words, studying Proverbs will help you understand proverbs, sayings, and riddles. These can be both spoken and experienced. Why did so and so

treat me that way? I don't understand! We have all had such an experience at some time or other. But wisdom will teach you to understand such enigmas. Wisdom will teach you how to understand what people say to you and to know whether it is wise or foolish. Wisdom will help you through daily life like nothing else.

### **III. Proverbs' Triple Application**

And so get wisdom! Get wisdom by seeking Christ, the wisdom of God, and by fearing the LORD which is the beginning of wisdom.

#### **A. To the Life**

Proverbs will help you to live wisely.

#### **B. To the Mind**

It will help you to understand clearly.

#### **C. To the Whole Person**

And it will help you to be wise. Wisdom is found in this book, and this book can be understood only in relationship to God. Do you want to be wise? Then seek the wise words of the God of wisdom. Amen.