

# Sermon 55, Life with the LORD of Wisdom, Proverbs 15:20-29

Read Mark 3

**Proposition:** Wisdom brings joy and life because it fits with the character of the LORD of wisdom.

- I. The Joy of Wisdom, vv. 20-23
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  - B. Speaking It, vv. 22-23
- II. The Life of Wisdom, v. 24
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    - 1. He ruins their homes, vv. 25, 27
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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, like the rest of the Bible, the book of Proverbs is concerned with knowing God. Specifically, of course, it talks about the wisdom of knowing Him. What is He like? And what is it like to know Him?

The book of Proverbs answers those questions. Specifically, our text this morning answers those questions. We'll see that the answer is that God is just and kind, and that to know Him brings joy and life.

### I. The Joy of Wisdom, vv. 20-23

Our passage starts with an emphasis on joy, an emphasis we'll see redoubled next week when we look specifically at the joy of the gospel. One subset of that joy is the joy of wisdom — a joy particularly expressed in learning wisdom and in speaking wisdom.

#### A. Learning It, vv. 20-21

Once again, we see a version of the opening proverb of this collection of the proverbs of Solomon — this time, though, in a version that warns against losing one's status as a son and gives a diagnostic test to you rather than to your parents.

The proverbs of Solomon in ch. 10 verse 1 opened with the statement, "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a heaviness to his mother." As we saw at that time, this is indeed the fundamental point of wisdom and has every right to stand as the heading that

relativizes and interprets the rest of the proverbs. Remember, Proverbs is a book of instruction to the wise son, telling him how to please his father. As we saw at the beginning of our study, this means that Proverbs is a gospel book in two senses. First of all, it addresses us as sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ. It is speaking to the believer, telling him how to live in a way that pleases his Father. Secondly, it is ultimately a character sketch of the living and perfect Son of God, who was perfectly wise and who always makes His Father glad. In other words, this is not “just” an old Jewish book. It is emphatically a Christian book, and one that speaks from beginning to end of Christ, the wise Son.

Christ makes His Father glad. Christ is a joy to His mother. And if you and I are conformed to His image, then we too are making our Father and our fathers glad, and we are bringing joy to our mothers.

But here, in ch. 15, at the halfway point of the book, that proverb from ch. 10 has been transformed slightly. Now it speaks of a foolish man (not “son”) and describes him based on his attitude toward his mother. Now, obviously from ch. 10 we know that in some sense the foolish son is still a son. But here, the son has been downgraded to be just a man. Is that intentional? Of course it is. Though a book like Proverbs is not going to say a great deal about apostasy, we can see just a hint that those who don’t receive Christ, who don’t believe on His name, are not sons.

So if you want to know whether you’re truly saved, tell me this: what do you think of your mother? A foolish man despises his mother. If you have contempt in your heart for the woman who bore you, nursed you, kept you alive for years, then you are a foolish man. Yes, I know that there are some truly rotten mothers out there who do evil things. It’s okay to disagree with your mother, and even to acknowledge that she is a deeply evil human being. But to despise her? That is the mark of a fool, not of a wise son. Ultimately, I think it’s safe to say, the proverb is pointing out that to despise your earthly mother is to despise your Heavenly Father. Who gave you the mother you have, anyway?

But let’s think for just a second about a further application of this. Paul tells us that the church is our mother. What kind of person looks down on and despises the church? A fool. Now, we all know the church has its problems. It’s made up of people like us. But a wise son will also think well of the church, which is Jesus’ preferred method for saving the world. So how’s that for two questions to diagnose your spiritual state? Do you think well of your mother, and do you think well of the church? Or do you look down on them?

If you do look down on your mother and your spiritual mother, the church, do you enjoy doing so? Does it feel really good to despise them? Then you lack sense. You’re brainless, the Hebrew is implying. Literally, it says you lack a heart. Folly is painful and awful, and you won’t enjoy it at all unless you are a heartless fool.

So right up front, we have two different sources of joy posited. One is the joy of training a wise son and of watching him grow up to be wise in his daily activities. The other is its opposite — the joy of feeling superior, of indulging in the sin of despising your mother and thus breaking the fifth commandment. One is a real joy, the joy of seeing wisdom passed on to

someone you love. The other is a fake joy, the ultimately painful pleasure of despising someone who gave you life.

The person who does have understanding will walk upright. Rather than indulging in the poisoned pleasures of feeling superior, he walks a straight path. That is, he lives uprightly. He walks the right way. He lives an obedient life rather than a foolish life. In other words, the person of understanding is just another name for the wise son. If you understand life, you will find joy in being good, being wise, being understanding. You will enjoy “getting it.” If you prefer your sin, you will never understand life.

### **B. Speaking It, vv. 22-23**

Well, not only is there joy in learning wisdom; there is also joy in speaking wisdom. The joy of giving the perfect answer is almost unlimited. Have you ever had the pleasure of being able to answer the question perfectly, when the previous conversation made it obvious that people simply didn't know? Brothers and sisters, that's a gift of wisdom. Jesus our Savior had this gift more perfectly than any other person has ever had it. Remember when they asked Him whether to pay taxes, and He simply said “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's?” That answer summed up the entire discussion into a single irrefutable sentence. He did that all the time, whether asking questions about divorce in the resurrection or whether James and John could sit on His right and left, or what have you. He always had not just a good answer, but the perfect answer. That joy He had will be ours when we are conformed perfectly to His image. When we look like Him, we will think like Him too. Already we have the mind of Christ; how much more perfectly will we have it then, when we see Him as He is?

When you learn wisdom, not only do you admire Christ as the one with all the answers (not “Jesus is the answer” but “Jesus has the answer”, perhaps?) — you also learn the wisdom of giving counsel. One of things we're going to talk about in Sunday School is Hannah Arendt's idea that true freedom to pursue happiness is not individual, but rather the freedom to participate in government. Public deliberation and taking action as a governing body is the pursuit of happiness. That, my friends, is simply one expression of the wisdom that Proverbs is seeking to inculcate. If you are truly wise, you will have the joy of giving counsel, the joy of participating in making a plan that will succeed because many people who know what they're talking about have given input on it.

Now, we don't see examples of this in the life of Christ. He did not consult with many people and get advice from those around Him. Why not? Because God doesn't need advice. He's not limited, weak, and frail. But we are. There's a lot we overlook, a lot we don't know. That's why virtually all human activities are in their very nature collaborative. Most of what we do we with parts, materials, tools, patterns, and designs thought up by others. We use information gathered by others. We learn truths thought through by others. Brothers and sisters, wisdom in this world recognizes just how weak and limited we are. Maybe the most important point here is that the wise man doesn't try to go it alone. He doesn't assume that he's knowledgeable enough, smart enough, shrewd enough. That's the thought of the arrogant man who despises his mother.

The humble man recognizes that he wouldn't even be here without his mother. He recognizes his limitations and seeks counsel to meet them.

You're heard that the problem with autodidacts is that they had a bad teacher? It's perfectly true. The wise man who doesn't have God the Father as His perfect counselor at all times seeks advice, wisdom, help in forming his plans.

The final bit of joy in speaking wisdom comes from the timeliness of it. We most often notice this when we're deprived of it. "Oh, it would have been nice to know that the deposit is non-refundable. It would have been nice to know that your official policy is that you don't pay for hotel rooms when the flight was delayed by weather. It would have been nice to know that we wouldn't be welcome to eat at the Lord's Table in this church." We can get very frustrated when advice is delivered to us at the wrong time, especially when that time is too late. But the word in season is so good precisely because it comes when it's needed. I don't like to use too many movie illustrations, but what could be more a word in season than Ben Kenobi's yelling "Use the force, Luke?" That was a word delivered right when it was most helpful. One of our goals in the church needs to be to speak words in season to one another. You can give wise, biblical, pastoral, patient advice — but if you give it when the person is wrestling a toddler and trying to get out the door, your advice will be worthless. Praise God that He sent His Son the Word into the world at the right time, when the fullness of time was come — and not a moment sooner or later than that.

## **II. The Life of Wisdom, v. 24**

Well, I quoted this verse to Alexa while studying for this sermon, and she was shocked. "You mean the truth of eternal life is as obvious as that in Proverbs?" she asked. Yes it is, brothers and sisters. The path of wisdom which is the path of life winds upward, and the farther you go on it the farther away from the realm of the dead you get. Walk on the path of life long enough, and you will attain eternal life. It really is that simple.

What about death, though? Doesn't everybody die? Yes, but only physically. Those on the path of life pass through death and find beyond it refuge and life. Otherwise the "path of life" would be meaningless, for it would lead as surely to death as the path of folly does.

To follow the path of wisdom is to walk with Christ. The path of obedience is indeed the way to life — and if you don't walk that path, you will never find life. Life leads away from death. Period.

## **III. The LORD of Wisdom, vv. 25-29**

The motivation for all of this — and the guarantor of it — is the LORD. And the LORD comes up a lot in the next fifteen verses or so of Proverbs. Why? Because we are approaching the halfway point of the book. What does this mean? Well, recall with me for a moment the structure of Proverbs. The book is built on seven discrete units; we are in the midst of what is by far the longest one, 10:1-22:17. This unit is itself broken down into two parts, and the seam between them comes right at the end of ch. 15. Before this seam, almost all of the proverbs are antithetic; after it, almost all of them are synthetic. Also, this seam is signaled by the mentioned of the fear

of God which is the discipline of wisdom in the final verse of ch. 15. Here, at the halfway point, Proverbs reaffirms its motto regarding the fear of the Lord as the foundation and content of wisdom, and tells us more about the Lord and why we should fear Him. Thus, the bulk of this sermon, and of the sermon we will hear in two weeks, deal with the character of Yahweh. What is He like? And what is it like to know Him? The answer to those questions given here is that He rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked — i.e., that He is perfectly good and always rewards the good while discouraging the evil. To know Him, then, is to know Him as rewarding, loving, and holy — while to fail to know Him is to go down to Hell with His curse on you. Let's see these aspects of His character in a bit more detail.

### **A. He Punishes the Wicked, vv. 25-29**

First of all, our Father punishes the wicked.

#### **1. He ruins their homes, vv. 25, 27**

He will personally tear down the house of the proud.

One of my mother's friends — let's call her Jolene — was in an abusive relationship. One day Jolene's husband got mad and went into her closet and ripped holes in all her clothes. Then he took the closet rod out and used it to bash a bunch of holes in the closet's drywall. Now, what message did that send? Was that a great, "Honey, I love you" Valentine's gift? I don't think so. As mom told me at the time, to rip up someone's clothes seems to be a clear message of "I would like to rip you to shreds." To poke holes in their house is an open attack on them.

Well, that's how God feels about the wicked. He doesn't want their homes to stand. He doesn't want their dynasties to flourish. He hates those with proud hearts, those that think well of themselves. That's why Jesus was constantly fighting with the Pharisees, never with the tax collectors and prostitutes. God Himself is humble, as seen preeminently in the humility of Christ His wise Son. And God will not tolerate the ridiculous pride that we humans display. He tears down the house of the proud. Now, this is God's ultimate plan. He doesn't always do it right away. Obviously, the proverb implies that right now, the proud have houses. They might have lots of earthly possessions. But they won't get to keep them forever; God will rip those things away from them, at their death if not before.

One major way that God tears down the house of the proud is by their penchant for financial fraud. Here in the USA you can go to jail for insider trading, tax fraud, and other illegal financial practices. In China, you can be executed for taking bribes — and the PRC has in fact executed several high-ranking officials in the last 15 years or so. At least in the People's Republic, the one who hates bribes literally will live, while those convicted of taking bribes can indeed face the death penalty.

So do you want to tear down your house? Do you want to trouble your own family? Then be eager to make money in every way possible. Squeeze every nickel until it bleeds. Pinch every penny until your family loathes you for making them drive old cars, use little hot water, freeze in the winter and sweat in the summer. And even if your home remains standing, your household

will take a major hit. That's the result of worshipping money rather than using it to honor God and to bless His people, including your church family and your children.

God hates it when we love money. He will let your love of money destroy your household if you don't repent and turn away from it. Once again, as we saw at the beginning of the proverbs of Solomon, treasures of wickedness profit nothing, but righteousness delivers from death.

### **2. He abominates their thoughts, v. 26**

Well, God not only dislikes and reacts against shady financial practices and arrogant-hearted sinners. He also abominates evil plans and the evil people who plan them. To abominate something is to viscerally hate it. That's how God feels about plans to open another Planned Parenthood clinic. That's how He feels about plans to commit tax fraud, to look lustfully, to falsify your timecard, and any other evil plan you can think of. He hates them. Why? Because He is perfectly righteous, and He loves righteousness. Therefore, He cannot possibly be in favor of evil plans.

### **3. He hates their words, v. 28**

So let's see what we've learned. Our Father hates the arrogance of the wicked. He hates their morally shady financial practices. He hates the way they think. Oh, and He also hates the way they talk. The mouth of the wicked pours out evil things. If you've ever tuned in to "shock jock" Howard Stern, or other well-known evil commentators, then you've had the dubious privilege of hearing the mouth of the wicked pour out evil things. Many of you get to hear this kind of thing all day long from your godless co-workers. You can hear all of their gross, crude, anatomically explicit, and desecrating conversation. Rest assured, the LORD who speaks wisely does not approve of those wicked words from your coworkers. Far from it. And that means that when you're assaulted by those kinds of wicked words, you can relax. You can hand them over to God. It won't be easy. But you can say, "God hates this. Therefore, I won't submit to it. I won't pick it up and start talking like this. I will refuse to join in this way of talking. And I will give my distress over it to God."

One other thing. If you enjoy tuning in to television shows and movies that are loaded with evil words, where's your heart? Do you hate what God hates? Or are you a lot more positive about the words of the wicked than He is? Approving of those things your Father hates is not a good idea. Indeed, it is to be a foolish son who despises Him rather than a wise son who listens to Him. If your mind is constantly filled with the pure words of God, then there will be no room for the putrid and filthy words of this crooked and perverse generation.

### **4. He is not available to them, v. 29**

Prayer is universal. Everyone calls on God, and most of us do it pretty regularly, if only to say "No! Don't let my loved one die" or "God, if you get me out of this I'll go to church for a year, I swear." But God is far from the wicked. This is not a denial of His omnipresence, but rather of His religious availability. He's not available to the wicked. He just isn't. What this means in particular is that He doesn't hear their prayers. We know that from the contrasting second half of

the verse. For God to be “far from the wicked” is just another way of saying that when the wicked call out, He’s ignoring them. Of course He knows what they said. But He pays it no mind.

Now, obviously we can’t take this as the be-all end-all statement on the doctrine of prayer. Solomon himself prayed for a number of different types of unbelievers in his prayer at the dedication of the Temple. Indeed, if we were to insist that God could never hear the prayer of an unrighteous person we would have to conclude that it is pointless to ask Him for salvation or to pray the sinner’s prayer. That’s not the meaning here, or Solomon’s point. Rather, the proverb is telling us something about the character of God. He is not beholden to sinners. He does not have to listen to them. He is perfectly willing to ignore them insofar as that suits His purpose. He doesn’t consider Himself bound to respond or bound to help when those who hate Him cry out to Him. In fact, if He’s tearing down a proud man’s house and that proud man tries to bargain with Him, God is perfectly just to stick His fingers in His ears, as it were, and to calmly keep driving His bulldozer through the arrogant sinner’s living room.

### **B. He Establishes and Listens to the Righteous, vv. 25-29**

Contrast that attitude toward the wicked with our Father’s attitude toward the righteous.

#### **1. He establishes the helpless, e.g., widows, v. 25**

First of all, He cares for the helpless. Though God does hate and punish sin, nothing said above should take away from His love and mercy to sinners. The fact of the matter is that our God cares deeply for the down and out, the oppressed and helpless. He is merciful — the first characteristic listed in His famous self-summary in Exodus 34. That means that He has compassion on misery. The widow here stands as a representative of someone who is socially powerless. She doesn’t have a man to protect her, work for her, stand up for her. She is grieving and alone. But Yahweh calls Himself a father to the fatherless and a protector of widows. Here He says that He will establish the widow’s boundary — that is, that He will protect her property rights from those who would trample on them.

Again, this is not necessarily in this life. This has its ultimate fulfillment in the life to come. But for now, we know that this is the character of our God. He protects widows. He cares for orphans. And so should we.

#### **2. He gives life to those who hate illicit gain, v. 27**

He gives life to those who hate illicit gain. Anyone who loves to get money regardless of its source is not like our Heavenly Father. Our Father wants us to hate the wages of unrighteousness. Money gotten by theft, by playing the lottery, by false pretenses — all of that is unlawful. Money squeezed out of your family, depriving them of the good things that they ought to be enjoying, is evil in His sight. Instead, God rewards with life those who hate wrongful gain.

Now, again, this is not a new way of salvation — “Hate illicit gain and you will be saved.” Rather, it’s telling us once again the character of the wise son, who seeks life in the Father’s presence rather than every last cent he can acquire here on earth. Do you want to live? Then don’t look to money. Look to Christ.

### **3. He loves the pure, thoughtful words of the righteous, vv. 26, 28, 29**

Finally, though, the major characteristic of our Father that the text highlights is that He loves to hear us pray. It's repeated in three different verses. Pleasant words are pure — that is, pure to Him, pleasant to Him, enjoyable to Him. Similarly, the righteous studies how to answer. He thinks about what he's going to say — and when he does, his mouth pours out not evil things but good things. Is your mouth a repository of all kinds of good things? Or is most of your conversation made up of complaints, sarcasm, discontentment, and negativity of all kinds? God hears the prayers of the righteous because they are good and pleasant. Incidentally, too, notice that you can tell a righteous person by whether he instantly has an answer or if he sometimes has to say "Let me get back to you on that." The righteous person loves truth, and thus he's often going to take some time to think about the right answer. Only the wicked have a glib answer ready to go for any question.

Well, if God loves to hear you pray, if in His sight your words are pure and thoughtful and pleasant, here's the million-dollar question: Do you pray? How many pleasant, pure, thoughtful words does God hear from you? Do you come to prayer meeting? Do you gather your family for prayer every day? Every week? Or never at all? And when you pray, is it basically the same thing every time, or is it actually pleasant, pure, thoughtful words? Brothers and sisters, if your speech doesn't match the description of the righteous person's speech, then we have reason to wonder if you are among the righteous. If your mouth sounds like the foolish person's, your heart might actually be foolish.

Don't let it be. Cry out in prayer to your Father, who loves to hear you. Seek the joy of wisdom and the life of wisdom by walking with the God of wisdom — and your path will lead you straight to Heaven. Don't ever quit praying. Amen.