

## **3Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Cultivating a Knack for Life**

(Studies in Solomon's Proverbs)

#### **The Step before the first Step to Wisdom**

(Proverbs)

Study #1

#### **Introduction: Backtracking to pick up missed steps...**

For nearly a quarter of a century, my mother-in-law, Geri Kerr, taught pre-schoolers at a small school housed in an Episcopalian church in northwest Houston.

Geri was really good at what she did. She had an intuitive “knack” for working with young children.

Through the years, she became convinced of something that many others in the field of early child development also know, that there is an important sequence to follow in a child's development.

If any stage in that developmental sequence is skipped, valuable lessons aren't learned. And the best way to address a missed stage is to go back and learn it.

Case in point - walking. If a child came to Geri's class walking (and they all did), but never having learned to crawl, she would spend time on the floor with that child helping him or her learn to crawl through games and exercises.

Crawling is that important. There is a proper sequence for little ones to follow on the road to walking.

So it is with most things in life.

There is a proper sequence for learning advanced algebra and calculus. You start with basic arithmetic.

There is a proper sequence for learning to play sports. As legendary NFL coach Vince Lombardi said when he began coaching the Green Bay Packers, “*Gentlemen, this is a football.*”

In sports, in academics, and in LIFE, mastering the essentials is essential. Even if it involves backtracking and retracing steps, it is worth it to get back to the basics.

Today, we begin a short series of summer studies in Solomon's Proverbs. We're seeking wisdom. And, yes, there is a proper sequence to follow if we would find wisdom.

I'll warn you that you may find out this morning that you are going to need to retrace steps, crawl before you walk, and focus on a fundamental or two before you can make progress in wise living. There is an essential prerequisite if we would gain God-honoring wisdom.

But I'll also assure you that focusing on the fundamentals will be well worth it!

#### **Background to the book of Proverbs**

As you may be aware, most of the book of Proverbs was written or compiled by King Solomon of ancient Israel, a man whose name has been associated with wisdom for the last 3,000 years.<sup>1</sup>

Scripture tells us (1 Kings 4:32) that Solomon spoke three thousand wise sayings, so it's not surprising that he compiled some of that wisdom in a format that could be passed down from generation to generation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon was the third King of the Kingdom of Israel, after Saul and David. He was David's son.

<sup>2</sup> Collections of wise sayings were common, and proverbs were a well-known form (or genre) of literature in the ancient world. There are many parallels between the Proverbs, and other similar types of writings from various ancient cultures (specifically from Ugarit, Aram, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Sumer.) In fact, the Bible itself contains other “wisdom literature” besides that which is found in Proverbs. The Wisdom books include Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and several of

All great literature - and Proverbs is certainly great literature - is written for a purpose. Solomon's purpose in writing Proverbs was to give practical advice that would lead to a God-honoring life.

He says that the key to unlocking that kind of a life is "wisdom."<sup>3</sup>

Wisdom is not at all the same thing as intelligence. It's possible to be really, really smart, yet lack wisdom.

The point of wisdom is not how high you spike on an IQ test, but how well you navigate life. To be wise means that you have cultivated a knack for life. To act with "wisdom" is to act with skill. For instance...

- When Moses described the technical skill necessary to make the garments that were worn by the high priest (Exodus 28:3), he used the word *wisdom*.
- In the actual construction work on the tabernacle, he mentioned the skill needed to design and from the metal work (Exodus 31:3, 6; 35:35), and said that the builders and craftsmen used *wisdom* to get the work done.

To the Hebrew way of thinking, someone was considered *wise* if they applied savvy, or expertise to whatever they did.

Sailors at sea, (Psalm 107:27), warriors in battle (Isaiah 10:13), and political leaders (Moses - Deuteronomy 34:9; Joshua - 2 Samuel 14:20; David - Psalm 78:72) are all described as *wise* if they knew what they were doing in their areas of expertise.<sup>4</sup>

So, again, biblical wisdom is not about theoretical knowledge or absolute mental horsepower.

Biblically speaking, to say that someone is "wise" is to say that they have good ol' common horse sense. They live skillfully, with finesse. They have cultivated a knack for life.<sup>5</sup>

But there is another element involved in biblical wisdom. As the Bible speaks about it, wisdom is fundamentally about God. So, when Scripture invites you and me to gain wisdom, there is a spiritual component that makes getting wisdom more *urgent*, more *enticing*, more *compelling*.

And wisdom does indeed invite us to find her! She is not standoffish. She begs us to find her and to follow her.

Scattered throughout the first several chapters of Proverbs are passages where Wisdom, personified as a woman, calls people (men, young men, especially, but women are certainly in view, also!<sup>6</sup>) to follow her.<sup>7</sup>

Picture yourself walking through downtown San Antonio. There at the courthouse a woman is standing. She's crying out to you!

### **Wisdom Calls YOU Out!**

#### **From the City Square (Proverbs 1:20-33)**

*[20] Wisdom shouts in the street,*

*She lifts her voice in the square;*

*[21] At the head of the noisy streets she cries out;*

*At the entrance of the gates in the city, she utters her sayings:*

*[22] "How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded?*

*And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing,*

*And fools hate knowledge?"*

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the Psalms. The closest New Testament parallel to this type of literature would be the book of James.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word that we translate "wisdom" - Hebrew *chacham* - occurs almost 350 times in the Old Testament.

<sup>4</sup> There are a couple more interesting uses of the word "wisdom" in the Old Testament. First, in Job 39:17, the ostrich's lack of ability to rear her young is seen as a lack of wisdom (i.e. she has no skill in mothering). And then, in Jeremiah 4:22, the prophet Jeremiah surprisingly lambastes the people of Israel for their sin. But in so doing, he says that they have "skill (the word is "chokmah/wisdom") in doing evil!" They are good at sin!

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<sup>5</sup> As is evidenced by Bill Hybels' short and helpful book on Proverbs, [Making Life Work](#).

<sup>6</sup> Certain ones have wondered if young men are more naturally in need of wisdom than other kinds of people? ☺

<sup>7</sup> "Personification" - a literary device which consists of giving personal traits to an inanimate object, like wisdom. Interestingly enough, because of the intensely personal descriptions of Wisdom in the early chapters of Proverbs, along with the listing of some of Wisdom's accomplishments (like creation), some have supposed that Wisdom is another name for the pre-incarnate Christ.

*[23] Turn to my reproof,  
Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you;  
I will make my words known to you.”<sup>8</sup>  
[33] “But he who listens to me shall live securely,  
And will be at ease from the dread of evil.”*

Next, imagine you have been walking on the River Walk all day long, sightseeing. You’re tired and hungry. It’s been hot; you’re sweaty.

You hear a voice inviting you to a banquet.

### **From the Heights (Proverbs 9:1-6)**

*[1] Wisdom has built her house,  
She has hewn out her seven pillars;  
[2] She has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine;  
She has also set her table;  
[3] She has sent out her maidens, she calls  
From the tops of the heights of the city:  
[4] “Whoever is naive, let him turn in here!”  
To him who lacks understanding she says,  
[5] “Come, eat of my food,  
And drink of the wine I have mixed.  
[6] Forsake your folly and live,  
And proceed in the way of understanding.”*

That would be a meal to remember!

However, we find Wisdom’s most compelling invitation at life’s crossroads, *[8:2] where the paths meet.*

The great sage, Yogi Berra, once said, “*When you come to a fork in the road, take it.*” Wisdom says, “*When you come to a fork in the road of life, follow me!*”

### **From an Intersection (Proverbs 8:1-36)**

*[4] “To you, O men, I call,  
And my voice is to the sons of men.*

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<sup>8</sup> In verses 24-32, Wisdom makes clear how STUPID and self-destructive it is to not follow her.

*[5] O naive ones, understand prudence;  
And, O fools, understand wisdom.”  
[10] Take my instruction, and not silver,  
And knowledge rather than choicest gold.  
[11] For wisdom is better than jewels;  
And all desirable things cannot compare with her.”  
[32] Now therefore, O sons, listen to me,  
For blessed are they who keep my ways.  
[33] Heed instruction and be wise,  
And do not neglect it.  
[34] Blessed is the man who listens to me,  
Watching daily at my gates,  
Waiting at my doorposts.  
[35] For he who finds me finds life,  
And obtains favor from the LORD.  
[36] But he who sins against me injures himself;  
All those who hate me love death.”*

Wisdom offers herself at the fork in the road of life. The choices we make at this intersection mean the difference between life and death. Her way is life, and she begs us to follow her.

In all three of these scenes (town square, mountaintop, intersection) Wisdom does not watch impassively as you and I march by. She cries out. She begs. She is sending engraved invitations.

Nor is she “picky.” This evite goes out to one and all.

- If you are a child who hasn’t yet had to make critical life-direction kinds of decisions, Wisdom invites you to choose to follow her *before* the storms of adolescence hit.
- If you are a young person who is standing at life’s crossroads today, Wisdom invites you to apply her ways to critical choices *NOW*.
- If you are an older person who has already passed through important intersections in life and may have taken a wrong turns or two (and who hasn’t!), Wisdom invites you to backtrack, retrace steps, and learn her ways.

Wisdom doesn’t just “move with the movers.” She is not just pursuing those who have it all together. She doesn’t just stay with the holy huddle of the mature.

It is never too late to follow Wisdom and it is never too early to begin to follow her. Eight or eighty - she's calling out to you!

And she promises that she is better than silver, gold and precious jewels.<sup>9</sup>

Most of us like the idea of having silver and gold and precious jewels. Wisdom claims to be better than all of that! We WANT something that is that good!

Thankfully, Solomon tells us in the book of Proverbs what is the necessary first step on the path to gaining wisdom.

And we're going to get to that necessary first step in a minute. But before we do that, we're going to think together about a troublesome emotion.

It is an emotion with which many of us deal on a regular basis, one that some people believe is the most prevalent emotion of our time. Some counselors have suggested that this emotion is the basis of all neuroses. It is undoubtedly one of the strongest emotions we experience.

I'm thinking about the emotion of FEAR.<sup>10</sup> Fear can produce a number of devastating effects. One of those is paralysis.

### **Considering a Troubling Emotion: FEAR**

#### **The Paralyzing Effects of Fear**

If there is any distinction to be made between fear (and its brother and sister *anxiety* and *worry*) and many of the other emotions we experience, it is that fear is a limiter.

It binds us, shackles us, constrains and restrains us; it puts a floor and a ceiling and walls around us. Fear limits our actions.

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<sup>9</sup> She guarantees that the one who finds her discovers understanding (1:6), freedom from the dread of evil (1:33), discretion (2:11), protection from evildoers (2:13, 16), good reputation with God and man (3:4), straight paths (3:5-6), freedom from fear (3:24); and sound counsel (8:14).

<sup>10</sup> In ancient Greek superstition, "fear" (*φοβος*) was a real and very powerful deity.

Let's say you long to take initiative in some thing. You want to try something new. It could be at work or at church, in the home or at school. Well, you start to calculate what might go wrong if you take this initiative. Pretty soon, FEAR of failure takes over and you are immobilized. You never try what you have imagined.

OR, just as bad, you begin to calculate the cost of your success and the added responsibilities that will be put on you if you succeed. You stand still and don't move because of a fear of success.

Or consider how fear works in relationships.

Suppose someone you know is in need of something you have to offer. You want to serve them. But you don't know how they will respond if you approach them. You're afraid that they might reject your offer. So you don't move toward them.

Maybe you want to expand your circle of friends. There are people with whom you would like to establish relationship. But fear shouts a warning!

*"What if he doesn't want to be approached?" or "What if she doesn't like me?" or "What if she yells at me?" or "What if he expects more of me than I am ready to give?"*

Again, FEAR - this time of rejection or inadequacy - takes over and you are paralyzed. Fear will do that.

As well, Scripture reveals that fear will lead us into temptation. If we give into that temptation, it will lead us into sin.

#### **The Sin-Inducing Effects of Fear**

In the Garden of Eden, after Adam committed the sin of eating the forbidden fruit, his fear of exposure led him to hide from God in the Garden. Fear will do that. It will prompt us to hide from God.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Fear contributed to the downfall of King Saul of ancient Israel. Samuel the pries told Saul to destroy the wicked Amalekites. However, Saul rejected the command of God, and spared the best things of the Amalekites, along with their king. When Samuel rebuked Saul for his sin, Saul's rational was classic - and sad. [*1 Samuel*

When it came to Israel's conquest of the Canaanites, fear was the one thing Joshua was to avoid like the plague because fear is death to faith. Fear will keep us from trusting God.

No doubt about it. Fear is an enemy. Over eighty times in the Bible we are told to NOT be afraid. It paralyzes and tempts and seduces. It is one of the enemy's most potent weapons.

So it may surprise that when Solomon is inviting us to a life of wisdom, he tells us that the first step to take on the path that leads to wisdom is fear.

He wants us to nurture fear. We are to grow in fear. We are to become not *less*, but *more* fearful.

But the fear we are to nurture is not the fear of failure or success or rejection. We are to grow in ***“the fear of the Lord.”***

Along with those eighty instructions to NOT FEAR, there are well over one hundred separate instructions in the Bible to ***“fear the Lord.”***

### **The Fear of the Lord**

#### **Called to “fear the Lord”**

One of the best kings of ancient Israel, Jehoshaphat, gave this instruction - ***[2 Chronicles 19:7] Now then let the fear of the LORD be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the LORD our God will have no part in unrighteousness, or partiality, or the taking of a bribe.***<sup>12</sup>

Nehemiah tells us that it was ***“the fear of God”*** that kept him “on mission” to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup>

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***15:24] “I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord and your words, because I FEARED THE PEOPLE and listened to their voice.”***

<sup>12</sup> Job says, ***[28:28] the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom.***

<sup>13</sup> See Nehemiah 5:15 - The governors who had preceded Nehemiah had exacted high taxes from the people for their own profit. Nehemiah did not lay burdens on the people as the former governors had done because of the fear of the Lord.

The psalmist, looking out for the good of young children, promised them a good gift when he said, ***“I will teach you the fear of the LORD.”*** (Psalm 34:11). He even said that the Lord has a special place in His heart for those who fear Him (Psalm 147:11 - ***“The Lord favors those who fear Him.”***)

When he wraps up his sage advice, the author of Ecclesiastes writes, ***[12:13] The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.”***

And if you're thinking that ***“the fear of the Lord”*** is a strictly Old Testament concept, well, think again.

In the first century, when Christianity was brand new, we are told that the early church ***“[Acts 9:31] throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.***

The apostle Paul writes that the fear of the Lord motivates him to:

- (1) evangelize (2 Corinthians 5:11, ***“Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men...”***);
- (2) embrace practical holiness (2 Corinthians 7:1, ***“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”***);<sup>14</sup> and to
- (3) pursue healthy relationships in the church (Ephesians 5:21, ***“and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”***)

The Apostle Peter couldn't be more clear when he says, ***[1 Peter 2:17] Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.***

And if all of this weren't enough, listen to the words of Jesus:

***[Matthew 10:28] “Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”***

So Solomon is not alone in urging us to fear the Lord.

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<sup>14</sup> Paul also says, in Romans 13:7, ***“Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; FEAR TO WHOM FEAR*** (a clear reference to God); ***honor to whom honor.”***

OK. But what do all these biblical writers **mean** when they tell us that we are to **“fear God”**?

Well, when we talk about the fear of the Lord we are talking about a multi-faceted diamond. Among the more prominent facets of that diamond is the message that God is a Judge.

### Understanding “the fear of the Lord”

*Recognize that He is the Judge*

In any society, judges are powerful people. Nationally, Supreme Court justices hold great power. Locally, San Antonio municipal judges wield great power.

But no Judge has power to judge like **[Genesis 18:25] the Judge of all the earth**. From Genesis’ Garden of Eden to Revelation’s Great White Throne, the Bible describes God as the ultimate Judge.

He is the One who determines final guilt or innocence. He determines eternal destiny, who will be justified, and who will be condemned.

His judgment is righteous and He has set His standard of final judgment high. Very high. He requires absolute perfection.

And since none of us are perfect, none of us have a leg to stand on in this Judge’s court. What we need from this Judge is not justice but mercy.

Now, the good news is that you can find mercy in the court of this Judge by turning to Jesus. Place your trust in Him, the Lord who died and rose again, and the Judge will give you eternal life!

You who have placed your faith in Jesus will never taste God’s wrath and condemnation. That’s what it means to be “saved.”

But even you who are children of God will still face Jesus as Judge at the end of time to stand for His evaluation of your life, to receive reward - or not! - for the deeds that you have done in THIS life. (See 2 Corinthians 5)

If we are going to grow in our fear of the Lord we will own this idea that He is our Judge.<sup>15</sup>

Another facet of the **“fear of the Lord”** diamond is God’s transcendent majesty.

*Bow to His majesty*

Fear was Isaiah’s response of **[6:5] “Woe is me, for I am ruined!...for my eyes have seen the King, he Lord of hosts”** when he had a vision of God in the temple.

This part of the fear package is to be bowled over by God’s enormity, His “otherness”, His eternal and infinite nature, His power, and His might.

Just think about how you feel when you walk outside on a clear night, look up at the sky and see the stars. Oh, of course you marvel at the beauty of it all. But if you stand there long enough, and think about what’s out there, you’ll eventually start feeling really small as you look at the infinite expanse.

Or think about what goes through your mind when you stand at the shore of the ocean, with the waves lapping at your feet. Sure, you feel refreshed and cool and playful for a while. But keep standing there, looking at the waters that stretch out for hundreds and thousands of miles beyond what you can see and you’ll soon feel small.

I think of how I feel when I’m hiking on a trail - in the Hill Country or the Rockies. Yes, I’m refreshed and exhilarated. Yes, I’m captured by the beauty of it all. But after a while, whether I’m looking up at a peak or down into a canyon, I am soon reduced to feeling small, a speck in the vastness of the wild place.

A.W. Tozer once wrote that the most important thing about us is the first thing that comes into our mind when we think **“God.”**

That’s a great line, and Tozer is no doubt right.

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<sup>15</sup> The verb “to fear” in the Old Testament (Hebrew, *yare*) means “to tremble.”

And it probably shows how far I have to go in my own spiritual life that it takes me a while to get to the really good thoughts about God. Well, the longer I think about Him, the bigger He appears and the smaller I become.

The fear of the Lord sees the hugeness of God and is awed by His majesty.<sup>16</sup>

Now, because God is an infinite God, there is no end to the number of facets to the *“fear of the Lord”* diamond we might come up with.

But because my sermon is neither infinite nor eternal, and because all good (and otherwise) things must end, I’ll suggest one final facet of the diamond of the *“fear of the Lord”* this morning.

This third facet of the *“fear of the Lord”* diamond takes seriously the word *“Lord.”*

#### *Submit to His sovereign authority*

As the Bible uses the word, *“Lord”* means more than *“sir”* and it means more than *“boss.”* When we say, *“Jesus is Lord”* we mean that what He says, goes. Period.

God’s reign is not a democracy. He doesn’t derive His authority from the consent of the governed.

People in biblical times and most people who have lived throughout time (including today!) understand this. We who live under a representative form of government have a harder time “getting it.”

Here is the truth, though. We are God’s subjects. He is the King. We are His servants. He is the Master. We are His slaves. He is the Lord.

To *“fear the Lord”* is to submit to His lordship and to obey Him. It is to do what He says to do and avoid what He says to avoid.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Summing up the fear of the Lord...*

Some years ago, Hadley Reed was a member of our church. He and his family have relocated to Dayton, Ohio. He is not stationed at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.

Hadley is quite a man. At one time in his military career he was a flight surgeon who accompanied Special Ops teams on missions. From those experiences (plus his own personal experience with cancer) Hadley had occasion to study fear - up close and personal!

Hadley told me once that the military spends a lot of time and money studying fear. It does all it can to help soldiers learn to think clearly when facing a fearful situation.

As we have already seen this morning, fear can be paralyzing, and that is deadly on the battlefield.

Hadley added to that thought. He said that when we fear something all of our energies and attentions are naturally focused on the object of our fear.

That could be an enemy standing in front of us or a plane flying overhead. Success in battle requires that the soldier NOT focus on that fearsome thing.

But when it comes to living for Jesus, there is a different dynamic at work. When you and I fear the Lord, THAT fear will override all other fears. THAT fear differs from other fears.

Other fears paralyze; this one liberates. This fear entices us toward holiness; other fears tempt us to sin. To say it another way, we will either fear the Lord or we will fear everything else.

And THAT fear equips us with the necessary foundation for wisdom.

#### **The Fear of the Lord: The First Step toward Wisdom**

That’s why Solomon tells us -  
*[Proverbs 9:10] The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
 And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 8:1-4

<sup>17</sup> Exodus 1:15-21

In the weeks to come we will look at several themes that are addressed in Proverbs and will find tremendous, practical help in cultivating that “knack” for life.

I’ll admit that it was tempting to jump right in and addressed one of those highly practical themes right off the bat. We could have dealt with money, or friendship, or sex, or anger, or the sluggard today.

That would have been a huge mistake.

We are often far too quick to think in terms of “how-to.” How can I walk faster? How can I run farther?

Today, what we most needed was a crawling lesson.

### **Conclusion:**

My mother-in-law used to teach four year olds who had learned to walk without having learned to crawl to go back before they continued forward. They had to learn to crawl. It was that important to proper development to learn to crawl.

I suspect that many of us, today, may have passed over a critical step on the road to Christian maturity.

We have learned the vocabulary of our Christian sub-culture. We have learned enough theology to be dangerous. We are even committed to a life of service.

But we have overlooked the indispensable step that alone will give meaning and purpose to all the steps that come later. We have not nurtured a fear of the Lord.

If we want a powerful life for God, it is essential that we develop that fear of the Lord. If what we long for is a wise life that honors Him, it all starts with a fear of God.

So, what about you?

When you think of God, do you recognize Him as a righteous Judge - who has forgiven you, a majestic Creator worthy of your reverence, a Lord worthy of your submission?

Do thoughts of your awe-inspiring God wipe away all other paralyzing fears, all other fears that might tempt you to sin?

If so, great!

If not, would you join with me in praying a prayer lifted right out of Proverbs, a prayer designed just for people like us who need to grow in our fear of the Lord?

*[1] My son, if you will receive my sayings,  
And treasure my commandments within you,  
[2] Make your ear attentive to wisdom,  
Incline your heart to understanding;  
[3] For if you cry for discernment,  
Lift your voice for understanding;  
[4] If you seek her as silver,  
And search for her as for hidden treasures;  
[5] Then you will discern the fear of the LORD,  
And discover the knowledge of God.”*