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Proverbs 4:1-9

First Message

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THE VALUE OF WISDOM

The first eighteen years of my life were relatively smooth sailing. I had a loving home. My needs and wants were provided for. I enjoyed above average successes academically and athletically. I was well-adjusted and likeable. I also was grounded spiritually, responding to the invitation to seriously follow Christ at a tender age fifteen.

The last twenty years have been different, however. I've had to deal with leaving home, going to college, not knowing a soul, my parents' divorce, financial independence, choosing my life's work, the deaths of loved ones, loneliness, marriage, dealing with the addictions and depressions of people close to me, having children, parenting children, juggling job, marriage and children, etc.

What challenges have you had to cope with? What would your list look like?

Sooner or later, life requires us to reach deep within ourselves to see what's there. Or, having done that, we search outside of ourselves for resources to guide us through unpredictable and sometimes treacherous waters.

What have you relied on? What has been your guide? And has it been working for you? Job asked, "Where can wisdom be found?" Can we wear a "wisdom patch" behind our ear? Hang out with wise people? Read enough books?

And it's tough to have wisdom in life when you're young. Mark Twain said: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years." For the young here today, what will be your guide?

Imagine there is a book that offers wisdom on how to handle the issues of life. Would you pick it up? This book is very practical, too. It speaks about dealing with the lure of easy money, easy sex, the pursuit of materialism, true friendship, the power of words to heal and hurt, use of time, dealing with gangs and peer pressure, family life, and the nature of God.

No, this book is not in the checkout line of the grocery store; it's within your reach. Welcome to the three thousand-year-old book of Proverbs.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs, written by Solomon, under God's direction, are a very readable manual for handling these challenges from a wise father's perspective to a teachable son. Eighteen times the father begins a section with the words "my son," and then shares from his treasure of wisdom. Often, he takes his son into the streets of real life to observe the outcomes of wise and foolish decisions in life. The wisdom is shared with us in the form of vivid pictures, brief sayings and analogies designed not to spoon-feed us, but to spur us into thought and reflection. We have to dig a little for its truth.

So this morning I invite you to let God do an examination of your life: what drives you, what you value, what you rely on for your

primary resource for handling life's problems. Are you ready to do this? Are you ready to join me? It's worth it.

In this three-week series in the book of Proverbs we will learn from the father's teaching, from chapter 4. Today, in verses 1-9, we will see the two ways we must value wisdom for the result to be a life of beauty—the way life was designed to be lived .

Proverbs 4:1-9:

**Hear, O sons, the instruction of a father,
And give attention that you may gain understanding.
For I give you sound teaching;
Do not abandon my instruction.
When I was a son to my father,
Tender and the only son in the sight of my mother,
Then he taught me and said to me,
"Let your heart hold fast my words;
Keep my commandments and live;
Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!
Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.
Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;
Love her, and she will watch over you.
The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;
And with all your acquiring, get understanding.
Prize her, and she will exalt you;
She will honor you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a garland of grace;
She will present you with a crown of beauty." (PROV 4:1-9 NASB)**

What a beautiful picture is set before us! Here is the impassioned appeal of the father for attentiveness from his son, the tender recollection of his own home environment, and the words of his own father, the boy's grandfather.

Since we're beginning in the middle of Proverbs, we must first understand some assumptions found in this book.

First, we must understand the nature of wisdom. What is wisdom, anyway? In Proverbs, wisdom is not measured by intellect or degrees, but by character. Wisdom is the ability to apply truth to one's life experiences. It is not merely knowing truth, it is not theoretical or abstract, but has as its goal successful and responsible living.

Furthermore, in the Proverbs, wisdom is often personified, and that Person is ultimately expressed in Christ himself in light of New Testament revelation. Jesus is the very embodiment of wisdom. God crystallized his wisdom in his Son. So to fully understand and embrace wisdom, one must seek after and embrace God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Evidence for this is found throughout the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 1:30, the apostle Paul says that Christ Jesus became the "wisdom from God" for us. In Colossians 2:3, he says that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Hebrews begins by saying that "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers

in the prophets in many portions and in many ways [which includes Proverbs], in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.”

A second assumption we need to understand is what is meant by the phrase, “the fear of the Lord.” It isn’t mentioned in our passage specifically, but as we have heard this morning in our Scripture readings, from Job (28:28), Ecclesiastes (12:13) and the introduction of Proverbs, the beginning of knowledge and the search for wisdom is “the fear of the Lord.”

What does this mean? Basically, it means an orientation to seek answers to life’s questions from a higher authority—the Lord—and not yourself. The egocentric person does not do that. He looks within himself for the resources to handle all that life throws at him. The “fear of the Lord” also is a deep respect and awe, not a fearful terror. It is not being afraid of God, that he is going to get even with you. It is being afraid of doing something that will hurt the heart of God.

A third thing we must understand as we approach our study in Proverbs is that we be teachable. The first words out of the father’s mouth in almost every section are: “listen,” “hear my words,” “give attention.”

Meaningful communication involves active listening—and listening well is difficult. If I want my five-year-old’s attention when I’m trying to teach him about safety, I appeal to him to stop what he’s doing and look at me. And he appeals to me when he wants to communicate something valuable to him. He’ll even grab my shirt and pull me down to him when it is evident I am preoccupied and merely paying lip-service to his voice.

Wisdom is not for a fool, not because a fool is dumb, but because he is unteachable. He is “wise in his own eyes.” He doesn’t seriously want to know about God. God desires our attentive hearts and minds, our willingness to learn.

The last thing we need to know as we come to this book is that wisdom is first to be learned in the home. Wisdom is best transferred generationally and along lines of affection.

Mother and father both are involved (1:8-9; 6:20) in this training of character. And the environment is the home, where tenderness exists and memories are created and shared. Further, the learning doesn’t stay there only, but immediately goes out into the streets (1:10-19), into all of life, to show the son what life is like and how to relate to it wisely.

So, what are the two ways we must value wisdom? And how should it look in our lives? The grandfather gives two images which represent how to treat wisdom if you’re serious about it. The first is in verses 5 and 7; the second is in verses 6, 8 and 9.

First, we must value wisdom as the supreme possession in life. Verses 5 and 7:

Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!
Do not forget, not turn away from the words of my mouth...
The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;
And with all your acquiring, get understanding. (4:5, 7)

By repetition, he gets his point across. Five times, the same word is used, which is translated “acquire,” “buy,” or “get.” This is a business term which means to purposefully and intentionally acquire something in order to possess it. When we were in Israel, I saw this word displayed in the banks while we were “buying” shekels. I also saw it on a shopping mall. Because you value something as essential to life, you acquire it.

The point here is that he’s not talking about a material thing, but wisdom. But, in the same way, do we purposefully set aside the valuable assets of time and attention in order to acquire wisdom?

My son asked us recently about heaven. He pondered this place where we’ll see God and be with him forever. He asked if he could take any toys with him. We said he wouldn’t need any of them, because in heaven it was one big party. He thought about that and asked if an angel could come down and retrieve a few of his “treasures,” his favorite possessions, which he keeps in a little box.

We find this amusing, but really, we live our lives accumulating and consuming as if we’re going to take our favorite toys with us. Is that wise?

The language is intensified in verse 7: “in all your acquiring, acquire understanding!” This means, buy it at any cost, above all other acquisitions!

The grandfather is saying, think of all the material things we acquire over our lifetime, yet if we leave out wisdom, we have nothing. If we are busy collecting things above all else, all we’re really doing is rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic!

The best indicator of our priorities is to examine our daytimers, our checkbooks, and have someone interview our wives.

I must say to you that when it comes to Christ being preeminent in my thought life, my schedule, my prayer life and devotional life, you wouldn’t think I valued wisdom much. You might think that I valued more the praise of people.

Too often we trivialize or marginalize God. We compartmentalize him so we can manage him.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the children were finding out about who Aslan is. They ask if Aslan is a man, and Mr. Beaver replies:

“Aslan a man? Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the song of the great Emperor-beyond-the-sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—THE Lion.”

“Oooh!”, said Susan. “I thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and make no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver, “if there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about being safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

Too often we have domesticated and tamed God. We don’t value him because we have the wrong idea of who he is, or we want a Jesus who is “safe.”

Secondly, we must value wisdom as the supreme relationship in life. This is the second quality which the grandfather emphasizes. Verses 6, 8, 9:

Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;
Love her, and she will watch over you...
Prize her, and she will exalt you;
She will honor you if you embrace her.
She will place on your head a garland of grace;
She will present you with a crown of beauty.” (4:6, 8-9)

Many times in Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman who is presented as the true bride of the soul. The language is that of a bride and groom. Notice that the level of intimacy intensifies in verses 6 and 8: Do not abandon her, love her, prize her, embrace her.

I went to a wedding last week. It was an wonderfully detailed and beautiful occasion. Time seemed to stop as a glimpse of heaven's joy and beauty were captured for a moment. The emotion for me came from the imagery surrounding the bride: the absolute preciousness of her dreams fulfilled there; her preciousness and purity in the eyes of the groom, her father, and all those who knew her made her much-anticipated entrance stunning.

This is the picture the father is giving us about wisdom: that Christ is to be our most treasured, cherished and honored relationship. Treasure him as you would a woman you are taking to be your bride for life.

A few weeks ago, my wife and I went with a group to tour Israel. For the rest of our lives we will recall that wonderfully rich time together. What a blessing for our relationship, that we were able to experience it together rather than build distinct memories apart from each other.

Too often we do this with Christ. We don't let him into all areas and experiences of our lives. We don't cherish his company. Thus we build separate memories and lives apart from him. So we lack the intimacy we long for.

Building a relationship with Christ, then, means spending time with him and not building distinct memories in life apart from him. We can spend time with him in prayer, both listening and speaking from the heart. We can spend time with his Word. And we can spend meaningful time with others who know him and will also encourage this relationship first in our life.

Seeking to prize Christ as our highest relationship will serve to make all our other relationships healthier.

If we do this, if we value our relationship with Christ over our other important relationships, like marriage and children, what effect will that have?

Eugene Peterson has some wise insights here:

When I observe the families where parents seem to be doing a good job of living the Christian faith in relation to their children, it is readily apparent that the actual practices vary widely. Particular rules, techniques of discipline, variations of strictness and permissiveness, they all run the gamut. One thing stands out, though. These parents seriously, honestly, joyfully, follow the way of Christ themselves. They don't define adolescence as a problem and try and solve it; they are engaged in vigorous Christian growth on their own, and permit their children to look over their shoulders while they do it.

Are we allowing our children to look over our shoulders at our dynamic relationship with Christ, our struggles and victories? Or do they only see our arguments and disappointments in their choices?

And notice that a dynamic relationship with Christ where we are communicating with each other, falling in love with him and lifting him up to the place of the most special relationship of our life will result in receiving back blessing. Christ, the wisdom from God, will guard you, watch over you, exalt you, honor you, and crown your life with beauty and grace. This is the nature of a prized relationship with God. It is two-way; it is increasingly tender and sweet; and we receive much more than we dreamed.

So we need to ask ourselves two questions:

Has a preoccupation with the acquisition of "stuff" got in the way of seeking the Lord, at any cost?

Is another relationship in this life of greater importance to us than Christ?

Proverbs reminds us that the wisdom of God is available to anyone who wants it. Come and get it. It is free, but not cheap.

Let us return to our first love, the Wisdom of God, Jesus Christ.

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