

Proverbs 2

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[0 : 00] We are in Proverbs. Tonight, Proverbs chapter 2. Proverbs wants us to pursue wisdom. In a way, it's a really simple book. The first nine chapters of all these poetic bits, and they kind of say the same thing over and over with lots of different images and different language. And then a lot of the book is really, really difficult to understand because there are these obscure Proverbs that you're meant to think about and toss over in your mind. To say the least, it doesn't make for easy preaching necessarily. And so let's look at one of these repetitious parts and see what we can find.

There's some really, really good things that the Lord would have to tell us here. I use the word pursue wisdom because it captures the different attitudes that we should have towards it, to call out for wisdom, to desire it, to search for it. Have a look at those first four verses again.

My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding, yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures. The book of Proverbs wants us to pursue wisdom. It stresses over and over that we should listen to the voice of wise teachers, to seek after wise instruction, to embrace it as a person. Wisdom is even portrayed, personified as a woman who's calling out into the streets. She's inviting people to her. She's sort of proclaiming her own benefits and grandeur. As I said, the middle of the book has all these proverbs that are meant to build wisdom in us by giving us things to think about and things to put into action. And then the end of the book concludes with another woman, but this time it's not a kind of personified abstract thing. It's an actual woman, a mother and a wife, and she has all of wisdom with her and she's embodying it and acting in this incredibly wise way. It kind of describes all of her characteristics and behaviors. And so we're, in view of all of that, supposed to want wisdom. We're supposed to want wisdom. Imagine the deacons sent around a questionnaire today. Four questions.

[2 : 39] The first one is this, true or false? I want to be wise. True. Number two, how important is wisdom in the Christian life? Not at all. Somewhat important. Very important. The most important thing in the Christian life. Let's say somewhat important for number two. Number three, describe two ways that you've tried to become wise this week. You might have read your Bible. I might have asked for a little bit of advice, but you might come up short on that. I'll come back to that. We'll put it that way.

And then number four, what does it mean to pursue wisdom? Some of you might have a nice answer. Some of you might look over at your neighbor and say, would you put for number four? What's it mean to pursue wisdom? That's a bigger question. We do want wisdom. I don't think anyone in here would come to me and say, you know what? I'd like to be a fool. Wisdom's really not my thing. I'll opt for a life of folly. Most of us do want some wisdom. Now, I don't know that it's always on a high-ranking list of Christian living, of our priorities for what it means to live in light of God's revelation, to live in light of God's community, to say, ah, wisdom for me is a priority. It's one of the top things I think about. It's one of the top things I do focus on devotionally in the week and spiritually.

We're not really sure how our other efforts sometimes to worship God have anything to do exactly with wisdom. Part of what's going on here is we don't think that wisdom issues, and I'll tell us, we'll unpack what those are. Wisdom issues are that important in the Christian life. But that important for the Christian life. Let's maybe view it like this. I have the basics of what it means to be a Christian with me in my daily, in my week, okay? So we've got maybe the Ten Commandments and the armor of God. Those kinds of things, the basics of what it means to go out into the Christian life. The belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, sword of the Spirit, shield of faith, shoes fit with the gospel. And you go out into your day with that armor on.

You go into the office and you hear someone bad-mouthing Christians, and so you take out the sword of the Spirit and you strike them down with God's truth. You strike down that opinion. You're sitting at your computer, and you're tempted to do something you shouldn't do.

But you realize you're wearing the breastplate of righteousness, and you need to protect your heart, and you stand firm amidst temptation. Your kids are lying to you, to your face, actually, again.

[5 : 49] So you take out that belt of truth, and you warn them. You just warn them that lying will be punished with the belt of truth. You find a friend in need, and so you tie up your shoes of the gospel readiness, and you go right to them and bring them the peace that only God can give. What could be more essential than the armor of God, and we'll say our Ten Commandments for guidance and weekly Christian living.

But there's a lot of stuff in between. There's a lot of stuff in between those core elements to Christian living and all of the world out there, right? If we can call the kind of world that we step out into every day or every week, it's a kind of white space, and we've got these black elements of the armor of God and the Ten Commandments, then we've got a lot of gray in between, okay? There's a lot of gray in between. There's a lot of things that happen out there that we're not always quite clear. They're kind of Christian-like, but at the same time, they don't always seem clearly related to these things that we have for Christian living. It's a lot of gray space, right? What kind of things do I have in mind? Well, things like financial responsibility, for example. Yeah, I mean, being a Christian really informs that, but don't always know how exactly, don't steal, I know that. Be generous, those sorts of things.

Things like laziness, our reputation among other people, our appetites, physical appetites even, how we speak around other people, the way we manage our emotions. How do those things fit into the Christian life? Because those things are the things that I'm referring to as wisdom issues.

I'm not going to tell you that those things are more important than some of the core aspects of the Ten Commandments, of our confession of faith, but I am going to say that they're very important and that they matter a lot to God and should matter a lot to anyone who calls themselves a Christian.

That list of topics I just mentioned, finances, laziness, reputation, appetite, speech, our emotions. There's at least 20 chapters of the Bible that are dedicated to those things, how to figure out how to deal with those things well and in a godly fashion.

[8 : 08] Those 20 chapters make up two-thirds of the book of Proverbs, so they're at least worth a look. Now, as I said, Proverbs is all about wisdom. That's clear even from the passage we just heard, Proverbs chapter 2.

One definition for wisdom is knowing how to do all these things well. The art of godly living. If you're going to write something down, if you're going to memorize something about wisdom, it's the art of godly living. It's not just following rules, but it's not doing away with all the rules and guidance whatsoever. It's an art form, and it's not just good living, it's godly living.

Godly living, it turns out, is spreading the gospel and knowing how to talk to people well. It's about speaking truth and about making, even negotiating, peace. It's about being able to resist temptation and also about keeping the right kinds of friends and avoiding dangerous situations.

Proverbs offers us something distinctive for godly living that we don't find many other places in the Bible. And so I've got some very good news today. And it's not only that wisdom is important, that we should want wisdom, but that God gives wisdom and wisdom protects us. God gives wisdom and wisdom protects us. The passage takes a weird turn, actually. We've been looking, we've been listening, we've been searching for wisdom. If you seek it like silver, if you search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. The search for wisdom should and will likely lead us to God. God is the owner of wisdom. He possesses it, he dispenses it, he guarantees it, he can distribute it. Without God we can have no true wisdom. So the search for wisdom will bring us first to God as its source. And it's not that God gives us wisdom and has nothing else to do with it.

Wisdom is not a birthday card that God might just purchase or take off the shelf, sign his name on it, give it, you know, ultimately that's for you, you keep that. It just has my name on it. And that's that's really all he has to do with it. It's not like that. God, wisdom is a God thing. Wisdom is a God thing. And it might just be on the next page actually in Proverbs 3, 3, 18 and 19. We're given a picture of what God does with his own wisdom. The Lord by wisdom founded the earth. By understanding he

established the heavens. By his knowledge the deeps broke open and the clouds dropped down the dew.

[11 : 28] If you need a chapter of the Bible to read this week or tonight, maybe alone, maybe with your family, maybe with friends, whatever it is, read Proverbs chapter 8. It takes those two verses and it just magnifies them. It talks about God's wisdom and her incredible grandeur because of her proximity to God and what God did in the creating of all things.

And this little poem too is trying to tell us how wonderful wisdom is, how attractive and powerful and holy wisdom should be to us. When God created the heavens and the earth, he used wisdom. He used wisdom. There are lots of examples I could give of incredible human wisdom, right? We can point to all of these things. And one of the wonderful things about wisdom is it is an area of common grace.

There are ways to live well, even if we don't do it out of love for God or as God's people to live well in the earth, that we would consider wisdom, right? And that things that all people can learn. But that's different ultimately from godly wisdom. But we have all kinds of wonderful examples. I've got notes here on architecture in Singapore, but I've recently been fascinated by barrels and barrel making. There's a wonderful history of of barrel making across Europe. And of course, for a long time, people just made clay pots to keep things in. And we all, most of us have made a clay pot actually in school. But barrels were a real innovation, right? And you start first by looking for really straight trees. And then if you cut those trees into strips of wood, and of course, you put them together and you have a nice side, they're just going to create a straight line, put a bunch of stacks of wood together, and they're flush. And so you've got to carve the sides of the pieces of wood until they start to fit together into a nice ring. And then they figured out how to bend these strips of wood. They treat them with water so they don't warp in the sunshine, treat them with heat so they are resilient. They tighten them up again and again, and they can hold liquid.

Hundreds and hundreds of years ago. It's really an impressive thing. So you've never geeked out about barrels. Now's your chance to look into barrels. It's an impressive feat of human engineering, skill. And in a way, it's such a meager feat compared to what we witness in God's creation.

[13 : 56] Gravity, temperature, the life cycle, the immeasurable interrelatedness of all things, the human body of loan. If you've ever had a heart scare, your heart's not beating enough, not fast enough, not in the right rhythm, things like that, it makes you very self-conscious about what that heart is doing. And you will think about it a lot, and you'll be very impressed that it just keeps going and going and going. It beats so many times every single day. So it's an incredible thing.

By God's wisdom, all things were created. Now instead of architecture or beating hearts or barrels, the apostle Paul is talking about predestination and God's plans for all time in the book of Romans. But he too admires the wisdom of God. He gets to a point in asking these theological questions where he doesn't have the answers. We can say that Paul doesn't have the answers to these questions. He's not provided with the inside, a view completely behind the curtain. And so he says this, O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?

Who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever." God's wisdom is a great mystery. It's well beyond our understanding. And yet, it is important and it is to some degree shared with us by God. God provides wisdom to those who pursue it.

And now we're in verse 9. Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity in every good path. For wisdom will come into your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will watch over you. Understanding will guard you.

To get godly wisdom is to undergo a sort of rebirth. Wisdom is for those who know God, and so to pursue wisdom, we must pursue God. Because it is God who gives us wisdom. It's a relational thing, and it comes into the heart.

[16 : 18] And this is why it deals with the fear of the Lord. As you saw in verse 10, wisdom will come into your heart. Knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. Discretion will watch over you. Understanding will guard you.

It's also going to say there that then you will find the knowledge of God, as we read before. The fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God.

And in a way, this is Proverbs way of saying you have the right relationship with God. The fear of the Lord is having the right relationship or the right kind of relationship with God.

The Bible uses all sorts of names for this. Covenant membership, belonging to the people of God, rebirth, the life of faith. Anyone identifying with those titles has the right fundamental attitude towards God.

As we heard this morning rightly, we need to confess. We come in repentance and faith. These are all core elements of the Christian life. But there is something about the Christian believer that at your core, you have a fear of God. You have a reverence for God.

[17:19] And you understand that that intimacy with God is not to be taken lightly and not to be taken for granted. That's the fear of the Lord. It's allegiance. It's acknowledging the Lord as Lord of your life.

It's a baseline attitude with all the different waves of everyday Christian life on top. So this is all about the promise that wisdom will come into your heart.

And I hope you're starting to see that the other stuff in life, the finances, your choice of words, reputation, friends, work ethic, that stuff is spiritual stuff and it's a matter of the heart.

To live life well, by that I mean to live life in a godly way, in all domains, requires an internal change that God does to us. To live life well, by that I mean to live life in a way, in all domains, we're going to live life in a way.

And we pursue it. It's not the exact same language, but similar when Paul speaks of the children of God, that God has sent his spirit into our hearts.

[18:23] Wisdom will come into your hearts. The spirit is sent into your hearts. This is the person who delights in the law of the Lord, who seeks God at work in everyday things, the person who's full of the Holy Spirit.

That person fears God and has wisdom in the heart. You might be confused still about how Proverbs fits in and across the whole Bible.

How does Jesus relate to Proverbs? How do Christians read Proverbs really? Right? We're starting to get some glimpses inside of that. But what's really a concrete way that this actually starts to fit up with our Christian theology?

One of the things we can do is to think about the wisdom that God gives us, like you think about the fruit of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Holy Spirit. They are born on us like fruit on a tree, but God really does the producing.

He produces the fruit and we simply bear the fruit. So we do and we should strive like Christ, to put on the new person, to leave sin behind, to clothe ourselves in righteousness. Right? The Christian life is an active life. We're told again and again, do these things, go after these things. But we only grow in Christlike behavior because God transforms us. He transforms our heart and our activity and our thoughts and all of these things. He unites us to Christ. The Spirit dwells within us. And so these are the basics of Christian identity. Biblical wisdom is a part, it's a part of that identity. And God gives it to us in this way.

[20:08] It's a spiritual gift. And it's one of the amazing blessings of knowing Christ. In a way, it is already yours. And it's something to claim and pursue and pray for.

This is one of the promises of Proverbs for those who pursue wisdom. To look for it, long for it, embrace it, and God will give it. The second promise is that those who pursue wisdom will be delivered from moral danger. They'll be delivered from moral danger. Let's have a look at verse 12 and then 16. Verse 12 and then 16. Wisdom will come into your heart. You will fear the Lord, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech. And then in verse 16. So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words. Both of these groups get a description. The people tending towards evil and the adulteress, protected from both of these things.

This path of evil, this way of evil. It's taken by those who lie, who cheat, who walk in darkness, who delight in things that God condemns. These are the wicked in Proverbs. So if you are reading it, the wicked shouts with his mouth, but the righteous will be prudent in his words. Something like that.

The wicked are these groups in Proverbs. They follow the way and the life of evil. They're the same thing as the fool, same thing as the wayward person. So there's two elements here. There's one, an element of temptation.

Right? You might be lured into getting money in an underhanded way. For example, that's something that the evil crowd might tempt people with. And wisdom is supposed to help us resist

that temptation. It protects us in that way. But there's also an element of growing wisdom within us. That God grows wisdom within us and we become people who just aren't quite as tempted as we might have been by those things.

Temptation just doesn't always have the same sting. Tempting. That's real deliverance in a way. Protection on the one hand and transformation on the other hand. It's kind of like learning self-defense. Someone can teach you all these different moves and you might have to think really hard about when to stick your right hand up and when to stick your left hand up in a fight. You know what to do. You can do it. You can resist and deflect and block. Protect yourself. But it's another thing to become an expert at those things and not even think about it.

[22 : 44] And just naturally do the motions, which I won't even try to imitate, and protect yourself and self-defense. That's the idea. On the one hand, it's a sort of strong-armed resistance to temptation. On the other hand, it's a people who are transformed into becoming people who have the skill of godly living.

We encounter temptation, alternative ways of life every day. And I'm not talking about the obvious ones. The billboard that says this, the kind of, you know, telling your kids don't watch that movie. It's just not going to be a good idea. Are you knowing when we spend time, if I spend too much time with with that group of people, it's just not going to go well for me, right? Some of these things are obvious that we know we shouldn't do. I'm talking about some of the more muddy scenarios, some of the more challenging questions that we face. Consider this one. You work a job and you know you're contracted to finish at 5 p.m. All of your colleagues stay until 6 p.m. And you'd be very happy to stay, but by staying, you might not be able to cook a meal for your family. You might not be able to spend particular time with someone in your family. You might not get to Bible study on the time that you'd like to.

It's not evil to stay in the office until 6 p.m., necessarily. Right? And you can run it through the kind of criterion of idolatry, something like that. Am I staying there just because I'm worshipping something else besides God? Well, maybe it's not clear cut. Maybe you don't feel that conviction no one else has told you. But there's still something there. It's not necessarily evil to stay in the office until 6 p.m., but it may not be the wise thing to do. And if you're the person or people at home and you're watching someone try to make this choice, it's also a question of how do you raise this issue? How do you raise these kinds of issues and questions? How do you talk about it?

And so on. It's a simple example, but you've got choices you're facing that life is demanding of you, choices that we have to make. And it's not always easy to know what to do. An extra hour, in this case, at work can mean a promotion. It can mean better relationships with your colleagues whom you care about.

[25 : 05] It could mean more money, all of which seems to be good for God's people, for your family, for you, for friends. Sometimes these choices are easy and sometimes these choices are really, really difficult.

Wisdom is the power from God that enables us to live well amidst all these choices of life, big choices and small choices. I'll say it one more time. Wisdom is the power from God that enables us to live well amidst all of these choices, both big and small. It protects us from going astray. It may mean that instead of making that choice alone and thinking, I can figure it all out, that you talk to the right people, that you humbly take advice on board, and you have confidence in the path before you.

All of that entails wisdom, knowing who to listen to, how to be open-minded, how to prioritize God amidst confusion and temptation. Wisdom is godly good sense, and it has some power to keep us from harm in the world. It does protect us to some degree. The last thing to say is it's of course not a guarantee.

Just because you read Proverbs and maybe abide by the Proverbs, it doesn't mean that something won't go wrong. Tragedy will strike. We will succumb to temptation. We will act foolishly, even as God's people. And so we continue to turn to the Lord in repentance and faith as always. Godly wisdom is a part of the Christian life. It's a part of the Christian identity. It's not the whole picture. So is wisdom a bonus? Is it a bonus in Christian living? Sometimes that's how it feels. I've got all the basics figured out, and now I've got this kind of bonus, this additive, and it's wisdom.

[26 : 59] Well, no, wisdom belongs to the core elements of the Christian life. It's a core part of the Christian life and a direct spiritual gift from God. I've given a few suggestions for application. One is to think about wisdom like we think about the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and to engage in our

relationship with God in a way that expects those things, that asks for those things, and to live in a way that pursues those things. And the second one, of course, is to study Proverbs.

Proverbs is going to kind of point to itself, which might be a little frustrating. It's not just that you get wisdom in the abstract, then you go out in your life. It's that you've got to read through some of these Proverbs. You've got to seek godly advice, and so on. You've got to sort of get stuck in and go for it. And the last thing is this, to ask God for wisdom. Sounds simple, but it is a really, really clear direction, particularly from the letter of James. James says this, if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith with no doubting.

Again, the wisdom of God is the wisdom that's found in Christ. And there's every spiritual blessing prepared for those who fear the Lord. So let us ask God for wisdom. Let us pray.