

Ancient Wisdom for Today

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
June 14, 2020

- Scripture: Proverbs 3:5-8; 2:6-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

^{3:5} Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.

⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.

⁸ It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body....

^{2:6} For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

⁷ he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,

⁸ guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.

⁹ Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path;

¹⁰ for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;

¹¹ prudence will watch over you;
and understanding will guard you.

Even with most in-person commencement ceremonies having been cancelled this spring, many of us still had the chance to listen to baccalaureate or commencement speakers: class presidents, school administrators, even dignitaries sometimes. I myself have had the honor of speaking on a few such occasions.

One of the more memorable commencement addresses in the last thirty years wasn't actually delivered by its author. In 1997 Mary Schmich, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, wrote what she *imagined* she would say if she were asked to give a commencement speech. You can find it online by searching the simple piece of advice that opened and closed her remarks: "Wear sunscreen." In an amusing yet poignant way Ms. Schmich offered advice to cap-and-gown-wearing teens about to merge into the world of adulthood, simple guidance like

- Read the directions, even if you don't follow them.
- Do not read beauty magazines. They will only make you feel ugly.
- Get to know your parents. You never know when they'll be gone for good.
- Be nice to your siblings. They're your best link to your past and the people most likely to stick with you in the future.¹

¹ Mary Schmich, "Wear Sunscreen." *Chicago Tribune*, June 1, 1997, at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/chi-schmich-sunscreen-column-column.html>, accessed 6/9/2020

Young people will read her column and think, “Yeah, yeah....” Adults will read it and think, “She’s so right...!”

Wisdom is the hard-earned reward for experience. Considering what they had to go through to attain wisdom, it’s natural for older generations to want to pass along the wisdom of their experience to the rising generations... praying that the younger generations will somehow have the wisdom to notice, hear and consider what is being shared.

The Bible tries to accomplish the same thing: passing along nuggets of wisdom to succeeding generations. We find it in the Old Testament book called, appropriately enough, “Proverbs.”

Why does the Bible include the book of Proverbs? We know the Old Testament includes books presenting the history of God’s people striving to learn how to worship and serve God. The Old Testament also contains the writings of prophets: figures who boldly called out their fellow Israelites to abandon their selfish, sinful lives and return to faithful living.

And then there’s a third category. It’s a sort of catch-all category. It includes a book containing the texts to religious songs (we call it the book of Psalms). The catch-all category includes secular poetry (the book called the Song of Solomon), along with a sort of diary encouraging one to take life seriously (the book of Ecclesiastes). And, of course, there’s the book called Proverbs.

A proverb, of course, is “a short, traditional saying that expresses some obvious truth or familiar experience.”² The biblical book of Proverbs appears to be a compilation of numerous collections of wisdom sayings handed down by rabbis – teachers. Scholars think it’s a mishmash of quotes because a few proverbs in the book appear several times word-for-word, and other proverbs are *very* similar though not identical. Scholars believe that the book of Proverbs may contain sayings that were collected over a very long period--perhaps 500-700 years!³

The book of Proverbs covers a wide range of topics, and while it has thirty-one chapters, the subject matter definitely isn’t organized by themes. If you open to any page you may find proverbs that address issues like:

- having a strong work ethic (10:26);
- using judgment and restraint to avoid foolish words and actions (13:16);
- respecting one’s parents (1:8);
- the importance of carefully choosing the company you keep (13:20)....

...honestly, isn’t that the kind of advice you might expect to hear in a commencement speech?

The book of Proverbs contains several adages that are fairly well known.

- Using the word “fear” to mean respect or worship, Proverbs 1:7 affirms, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge....”
- Proverbs 15:1 counsels “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

² Michael Agnes, ed. Webster’s New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition. Cleveland: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2007, 1155a.

³ Leo G. Perdue, Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching—Proverbs. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000, 1.

- Proverbs 16:9 reminds us that “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.”
- Proverbs 16:18 warns of the danger of arrogance leading to a downfall: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”
- And one that has come to mean a lot to me in the last few years, Proverbs 17:6 testifies that “Grandchildren are the crown of the aged....”

And there are some proverbs whose meaning is not readily apparent to us today: For instance, Proverbs 26:13 declares, “The lazy person says, ‘There is a lion in the road! There is a lion in the streets!’” It makes no sense... until you understand that it’s meant to suggest an excuse a lazy person might use to avoid work (although it’s true that the smaller Asiatic lions were wild in that area).

But is the book of Proverbs more than a collection of sayings worthy of appearing on t-shirts or refrigerator magnets? Consider this: Jesus quoted the book of Proverbs in his teaching and preaching. After all, there was truth in the sayings, and the people would have been familiar with the proverbs. For instance,

- In Luke 14:7-11 when he dined at the home of a Pharisee and saw guests jockeying for the best places at the table, Jesus reminded those in attendance of what it says in Proverbs 25:6-7: “Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.”
- In the Sermon on the Mount, his familiar counsel to “Seek and you shall find” certainly reminded people of Proverbs 8:17 in which the voice of Wisdom assures, “I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.”

Indeed, many biblical proverbs paint a picture of the kind of life Jesus urged his followers to lead:

- Proverbs 11:25 declares that true prosperity is the result of generosity.
- Proverbs 19:1 asserts that being poor but honorable is better than being rich and foolish.
- Proverbs 31:8-9 calls us to speak up for those who aren’t being heard, and to defend those who are destitute.

“Jesus taught, lived, and died for these ideals. He embodied the wisdom of caring more for the well-being of others than for yourself, an idea many decry as foolish.”⁴

So to your “summer reading list” you might want to add the biblical book of Proverbs. You’ll hear the wisdom of ancient rabbis, some of which sounds like it was uttered today. You’ll find familiar expressions and say to yourself, “So *this* is where that comes from!” And you’ll discover that as you strive to live a Christ-like life, many of the qualities of the life he lived are rooted in ancient wisdom: the wisdom of the book of Proverbs.

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⁴ Lt. Seth L. Bryant, chaplain, US Navy, “Jesus and the Book of Proverbs,” August 28, 2013 at <https://heraldmagazine.wordpress.com/2013/08/28/jesus-and-the-book-of-proverbs/>, accessed 6/9/2020