

Text: Proverbs 2:1-12

July 6, 2008

Theme: Wisdom is a lifestyle of pursuing the mind of God and acting accordingly.

Title: *Pursue Wisdom*

In 1987, new technologies were popping up all over the place. But computer manuals were dull and hard to understand.

A frustrated customer in a computer store, who knew nothing about computers, was looking for a simple, basic book about the DOS operating system—“something,” he suggested, “like DOS for dummies.”

With that, the “for dummies” phenomenon began.

In November, 1991, *DOS for Dummies* by Dan Gookin was met initially with skepticism—bookstores concerned that the title would be insulting to customers. Consumers, though, identified with it, now with more than 125 million “for dummies” books in print in 39 languages.

Because we feel a need today, more all the time, to break down this complex, data-glutted, information-overloaded world into simple terms that are easy to understand.

I read this week a prediction by IBM that in the near future the world’s information base will be doubling in size every 11 hours. A decade ago, professional computer users and managers worked in kilobytes or megabytes. Now school kids have access to laptops with tens of gigabytes of storage. Network managers think in terms of the terabyte (1,000 gig) and the petabyte (1,000 terabytes). Beyond those lie the exabyte, zettabyte and yottabyte, each a thousand times bigger than the last.

When Karen and I moved to Centenary in 1997, there were twenty million searchable pages in the World Wide Web. Today there are 27 billion pages.

A study cited in *Newsweek* reported that the average worker in a large corporation receives nearly 180 message every day: emails, cell calls, voice mails, pagers, post-its, faxes. We’re absolutely overwhelmed with information.

So it’s no wonder people need wisdom spelled out in simple terms: not just more information. People need wisdom for living well, not just knowing more, not just accumulating more data. We’ve got that. And not much to show for it.

It was in the news this week that Leona Helmsley, the New York City real estate tycoon, left a trust fund in her will of \$12 million for her dog, a 9-year-old Maltese named “Trouble.” Judge Renee Roth of Manhattan Surrogate Court reduced the trust fund to \$2 million, designating the rest to Mrs. Helmsley’s charitable foundation.

You’ve got athletes planning to boycott the Opening Ceremonies in Beijing because the smog, the pollution is so bad they don’t want to be outside except to compete.

You’ve got over 2 million people signed up for an online new age religion seminar with Eckhart Tolle, a group the size of the Episcopal Church in the United States. And all it took was an endorsement from Oprah.

You’ve got a study from the Pew Forum week before last identifying Oprah as the dominant religious leader in America, saying that 70% of Americans who claim affiliation with a religious body—including Christians—agreed that “many religions can lead to eternal life.”

In a Wikipedia world where anyone can be an expert and all ideas are considered equal, with all the information in the world and so little to show for it, wouldn't you agree with me that what we need more than anything is just wisdom.

“Where is the wise man?” Paul wrote the Corinthians. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this age?” (I Corinthians 1:20)

It's our own dummy-ness that is at the root of a lot of the problems we have in life. You know smart, hard-working people whose lives are filled with difficulty, in large part, because they lack a sound navigational system. They lack the wisdom for making decisions that keep them out of moral blind alleys and dead-end roads.

So that's why we're giving ourselves this summer to a Sunday study of *Wisdom for Dummies*, for people like me, like you, who like it spelled out in simple terms: the wisdom of God's truth.

A handful of the books of the Bible are devoted to this topic of wisdom—James in the New Testament; Job, Ecclesiastes, and particularly the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, probably the most down-to-earth book in the entire Bible.

Comprehending Proverbs requires no seminary degree; it uses very few confusing theological terms.

The Book of Proverbs takes the wisdom of God Himself and puts it in the form of clear truths for making life work.

So, for anyone else interested, registration opens today for the Proverbs School of Wisdom. And the line forms behind me.

And the first question on the enrollment form might read something like this: “If God said, ‘I'll give you one thing, anything you want,’ what would you choose?”

A new house? A new body? A new job? A new relationship?

That actually happened to one guy: Solomon, David's son, the third King of Israel.

II Chronicles begins like this: “God appeared to Solomon and said to him, ‘Ask for whatever you want me to give you.’ Solomon answered God, ‘You have shown great kindness to David my father and made me king in this place. ... Give me wisdom..., that I might lead this people...’” (II Chronicles 1:7-10)

First priority, greatest desire, the one thing I want most of all: Solomon said, “I want wisdom.”

Last week Karen and I celebrated the fourteenth anniversary of meeting one another, which took me back to those months of our courtship: how totally flipped I was over her, how I was always thinking about the next time I would get to see her, what I could get for her, how I could impress her, what would make her happy.

I love her 100 times more today. But I remember how nothing was beneath me then. Eagerness made me humble. She was my main desire, what I wanted more than anything else.

Which is, I think, one of the main reasons why Proverbs often describes the pursuit of wisdom in terms of courtship, of an all-out, passionate pursuit. Much of the Book of Proverbs reads sort of like a father teaching his son to prefer wisdom rather than the kind of woman who will lead him astray.

Wisdom begins in a strenuous search for it: first priority, greatest desire, the one thing I want most of all: “...if you apply your heart to understanding,...if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the

fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.” (Proverbs 2:1-5)
The Bible says, “Getting wisdom is the most important thing you can do.” (Proverbs 4:7 [LB])
That’s why Paul’s prayers for the young churches were focused so frequently on their growth in wisdom, like to the Ephesians: “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ...may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.” (Ephesians 1:17)
Or like to the Colossians: “...we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom.” (Colossians 1:9)
So if we agree with Solomon and Paul that getting wisdom is the most important thing we can do, then nothing will be beneath us. Wisdom only comes to the humble and eager, the teachable and simple.
I remember going back to Cave City in 2000 to fulfill a promise: the funeral of Gene Miller, an elderly, crusty, former grocer who was like a father to me in my first years as a pastor: tender-hearted, simple, a man who always had time to talk, easy with his corrections that I came to trust and seek, a real friend who grew me in wisdom.
A man named Neal was known to be a kind and loveable character around town. He was considered by many to be quite simple-minded.
Time after time, people in this small town would come up to him and offer him his choice of a dime or nickel. Always, he would take the larger coin.
Finally, a bystander could bear this mockery no longer. He went up to Neal and said, “Don’t let these people fool you. The nickel may be larger, but the dime is worth twice as much.”
“I know that,” Neal whispered to him, “but if I start taking the dimes, they’ll stop offering me money!”
Wisdom is discovered among the simple and humble.
Proverbs 13:10 says, “Pride breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.” Proverbs 9:8: “Rebuke a wise man and he will love you.”
Wisdom only comes to the teachable, those who believe that getting wisdom is the most important thing you do.
That’s who wisdom comes to. But where does wisdom come from?
“The Lord gives wisdom...,” Proverbs 2 goes on, “and from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding.” (Proverbs 2:6)
To get information you look around. To get wisdom you look up. Knowledge comes reason. Wisdom comes from revelation. Knowledge is something you learn. Wisdom is a gift.
“How does a person become wise?” Proverbs 1:7 [LB] asks. “The first step is to trust and reverence the Lord.”
To reverence God is to take Him as He really is: not the man upstairs, not the big buddy in the sky. He’s not your co-pilot. He’s no co-anything. He is God, “wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom,” Isaiah 28:29 says.
Ultimately, wisdom comes from knowing God. More than knowing facts about God. You and I can believe things about God, but so does the devil. I believe Kim Jong-il exists, but I’m not a North Korean Communist. I believe Hitler was real, but I’m

not a Nazi. I believe in Jesus Christ and I am a Christian. Why? Because it's more than knowing about Him. I know Him.

We know that Jesus Christ is alive, that He rose from the death endured to deal decisively with the biggest challenge to humanity: our sin problem that separates us from God. We know that our reconciliation to God is a gift we can receive by faith to have a relationship with Him. We commit our lives to Him. That's what it means to know God.

“And knowing God results in every other kind of understanding,” Proverbs 9 says. (9:10b [LB])

And in every other kind of benefit. Proverbs 2 lists some: “He holds victory for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.” (Proverbs 2:6-8)

The whole Book of Proverbs is consistent in this rationale for why we should get to know God and become wise. Because the bottom line is wisdom pays. Proverbs 3 says, “Wisdom offers you long life, wealth and honor. [It] can make your life pleasant and lead you safely through it.” (Proverbs 3:16-18 [GN])

With the Olympics beginning August 8, it makes me think of growing up watching on television the opening segment of *The Wide World of Sports* that illustrated “the agony of defeat” with a painful ending to an attempted ski jump. Many of you may remember that segment.

It was interesting for me to learn that that skier actually chose to fall rather than finish the jump.

As he explained later, the jump surface had become too fast, and midway down the ramp he realized that if he completed the jump he would land on level ground beyond the safe sloping landing area, which could have been fatal.

As it was, the skier suffered no more than a headache from the fall: the agony of defeat, but also the benefit of wisdom.

Wisdom pays. It pays to save sex for marriage. Kids do better when they're parented based on the principles of Scripture. You benefit from managing your business and organizing your personal finances according to God's wisdom. Communities are improved when we care for the poor as God requires. Relationships are stronger based on God's patterns.

Wisdom is from God, and wisdom is what makes life work.

What we're saying here is really crucial: that wisdom—knowing the mind of God and acting accordingly—wisdom is a lifestyle.

James 3:13 asks, “Who is wise...among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.”

Wisdom is a lifestyle that sets priorities and makes decisions. “Then you will understand,” Proverbs 2 goes on—upon committing yourself to do what wisdom requires, not just talk about it, but by setting wise priorities and making wise decisions—“Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path.” (Proverbs 2:9-11)

The wisdom lifestyle will challenge others to take the good path.

Some of us were at a conference a couple of weeks ago at Wheaton College where Jim Elliot was a student, who was martyred along with his classmate, Ed McCully, as

missionaries to Ecuador. Jim once prayed, “Father, make of me a crisis man. Bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milepost; but make me a fork, that people must turn one way or another on facing Christ in me.”

Wisdom does this in people. You feel it, that there is the wisdom of God about this person. He speaks with integrity and keeps promises. She stays honest and has proven reliable.

James says that wisdom is “peace-loving” and “considerate” and “full of mercy.” (James 3:17)

Wisdom serves intensely and encourages steadfastly and gives generously. Proverbs 11:25 says, “A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.”

Whatever the category, wisdom is lifestyle. The Bible says, “[Solomon] wrote these proverbs to teach his people how to live—how to act in every circumstance...” (Proverbs 1:2 [LB])

So the question remains: “If God said, ‘I’ll give you one thing, anything you want,’ is that what you would choose?” Would you choose wisdom?

I’ve told our confirmation class each year here at Centenary that life is built on three basic decisions—you Master, your mate, and your mission—and the latter two are greatly determined by the first.

One single decision can determine a person’s destiny. In fact our students probably understand that today better than most of us. A week ago this afternoon, it became national news when someone made a decision to drive recklessly on a wet road that circles Dothan, Alabama. Many people’s lives were endangered by that decision, and one life was tragically lost. That driver’s life has now been permanently altered.

One single decision can determine a person’s destiny. And I want to challenge you today: would you decide to make wisdom the goal of the rest of your life?

Here are three disciplines you already know about for doing that, but let me remind you. First, the Word of God.

Psalms 19:7 says, “The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple” God’s Word, II Timothy 3:15 says, “is able to make you wise for salvation.”

What have you got going for Bible study this summer? If you’re not in a Sunday School class, will you wait for someone to invite you, or will you talk with some of your friends and just get it going, just get into the Bible? Get into a small group and stay in it, through thick and thin.

Second, people. Think right now of one or two people you would consider to be wise. They probably come to mind pretty quickly. Go ahead and picture them. Would you make a decision to call one of them up this week or next and get together, share a meal, talk on the phone, ask some questions, find out what has made them wise, see what you can learn.

Proverbs 13:20 says, “He who walks with the wise grows wise...”

Or, third, maybe there’s even a prior decision for you: like we were saying earlier, a decision to get to know God, not just know about Him, but a decision to turn toward Him, to seek Him, to apologize for not reverencing Him, to commit your life to Jesus Christ.

Colossians 2:3 says, “The secret is Christ himself; in him lie all God’s treasures of wisdom...”

Jesus came into the world with wise men seeking Him. And wise men and women—not dummies—still do.

Sources:

David R. Thomas, *Become Wise* (May, 2000).