

“Wise Up!”

Proverbs 1:20-33

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Who is the wisest person you know? What separates him or her from others? How did this person get to be so wise?

The focus of our text today is upon wisdom, a common subject in Proverbs. This book belongs to a part of the Old Testament known as Wisdom Literature. It contains the teachings and writings of some of Israel’s wisest people, including Solomon, and is comprised of pithy statements that relate to behavior and relationships.

Other questions emerge from today’s text that I want us to consider. What is wisdom? Why do we need to be wise? Where can we find wisdom? What common traits do wise people possess? Let’s see how our text can help us answer these questions.

According to ancient sages, wisdom is the art of good living. It is a practical word that refers to the skillful mastery of life. A wise person is one who knows how to navigate safely through the confusing experiences of life.

There is also a moral dimension to biblical wisdom. It certainly exceeds the knowledge of facts, as important as this is. It is the ability to discern what is important in order to pursue it and what is right in order to do it.

Why do we need to be wise? Based upon our text, wisdom will keep us from making painful mistakes that hurt others and us.

The calamity mentioned in this passage seems to be self-inflicted. “Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they will eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices” Proverbs 1:29-31.

Those who refused to listen to wise counsel suffered anxiety, distress and destruction. They did not have to, but chose this fate by ignoring good advice and making bad decisions.

Each time I hear a prominent person making a tearful confession after a moral lapse, I wonder whose warning was ignored. Who tried to keep them from bringing shame and disgrace upon their family and throwing away their future? You can be sure that someone tried to reason with them, but to no avail. How sad.

In his book, The Tug of Home, Chuck Poole tells of an incident that occurred in his life when he was six years old. It made a lasting impression upon him.

He and his dad went to the store. His dad bought him a candy bar that was a rare and welcomed treat. On the way home, Chuck opened the candy bar and then made a grave mistake. Instead of throwing the piece of cardboard under the candy bar out the window, he accidentally threw away the candy bar. He quickly turned around only to watch the truck behind him crush his prized treat.

He says in his book, “It has been thirty-five years since that happened. I don’t recall what I got for Christmas that year or what I made on my report card. I can still remember, though, the awful, empty feeling that swept over me when I realized that I had thrown away the very thing I wanted and that I was left with nothing.”

We live in a world filled with trash, trinkets and treasures. For the most part, we accumulate trash and collect trinkets. Our highest calling is, however, to pursue treasures that we never carelessly discard. How tragic it is to see someone throw away the wrong things, such as good health, special relationships, integrity, opportunity, freedom and faith. Perhaps the author of this passage had this in mind when he referred to the “simple ones and fools.”

To the contrary, the sage that penned this was convinced that acting wisely would lead to a clean conscience, peace of mind, a sense of security and true joy. Of this he was confident and his words could not have been plainer.

“For waywardness kills the simple and the complacency of fools destroys them, but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without the dread of disaster” Proverbs 1:32-33.

If wisdom is so practical and valuable, where can it be found? Is it elusive? Is it available to everyone? What does our text imply?

“Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks. ‘How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?’ Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you” Proverbs 1:20-23.

It doesn’t sound to me like wisdom was hidden or timid in Solomon’s time. It cried out to be heard wherever people gathered to discuss the issues of the day, yet no one listened. The problem was not that wisdom was hiding or silent, but it was rejected and scorned. Its voice was drowned out by all the others.

I don’t think wisdom is hard to find in our world, either. You must, however, look in the right places for it.

Where would that search begin? Where did Solomon start when he became the king of Israel? He sought guidance from the Lord.

You recall when Solomon ascended to the throne after the death of his father, David, he had a dream. The Lord appeared to him and said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Solomon responded, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father, David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, ‘Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have you asked for the death of your enemies, but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be” I Kings 3: 5b-12.

I believe wisdom is found when a person turns to God in prayer and asks for it as Solomon did. The New Testament writer, James, certainly supports this.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does” James 1:5-8.

My favorite part of James’ advice focuses upon God’s eagerness to grant wisdom “without finding fault.” He does not scold us for not knowing, get frustrated over us asking the same question repeatedly or rebuke us for not taking His advice previously. Like a responsible, patient and loving parent, He gently teaches and guides. Why would we not turn to Him for wisdom?

I also believe that wisdom is found in the scriptures. The Psalmist certainly had confidence in it.

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them is there great reward” Psalm 19: 7-11.

Wisdom comes from being observant. “Anyone can learn from his own mistakes. Wise is the person that learns from the mistakes of others.” I’ve learned a lot about life from watching others and listening to their stories. It has helped me reflect upon my own journey.

It must be said that there are times when wisdom comes from unexpected sources, such as, children, strangers and even people from other traditions. If you are a student of Proverbs, you know that wisdom is personified as a woman. This had to catch Solomon's audience completely by surprise.

In that male dominated society, if a woman had gone to the city gates to engage in debate, she would have been chastised and sent on her way, no matter how loud she raised her voice. What was Solomon's underlying message in portraying wisdom as a woman? Was he encouraging his hearers to look for wisdom from the most unsuspecting sources? Perhaps and I would certainly agree.

Let's return to my opening questions. **Who is the wisest person you know? What separates that person from others?** I've given that a lot of thought and here is what I think.

The wisest people I know are humble, teachable and open to receiving truth from any source. They are good listeners. They hunger and thirst after righteousness. They suspend their understanding of truth in pursuit of a deeper level of understanding. They say things like, "I was wrong. I made a mistake. I threw away the wrong thing. I don't know. I have changed my opinion on that. Where will that lead? What do you see? What do you think? What have you learned?"

Does this sound like you? If so, I would be willing to say you are on someone's list of wise persons whose counsel they value and seek.