



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Praying for Godly Skillfulness" - How to Pray Sermon Series

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Proverbs 3:13-15 – *Joyful are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, ¹⁴for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold. ¹⁵She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.*

Proverbs 4:7-9 - *Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. ⁸Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. ⁹She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor."*

The other day I was reading something dreadful on the Internet. No, it wasn't about raging fires on the mainland, or wars overseas, or Harvey Weinstein's latest charges. It was about Information. Particularly about how fast information is doubling in our world.

In the 20th century Richard Buckminster Fuller, an American architect, systems theorist, and futurist created what is known as the "Knowledge Doubling Curve." He noticed that up until 1900 human knowledge doubled approximately every century. By the end of World War II knowledge was doubling every 25 years. Today on average, human knowledge is doubling every 13 months!

For me, this is dreadful news because it means by next Thanksgiving I will be *twice* as ignorant as I am now! You guys think I'm dumb now, wait until next Christmas. I'll be the village idiot!

Needless to say, we are flooded with Information. But as biologist E.O. Wilson has observed, "We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom." Do you share in his observation as you look at our world, as you watch the news, or look at your own life?

A few moments ago we just read a very impassioned plea by the writer of Proverbs to do all that is possible to get at wisdom. But I have to ask, "Why is there such passion here? Why such intensity about getting wisdom? What is it about this issue that evokes such zeal to pursue it?"

James 1:5 tells us that if any of us lacks wisdom we should *pray* to God for it because He will give it generously. But my question is, "Do we really know or do we really understand what we are asking for?"

If we take James' words at face value it can sound like we just ask, sit there and let the Lord dump all kinds of wisdom into our hearts and minds. But is that what

he means? When we pray for wisdom what really is involved here?

Today let's look at the nature of wisdom as the scriptures speak of it and then look at a couple of ways in how to live with *Godly Skillfulness* in our world.

First, let me give you my own working definition of biblical wisdom. Warning: it may seem a bit simple at first. It's hard to summarize such a grand topic without being a little reductionistic, but I assure you each word is chosen carefully.

So here is my working definition: "Wisdom is the godly skillfulness in applying God's values, purposes, and truth in the many practical affairs of everyday life."

First of all, why use the word "skillful"? In looking at the central meaning of the word wisdom, as well as its synonyms, such as understanding, insight, prudence, knowledge, and discretion the issue of skill is threaded throughout their meanings in Hebrew from the Old Testament.

The word wisdom itself, חָכְמָה (*hāk·ma*), means the capacity to understand so as to have skill in living.

So in the very meaning of the word wisdom itself it contains the quality of skillfulness in living out what we understand.

You will see this in Exodus 35 after God gave all the directives about building the tabernacle. Moses said to the people, “All who are *skilled* among you are to come and make everything the Lord has commanded...” The word “skill” here is the word חֲכָמָה (*ḥāk·mā*) again.

Part of my point here is that wisdom is not simply intellectual knowledge. It is also a word that describes a skilled artisan, a craftsman—one who excels at their craft. And this is what the Bible, what God calls us up into, when it speaks of wisdom; to be a craftsman at life, to be skillful at living into God’s intended values, purposes, and truths, skillful at creating a *life well lived* (which is really the whole goal of what wisdom literature in the Bible teaches us). And this is crucial because as British Educator, Kenneth Robinson has noted, “There is nothing so influential as a life well lived.”

And this is why perhaps that when you read “wisdom sections” of the Bible, like the Book of Proverbs, or the Sermon on the Mount, or the Book of James...you see that they touch on all kinds of issues about life. In these writings you see words of wisdom on work, relationships, leadership, money, justice, speech, sex, listening, and even the care of animals!

Proverbs 12:10 “A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.” Did you even know that was in there? That the sign of a wise person is the care of animals?

Here’s another common issue that wisdom literature wants to touch on. And that is helping someone with anxiety, which is a very common problem in our culture. Proverbs 12:25 gives wisdom on how to approach your anxious friend when it says, “An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.”

This last offering is about the common issue of being opinionated. **Proverbs 18:2** says, “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing their personal opinion.” What would happen to the Twitter-sphere, or Facebook, or half of what is said on the news...if we lived into the wisdom of this *one* verse?!!

My point is that wisdom is to permeate everything we do, to permeate the many and practical matters of everyday life. Why do I bring this up? Because if we are not wise in the various and practical things of life, we can do a lot of damage to people and to our culture.

To be honest, I have heard far too many times that when it comes to things like dealing with anxiety or depression, Christians have responded with foolish and devastating words. For example, “Anxiety is a lack of faith.” “You just need to get a grip and trust God more.” “Why do you need to take medication?” “You have to just give it to God and have faith in Him.”

Or when women who were being emotionally abused by their husbands were told by a pastor no less, “You just need to submit to your husband and this would stop.”

Just a very basic understanding of anxiety or abuse could

prevent such devastating foolishness to be expressed.

Here’s something we need to understand about foolishness. Foolishness is just as powerful to impact life as wisdom. It moves us in the wrong direction, but it can still have a powerful impact on people’s lives. You see, foolishness is not just wrong, it’s devastating!

Look at **Proverbs 12:18**, “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Notice that reckless words pierce like a sword. This is no pinprick or pinch. The wounds of a sword are not superficial, they cut deep and last long.

And when you speak foolish words like, “You lack faith; that’s why you are depressed,” or “Just submit to your emotionally and verbally abusive spouse”, we are spewing forth reckless words that cut deep and last long in the human soul.

And this is why in part, wisdom is passionately encouraged—because *without* it, lives are severely damaged, families are torn to shreds, communities are deeply divided, and nations become corrupt.

Or to put a more positive slant on it, wisdom is passionately encouraged because with it comes the power to live well, to lead well, to parent well, to do business well, to do all things well as a person of God.

And this leads me to my next point about the nature of wisdom: True wisdom is always godly.

There is no true wisdom if there is not godly character through which wisdom comes, and after which goodness is left behind.

What do I mean by that? Look at James 3 where James writes about having “wisdom from above.” He teaches us that biblical wisdom is filled with and leaves behind a “Godly footprint.”

Let’s read from **James 3**.

¹³ “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom...

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”

Notice how wisdom is more than just knowing the right thing, but it is living out and leaving behind the right character—leaving behind peace, righteousness, humility, willingness to yield, mercy and fruitfulness, etc.

My point is, wisdom doesn’t simply leave behind smart ideas in its wake, but it leaves behind more of God’s will, God’s character, God’s love and peace, more of God’s values.

Why make this point? Because to be wise is not simply to be right, but to be right in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons, to the right degree to the glory of God and the good of all.

For example, when my dad, who was Joe mechanic, would try to teach me how to fix engines he would tell me what to do, but get immediately and fiercely frustrated with me when I didn’t do it correctly and begins shouting his corrections: “No, that’s not how you do it! You do it like this!!”

He was right of course, but he was not wise. He was not wise

because his correction was to the wrong degree. It was over the top. And instead of leaving behind peace and mercy, he left behind in me humiliation and discouragement.

Or like when you just pull into the church parking lot with your spouse or friend or roommate, and decide to unload on them something you are legitimately upset about (e.g. “I can’t believe you left the toilet seat up again!”). This is a right thing to do, it’s good to speak out about what is upsetting you, but it is being done at the wrong time. And as a result, what you are leaving behind is not peace, but frustration. You are right but you are not wise. Because to be wise is to be right, in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons, to the right degree to the glory of God and the good of all.

One last thing about the nature of wisdom, it is never to stay in your head. Right after Jesus gave His monumental sermon on wisdom, which we call “The Sermon on the Mount”—a sermon on what a life well lived looks like in the kingdom of God—what does Jesus say? In **Matthew 7:24** He says, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...”

Jesus *doesn’t* say that everyone who hears these words and really believes them is like a wise man. He doesn’t say that everyone who hears these words and gets really excited about them is like the wise man. No, the wise person is the one who puts Christ’s words into *practice*. And this is *always* expected of wisdom in the Bible: to end up out of our heads and into our hands.

We evangelicals tend to be very passionate about the Word of God. We emphasize it in so many different ways, and this is a good thing. It’s often the centerpiece of the worship service. But over the years I have noticed something interesting. We love the ideas of the Word, but struggle to *love putting them* into the actions of our daily lives.

I think this happens because loving ideas keeps me safe; it keeps me from getting muddled by the world of reality. I don’t get tired and worn out when I love ideas, but it does sometimes wear me out to live into the ideas of Christ in a not so Christ-like world.

It does wear me out to love my enemy; it does wear me out to help the drug addict; and it does wear me out to share my faith with non-Christians. But the world doesn’t change when Christians just love ideas or love the truth. Marriages don’t change. Kids don’t change. The poor don’t change. Politics don’t change. We don’t change when we just love ideas.

The bottom line is that when I find myself loving the idea of peace, but not actually love making peace, or loving the idea of discipleship but not actually making disciples, or loving the idea of justice but not actually doing justice...then I’m missing the whole point of being a man of godly wisdom.

The 19th century poet John Keats observed, “Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced. Even a proverb is no proverb to you till your life has illustrated it.” I think he really nails it.

There is so much more that could be said about the nature of wisdom. But let’s now turn our attention to *how* we get wise.

There are many ways to seek out and obtain wisdom. As we have taught over these past months, know the Word of God well, meditate on the Word, pray regularly, read a lot of wise things, dialogue with other wise people, etc.

I don't want to ignore those, but I want to get into things we don't normally mention, which are emphasized in wisdom literature. Let me mention just two essential elements and skills to build wisdom: Self-reflection and setting your heart.

Why bring up self-reflection? Because in the Bible, there is no wise life, no vibrant life, if there is no reflective life. Let's see what I mean.

Proverbs 14:8 says, "*The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways...*" The phrase "give thought" means to *look closely* at something, to reflect on and process information, so as to respond in a skillful manner to what you are facing in life. Proverbs 14:15 says, "A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man *gives thought* to his steps." (again, it is the same word in Hebrew as in verse 8).

Why do I emphasize this so much and so often? You see, we cannot have a life well lived, we cannot be wise—if we are not self-aware. Notice that the wise person gives thought to *their* ways, *their* steps. Do you spend time thinking about your ways and your steps? For example, many wisdom sayings talk about dealing with our anger, but we cannot deal with it unless we are aware of it. And studies show that over 60% of us are *not* aware of our emotions as we are experiencing them. That's a lot of room for acting or speaking in an unwise way.

Proverbs 29:11 says, "*A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back.*"

How many of us have been too often on *the front side* of that verse and not the back end because we are not minding our emotions, because we are not self-aware of the anger we feel and how we are expressing it to others?

Think of all the unrestrained words of anger on Twitter, Facebook or texting etc. Think of all the cyber-bullying that happens with unrestrained words. Think of the damage "full venting" does in wearing down a relationship, in increasing shame in the heart of a child by an adult.

Again, now you know why self-awareness is so passionately encouraged, because without it we damage so much in our lives and in the lives of others. "Quietly holding back" is not just polite, it is soul saving, life giving, and relationship deepening.

Okay, so we need to be self-reflective. Now let's look at the last thing, "setting your heart" toward all of life.

The people of God have long thought God will guide us in all places and in all times and in all kinds of ways—not just when we are reading the Bible or attending church or at a prayer meeting, but in all kinds of situations. The writers of Proverbs always looked deeper into things than the average person. They would look for wisdom in the everyday moments of life.

For example, let's look at **Proverbs 24:30-34**, "*I went past the field of the sluggard, past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment; ³¹thorns had come up*

everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. ³²I set my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: ³³A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— ³⁴and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man."

Again, this idea to "set the heart" is a way of saying to look at something with a deeper, prolonged, *curious* gaze. I emphasize the word "curious" because one researcher pointed out that children ask 125 probing questions each day. However, an adult asks only six! That means somewhere between childhood and adulthood we lose 119 curious questions per day! This is no cute statistic. Think of the tragic loss of wisdom when that is the case.

Folks, there is no wisdom without curiosity, without setting the heart at what is going on around us, at the people we interact with, even at the mundane experiences of our day. And let's face it, there is nothing more mundane than a beat-up yard, such as in those Proverbs verses.

But this is exactly where this person learned a lesson. All because that person was one who knew the value of setting their hearts to anything and everything, however pedestrian it was. Where many would pass by such a place and see merely a mess, if they saw anything at all, this person sees a life lesson; he sees God deepening something in him.

My point of all this is, how many times have we looked, but not seen? How many times have we heard, but not truly listened?

How many times have we missed opportunities in the everyday that could have made us wiser and the world richer? How many times have we been in small groups and listened to people speak, but still could not see the deeper issues of their soul and missed out on the opportunity to become wiser in the process because we have not set our hearts toward them?

Part of my point is this: Wisdom is not automatic or inevitable, it is *intentional*. And that is why we need to learn the spiritual discipline of setting our hearts to worship, to the spoken prayers, to the silences, to the sermon, to our visitors, and to our fellow Christians as we have some coffee together. What might our experience on a Sunday be like if we set our hearts toward all these different activities and people?

What I have noticed is that people come to church and drive home asking each other, “Did you get anything out of that?” (I used to do this too!) This is not a good wisdom question. The wisdom question is this, “Did you put anything into it? Did you set your heart to all that was going on?” Because God was here and He was doing something.

Let me finish with a personal example of what can happen when we set our hearts toward people. It was an event with my son, Caleb. About ten years ago or so when my son was a young teenager, he found a new love—the ukulele. Even when he was a beginner just doing basic lessons was never enough. He always liked to invent stuff.

One Saturday night I was in my office in my home working on my sermon and Caleb came running in wanting to share with me “his song intro.” He came flying

in and said, “Dad, check this out. Check this out!”

Normally I would just respond half-heartedly and say, “Okay, what is it?” But when I turned to him and instead of doing the typical thing, I set my heart toward him in that brief instant I could see in his face and eyes that this meant more to him than simply playing some chords. He was seeking something from me. I could see that it was one of those, “Hey dad, look what I can do! Are you proud of me?” kind of moment. It was a grand moment to care for my son’s soul.

I saw it was a much more spiritually and relationally important moment than I had first thought. Yes, I could have kept working and that would have been a good thing. But when I “fixed my heart toward my son” I became aware of and attentive to a moment to celebrate life with my son and affirm in him the glory that God gave him through the joy of music.

Did he play well? Did it matter? Let me be honest, I don’t recall a word from the sermon I preached the next day, but I do recall vividly his face that Saturday night. And that was worth everything.

The bottom line is that in that moment when I set my heart toward my son I saw something sacred, something dear to God, beauty and glory and joy in my son...I saw a soul trying to be greater. What would have happened if I did not set my heart toward him?

Later on I began to reflect how many times I have missed other sacred moments with him, or my daughter, or my wife, or with

my church, or with my non-Christian neighbors, etc.

How much glory, how much beauty and opportunities for joy and wisdom have I missed because I just wasn’t attentive, I wasn’t setting my heart toward everyday sacred moments.

Brothers and sisters, as I close let me share one last Proverb. In **Proverbs 13:14** it says, “*The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death.*”

I emphasize all this about wisdom today because I have hope that we, the people of God, would become for our hurting, confused, and foolish world—a world drowning in information, but starved for wisdom—that we would become a fountain of life. That we would be the source that the world looks to in order to truly find out what it means to develop a life well lived.

Again, in the words of Sir Kenneth Robinson, “Nothing is so influential as a life well lived.”

May you have the godly skillfulness to do just that.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com