

Choices

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 13 May 2018

Preacher: Nick Louw

- [0 : 0 0] Choices. Life is full of choices, isn't it? You make choices every day. You can't help but have to make choices. We live in a life where there's decisions that you've got to make. Small decisions, big decisions.
- In fact, it's been said the entire course of our lives can be seen merely as a result of a series of choices that we've made. Which is quite true. Your choices that you make through life have resulted in where you are now.
- They've resulted in who you are now. But I'm sure as you sit here this morning and you think through all the choices you've made in life, I'm sure you'd admit that you haven't always made the right choices.
- In fact, you might say some of your decisions have just been downright stupid. Ones that if only you could go back in time and change, you would.
- You know what I'm talking about or is it just me? There are choices, aren't there, in your life that you can't help but look back and go, No, that was done. That was a stupid thing that I did. That was a stupid decision.
- [1 : 0 9] I think we've all done that. I think we've all made stupid decisions in our lives. But what if I told you this morning there's a way you can avoid stupid decisions before they happen?
- Well, there is. And it's called wisdom. Wisdom is basically the ability to make right decisions in life.
- And it just so happens that there's an entire section of the Bible devoted to it. It's called the wisdom literature. It consists of the books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.
- But it's not limited to those books. You find bits of wisdom throughout the Bible. But it's these books, the wisdom literature, that have wisdom in its most concentrated form.
- And they're in the Bible because wisdom is actually something that God wants to give us. Wisdom is something that God wants to provide to us just as much as he provides food from the ground, just as much as he gives us breath and sunlight, all the things we need to live in his world.
- [2 : 1 1] Well, he also gives us wisdom in order to make the right decisions in his world. Wisdom is kind of the structure of common sense that he's built into this creation, into this world.
- And he wants us to be able to have it just as much as we need anything else. And not unlike a parent who provides for a child. If you think about it, a parent doesn't just provide food and shelter and clothing for a child.
- A parent also provides wisdom. A parent, part of their job is to give their child the ability to make the best decisions in life. For example, don't play in the road. That's actually a wisdom statement.
- It's helping a child to make the best decision about where to play. Well, in these books, you find wisdom from our Heavenly Father. Wisdom from God.

About various practical areas of life that we will need to know how to make decisions in. As you work through the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and Job and Song of Songs, you see wisdom about work, about relationships with colleagues, about how we use our money, about sex, about relationships with other people, friendships, about parenting.

[3 : 26] There's very practical wisdom in these books. And it's all here to help us to avoid making bad decisions in these areas of our lives. Bad decisions that I'm sure if we look back on those areas of our lives, we would say, no, we've made those bad decisions.

Well, wisdom is here to help you prevent bad decisions. And that's why we're going to spend the rest of this term exploring the first of these books, Proverbs. And this morning, the best way to start Proverbs, of course, like any book, is to read it from the beginning.

We're going to start by reading the opening words, which are really in Proverbs as an introduction to the whole book. They set the scene. They set the tone. They help us to understand what the book's about. It's kind of like a prologue.

When you read a prologue in a book, in a normal book, it kind of sets the tone. Well, that's what these first seven verses do in the book of Proverbs. And they describe, really, the kind of wisdom that God wants to give you and me.

And so, as we go through these verses, I basically just want to ask three questions that the passage answers. The first is, what is wisdom? Then we're going to look at, who is it for? And then we're going to look at, how do we get it?

[4 : 35] Very simple questions, and that's what we're going to look at this morning. So, firstly, what is wisdom? Now, I've already said wisdom is the ability to make right decisions. But this introduction elaborates on just what that means, what that includes, what wisdom includes.

So, verse 2, it says it's for understanding words of insight. Now, that word insight means the ability to see into a situation and understand what the options are, even before we make a decision.

It's almost like it's taking us out of the situation we're in and helping us to see it from an outside perspective. That's what insight means. And that's part of what wisdom is. Wisdom is, verse 3, receiving instruction in prudent behavior.

Now, prudent behavior means to act in order to prevent disaster, literally. Act in order to find the best outcome. So, it's talking about living in a world where you're going to face hostility, you're going to face threats.

Prudence is the ability to avoid those threats when they come. Wisdom is, verse 4, for giving knowledge and discretion to the young.

[5 : 48] Discretion means the ability to make plans ahead of time, to decide your course of action before you take it. That's discretion. And so, in summary, if we just take those words, which are here to help us to understand a little bit more depth about what wisdom is.

In summary, wisdom means the ability to react to situations in your life and make plans that will lead to the best outcome. The question is, though, and this is what we've got to think about, what is the best outcome?

When we say, well, wisdom is the ability to make plans to lead to the best outcome, what is the best outcome? Is it what's best for me, personally? Is it what's best for my community?

Is it what's best for my world? What is it that we're aiming for here? What is the goal of wisdom? Well, we see that, too, in this passage. And it's here that we really see the difference between worldly wisdom and the kind of wisdom that God wants to give us in the Word.

And those are two different things. They're similar but different. Worldly wisdom and godly wisdom. You see, at the time these proverbs were written, these weren't the only proverbs floating around in the ancient world.

[7 : 02] There were proverbs written down in every culture. And every culture had their own version of collections of proverbs like this one, and wise sayings from their sages and their wise men and women.

So Israel wasn't alone in having a book of proverbs. Even today, every culture has its proverbs, doesn't it? You find little wisdom sayings in every culture.

A stitch in time saves nine. Or look before you leap. And, of course, these proverbs are typically framed in these short, memorable forms, these little phrases. Because, you know, look before you leap is easier to remember than in advance of committing yourself to a course of action.

First consider your circumstances and options. So wisdom is summarized. It's distilled in these little short, memorable quotes. And we find them throughout proverbs. Especially after, from chapter 10 onwards.

There's just these single quotes which proverbs are made up so that we can remember them. So that they're easy to store in our brains. And every culture in every age has these little wisdom sayings.

[8 : 11] What's the difference then between all that wisdom that the world has accumulated over time and the wisdom that God gives us here in the Bible? What's the difference? Because at first look, it doesn't seem to be much difference at all.

The practical advice in all these areas of life is quite similar. Except for one major difference. And that is its outcome, its goal, what it's aiming for. Worldly wisdom aims for you to have a happy, prosperous, and safe existence in this world.

And it's useful for that. Worldly wisdom helps you to make the right choices to be prosperous and safe and the best you can be.

But biblical wisdom has different goalposts. According to these verses, the purpose of this wisdom that we find in the Bible is, at the end of verse 3, for doing what is right and just and fair.

That is the goal of biblical wisdom. It's not just here to give us success in the world's definition, but to give us success according to God's definition of success, which has all got to do with our relationships.

[9 : 23] True success in God's eyes is relationship success, if you like. Right, for example, is the word righteous, in fact.

And it talks about relating to God properly. Having a right relationship with God. And justice and fairness talk about relating to other people properly.

And that is true success in God's eyes. Not how big your business is or how much money you have in the bank. But true success is to be in the best relationship with God and other people that you can possibly be.

Where fairness rules rather than selfishness. And, I mean, think about it. Which world would you rather live in? Would you rather live in a world where everyone is wise in terms of getting the best for themselves?

Or would you live in a world where everyone is wise in terms of having the best relationships with everyone else? The answer is obvious, isn't it? Well, that's the kind of world God wants us to live in. That's the kind of life he wants us to live.

[10 : 27] That is a truly successful life. When you think of success, what do you think about? I wonder if your definition of success is the same as God's definition of success.

Do you measure how successful your life is by the quality of your relationships rather than the size of your house? Well, that, you see, that kind of godly success, relational success, is the goal of the wisdom that he gives us in the Bible, in these books.

So that's what wisdom is. Secondly, who is it for? Again, this introduction tells us in verse 4 and 5. Have a look. For giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young, let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.

So basically, there's three types of people who need this wisdom. Firstly, the simple. In other words, the stupid. The dull. People who can't figure out how to live by themselves.

Which is actually a great encouragement, because we're all stupid, to some extent, aren't we? I mean, none of us are as clever or observant or knowledgeable as we'd like to be.

[11 : 42] But that's okay, because we can still have wisdom. The fact that God's wisdom is for the simple is really encouraging, because it means wisdom is not the same as IQ. Wisdom is not the same as intelligence or education or intellect.

You can have wisdom even if you're stupid, even if you're dull, as we all are, to some extent. You can be very intellectually challenged and still have wisdom, making good decisions in life.

Or, on the other hand, you can have a very high IQ and still make bad decisions. And we've seen examples of that, haven't we? And so wisdom is for the simple. Wisdom is also for the youth.

Now, youth can be stupid or clever. I've come across examples of both. But one thing that youth lack is life experience.

They haven't had much chance to accumulate their own wisdom in life, which normally comes when we make mistakes. As we go in life and we make enough mistakes, we learn from them and we accumulate wisdom.

[12 : 49] But if you're young, you haven't really had the chance to make too many mistakes in life to learn that wisdom. But that's okay, because God is willing to give you His wisdom so that you can avoid those mistakes before they happen.

So youth, young people. I sound so old when I say that. Young people. But this is saying to you, this is saying that if you read the Proverbs, you can start to get wisdom that you would have otherwise had to learn the hard way.

Now, chances are, I'm realistic here, chances are, even though I say that, you're probably not going to rush home after church and open the book of Proverbs and read through them today.

Instead, probably, you will not read Proverbs. And you will go on to make those mistakes that it warns you of.

And you will learn that wisdom the hard way. And one day, in years to come, you will start to read the book of Proverbs. And you'll say to yourself, man, if only I knew this when I was young. And so, young people, save yourself some pain and read the Proverbs first.

[13 : 58] Engage with them. Dive into them. Understand them. Because the Proverbs are for the youth. And older people, by the way, what this also means is, don't despise young people for their youth.

It's very typical that older people will look down on younger people. Ridicule younger people. Because what this is saying is, if they have God's wisdom, they can be far wiser than their years.

And far wiser than an older person who doesn't have God's wisdom. And Paul tells Timothy, don't let them despise you for your youth. You can be young and you can be wise.

The key, though, is to find God's wisdom in Scripture. And so, these Proverbs are for the youth. But there's someone else these Proverbs are for. Verse 5, Let the wise listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance.

So, wisdom is not just for the simple and the young. It's also for the wise and the discerning. Because the truly wise person is really the one who knows how much they still don't know.

[15 : 05] That's true wisdom. The truly wise person is always teachable. They can always learn more. They never think they know it all. In fact, Proverbs 11, verse 2 says, When pride comes, then comes disgrace.

But with humility comes wisdom. The wise person is the one who admits, humbly, that they need more wisdom. And so, wisdom is for everyone, as long as they realize they need it.

Wisdom is for you, as long as you realize that you need it. Whether it's those with no wisdom, or those with a lot of wisdom, everybody needs more. In some ways, wisdom is like food.

You know, you don't say, Well, I don't need any more food because I've had so much in the past. No, every day you need more food to keep going. Food is something you continually need to take in.

Well, it's the same with wisdom. The moment you think you don't need any wisdom, well, that's when you become a fool. And so, that's who wisdom is for. But now we move on to the most important question of all.

[16 : 08] And that is, How do you get it? If this wisdom is so important, if it helps us to make the right decisions, if it's for the young and the old and the wise and the simple, and we all need it, then how on earth do we go about getting wisdom in our lives?

In fact, one of the Proverbs actually just simply says, Get wisdom. But how do we do that? Well, we find out here. Now, think about this. When you have a choice to make in life, how do you actually go about determining which is the right one?

What steps do you take to determine the right choice? Now, typically, a Christian, when they have a decision to make, they'll look in the Bible, I hope so, and to see if there are any clear guidelines in God's Word about this decision.

So, for example, getting a job in the sex industry is not the right decision because the Bible clearly says that it's sinful. So, that's obvious. But the difficulty comes when we don't have clear-cut choices in God's law.

When there's not a necessarily morally right and wrong answer to this decision. What do we do then? Well, I'll tell you what many Christians tend to do.

[17 : 20] Many Christians, when they have a decision that the Bible isn't clear on an answer for, they will go out for a walk in nature and they will wait to hear the still small voice of God speaking in their ear or in their conscience.

They want God to tell them through feelings and visions what decision to make. Or through hints that He gives them in their life, like little signs that are clues as to what God, as if He's playing a game with us.

And He doesn't want to give us the answer but He wants to give us clues. So, you know, someone might be considering whether to take up a job opportunity in China and they pray and they go, God, what must I do? What must I do? And then they go to the post box and it just so happens that they get a menu from a Chinese takeout and they go, oh, thank you God, you gave me the sign.

I'm going to China. I've heard of people who make decisions that way. But that's not the way that God guides us to make decisions in life. He doesn't play games with us.

No, in fact, according to this passage, look how He guides us to make decisions. Not through feelings or, you know, weird signs, but through, verse 2, words of insight.

[18 : 33] Verse 3, through proverbs and parables. Verse 5, through listening. Verse 6, through sayings and riddles. So God actually uses written words to give us guidance in the form of proverbs.

But the thing about proverbs, if you read them, is you never find the exact answer you're looking for. You know, there's not a proverb that says you must go to China or whatever. No, because God doesn't want to make the decisions for you when it comes to these decisions.

He wants you to get the ability to make the decisions for yourself. That's part of maturity. It's part of growth. And so He equips you with wisdom in the form of these kind of enigmatic sayings.

Some of them are riddles. Some of them are things that you've got to work through. And again, this is not God playing games with us. It's helping us train our minds to think about wisdom and to think about how it applies in different situations.

The proverbs are here and they're not necessarily clear answers because they are there to exercise your thinking as you work through them and talk about them with other people and chew over them.

[19 : 40] It's like we exercise our body through spending time on the treadmill or if you want to increase your skills in a sport, say tennis, you would go and you would practice the shots over and over again.

Well, so too, we need to exercise our minds. We need to practice our thinking and our skills at living through spending time in these proverbs, discussing them, chewing over them, going back to them again and again.

That's what they're designed for. That's how they're designed to be read. And then learning how to apply different ones into different situations because you'll also find not all the proverbs apply in every circumstance.

They're not hard and fast rules that are always applicable 100% of the time. How do we know this? Well, because there's a classic example in the book of Proverbs.

You can turn there if you want or you can just listen. I'll put them up on the screen. Proverbs 26 verse 4 for example is this. It says, Do not answer a fool according to his folly or you yourself will be like him.

[20 : 44] Now that's a good piece of advice. Don't answer the fool. Don't lower yourself to engage in someone else's foolish debate especially on Facebook by the way. This is really good proverb for social media and we think, good, don't answer the fool according to his folly.

But what does the next verse say? Verse 5. It says, Answer a fool according to his folly or he will be wise in his own eyes. So now, you must answer the fool and use his own foolish arguments to show him how wrong it is.

But which is it? You know, must we answer the fool according to his folly or mustn't we? The Proverbs tell us to do both because it depends on the situation. You see, Proverbs, as I say, they're not hard and fast rules and we mustn't read them like that.

They're principles. And part of wisdom is learning what principles to apply in what situation. And so, wisdom, this ability to make right decisions comes over time as we meditate and chew over this wisdom literature and we let God exercise our minds through it.

Which we're going to do this term in church as we study the Proverbs but also in growth groups. So this term, if you're not yet going to a growth group, this is what we're going to do.

[21 : 58] We're going to look at Proverbs together. We're going to chew over them. We're going to apply them into situations in our lives. If you're sitting at home watching TV rather than going to growth groups, you're wasting your time because that's not going to give you wisdom.

But this will. But that's not all we need to do in order to get wisdom. We can go to growth group and we can meditate on Proverbs for years and still not live wisely.

You can read Proverbs through a hundred times and still not make the right decisions in life because right at the end of this introduction to wisdom, we're told probably the most important thing.

Verse 7, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and instruction. Now this statement, the fear of the Lord, appears over and over again in the Proverbs to be a constant reminder as we read through it.

There are milestones reminding us the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Chapter 9, verse 10, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

[23 : 01] Then we carry on chapter 15, verse 33, wisdom's instruction is to fear the Lord. And it's saying unless you fear the Lord, you will never actually be able to apply all this other wisdom properly, appropriately.

Because no matter how much wisdom you have, unless you build it on the right foundation, it will all come falling down in the end of the day. And that right foundation, we're told, is the fear of the Lord.

But what does it mean to fear the Lord? It's an often misunderstood phrase. We see it in the Bible sometimes, and it's easy to kind of get it wrong and misunderstand what it's saying.

You see, the word fear here doesn't mean the kind of fear you have towards criminals and terrorists, a negative fear. It's a positive kind of fear that it's talking about when it says fear the Lord.

It's a reverence and an awe. It's kind of the thrill of fear you feel when you're standing outside in an awesome thunderstorm. You've been in that situation and you just feel overawed.

[24 : 02] You feel so small that you're not, it's not a negative fear. It's an exciting fear. Well, it's a positive fear. That's the kind of fear of the Lord we're meant to have, an awe, a recognition of His power.

It's a good fear. There's a really good scene actually that describes it in the Chronicles of Narnia.

Remember we watched that movie, one movie night here? The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe written by C.S. Lewis. Now you might remember when Susan first comes into Narnia and meets Mr. Beaver.

Mr. Beaver first tells her about the great Aslan. And he says this, he says, Aslan is a lion, the lion, the great lion. Ooh, said Susan.

I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion. Safe, said Mr. Beaver. Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, but he's good.

[25 : 04] And that's a brilliant description of what it means to fear God. To recognize that even though he is good, he is to be feared because he is not safe. He holds your life and your destiny in his hands.

He is to be listened to. He is to be paid attention to. To fear God is to realize that what he says is a matter of life and death. And so your fear of God will be seen in how much attention you pay to his words.

And not just the wisdom he's given, but everything else he tells us in the Bible. His work in this world, his plan of salvation unfolded and climaxing in his son sent to earth to save us.

How much attention do you give to those words in your daily life that God has revealed to us? Do you truly fear him? Enough to listen to him attentively, soberly, constantly.

Because no matter how worldly wise you may be, no matter how successful your business is or how well you run your household, if you fail to fear the Lord will then, all of that other wisdom will count for nothing.

[26 : 17] And that's exactly what Jesus meant in his parable in Matthew 7 that Adrian read for us. I'm going to read it again. Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house, yet it did not fall because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.

The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. See, this is some wisdom right here in Matthew, in the Gospel.

Jesus is comparing the wise man and the foolish man. And he's saying that he came into this world to give us a way to be saved from the storm of God's judgment. He came into this world to give you a way to find shelter from the storm, to find a solid foundation that you won't be taken out by God's justice because Jesus died on the cross for your sins.

And that's what he did when he went to the cross. He gave you a rock to build your life on, but if you ignore that, then all of the other wisdom you might have counts for nothing.

[27 : 38] Unless you come to listen and live by what God has revealed in the Bible and in Jesus' son, then you can never have any real wisdom. You can never really make the right choices in life if your choices aren't determined by the Gospel.

But when you come to God through Jesus and you learn to fear him and you learn to listen to him and you learn to live by his words daily, well then and only then can you begin your journey to living a wiser life.

Will you do that with us this term? Let's ask for God's help. Lord, we do thank you for your wisdom that you give us in the Proverbs. We thank you that you've helped us to understand how to make choices in the world that you've put us in.

Just as much as you give us food and water, you give us wisdom. And we thank you, Lord. Help us to be attentive to it. Help us to pay attention. Help us to engage our minds this term in the next few weeks as we open this book of Proverbs.

But not only now, as we continue on in our lives, help us always to come back to your wisdom so that we can know what decisions you want us to make. And we pray this in Jesus' name.

[28 : 50] Amen.