

## **The One Thing You Need To Succeed In Life**

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Rich Nathan

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Everything Your Parents Should Have Taught You (But Probably Didn't)

Proverbs Series

Proverbs 1:1-7

How many of you are still without power? If you see anyone with their hands up, just quickly lean over and pray for them. How many of you were without power until Saturday? Friday? Thursday? Wednesday? Tuesday? If you only lost power until Monday, then you don't even qualify for raising your hand.

During most public crises like this I always think of the opening line from Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* where Dickens says:

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times...

I've had so many folks in the church tell me that they experienced more community with their neighbors than they ever have because people were out of school and out of work. Folks were walking up and down the street helping each other, cutting up branches. People strung power cords from their houses to their neighbors' houses to share electricity. There were thousands and thousands of potlucks around the city. I had so many folks here at church tell me that they finally met some of the neighbors on their street. They shared meals together. They helped with clean-up. People actually talked to their own families because the TV was off and the computer was down.

And, of course, for some, it was the worst of times. They had electric water heaters so they had no hot water. People lost food in their freezers.

We are living in interesting times. We haven't had a week like this on the stock market since the depression. The government has had to step into our economy at a level that would make any socialist proud. Clearly people across America are feeling terribly insecure about our jobs, our life savings, and our investments. I feel like God has led me to do the series that I'm starting today for just such a time as this. Today I'm starting a new series for the fall from the book of Proverbs, an amazingly important book from the Old Testament. Many folks know it only by its pithy little phrases. Have you ever wondered why the book of Proverbs is in the canon of scripture? Why do we have a book like Proverbs in the Bible with its pithy sayings?

### **Proverbs 10:4**

Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth.

### **Proverbs 15:1**

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Why did God give the Jewish people a book like the book of Proverbs? After all, the nation of Israel already had the law, especially the Ten Commandments that taught the Jewish people how to be moral – Don't lie, don't steal, don't commit adultery, don't kill. To succeed in life, isn't it enough to follow the rules and to be a moral person, to tell the truth, to be faithful to your marriage vows? To succeed in life, isn't it enough to be ethical? The short answer is "no."

Morality is not enough. It is not enough to be ethical, to live a clean upright life. The book of Proverbs is in the Bible, in short, to say to us that you need more than morality to be successful in life.

Now, hear what I'm saying and what I'm not saying. Moral rules are important. It is important to tell the truth. It is important to honor your commitment in marriage, to refuse to take what isn't yours. We need moral rules as bedrock upon which to build our lives and bedrock upon which to build our society. I'm not in any way arguing in favor of the kind of moral relativism someone will encounter in the university dormitory or classroom where people say, "Why do we have any rules at all? Who said these rules are the ones we should we follow? Why can't we make up our own rules?"

We live in a pluralistic society right now where people are constantly fighting about morality. So many of our arguments with each other are about the moral rules; what is good and what is bad, what's right and what's wrong. But even if we could all agree on the rules, and even if you personally follow the rules, you did the rules all the time, you would still need the book of Proverbs for the 95% of situations in life that the rules don't cover.

The rules say, "Keep your marriage commitment." But the rules don't tell you who to date, or how to choose a marriage partner well, or whether to break up with someone. The rules don't tell you who to give your heart to. You can be an ethical person and still not know what job to take or whether you should move to another city. The rules say, "Don't steal;" that's important. But we need more than the rules to figure out if we should loan our money to our constantly out-of-work brother-in-law, or if we should co-sign on a loan for our 30-year old daughter.

Tell the truth? Yes. Tell the truth. But should you confront a coworker who is not pulling her weight on your team? And if you should confront, how should you do it?

Proverbs deals with the vast majority of situations in life that are not covered by the rules. And virtually every society in the history of the planet said we don't need less than moral rules, we don't need less than ethics, but we definitely need more. We need guidance. We need advice. We know that making a mistake in

some of the areas I just mentioned, making a mistake, for example, in who you marry, can lead to disaster in life. So every society in life has come up with proverbs, ways to successfully address the multitude of situations that life throws at us.

We have a church planting team in Tanzania right now. Africans love proverbs. Every tribe has hundreds and hundreds of proverbs. I'm reading some proverbs from Tanzania where we have our church planting team and where we're involved in helping to bring clean water to a city of 5 million people. Listen to these Tanzanian proverbs:

Do not make the dress before the child is born

In a country where infant mortality is high, here's the proverb: "Do not make the dress before the child is born." In other words, life is unpredictable. It is often deeply disappointing. Don't multiply your grief by investing in what may turn out badly.

Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.

In other words, don't be too sure of the future. There is a Yiddish proverb:

Before you start up a ladder, count the rungs.

In other words, know the risks and the dangers before you act. We say:

Look before you leap.

Check things out, investigate things, ask questions, and then act. Don't act thoughtlessly.

We human beings so desperately crave advice and wisdom for living that we eagerly read what our fortune cookies say. There is some good advice in our fortune cookies, things like:

He who laughs at himself never runs out of things to laugh at.

There is silly advice. Things like:

He who throws dirt is losing ground.

There is disturbing counsel like:

That wasn't chicken.

And then there are odd fortune cookies, things that you don't quite understand. You think you might, but you aren't sure. Things like:

Never wear your best pants when you go to fight for freedom.

Mostly in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, people have opted for one of two responses to life's complexities. Either we turn to science, especially the social sciences – economics, psychology, sociology - to give us a technical answer, a data-filled answer for personal problems or financial problems. Or we turn to morality. And so we hear, even in the current financial meltdown, that what America needs is to stop being so immoral. The stock market crash, the whole mortgage meltdown, the massively growing budget deficit, the housing crisis – it's all rooted in unethical behavior. It is all rooted in greed.

We certainly need technical answers that have been tested in a laboratory or modeled on a computer. We certainly need to pay attention to morality. Dishonesty and covetousness definitely played a role in the current financial meltdown. But we need more than science. We need more than ethical behavior. We need wisdom to do life well.

Wisdom. If you want a shorthand definition, wisdom is skill in living.

Wisdom = Skill in living

Wisdom is skill in relating to God and relating to all sorts of people – rich people, poor people, wise people, foolish people, young, old, parents, children – skill in relating to God; skill in relating to all sorts of people. And wisdom is masterful skill in relating to all kinds of situations – sickness, health, poverty, prosperity, difficult children, compliant children, sexual temptation, marital faithfulness – masterful skill in relating to God, to people, and to life circumstances. And this masterful skill produces abundant life.

Today I'm starting a new series from the book of Proverbs that I'll be teaching from throughout the fall. I've called today's talk, "The One Thing You Need In Life to Succeed." Let's pray.

We Americans know we need wisdom. That's why every bookstore has row after row of what we call self-help literature. We know we need wisdom. We know we need someone to guide us through the complexities of life – those areas that the rules don't cover. That's why we have shows like Dr. Phil and columns like Dear Abby, and hundreds of thousands of people flock to counselors. It is because we crave advice from people who seem to know how to successfully navigate the complexities of life and the complexities of relationships well.

And of course we often feel horrible inside because we know that we are in a situation right now that we don't have the wisdom to handle. There are some

things that just go beyond our capacity to navigate. That is why we have the book of Proverbs.

So let's look at this together.

### **Proverbs 1:1-7**

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: 2 for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; 3 for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair; 4 for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young— 5 let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance— 6 for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. 7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

This section answers all of the basic questions we would have of any book. Verse 1:

### **Proverbs 1:1**

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

Verse 1 deals with the literary form (what type of literature is this?). We find out that it is proverbs, brief pithy memorable phrases that express truths about human behavior. It also deals with the question of authorship (who wrote it?). We discover that it is King Solomon.

Verses 2 to 6 answers the question of purpose:

### **Proverbs 1:2-6**

for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; 3 for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair; 4 for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young— 5 let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance— 6 for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

Why was the book written, what the audience was, who the book was written for. And then finally, verse 7 tells us what a person needs to profit from the book.

### **Proverbs 1:7**

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Now, let's look at this. First of all, the book tells us in the very first sentence what kind of book this is and who wrote it. The book is called Proverbs which is a type of wisdom literature. We have several books in the Bible that are called Wisdom

Literature – books like Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. What binds them together is the distinct way that God speaks in these books. It says in Hebrews 1:1:

**Hebrews 1:1**

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,

The writer of Hebrews is telling us that there is a diversity of ways that God spoke in the Old Testament. For example, God spoke to Moses through burning bush. He spoke face-to-face with Moses on the top of Mt. Sinai. God spoke through Moses in the form of law and legislation. God spoke in a different way to the prophets. He spoke through visions and dreams and audible voices. And in the wisdom literature, like Proverbs, God spoke through the sages, through the wise men of Israel as they reflected on life and on God's creation.

We see this in places like Proverbs 24:30-34:

**Proverbs 24:30-34**

I went past the field of a sluggard, past the vineyard of someone who has no sense; 31 thorns had come up everywhere, the ground was covered with weeds, and the stone wall was in ruins. 32 I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: 33 A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— 34 and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

The laboratory was the sluggards' field, the lazy person's farm. And the sage, the wise person, surveys the field and reflects on his observations and comes to this conclusion:

**Proverbs 24:32-34**

I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw: 33 A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— 34 and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

Now the reflections on creation and conclusions of the sages' weren't just their journal entries. We are not reading the book of what popped to a person's mind even a smart person's mind as they looked out at life. Proverbs is God's Word to us about how to skillfully handle life's complexities. The people who wrote the book of Proverbs are writing first of all as members of God's covenant community. They have the Torah, that is the people who wrote the book of Proverbs had the five books of Moses which they were required to copy by hand. Did you know that the kings of Israel like Solomon, who wrote most of the book of Proverbs, were required to copy the first five books of Moses by hand?

### **Deuteronomy 17:18-19**

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. 19 It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees

The kings were required to copy and to study the law of God every day of their lives. Can you imagine if we simply required every president as their first action upon being inaugurated the requirement that they copy out our Bill of Rights and our Constitution as well as key treaties like the Geneva Accords. And then we would require presidents to study the Bill of Rights and the Constitution and key treaties and laws every day.

The men who wrote the book of Proverbs were men who had the law of God inside of them. They were copying it; they were studying it; they were memorizing it. They weren't just looking out at life as neutral observers. They were looking out at life as people who were deeply impacted by God's covenant.

And just as important, God was speaking to them as they observe life. Here is what we read in Proverbs 2:1-6:

### **Proverbs 2:1-6**

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, 2 turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding— 3 indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, 4 and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, 5 then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. 6 For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

The bottom line? The book of Proverbs is more than ancient self-help literature. This book comes from the mouth of God. It is every bit as Holy Spirit inspired as is God's law or what we read in the prophets. The only difference is the way the inspiration came and the form in which it was written. It came through observation, through reflection, through study. And the form it was written in is mostly short, pithy statements. But the book of Proverbs is to be received as God's Word to us. This is God's wisdom. God has spoken so that we can successfully navigate life in the thousands of situations that the rules don't cover.

Do you think we need God's wisdom in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Do you think we need God's wisdom in our country right now as we seem to be careening from one crisis to another? We have financial crises, energy crises, moral crises (50% of children who are born to women under the age of 30 are now born out of wedlock). We have environmental crises, problems of food shortages, and water

shortages. And then, of course, every one of us has personal questions that we would love to receive counsel on – who to date, who to marry, what should we say to people in different situations? In a time of societal crisis and in our own time of personal need, we desperately need wisdom to skillfully navigate life. And the wisdom that we need can only come from God.

Now, I want you to see a contrast between what we men and women can know through our own study, through our own research, and through our own investigation and what, by way of contrast, can only come to us through God's revelation to us. In 1 Corinthians 2:6-7:

**1 Corinthians 2:6-7**

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

What does the world in its wisdom know? How does the world in its wisdom think? Go back to the 1920's and 30's in Germany. Germany was one of the most educated nations in the history of the world. If you look at the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, German scientists won the largest share of the Nobel Prizes that were handed out. German universities were the envy of the world. This was the nation that produced Einstein and Freud, and Schiller, and Goethe. It had the world's most impressive artists and musicians. When Hitler took over in January 1933, do you know what happened?

If you read German history you will find that within months the Nazis had working for them almost all of the journalists, the lawyers, the physicians, the psychiatrists, the philosophers. Some of the most brilliant minds – philosophers like Martin Heidegger, were celebrating Hitler's coming saying that in Hitler a new age had dawned. The best and brightest minds participated in the Jewish Holocaust.

The world, in its wisdom, employs the most brilliant minds used to justify the unjust. The best and brightest minds scheme and lose of billions and billions of dollars, whether we're talking about Lehman Brothers or AIG, or Bear Stearns. When the world in its wisdom looks at human history, do you know what it sees? The great historian Arnold Toynbee said history is just the story of men and women going around in circles. There's no advance. There's no explanation. There's no rhyme or reason.

The French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre said that the universe is absurd. The French existentialists said life makes them nauseous. Paul says he speaks a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. The people who say that the universe is absurd, that life makes them nauseous. The wisdom of this age



makes tax payers bail out their own dreadful decisions while they walk away with tens of millions of dollars in compensation, offer defenses and philosophical excuses for dictators and holocausts and murders.

In 1 Corinthians 2:7-8 we read:

**1 Corinthians 2:7-8**

No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Ultimately, where we see the blindness and the futility of this world's wisdom is when it comes to their failure to perceive who Jesus Christ is. What did this world in all of its wisdom perceive and understand when it looked at Jesus of Nazareth? The greatest men in the world didn't get it. They looked at Jesus of Nazareth and just saw a man, a carpenter, a Jewish rabbi, who was a threat to their power and pretensions. They didn't see that Jesus was God come in the flesh. They didn't perceive that this man Jesus was God the Creator of heaven and earth come down to rescue and save us. When the rulers and wise men and the religious and philosophers looked at Jesus, they didn't know that looking back at them through his eyes were the eyes of Almighty God. In rejecting Jesus, the wise didn't understand that they were rejecting God. When the rulers crucified Jesus, they didn't know that the nails they were pounding into his hands were being pounded into the hands of God.

There are some things that we will not be able to get by our own brain power, by our own study and investigation. There are some things that require God to speak to us. Certainly, we won't be able to get Jesus. If you struggle with Jesus, just Jesus – you say, “You know, I like and admire what many Christians do. I'm interested in Jesus. I find him fascinating. But I just don't get this Jesus-is-God deal at all. I appreciate many of the things Jesus stood for, but I just don't get this I've-got-to-worship-Jesus thing or become one of his followers. I just don't get it.” If you don't get Jesus, you are in great company because we can't get Jesus by our own study and our own investigation unaided by the Holy Spirit.

One of the men who was Jesus' followers, a man named Peter, had a flash of insight one day in response to Jesus' question, “Who do people say that I am?” Peter looked at Jesus, this man who everyone would agree was a good man, a kind man, certainly a real man (we have wonderful historical records that Jesus was a real man) and said, “You are the Christ. You are the Son of the Living God.” Jesus didn't respond to Peter and say, “Peter, what an amazing guess. Out of all the possibilities that you could have come up with, you just nailed it. Peter, what brilliant intuition! You are so smart. You must have an IQ of 180. You must have earned perfect scores on your SATs.”

Jesus didn't say, "Peter, you must have studied all the great philosophers. Did you take a class on the philosophy of religion?"

What Jesus did say was:

**Matthew 16:17**

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

If you struggle with what Christians believe about Jesus, you say, "I just really wrestle with this idea that Jesus is God and the notion that I'm supposed to worship Jesus and follow him," ask God for a revelation, for a flash of insight concerning Jesus. Ask God to speak to you. Don't try to prescribe the way he will speak to you, but ask God to speak to you about Jesus in a way that you would know for sure that that was God speaking. You will not understand Jesus apart from a revelation from God.

And you will not understand how to negotiate life skillfully apart from a revelation from God. We need Proverbs to come to us from the mouth of God as inspired scripture to skillfully navigate life.

Now, it is important to read Proverbs correctly. Because life is complicated, no one Proverb holds the exhaustive truth about any subject. And that's where so many folks make their mistake and get into trouble. We latch onto one Proverb and we say, "This is the total sum of truth regarding a certain subject." You parents know this one really well. Those of us who are parents, we latch on to one Proverb – Proverbs 22:6:

**Proverbs 22:6**

Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

We see this as the sum total of all that God wants to say to us about child raising. Here's what happens. You latch onto Proverbs 22:6 as the sum total of truth regarding your kid. And if your kids are doing well, they haven't departed from the Way; they walked down the sidewalk right in the middle never making a false step to the right or to the left, if your kids are doing well, then all you have is Proverbs 22:6 and you are going to be filled with incredible pride. "Yup! Honey, we did it! We did it right. We are fabulous child-raisers. We're not like those other loser-parents out there, whose kids are having problems." If your kids are doing well, you have this hugely inflated sense of yourself and your parenting skills.

And if your kids are having problems, they are not walking down the center of the sidewalk, they are playing in the street and stumbling down the interstate, you feel terrible. You look at the Proverb about training up a child in the way they

should go and when they are old they won't depart from it; and, so they're departing and you say, "We blew it. We're rotten people. We're horrible parents."

No one proverb contains the whole truth. To obtain God's mind on something like child-raising, you have to read lots of other proverbs concerning why our kids turn out the way they do. There are many proverbs about wise and teachable sons and daughters, who listen to their parents. And there are many proverbs about stubborn fools, who reject all counsel and reject all wisdom. When we read Proverbs, we need to see that each proverb is being like a facet on a diamond. We have to gather all the proverbs together on certain subject to see the whole diamond with all of the facets of the truth.

And it is best to read Proverbs in community. That's why we have small groups, so that with other believers we can read the scripture and talk about it and learn from each other. Proverbs is inspired by God, but it has to be read correctly understanding that no one proverb exhaustively covers a subject. And it is best to be read in community as we interact with other people over the meaning of the text.

Now, why was the book written?

**Proverbs 1:2**

for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight;

There is this long run-on sentence from verse 1 to verse 6. Proverbs was written to impart wisdom. Wisdom is not just a function of a person's education. You can be brilliant in your technical area of expertise. You can be a brilliant attorney and yet be an absolute fool regarding how life is to be lived. You can be a brilliant researcher, a brilliant physician, or college professor, or engineer, and yet be absolutely clueless regarding how to have a successful marriage. There are so many brilliant people who are not only on their second marriages, but they're on their third and fourth marriages. And even these second, third and fourth marriages are failing. You may know an amazing amount about running a business, or selling a product, or making money, but you may know absolutely nothing about managing your anger, or handling your sexuality, or responding to criticism, or finding true and lasting happiness in this world.

Friends, we all know people who have talent, wealth, looks, and charisma – all the things that everyone says you need to have in order to succeed. We all know people who have everything going for them and whose lives have regularly blown up. And we all know people who don't seem to have very much going for them. They are not great looking, or they are not particularly wealthy. They may have health issues. They may have special needs kids, and yet, these folks seem to have done really well. What's the difference?

Proverbs says it all boils down to wisdom. Some people have great skill in

negotiating life's complexities. And others, despite all of their talents, lack wisdom.

There is a story that comes out of the life of King David back in 2 Samuel. David faced a rebellion from his own son. Absalom rose up in a coup-d'état and overthrew David, so David had to flee. Well, there is this wise man named Ahithophel, who threw in his lot with Absalom. Ahithophel was known as the wisest person in Israel. Now, David knew that Ahithophel was incredibly wise and that he had no hope so long as Absalom had Ahithophel's wisdom available to him.

So David goes to Hushai and he says, "Do everything you can to frustrate the counsel of Ahithophel. So Hushai speaks to Absalom and he ingratiates himself with Absalom.

Now Absalom is faced with a decision: When should I go on the attack against my father, King David? And Ahithophel says, "Do it now and the kingdom is yours. Do it now and you will win." But Hushai appeals to Absalom's vanity and fear. He says, "Wait a minute. Your father is a skilled fighter. Here is what you need to do. Don't attack right away. Gather more troops." And Absalom listens to Hushai. He says, "There is no reason to take the risk right now. I will pause. I will wait." So he rejects Ahithophel's counsel. And Ahithophel goes home and hangs himself.

Why does he hang himself? It is because Ahithophel knew that if you reject wisdom, you can keep disaster away for a little while, but you are not going to be able to keep it away forever.

One thing that is necessary to do life successfully is wisdom. You see so many bright people, talented people, well-educated people just careening from one life disaster to another, conflict constantly following in their wake, they have no wisdom in relating to people, no wisdom in relating to circumstances, no wisdom in relating to God.

So, who is the book written for?

**Proverbs 1:4**

for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young—

We read that it was designed for giving prudence to those who are simple and for those who are young. First of all, the book was written for the simple, the young. The simple person in Proverbs is the naïve person, the gullible person, the person, who is uninitiated in the way life works. Proverbs is specifically addressed to teenagers, who are for the first time making their way out into the world. It is focused like a laser on young people who are venturing away from

their homes for the first time – college freshmen, young men and women joining the military, young people who are moving to another city to take a job. The simple are the open, the gullible, young women and men who can be taken advantage of.

But Proverbs is not just written for the simple; they are also written for the wise. Verse 5:

**Proverbs 1:5**

let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance—

We are told here at beginning of the book of Proverbs that this book is not just written for the young and naïve, but you can always become wiser at any age, no matter how much life experience you've had. Proverbs is suggesting to us that to do life well, you need to be a lifelong learner.

In this little introduction we read that the book is written for both the young and gullible as well as the old and wise. It reminds me of something that the great Saint Augustine said 1600 years ago. He said:

The Bible is shallow enough for a toddler to wade in and deep enough to drown an elephant.

It is a great book for college freshmen who are trying to make their way out into the world for the first time; and, it is a great book for old saints. I've been told that Billy Graham has read a chapter of Proverbs every day of his life for the last 60 years. Is there anyone who has handled life with all of its complexities with greater tact, greater skill in negotiating through complex issues? Is there anyone who has handled things better than Billy Graham in the last half century?

Now, the setting for teaching the book of Proverbs was the home. They may have been written by kings in a royal school, or a royal court, but the setting of dissemination, where this wisdom would be pressed out, was the home. That's why I've called the whole series from the book of Proverbs, "What Your Parents Should Have Taught You (But Probably Didn't)."

There was a book written 15 years ago called, *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned In Kindergarten*, in which Robert Fulghum said that the wisdom he needed to do life was not learned in graduate school. It was learned in Sunday School and in sand boxes:

- Share everything, play fair
- Don't hit people
- Put things back where you found them
- Clean up your own mess

- Don't take things that aren't yours
- Say you're sorry if you hurt someone
- Wash your hands before you eat
- Flush

Robert Fulghum was on to something. These are things that should be taught to us in our families and often aren't. We need the wisdom of proverbs.

Well, if wisdom is the bottom line requirement for being successful in life, how do you gain wisdom? How do you grow in wisdom? How do you become skillful in navigating relationships with all kinds of people, being able to handle all kinds of circumstances? How do you become skillful in your relationship with God?

It is not just a matter of studying. Gaining skill in life is not just memorizing Proverbs, although that is helpful.

### **Proverbs 1:7**

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

There is a certain posture, a certain attitude that you need to have as a foundation for gaining wisdom.

### **Proverbs 1:7**

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. By beginning we are not talking, as one commentator said, the starting block that the runners leave behind; rather we are talking about the foundation on which all else is built. What the writer of Proverbs is saying to us is that if you want to gain this thing called "wisdom" which is the key to doing life well, if you want skills in learning how to relate well to your wife, or your husband, if you want skill in learning how to relate to your kids, or your parents, if you want skill in relating to people in your workplace, skill to deal with conflict, relating to bosses, relating to employees, if you want skill in handling what is being thrown at you by life, then you need to begin with your relationship with God.

And your relationship with God has to be absolutely central to all of your life. You can't become wise by having your relationship with God be one of the many things that you've got going on in life. You enjoy exercise, you like to garden, you love reading, you've got your job and along with many of the other activities of your life, you also have a relationship with God. If that is what's going on, you will never become a wise person according to the book of Proverbs. Your relationship with God has to be the most important, the most central thing, the organizing principle of your life so that in every relationship that you have and

every person you choose to date, in every job you choose to take, in every major decision - are you going to leave the city and go somewhere else, the kind of home you're going to purchase, everything you do, you always come back to this one central question: how is this decision going to affect my relationship with God?

The question that drives us toward wisdom is not "How can I use God to get the kind of life that I have determined I want to live? How can I use God to get me the job that I want? How can I use God to get me the kind of man or woman I want? How can I use God to get me the money I want?"

That's not it. Rather, the question is, "How will this decision I'm making get me to God?" Not how will God get me to the thing I want, but how will the thing get me to God? Because everything has to do with God!

So, when I'm considering that my relationship is the central thing about my life around which everything else is going to be organized, the writer of Proverbs sums up the centrality of one's relationship with God by using the phrase, "fear of the Lord."

#### **Proverbs 1:7**

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The fear of the Lord is used over 100 times in the Bible – 19 times in the book of Proverbs alone, 49 times in the Psalms. The book of Proverbs begins with the statement that, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" and the book of Proverbs ends with the statement in Proverbs 31:30:

#### **Proverbs 31:30**

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

The fear of the Lord serves as bookends for this whole discussion of wisdom. What is the fear of the Lord?

For many people, when they read this, it sounds like you're supposed to be scared of the Lord. "Don't hit me, Lord!" "Don't get me, God!"

Let me approach the fear of the Lord from two angles. First of all, fear of the Lord is just the other side of the coin of the love of the Lord. Deuteronomy 10:12 says:

#### **Deuteronomy 10:12**

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul

It doesn't say, "All you need to do is fear the Lord," or "all you need to do is love the Lord." Rather, it says, "Fear the Lord and love him." The more that you fear the Lord, the more that you love the Lord!

How exactly does this work? Let me share with you a few thoughts in closing.

Tim Keller, who is a wonderful writer and pastor at Redeemer Church in New York, said that psychologists have told us that if we understand our greatest fear, we understand what our heart is after in life. If you understand your greatest fear, you will understand what you are looking for most in terms of your security, significance, or identity. Follow your fears and you will figure out what you love. Pay attention to your nightmares and you will figure out what you love. If what you love most is approval, then perhaps in your nightmares, your worst fear would be rejection. If what you love is power and respect, then your nightmares might include humiliation. On the other hand, if you are a people-pleaser then you don't care about humiliation. What you care about most is making sure that people love you. And what you fear the most is someone disapproving of you.

Your greatest fear is the indication of what you want the most. So, if you are living for your children, then the thought of the loss of one of your kids is absolutely devastating. If you are living for money, or you are living for career, then the loss of money or the loss of career would shred your life. If you are living for your boyfriend or your girlfriend, then breaking up will shatter you.

The bottom line is that if you understand your greatest fear, you will understand your greatest love. You can believe in Jesus Christ and you can believe that he died for your sins and rose from the dead, you can be inspired by Christ's life, you can be inspired by his teaching, but he has not yet become your fear. In other words, Christ is not yet the main thing in your life that you fear losing. But once Jesus Christ stops being a doctrine, once he stops being just a person who lived 2000 years ago, once Jesus Christ stops being someone that you abstractly believe in, once Jesus Christ becomes the main love and the main fear of your life, the one who you say, "You know, if I've got Christ, then my life has meaning. If I was to lose Christ, it would shred me. Life would be worthless without him." If you think about fear, think about what is it that controls me, what grips me. About what do you say, "If I can't have this, I will be devastated?"

What the writer of the book of Proverbs is saying is that square 1 for gaining wisdom, the starting point, is having this one great fear in your life – the fear of losing relationship with Christ that would render everything meaningless, the fear of just going through the motions of religion, Christ as an idea or a doctrine. Step 1 in gaining wisdom is having this one great love in your life – Christ at the center of everything. The writer is saying step 1 in gaining wisdom, skilled in handling life successfully, hanging on to Christ as if your life depended on it.



Compared to him nothing else matters, nothing else inspires, no one else motivates. If you want to have wisdom, fear the Lord and love him. Let's pray.

## **The One Thing You Need To Succeed In Life**

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Rich Nathan

September 20-21, 2008

Everything Your Parents Should Have Taught You (But Probably Didn't)

Proverbs Series

Proverbs 1:1-7

- 1. Why do we need the Book of Proverbs?**
- 2. What kind of book is Proverbs? (Proverbs 1:1; Hebrews 1:1)**
  - A. Reflections on life (Proverbs 24:30-24)
  - B. Inspired by God (Proverbs 2:1-6; 1 Corinthians 2:6-8)
- 3. What mistake do people make in reading Proverbs? (Proverbs 22:6)**
- 4. Why do some people succeed in life and other people fail?**
- 5. Who is Proverbs written for? (Proverbs 1:4-5)**
- 6. What attitude do you need to become wise? (Proverbs 1:7)**