

*Proverbs 9:1 Wisdom has built her house;
she has hewn out its seven pillars.*
² *She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;
she has also set her table.*
³ *She has sent out her maids, and she calls
from the highest point of the city.*
⁴ *“Let all who are simple come in here!”
she says to those who lack judgment.*
⁵ *“Come, eat my food
and drink the wine I have mixed.*
⁶ *Leave your simple ways and you will live;
walk in the way of understanding...*
¹⁰ *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

WHERE TO BEGIN?

Anyone who watches or listens to news knows that there are problems out there. Once in a while you get a good story. But usually, one news story makes you irate. The next makes you want to cry for someone. Another simply makes you drop your jaw. Life has become a soap opera. If the world is so full of problems, if we are all up to our armpits in them, where can we begin?

Someone opined that a good place to begin is with Sunday sermons. He said, “We need more straight talk about this world’s problems, not just about God. No book of the Bible does this better than Proverbs. Listen to verses like these:

“Proverbs warns against bad associations: *‘My son, if sinners entice you...If they say, “Come along with us; let’s lie in wait for someone’s blood... we will get all sorts of valuable things... These men lie in wait for their own blood!’*” (1:10-18)

“This book of the Bible teaches hard work: *‘A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit.’* (24:33-34)

“Proverbs talks about road rage, well sort of: *‘A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult.’* (12:16)

“Proverbs tells us to set Right Priorities: *‘Better a dry crust [of bread] with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife.’* (17:1)

“We need,” this man concluded, “our pastors to preach more often from the book of Proverbs.”

Who knows? Maybe that would help. Proverbs is a book of the Bible; it is God’s word. Proverbs speaks directly to the big problems of life on earth more so than any other book of the Bible. Should I preach more often from Proverbs? Is that where to begin?

Few things are more enjoyable than a good meal with friends. At all the great celebrations of life, what do we do? We eat! Many of you were here yesterday. We worshiped at the marriage ceremony of Wilma and Cecil, and then we all got in our cars and trucked on over to the VFW. Or can you imagine a graduation party without food? Baptisms and confirmations are good excuses for church potlucks. And where do we usually get together with friends, if not at restaurants? If someone invites you over to their house, even if it’s not for a meal, we do expect snacks or maybe a desert. And in the

Lutheran Church, we—now I don't mean to be shocking—but we even have food at funerals!

Eating a feast is hearty Bible language for what happens when we listen to God's word. Listen to our reading, "*Wisdom has built her house... She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table... 'Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed'*" (1,2,5). This is no drive-through at Rally's, this is a feast with meat laid out on the platters (vegetarians, please pardon me, but you get the picture). There is wine poured into the glasses. You're not eating off paper plates, Wisdom has put the fine china in front of you; "*[Wisdom] has set her table.*" It is a feast. And the feast is the next 20 chapters of the book of Proverbs. You remember those words I read to you? The "*a little folding of the hands to rest...*" or remember the "*fool who shows his annoyance and the wise man who overlooks an insult*"? Those are the feast that Wisdom sets out for us.

When you eat well, you are healthier, stronger, smarter, and feel better. Listen to God's wisdom and that wisdom will make you healthier, stronger, smarter and feel better. You will be a more helpful neighbor. You will be a better parent. You will be a child who makes the parents proud. Listen to Proverbs and you will avoid many those dangers which make wrecks of lives – things like addiction and bad associations. The book of Proverbs encourages you and me to be principled, to act with integrity, in ways that are worthy of respect, and healthy. In the book of Proverbs God seeks to give you a better life in this world.

I. But Is True Wisdom Even Possible?

If God really wants to give us that, if that is the banquet that Wisdom invites us to, why don't we do these things? Well, because it is a lot of work.

Being wise in God's eyes is not about doing the right thing so that you somehow get the success you want in life. Acting out God's wisdom is a lot of work because godly wisdom is not about me. It's about God and what he wants in my life. What God wants in life is that I first of all love him, and then that I love the other people in this world, and I come in third place in a three horse race.

Suddenly wisdom looks a little less pleasing. I think all of us feel this at some point, but perhaps no one so acutely as the Mom. (By this I do not put down fathers or anyone else. This is simply my perception.) To perhaps no one is the truth so in-your-face as for Mom: she lives to serve others. I don't need to get into the details. But at some point, except for the eight perfect mothers in the history of the world (just kidding, there weren't even eight), every single mother gets to this point, "Do I only live for other people?" Now there is a question with a complicated answer. We all need our personal time and fulfillment and all that. But basically, we do exist for other people. And our human nature cannot be content with that answer. And what is true of moms is true for every one of us. We do not want to only live for others. That is why we don't always follow God's solid wise advice, because we cannot be truly selfless people, due to the sin that lives in each of us.

As an example, just one of many, do you remember that one proverb I read about "*overlooking an insult*"? That isn't easy. Don't confuse holding your tongue while you still bear a grudge in your mind with "*overlooking an insult*". Is that something you do well? Me neither. I want to say my piece, even if it does hurt people. Don't you just want to vent sometimes?

Wisdom is difficult because it requires us to love other people more than ourselves, and not just once in a while when it is convenient, but all the time.

Suddenly, we realize that we have not always followed God's will in regard to the wisdom that could make this world a better place. We see how we are part of the problem. Every major crisis is not something completely different from how we act, but merely our sorts of actions magnified. Brutality toward others is merely a magnification of how we can be petty and mean. Robbery is merely a magnification of selfishness. Persecution is merely a magnification of our snarky comments.

And if the problem resides in us, who listen to God's word on a regular basis, then the question still remains, "Where to Begin to solve the world's problems?"

II. The True Beginning of Wisdom

Where to begin, indeed? With a great many things, the beginning point is the crucial point. Let me give you the example of financial investments. Let's say you invest \$100 a month, from age 25 to 35 and then stop and never invest another dollar. Another person gets established first, and starts investing \$100 a month at age 35 and puts that money in every year for 30 years, until age 65. Who is going to have more money? The person who only put in from 25-35. That's how compound interest works. Oh the money is not the important part. The important part is the starting point. Starting at the right starting point makes all the difference in the world.

And when our starting point is, "Do what God tells us to do in the book of Proverbs!" we have a problem. Our problem is that we can't even get off the starting blocks. If we think that just doing all the things in the book of Proverbs solves all our problems, we have another thing coming because we are too imperfect to do it.

Listen to more of Wisdom's call in verse 10, "***The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.***" Did you hear where we need to begin? "***The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.***" Before we get to wisdom, we need to start with knowing God. As we have heard in other sermons and Bible readings, to "know God" means to know the one he has sent—Jesus, the Savior of the world.

You need faith in that Savior before you can be wise in God's eyes. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). All wisdom for our lives in this world needs to start in Jesus Christ. But before I go down that line of thought, we need to think about this question.

If, as I mentioned earlier, well actually it was Jesus who mentioned this—if the sum total of being wise and doing God's will is to love, then some people have a very big problem.

If you have not been loved and respected in your life, how in the world can you show it to other people. In your and my life experiences, we know that people who never knew love, who knew abuse and manipulation in their childhood especially, are at a great disadvantage. They find it much more difficult to be loving toward others, because they don't know what love feels like, and they might even find love uncomfortable, abnormal.

If you are someone who has never experienced loving wholesome relationships, what hope do you have? There is hope because there is one who has broken into this world of imperfect people and he has shown love. And that is God himself. And if you had never known a mother's love, or a father's approval, or a friend's concern, God himself has shown the greatest love of all in sending his Son to save you. And that Son gave up his life for you.

God has broken into that relentless human cycle of sin giving birth to more sin, and he with that perfect love tells us to look at him and to block out all the imperfections of this world. Then we can begin to find and to live the solution to the world's problems.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

If you don't start with believing and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, all the rest of the book of Proverbs is useless. And maybe that is why more pastors don't preach from the book of Proverbs—because Proverbs is part B, and you need part A (faith) first.

The wisdom found in Proverbs can shape our lives. I know that I have benefitted from God's Word in Proverbs. This book has helped me change some behaviors into something closer to God-pleasing behaviors. And if you want to know about it, ask me sometime. But I'm not there yet, and I won't get there either in this world. That is why, even more than knowing how to act good and be wise, I pray that God keeps his gift of faith alive in me. Because, "***The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.***" Amen.