# The Way of Wisdom

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Date: 07 July 2019

Preacher: James Lapping

[0:00] The reading today is taken from Proverbs chapter 3 verses 1 to 12 and you'll find that on page 636 of your pew Bibles.

Okay, wisdom bestows well-being. My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity.
Let love and faithfulness never leave you. Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.
Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight.
Do not be wise in your own eyes. Fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.
[1:23] Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops. Then your barns will be filled to overflowing and your vats will brim over with new wine.

My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves as a father the son he delights in.
Thanks be to God. Thanks for reading. I've taken a bit of a battering this morning, but what a joy to be with us all on Sunday.
And I think we're going to have to pray for God's wisdom and help and preaching from us after Darren's warning there about how difficult Proverbs is. I clearly need a lot of help there. Right, let me pray for us.
Father, we thank you for this wonderful book. We thank you for this wonderful reading. We pray, Lord, that you'd use this time now to make us wise.
[2:29] If anything is unhelpful, let that be, Forgotten Father. And what is helpful for building us up, making us wise, trusting you more, may that be remembered and dwelt on and thought about.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. And it would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bibles open. And you should have a rather elaborate white sheet there with some notes on that.
We'll give you a steer. Or at the very least, let you know that we're heading towards the end, which is always a comfort in a talk, isn't it? So if you've just joined us on Sundays or if you're visiting this morning, we've been going through a book in the Bible called Proverbs.
And Proverbs is filled with these short, pithy sayings. And it's all about how a person can be wise and live the good life that God wants us to live.
And it's all about wisdom. But it's not in a transactional or economic or marketplace sense. It's not like you do something and you get something back. So I wonder if you've gone to a bookstore recently, maybe Foils or one of the other university bookstores, and you'll go in there and you'll walk and you'll see the self-help section.
[3:44] And what kind of book titles on the self-help section? Well, it'll be Four Steps to Riches or Seven Habits of This or The Three-Point Plan to Holistic Living.

And you can see the philosophy and the sense that's going on in those books. If you follow this list, if you do these steps, then cha-ching, you'll get this result out.
And that's not the kind of book that Proverbs is. And we remember that great illustration we had last week, that great pile of rule books there that we had to try and keep that we might remember from last week that illustrated that.
But Proverbs is more realistic and it's more nuanced about the infinite complexity of life and all the problems and struggles surrounding it, that most of the moral rules that we learn don't apply to.
And it sees rather than what you do, it's who you are, the type of person you are, what you value, what you love, that will determine your destiny in life.

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[4:52] And whether you're a wise person. So wisdom is not so much a set of steps, a technique or something like that, but a way of living. It's a path to be followed, a way of seeing the world.

And so wisdom, we defined it last week. We had a crack at defining it. We saw that wisdom involved seeing that God made the world. And we see that this morning slightly later on after our reading.
So verse 19 and 20, by wisdom, the Lord laid the earth's foundations. But although God made the world, we also see that there's lots of problems in the world that weren't what God wanted for the world.
And then finally we considered how wisdom is knowing how to navigate and get through these problems and struggles to live the wise life, to reach the good life. So this morning we're going to consider three things.
And you'll find those on the sheet there. That's the goal of wisdom, the path of wisdom. And then finally the fulfillment of wisdom. And you'll notice there, if you pick up the sheet there, I've printed a whole lot of Proverbs from our reading this morning that are on the sheet there.
[6:02] And the reason for that is it's very easy for us to approach Proverbs and read some of these amazing promises in these Proverbs. Look at this. For they will prolong your life many years, bring peace and prosperity.

If you fear the Lord and shun evil, then you'll have health in your body and nourishment to your bones. And then honor the Lord. And what happens?
The bonds will be overflowing. And the vats will brim over with new wine. They're astounding promises. And all we have to do to get these, some might say, is trust the Lord with all your heart.
And that's a kind of a transactional way of understanding the Proverbs. And that's the kind of thing that we might see in the prosperity gospel, if you've heard about that, or sometimes the name and claimant kind of gospel.
And why is that? Because partly that's our experience. We see that when people live the good life, good things happen. This is a bit of a problem with Christianity, is when people become Christians.
[7:08] So you live on an estate, you become a Christian, what happens? You become wealthier, and you end up moving off the estate. And so there's no more Christians living on poor estates.

So there's a partial wisdom in this experience and in these happening. And the temptation is for us to read these verses as simply as a formula or technique.
So what do I mean? We say that God promises to give me good things. All these things that we read about in the Proverbs, whatever it is, good health, wealth, marriage, good life, so long as I do this list of stuff.
If I keep all the moral laws, if I have enough faith, if I watch what I eat and say, watch my words, and then the bad things in the world can't get me.
And what happens is, how are we treating God then? We're treating God as a talisman, a genie, to help me improve my life, and to give me my best life now.
[8:13] So long as I figure out the right technique, or the right combination of things to do to approach God, then God will give me what I want.

And we're all susceptible to this kind of thinking, aren't we, in a bit? So I wonder if you've ever struggled over something in life, and you might go, well, God, I've had quiet times for a week, and I've helped out on Sunday service.
I serve tea and coffee. I sing at the front. Surely you should give me that job promotion that I want. Surely I should have that relationship I want. Surely I could get a job raise or something like that.
And on the face of it, that seems like a very reasonable way of reading these verses, don't it? I mean, look what it says. My son, don't forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart.
And then what happens? For they'll prolong your life many years and bring peace and prosperity.
That seems like the plain and easy way to read these verses.
[9:18] But I want to suggest that a simply transactional way, economic way of reading those verses, is an incorrect way of reading those.

And what I want to suggest is a couple of things for us to remember when it comes to reading the book of Proverbs. And the first thing really is that we should be reading it holistically.
We should be reading it as a whole. So I wonder if you follow Twitter. Laura Koonsberg, BBC reporter, what's her Twitter bio? She goes, 140 characters doesn't tell a whole story.

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If you want to know the nitty-gritty, if you want to find out what it's about, you need to dig a little bit deeper and seek out all the facts and figures. And then secondly, I want to suggest that when we come to Proverbs, we need to be reading it backwards.
Well, what do I mean by that? Well, if you remember last week, I suggested that Proverbs was written as a manual for young boys and girls on how to live the wise and good life.
[10:28] And so what the author is trying to do in writing the Proverbs is to think about the end of things so that if we understand the end of things, we can understand the goal and not merely live for the here and now.

Now, that might be slightly tricky for us to understand. So let me ask you, when it comes to chocolate, are you a hoarder or a wolf? You know what I mean there?
A hoarder stashes the chocolate away, hides it in the little corner, saves it, takes a little bit, eats it up. And wolf, if you're of the wolf clan, hand up. They're not satisfied until they've eaten all the chocolate in the house at that moment.
And they save nothing for later. And the trick for us as we come to Proverbs is that we need to learn to be hoarders. We need to be looking at the end of things.
You see, for Jewish folk, the righteous life, the life well lived, did not end in death, but rather it was escaping death into the very presence of God, into glory.
[11:44] And so look at, turn over to chapter 4, 418. Just read a verse there. What do we see? We'll comment on this verse later. The path of the righteous is like the morning sun.

What does it do? It shines brighter and brighter till the full light of day. Maybe you're not convinced. Let's look slightly ahead.
Proverbs 12, 28. I've just printed it on the sheet there. What does 12, 28 say about the righteous life? In the way of the righteous, there is life. Along that path, there is immortality.
It's a greater promise than simply a promise for this life. And then again, 23. Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord. There is surely what?
A future hope for you. A hope that you'll be not cut off from. It's a hope that will last. So the goal of wisdom is the good life.
[12:45] And in part, that good life is partially fulfilled now. Along with sickness, struggles, illness in life, taxes, death.

And in order to navigate those struggles, we're going to need wisdom. Both for this life and for eternity. But that is only the beginning. It's not the be all and the end all.
If we understand the end of all things, the goal, then that will radically shape how we think about life and how we think about living the good life.
So let's consider how we should be living the good life. The path of wisdom, if you're following on the sheet there. So having considered the goal of wisdom, how do we reach this, we're looking along the path of wisdom.
And what we're going to learn here is something about God and we're going to consider two implications from that and then we're going to consider something about ourselves and one implication from that. So something about God, and this is point A there on the sheet, something about God, the Lord loves you.
[13:51] And L-O-R-D, capital letters, that's the Bible's way of talking about God in His personal, intimate name to people. So look at verse 3 there. Let love and faithfulness never leave you.

I want to just share with you, I've been an absolute fool when it comes to reading. I know I shouldn't be a fool, but I've been an absolute fool when it comes to reading this verse. See, I've always thought, let love and faithfulness never leave you.
And I've thought, well, that's something I need to do and then I'll be a good person and then I'll have those treats. But rather, it is something that I must receive.
I must receive the love and faithfulness of God that the Lord loves you and me in a way that's hard to comprehend.
And the word that He uses there for love is the intimate, unbreakable, family covenant word that God uses especially for His people.
[14:54] That the Bible uses for how God promises to love His people no matter what in all circumstances of life, come what may. And faithfulness is kind of a similar thing of saying that.

And so the first step to becoming wise, if we're going to be wise people here at St. Silas today in 2019, is that we need to realize that we're loved in this way by God.

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You must never forget that the Lord loves you and is always faithful to you. He'll never let you go. And if you have that rock under your life, no matter what happens in life, you'll be able to stand strong.
Now I wonder if you've ever been to the beach before. Maybe you've been to the beach, you've gone down to the rock pools, you would have seen some little mussels. Do you get mussels in Scotland? I'm not sure. Have I seen them yet?
Have you ever picked a mussel off? And I wonder if you've seen on a mussel, there's that little bitty thing that hangs off it. It's called the beard of the mussel. Now, they've got all these scientists who've done all the science stuff on this and they've never been able to replicate that glue that attaches the mussel to the rock.
[16:02] It's the most powerful adhesive in the world. And if someone could ever figure out how to make that glue, well, they'd make a fortune. But no one's been able to do that. But that glue is like comparing Pritz stick to no-nails industrial strength glue when you consider how the Lord loves you and will hold on to you no matter what.

The waves may come, the surf may pound, winter, summer, birds may pack, octopi might pull, but the Lord will never let you go. And what's the implication of that?
If we understand that, well, then we'll trust the Lord. Point B there. So look at the verse 5. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your whole own understanding.
And if you see that you love like that in a way that's really remarkable, if you see this in your life, then the natural response is that you will trust. You'll trust someone because you know that they've always got your best interests interests in heart.
They'll always act in your best interests even though it hurts at the time. You'll trust them because they'll always give you the freedom and space to flourish but will still be holding you tight with all your heart.
[17:18] That is, you trust with everything that's within you. No half measures. And so I was listening to a talk and it was this American chap who was reflecting on this. He was talking about his grandfather who he saw this frozen river for the first time in his life and he'd heard you can walk across frozen rivers.

So he gingerly stepped out one knee, one knee, one hand, one hand, started crawling. Lo and behold, he heard this rumbling behind him and it was this wagon, it was quite a while ago, with this horse and cart and loaded up and it came charging across the river and he felt like such a fool on his hands and knees.
When you should be trusting the Lord with everything, no half measures because the Lord will hold and sustain you and then leaning not on your understanding. So who are you going to look for for wisdom, to ourselves or to God?
See, if you don't see that God loves you totally and completely, you're always going to be wondering, should I trust God?
Should I not? Is he going to hold me? Is he really on my side? And you'll be like that character described in the beginning of the book of James who's constantly looking for wisdom but is getting tossed back and forth because he doesn't realize that he is loved by God and that he should be trusting him in all things.
[18:38] He'll be flip-flopping the whole time. But if you know that the Lord loves you, then you can trust him. And the second implication there is that you trust him, see, in all your life, in all your ways.

So verse 6, look at verse 6 there. In your ways, submit to him and he will make your paths straight. And here's the thing, if you trust God and you acknowledge him in all you do, if you give him glory, if you're heading towards that heavenly goal, God will smooth your paths.
The big mountains in your life that seem so intimidating, threatening, that might destroy you, they'll become as nothing because you know that you're loved by God.
And that knowledge becomes a rock under your life. And when that knowledge becomes a rock under your life, that becomes incredibly attractive to people around you.
I wonder if you've ever met someone who it seems as though nothing seems to faze them. I'm not talking about being stoic, like I'm just going to keep on going no matter what.
[19:45] But there just seems to be a rock under their life and a graciousness that no matter what happens, they know what to do, they know how to behave, they know who to trust.

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And it's incredibly attractive. And that's the goal. We're meant to be attractive to people so that people can come to the Lord and see how wise and awesome and loving he is.
And next, we do this day in and day out, day in and day out. See, what's the Bible's favorite way of talking about the Christian life? Well, it talks about the Christian life as a path. And there are some hill walkers here at church, I know.
And what's the trick about finishing a hill walk? Well, you just need to keep on going. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, plod, plod, plod. It might rain, it might snow, but if you're ever going to get to the end of the track, you're going to have to keep walking in every situation.
And why is that? Because becoming wise is not a quick fix. It's not as if you can take a pill and say, right, that's it, now I'm wise.
[20:51] But it's a journey, it's a path that you must follow day in and day out. It's about becoming a person that is wise, that loves the Lord, and that knows that He is loved.

So let me try and convince you further of that. The Proverbs and the Psalms are meant to be read in a way whereby they are acting on your heart and shaping you day by day as you think about them, as you meditate on them, as you reflect on them.
And they change you into the kind of person that God wants you to be, slowly, thought by thought, action by action, not this, but that, not that, but this.
And you know the old adage, sow thoughts, reap an action, reap an action, reap a habit, sow a habit, reap a destiny. And that's the kind of philosophy that's behind the Proverbs and how we're going to be living the good life.
So the Proverbs writer, he wants to shape our character that we might become wise. So we've learned something about God and two implications and then something about ourself and that's point D there.
[22:04] We need to be humble and committed to regular self-examination. So look at verse 7 there. Do not be wise in your own eyes.

Fear the Lord and shun evil. And notice how hard this is to do if you don't realize that the Lord loves you and is committed to you. You see, unless you have that rock of unconditional love under your life, it will be incredibly hard to examine yourself.
If you try and examine yourself, it will either crush you when you realize that you're not the person that you thought you were or turn you into a liar and that you'll keep on making excuses for where you get things wrong.
You'll say stuff like, it's not me, it's my upbringing. If you had the bullies at school I had, then you'd do the same thing. And if you're always trying to be wise in your own eyes, you'll never look at yourself honestly.
You'll always excuse your own bad behavior and at the same time condemn and judge it in others. But if you know that the Lord loves you, the beginning of wisdom, and that's a rock under your life, then you'll look at your life and you'll say, what will you say?
[23:19] You'll say, oh, I'm a fool. I didn't know that. I should have known that. And what will you do? You'll say, it's okay, God loves me. And you'll cry out to the Lord to save you from your foolishness, from your wisdom.

And at that very moment that you think you're a fool, you'll be heading towards wisdom, rocketing down the road towards being wise and the type of person that God wants you to be.
Being humble and leaning not on your own wisdom, but on God's wisdom. But if you always try to excuse or justify yourself or cast slight on others, then you're going to be very, very far from wisdom.
And what's the implication from that? Well, it means there that we're going to accept hardships as heavenly love. Point E.
So look at verse 11 and 12. My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline. Do not resent his rebuke because the Lord disciplines those he loves. As a father, the son he delights in.
[24:22] See, the final step on the path to wisdom is not railing against life's disappointments and getting down about them, but drawing a line under them and accepting them as a part of the Lord's love and care for you as a child of God.

So how do I know that the goal of wisdom is more than comfort in this life? What we looked at right at the beginning. It's because in the same section where God gives these amazing promises about how we can have peace and prosperity, he also gives these promises of disciplines and hardships

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because he wants us to become wise so we can reach that heavenly goal, that end goal, that heavenly perfection.
And in order to do that, we need to accept instruction and discipline. So consider Job, maybe you know the story of Job. he never did anything wrong in his life and he had unimaginable suffering.
And then consider Jesus. He never did anything wrong. He loved God perfectly. He was loved by God perfectly and yet he still went through unimaginable suffering.
And so the author of the Hebrews writes, son, that's Jesus, son though he was, he learned obedience through what he suffered. Not as a punishment, but as a discipline to become wise and to grow into that glory that God wanted him to follow.
[25:51] Why is this? Because the goal of wisdom is not our health, wealth, prosperity. Those are all side effects, good as though they are and as lovely as they are to have.

The goal of wisdom is that we reflect the unimaginable light and glory of God back to our heavenly father in eternity. Look at verse 18 in chapter 4 again.
The path of the righteous is like the morning sun. It shines brighter and brighter and brighter to the full light of day. Remember in heaven there will be no sun because God will be there and he will be our sun and we will grow into that lightness reflecting the light of God back to him in eternity with our heavenly father.
What an amazing, glorious picture. But I wonder if we might move on to consider our final point there. So we consider the goal of wisdom, the way of wisdom. Now we're going to consider the fulfillment of wisdom.
And that picture there of us growing into that eternal glory might seem like a bit much. But here's the thing is that you can never separate wisdom from God.
[27:04] See, God is wisdom. To know God is to be wise. You see, from some of these proverbs that we've been looking at Sunday by Sunday, you'll see they might seem very pointless in the face of some of life's struggles and circumstances.

So in some situations, to try and apply these proverbs to comfort a friend would be the exact opposite of wisdom. It might be unkind or even ridiculous ridiculous to say to someone in the midst of irrational suffering, great suffering, and we all know situations like that, that they should simply accept that suffering as the discipline from God who loves them.
To say that would be absurd to them. But I want to argue that even in the very worst circumstances, God is still the wisdom we need.
What I mean. Let's look at verse 3 and 4 there. So let love and faithfulness never leave you. Bind them around your neck.
Write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you'll win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man. And then in Luke chapter 2 we read how Jesus is the fulfillment of this proverb.
[28:29] And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. You see, Jesus knew perfectly God's love and faithfulness.

He knew like no one else the full extent of the Father's love for us. He lived with God as God in perfect love in eternity before coming down to earth.
And when he came to earth in God's wisdom, he saw and knew the sadness and suffering and pains and struggles of earth and how far that irrational suffering was from God's perfect love and faithfulness for us.
But what did Jesus do? He went to the cross. He goes to the cross to show that he understands what it is to suffer greatly and irrationally for no rhyme and reason.
to suffer abandonment by his friends, to suffer state-sanctioned violence, to suffer physical brutality because he knows what it is to suffer, because he knows that suffering is not part of the wisdom of God.
[29:39] He goes to the cross to end suffering once and for all and to take the punishment and pay the price for sin, that the hatred that causes that irrational suffering.

Jesus paid that price in the wisdom of God and in the wisdom of God, Jesus did that to accomplish the goal of wisdom. That's to make us perfect like God and open up eternity for us.
So why does Jesus do this? He did it because Jesus understood God's perfect love and faithfulness to us and to him.
You see, Jesus knew God's love and faithfulness and he wore them, not around his neck, but on his head as a crown of thorns.

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He knew God's love and faithfulness as they were written on the tablet, not on the tablet of his heart, but on the tablet of the charge that was above him on the cross, King of the Jews.
[30:42] And he went through all of that, that we might become wise and have the good life with God in eternity forever. As the fulfillment of God's love and faithfulness to us as God's wisdom.

Let me pray for us as we finish. So Father, we thank you that in Jesus we can be wise. Father, we thank you for wisdom.
We pray that we'd seek it out in all circumstances. We pray that we'd seek it in trusting you and in trusting your Son more and more each day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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