

THE VALUE OF WISDOM

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 39; Proverbs 2

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. (Prov. 2:6)

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

More than any preceding generations, we live surrounded by and bombarded with words. From news reports to tweets to song lyrics on our televisions or radios or mobile devices, the average person's brain sorts out a lot of input every single day. Whether the content creators believe they are sharing crucial knowledge or trying to sway us to a point of view or sell us a product, the result can be the same. We process an immense quantity of words and have to decide what we care about retaining, what we will act upon, or whether we will dismiss the ideas and values expressed.

Some of those phrases, and particularly the ones set to music, can get in our heads and take up residence whether we want them to or not. A catchy song (for instance, "I Want It That Way") featured in a popular culture moment (an episode of *Brooklyn 99*) and repeated in a commercial (Doritos's Super Bowl ad) might stick with you for weeks. Just as it begins to recede, you hear it over the loudspeaker at a school event, and the earworm is back. "Tell me why-y!" Why that lyric again?

How, then, do we make space for the things that might really matter to us and make us better people? We turn down the noise, turn off the devices, and listen.

Holy God, meet us in this moment. We are looking for you and hoping for a word we can hear and understand. Help us to turn away from distractions and focus on you as we study ancient wisdom and seek insight for this time in our lives. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Proverbs 2:1-11

2:1 My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
²making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
³if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
⁴if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures—
⁵then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
⁶For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
⁷he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,
⁸guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.
⁹Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path;
¹⁰for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
¹¹prudence will watch over you;
and understanding will guard you.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

A WORD ABOUT LISTENING

Almost every Tuesday morning, I stop at a Starbucks after a regularly scheduled appointment. All coffee shops feature a layered soundtrack of grinding beans and cappuccino makers, indie music played a bit too loud, and the voices of customers and staff. This one seems to have added a layer of white noise that I cannot attribute to a machine, and while it might protect conversation from being overheard, it also makes it hard for the barista to hear me when I order my drink. Every week we go through the same exercise. She asks what I would like to have, and I say, “A Tall Mocha,” and she says, “Excuse me?” or “Can you speak a little louder?” I repeat myself, sometimes twice. She focuses intently, but the combination of the ambient cacophony and my soft voice work against her actually hearing me.

The reality of most everyday situations is similar. There is a lot going on at the same time. At home, the washer and dryer are running, the cat is meowing, the letter carrier comes up the driveway, and a branch that needs trimming rubs against the window. At the office, a folding machine ka-thunks, the water cooler glub-glubs, phones ring, and a coworker has a story to tell, but we keep an ear out for the ding of email anyway. We operate on the assumption that we can do more than one thing at a time.

The writer of Proverbs encourages the reader to make “your ear attentive to wisdom” (v. 2:2a). Hearing is passive; it happens without our intention or permission. Listening is active and attentive. To begin, we must choose to tune out whatever distracts us and make time and space for God’s wisdom. That might look like turning off the TV earlier than usual and allowing some quiet in our minds before we fall asleep. Or it might look like going for a walk without headphones in and a podcast playing. It might happen on the commute to work if we don’t turn on drive-time radio.

We might also read a book of godly wisdom, one from the Bible, or one written by a person of mature faith. We might ask a trusted elder or peer to talk about what he or she has learned in life. Or we might spend time in study and discussion with other people committed to growing together, as you are doing in class today.

? **When was a time when you found space for listening to God? What distractions keep you from making your ear attentive to wisdom?**

A HEART FOR UNDERSTANDING

On Sunday morning, Pastor Jay looked forward to being just like the other parents of kids in the confirmation class, taking a family photo and enjoying cake at the reception in the fellowship hall. But his son Billy was less excited about celebrating and instead felt stressed about getting to a scheduled tennis match on time. “I left my phone at home. How will I know if I need to be there?”

Meredith had plans for lunch with a friend until her cell phone rang midmorning on Monday, the number a familiar one. The nurse at her daughter’s high school said, “Shuri came in complaining of a headache, and we let her lie down for a few minutes. Then she threw up a little. Can you come and pick her up?”

Each of these scenarios called for the parent to curb an initial reaction of irritation and read between the lines. Jay had joyful expectations about the events of the day, but he also knew that Billy was experiencing the strain of reconciling conflicting demands. Meredith felt pretty sure that Shuri was not sick but actually felt anxious about a major project for French class. Jay and Meredith both understood the situations; more importantly, they understood their children. Jay allowed Billy to go home to their manse across the street and check his phone for a text from the tennis coach. Meredith cancelled her plans and picked Shuri up from school. Both parents took the time to talk about what happened later, offering reassurances and encouragement.

Of course, becoming a parent does not automatically result in mature understanding. Some parents would have been impatient or angry in these situations, and others would have given in too easily without focusing on what might be learned from the experience. Both parents and children benefited from unpacking what happened and wondering together what fueled the stress in the moment.

Embodying God's wisdom requires more than intellectual attainment. Proverbs specifies "inclining your heart to understanding." God wants to be in a relationship with us that goes beyond what we learn in books or how we behave in the world. While emotional connection seems to come more naturally to some people than to others, we may all cultivate this understanding if we commit to it. For a parent that might mean remembering what it felt like to be the age your child is now. For a boss it could mean taking an employee's circumstances into consideration. As people of faith who hope to live in a godly way, we open our hearts to try and understand God.

? What makes it harder to understand persons in some situations than others?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Prudence may be one of those words that we have heard but find ourselves hard-pressed to define specifically. It sounds a bit old-fashioned, like the name of a great-aunt or a great-great grandmother. Or it might strike us as uptight, a word for people who judge us. "Prudence will watch over you" (v. 11) could sound more judgmental than reassuring. Merriam-

Webster offers this definition geared to kids: prudence is “careful good judgment that allows someone to avoid danger or risks.”¹ The emphasis is on judgment and understanding ourselves.

Recently, a church leader at a conference offered a wise and powerful reflection on building multicultural understanding in the church. He highlighted the Roman centurion who saw the crucified Jesus not as a criminal but as the Son of God (Matt. 27:54). How often do we affirm someone we think of as “other” and question ourselves, rather than questioning others and resting confident in our own world view? The leader challenged the attendees, saying, “Insight precedes eyesight. And if you want to see the other clearly, you need to see yourself better.” We need to understand where we are coming from first in order to understand others.

A pastor of a church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, began a workshop called “The Color of Whiteness: Engaging White Privilege In and Through the Church” by asking participants to write a racial autobiography. It proved challenging to the white people in the room to answer even the first question. “How do you self-identify in terms of race?” Is it okay to say white and not feel sheepish about it? What does being white actually mean? The pastor pointed us to our early experiences and family influences.

Proverbs 2 reminds us that insight is not the same thing as intuition, a knowing we cannot explain or something we just “get.” The text exhorts the reader to “cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding.” It takes intentional effort to gain understanding and develop the careful good judgment we can call prudence. Wisdom is not just about avoiding risk or developing our one-on-one relationship with God. Wisdom requires awareness of the way we relate to others and move in the world.

While we can never fully understand God, when all people understand themselves, and then each other, the whole world will be in a condition of knowledge and prudence that is pleasant to our souls.

? When have you been surprised by another person’s experience? What would you want others in your class to know about you that might surprise them?

1. “Prudence,” Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prudence.

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture reading that may be helpful for your study.

1. Like other Old Testament Wisdom books, Proverbs defines wisdom, explains how to find it, and describes the benefits of living by it. Unlike the books of Ecclesiastes and Job, Proverbs keeps the reality of unjust suffering in the background and presents a more optimistic view.
2. Proverbs affirms that “the fear of the LORD” will lead to relative security, a good reputation, and meaning in life.
3. In Hebrew, Proverbs 2:1–22 is one elaborate sentence of 22 lines, corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.
4. Although the parent speaks (Proverbs 2:1), he points beyond himself and advises the son to listen to “wisdom” and “understanding,” which come from the Lord.
5. Proverbs 1 and 2 affirm the reciprocal relationship between humans and wisdom. Whereas Wisdom “cries out” and “raises her voice” (1:20–21), the parent urges the son to do the same in his search for insight and understanding (2:3)
6. The long “if” condition beginning in 2:1 offers the son two “then” outcomes resulting from wisdom: relationship with God (vv. 5–8) and positive relationship to humans (vv. 9–11).

A LOOK AHEAD

| DAILY BIBLE READINGS | | | |
|----------------------|---------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| M | Jun. 15 | Christ, the Wisdom of God | 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 |
| T | Jun. 16 | God Abundantly Rewards Job's Faithfulness | Job 1:1–5 |
| W | Jun. 17 | God Restores Job's Family and Wealth | Job 42:10–17 |
| Th | Jun. 18 | Wisdom Calls the People to Respond | Proverbs 8:1–7 |
| F | Jun. 19 | Wisdom Present and Active During Creation | Proverbs 8:22–31 |
| Sa | Jun. 20 | Choose Wisdom and Live | Proverbs 8:32–36 |