

THE WISEST ATTITUDE OF ALL**PROVERBS 1:7**

I've been told that in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition, those gathered for worship will lift up their own ornate, gold-clad Bibles during the service as the priest chants a single word: "Wisdom! Wisdom! Wisdom!" That's about the best one word description of the Bible you're ever going to get. It's wisdom!

Today I'm beginning a new message series I'm calling "How To Live Wisely and Well." We're going to look at eight dominant themes found in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. If you like down to earth, practical truth you can use every day of your life in many different situations and circumstances, you're going to enjoy this series. There are two important truths about the book of Proverbs you need to keep in mind. First, the book assumes life experiences are one way God reveals His truth into our lives. Now, you know God has revealed Himself in the Bible. He's also revealed Himself in all the beauty and wonder of creation and nature. He revealed Himself supremely in the words and life of Jesus. But, God also reveals Himself to us through the everyday experiences we go through in life and living.

Second, the book of Proverbs is for people who already love God and want to obey Him. It doesn't tell you how to become Jesus' follower. It tells you how to live after you've made that decision. Obviously, it was written hundreds of years before Jesus lived so it doesn't mention Him per se. Instead, Proverbs describes how you and I ought to live on the basis of who God is and what God has done for us. It's possible for someone to read Proverbs and easily get the mistaken idea you can become a Christian just by acting wisely, or being moral in your behavior, or by acting as a good neighbor, or by being honest in your business. But, of course, most of here today know a person can only become a child of God by grace and grace alone. That happens when you put your faith and trust in what Jesus did for you at the cross and the empty tomb. Once you've entered into that eternal relationship, God wants your everyday actions, attitudes, and lifestyle to reflect that personal decision. So that's what Proverbs is all about. It describes how to live wisely and well in this world as someone who is already a child of God and a follower of Jesus.

Now, today, I want to explore with you an attitude of heart and mind that's absolutely essential to living life wisely and well. If you truly want to be successful in all areas of your life, you will need to adopt and then maintain a specific kind of attitude your whole life long. You approach every day with this same attitude. Let's define it just now.

THE ATTITUDE DEFINED.

This attitude is really the foundation to understanding the entire book of Proverbs, but also understanding the entire Bible as well. There it is – "the fear of the Lord." But what does that really mean? It doesn't mean to live in terror of the Lord. The fear of the Lord means a loving and obedient respect for God that permeates all your thinking about life, all your actions in life, and all your feelings about it. Fearing the Lord is about offering God loving and obedient respect all day and every day. It's similar to the kind of love a

child naturally offers Mom or Dad. But it also includes obedient respect because you love God and you know He holds you accountable for the way you live your life. Fearing the Lord means acknowledging deep down in your bones that this is God's world. You acknowledge He's set up this life to run best by following certain guidelines. When you live by those guidelines, your life goes along pretty well. But when you refuse to live by them, your life starts to go downhill in a hurry. Adopting this attitude is essential if you want to live wisely and well every day. A wise person just fears the Lord. He or she offers God loving and obedient respect every day and that gets revealed primarily in and through your everyday lifestyle.

Here's another definition of fearing the Lord I like very much. It's "awe that leads to action." Because you love and respect God, every moment of time is the Lord's time. Because you love and respect God, every person you relate to gets treated with integrity and kindness. Because you love and respect God, every thing God says to do is a command not a suggestion. Because you love and respect God, every blessing in life is His gift. This is an attitude toward life and living that provides us with a whole new perspective on life and how to live it. It's a perspective that comes to us from God.

Fearing the Lord is here described as "the beginning of knowledge." Now that means two things. If you want to live wisely and well, you must begin with the right attitude: fearing the Lord. But that word "beginning" also refers to the main part or portion of something. In other words, the biggest part, the main portion, or the most significant aspect of being wise is to offer the Lord loving and obedient respect all day every day. Solomon, Israel's third king, is credited with authoring most of the book of Proverbs, but he also wrote another book in the Old Testament called Ecclesiastes. Solomon was someone who had it all and did it all. What was his conclusion about how to approach life? "Everything you were taught can be put into a few words: Respect and obey God. This is what life is all about." (Ecc 12:13 CEV)

Throughout the book of Proverbs, the opposite of the wise person is called "the fool." What's a fool? Is it a person with a low IQ? Someone deprived of a good education? Someone who had no positive role models in life? No. The fool is a person – no matter how educated, intelligent, or sophisticated – for whom fearing the Lord is just the last thing to ever enter his or her mind. There are a few philosophical atheists out there. They don't believe in the existence of any God. But there are many practical atheists. Those are people who say they believe in a God but who live as if He doesn't exist. Practical atheists can even attend church and feel comfortable in a worship service. While they believe God exists, they don't really love God or have any desire to obey Him. That never occurs to them. But if you don't love or respect God, you don't truly fear Him in the biblical sense of that word. That's why I can say with confidence that even though a person has several educational degrees, is intellectually brilliant, or is highly successful in business, if you don't fear God you're a fool. The Bible says, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no god.'" (Ps 53:1 ESV) On the other hand, you can be very average intellectually and possess few remarkable skills or talents that make you stand out among other people. But if you fear the Lord, you are wise.

Here's something else that's important to remember about being a fool. Look at the second half of Proverbs 1:7 – "... but fools despise wisdom and instruction." Most fools won't say they actually despise God or that He's completely irrelevant to them. They know that sounds bad. What they despise are His boundaries and guidelines for live and living. Maybe the clearest and most glaring example of this fact in our culture is its attitude toward sexuality. Because of sexually transmitted diseases, our culture advises us to have "safe sex." But most people aren't interested in God's definition of safe sex. He's very clear about it in His Word. Truly safe sex is an exclusive relationship between a man and woman in marriage. There's no such thing as "safe" pre-marital sex. And yet you will find any number of intellectually gifted people who say, "Quick! Hand out condoms! Teenagers can't control themselves. Teaching them the value of abstinence before marriage is ridiculous. It will never work!" Some years ago now, a school district in Colorado began handing out free condoms to high school students. They were surprised – yea, even shocked and dismayed! – when teen pregnancies actually increased rather than decreased.

But there's no such thing as "safe" extra-marital or gay sex either. Apparently, last month was declared Pride month by the LGBTQ community. If it was only about objecting to discrimination, well and good. It's always wrong to treat people unjustly. And not just because it's supposedly un-American, but because it's ungodly to treat anyone hatefully for any reason. But neither is it right to take pride in or celebrate what the Bible says you should be ashamed of. When you start fearing God in the biblical sense, the Bible says this, "You are now ashamed of the things you used to do, things that end in eternal doom." (Rom 6:21 NLT) "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but" – what do fools do? – "fools despise wisdom and instruction." When you despise God's guidelines and boundaries, you despise God Himself.

Even people who love God can fall into this trap. King David was called a man after God's own heart. But that didn't prevent him from committing adultery with a woman named Bathsheba and arranging for her husband to be conveniently killed in battle. When the prophet, Nathan, confronted David about his sin, here's what God said to David, "You have despised me by taking Uriah's wife to be your own." (2 Sam 12:10 NLT) You despised ME! Who's "me" in that verse? God. When you reject any of God's boundaries for life and living, you reject God. I've been hitting the sex thing pretty hard today, but this principle applies to all the other sins we tend to overlook, rationalize, or try to excuse away. Racism offends God as much as gay sex. So does despising the poor and being OK with how they get marginalized and oppressed. Abuse of others in any way shape or form, lying, greed – those are other ways to shake your fist in God's face. You can say you believe in God. You can even come to church, sing songs of praise, and listen to Bible messages. But if we find it hard or inconvenient to conform our attitudes and lifestyle to His ways, the Bible has one word for us: "Fool."

Have you ever had to use the Geek Squad? That's a company found in Best Buy stores that helps out technologically incompetent people like you and me! One of the Geek Squad ads says, "We're geeky, yes, but we also know what you're going through, because nobody is more into technology than we are." When you need the Geek

Squad, you give them a call, they fix your problem, and then they leave you alone. Is it possible for us to treat God like people treat the Geek Squad? C.S. Lewis' mother died when he was quite young. When he as an adult follower of Jesus looking back at that hard time, he wrote this, "I had approached God, or my idea of God, without love, without awe, even without fear. He was... to appear neither as Savior nor as Judge, but merely as a magician; and when he had done what was required of him I supposed he would simply – well, go away. It never crossed my mind that [my prayers] should have any consequence beyond restoring the status quo." Anytime we expect God to fix our problems, restore the status quo, and then go away so we can live without Him, we've just treated God like the Geek Squad. The definition of the wisest attitude of all is to fear the Lord. But other verses in Proverbs help us understand what that looks like.

THE ATTITUDE UNDERSTOOD.

When you fear the Lord, you acknowledge reality. "For the Lord grants wisdom! From his mouth come knowledge and understanding." (Pro 2:6 NLT) God is the author and source of any and all true wisdom in life. Elsewhere the Bible says, "If any of you need wisdom, you should ask God and it will be given to you. God is generous and won't correct you for asking." (Jam 1:5 CEV) Some people want everything in life to be black and white. Others think nothing is black or white – just different shades of gray. Both are wrong. When you give God loving and obedient respect, you get His perspective on life's decisions and choices. Not everything in life is black or white. Often we have to seek God's guidance, direction, and wisdom. Let's just remember that any and all true wisdom is found in God and God alone. When you fear the Lord, you acknowledge that truth and you live in such a way that recognizes He's the source of all true wisdom.

Consider these verses. "Pay attention to advice and accept correction, so you can live sensibly. We may make a lot of plans, but the LORD will do what he has decided.... No matter how much you know or what plans you make, you can't defeat the LORD." (Pro 19:20-21, 21:30 CEV). Fearing the Lord means you recognize God ultimately controls everything in all of life. This is God's universe and He runs it His way. If you don't agree with God, so what? There's nothing that can thwart Him or get the better of Him in the end. So if you insist on living by your own rules, you will continually find yourself at odds with this all knowing, all powerful God who controls everything. Fools end up having a perpetual spiritual headache! They keep running into this brick wall-like reality of God and how He's made His universe to operate.

I would like to have met baseball umpire, Babe Pinelli. He called baseball games during the time Babe Ruth played the game. Once when Babe Pinelli called Babe Ruth out on strikes, Ruth argued with him, "There's 40,000 people here who know that last pitch was a ball, you tomato head!" I like Pinelli's response, "Maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts." Babe Ruth made the mistake of thinking the more people who believe something, the truer it becomes somehow. It doesn't matter if everyone on the planet disagrees with God; only His opinion counts.

When you fear the Lord, it shows up in your behavior. For instance, your integrity increases because you know it matters to God. “By living right, you show that you respect the LORD, by being deceitful you show that you despise him.” (Pro 14:2 CEV) When you truly fear the Lord, you don’t come to church just to get that “holy feeling” and then live any way you please the rest of the week. Integrity is consistent or it ain’t integrity! You’ve heard the expression, “What you see is what you get.” That should be true of someone who fears the Lord. The fool is deceitful – always trying to be something he’s not or trying to convince others that she’s something other than what she is. Integrity isn’t perfection. We all sin, make mistakes, and blow it on occasion. Sometimes integrity is about how you handle those inevitable mistakes we all make. Do you confess it or excuse it? Do you ask for forgiveness or defend yourself? Do you get up and start living for the Lord again or wallow in spiritual defeat? “If we truly love God, our sins will be forgiven; if we show him respect, we will keep away from sin.” (Pro 16:6 CEV) If your heart is set on doing life God’s way, it’s reasonable to expect you will gradually begin sin less as you grow in your love for God. Doesn’t that make sense?

When you fear the Lord, you live with increasing humility. “Showing respect to the LORD will make you wise, and being humble will bring honor to you.” (Pro 15:33 CEV) You are never wiser than when you freely admit you are never the final source of wisdom. That requires humility. For just that reason, truly wise people seek the counsel and advice of people who are walking with the Lord in love and obedience themselves. The Lord speaks through people who fear Him. Also, when you fear the Lord, you live with increasing tenderness. “Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD, but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.” (Pro 28:14 NIV) Having a tender, soft heart towards God at all times is another way of appropriately fearing Him. A hard hearted person stubbornly refuses either to let God into his life or to give Him His rightful place in her life. When you truly love and respect the Lord, the Holy Spirit is able to find in you a tenderness, a readiness, and an eager desire to please Him in everything. Fearing the Lord. Define it. Understand it. And, finally, value it.

THE ATTITUDE VALUED.

“Better to have little, with fear for the LORD, than to have great treasure and inner turmoil.” (Pro 15:16 NLT) The Bible doesn’t condemn financial wealth in and of itself. But if you’re ever faced with a choice between being rich and fearing the Lord, it’s better to fear the Lord every time. Fearing the Lord is that valuable. Nothing is more important than following Jesus and living the kind of life that pleases him: not money, not health, not success, not prestige – nothing. Perhaps that’s one reason God allows some very difficult things to come into our lives from time to time. Why? To underline for us that there’s nothing more important than to fear Him.

Here are some reasons fearing the Lord has great value. When you fear Him, you enjoy contentment. “The fear of the LORD leads to life. Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.” (Pro 19:23 NIV) When you fear the Lord, you realize all of your basic needs are met and God will not let you miss out on anything that would contribute to your well-being. That word “rest” in that verse means literally to “pass the night.”

People who fear the Lord sleep better because they know their deepest needs have already been met and will continue to be met. God has provided, is providing, and will provide what we need when we need it. Contentment.

Here's another reason fearing the Lord is so valuable. When you fear the Lord, you fear nothing else. You have a true sense of safety. "Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but trusting the LORD means safety.... Those who fear the Lord are secure; he will be a refuge for their children." (Pro 29:25, 14:26 NLT) Sure, you're still going to have problems and challenges even when you're following Jesus closely. That verse suggests, in fact, there will be times when we need a place of refuge. Oswald Chambers had a great insight, "The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God, you fear nothing else; whereas if you do not fear God, you fear everything else." My friend, if you trust in yourself, if you trust in other people, if you trust in your financial portfolio, if you trust in your government or some political party, if you trust in your military, you are going to be severely disillusioned to say the least. When you fear the Lord, you put your ultimate trust in the Lord and in Him alone.

Why is this attitude of fearing the Lord so valuable? When you fear the Lord, you live the fullest life possible. "Fear of the LORD is a life-giving fountain; it offers escape from the snares of death.... True humility and fear of the LORD leads to riches, honor, and long life." (Pro 14:27, 22:4 NLT) The best possible life this side of Heaven is the life dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ. The most rewarding life is the one lived everyday for God's praise and glory. The only life worth living is the one that fears the Lord.

When you hear that phrase "the fear of the Lord," have you ever thought it was like watching a police car slip behind your car in your rearview mirror? Here's a better picture for the fear of the Lord. It's like a teenage driver who suddenly spots Dad's car in her rearview mirror. Seeing him back there puts her on notice to be on her best behavior – to always use her blinkers, to stop at a yellow light rather than accelerating through it, and to keep both hands on the wheel. But it also tells her that Dad cares enough to follow her. It reminds her she's safe. Dad isn't trying to trap or trick her. He's trying to help her develop good habits, be careful, and obey the appropriate laws so she'll stay safe until she gets home. Yes, she's driving on her own, but not completely on her own.

That's how it is for followers of Jesus like you and me. The fear of the Lord means we live life with our Heavenly Father always in our rearview mirror. We glance up and see His brilliant holiness, yes, but also His infinite love and care for us. What's our response to that? Respect, reverence, trust, and love for Him every day and all day. Do you want to live this life wisely and well? Then, fear the Lord. It's the wisest and best way to live this side of Heaven.