

Proverbs: A Curriculum to Cultivate Character and Transform Culture

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life
Zionsville Fellowship | May 3, 2026 | Drew Hunter

This morning we'll finish Proverbs; Next Sunday we'll begin a short series on the Apostles' Creed.

We've walked through Proverbs section-by-section, and now we'll consider it as a whole. Let's read the first seven verses together, and then we'll pray.

[Read Proverbs 1:1–7] [Pray]

What does the world need right now? What do each one of us, and our whole culture, need?

In one word, we need *wisdom*.

What is wisdom?

It is a trusting reverence in the God who made us, saves us, and transforms us.

It is knowing God and living in line with his good design for every aspect of life and society.

It receives reality as a given, and as a gift, and it adjusts to it.

It is following Jesus—receiving his forgiveness and being transformed by his Spirit.

This is the life that the Bible calls truly blessed, truly prosperous, truly successful.

And we all need this. We often measure success by our wealth or reputation. Or we hear that the highest value is finding yourself, defining your meaning, and living it out. But this is not wisdom, and that's why it's not working for us.

We need to rediscover the wisdom of Jesus. He is not just a prophet, priest, and king—he is a sage. He is the most brilliant person who ever lived, and he is an expert on every aspect of life and society. And he came to give us salvation and make us sages.

And one way we find his wisdom is by engaging with the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs is a comprehensive vision of wisdom for our lives, relationships, and all of society.

It helps us see reality clearly, and live in line with it.

It is relevant to every culture because it is about God's design for human life and flourishing.

But we often neglect proverbs or just pick and choose the little bits that resonate with us. We read it searching for little golden nuggets of advice buried in the rest of its rocky soil.

But we've seen that Proverbs is actually more like a curriculum. In a school curriculum, each grade builds on the previous one. Or in the classical model, it moves from grammar to logic to rhetoric. Each builds on the previous section.

Proverbs is like this. It's a progressively developing curriculum in character development. And this matches how we learn and develop and grow in wisdom. We grow in stages.

The book presents wisdom from a father to his sons. The father speaks to his sons to prepare them for adulthood. And he lays out this curriculum to walk through with them.

So, here's what I'd like to do with this final message.

I'd like us to follow this son as he progresses through this curriculum. He starts by listening to his father at the beginning. Then he moves through progressively more advanced stages.ⁱ

We'll move through Proverbs in six movements, and then the seventh is Jesus as the culmination of the curriculum. The curriculum progresses in these steps: beginning, elementary, intermediate, vocational, advanced, embodied, and culminated.

1. The Beginning of Wisdom: Fear the Lord and Seek Wisdom (1–9)

The first section is the beginning of wisdom.

This is the first nine chapters. For each of these sections, I'll include a summary of the heart of it. The summary of the beginning of wisdom is this: Fear the Lord and seek wisdom.

The Father answers three key questions about wisdom here.

First, what is wisdom?

Wisdom is not just advice for decisions; it is about becoming a certain kind of person. Verses 2 and 3 show us three aspects of wisdom—intellectual, practical, and moral.

1. The intellectual is first: "To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight." Wisdom involves thinking, understanding, discerning.
2. It is also practical—it says next, "to receive instruction in wise dealing." Wise dealing is about skill in navigating the complexities in life.
3. And it is also moral—it says next that it involves wise dealing "righteousness, justice, and equity."

Wisdom is intellectual, practical, and moral. So, it involves the whole person and the whole of life. Wisdom is becoming a virtuous person who lives skillfully in the world.

Second, how do you get wisdom?

And the fundamental posture is the fear of the Lord. This is verse 7, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."

The fear of the Lord is trusting reverence in God as your creator, savior, and wisdom-giver.

It is a posture of humble openness to reality as God made it and wisdom as God defines it. Proverbs offers wisdom to everyone who is humble enough to receive it. You have to dethrone yourself and submit to God.

Third, who is wisdom for?

Proverbs is especially framed as wisdom for young men. In verse 8, a father addresses his son to give him wisdom—he says, “hear, my son.” That is repeated throughout the first 9 chapters. The father is raising his sons to be sages. Proverbs is preparing the next generation to lead the community and the nation. This is what young men—and all of us—need to lead ourselves, our families, our churches, and our culture well.

Many young men today grow up without dads. Or their father was passive and aloof. Or their father thought that providing money and sports is all they needed to do. This is why so many young men are hungry for true wisdom. And many young women are looking for wisdom as well. It’s why so many influencers have a massive following of young men and women.

Maybe you didn’t have a parent who gave you wisdom. Proverbs is here to give you what you need. And if you are raising children, Proverbs is the curriculum you can share with them.

The rest of the first 9 chapters are largely a series of talks from a father to a son.

And the main emphasis is to do whatever you can to seek and find wisdom.

So, chapters 1–3 give a clear progression: the father pleads with his son to *choose* wisdom, then to *seek* wisdom, and then to *keep* wisdom

Then chapters 4–7 says there are two paths in life—the path of wisdom and the path of folly. One path leads to you becoming a man or woman of virtue, wisdom, and joy. The other path leads to you becoming a man or woman of evil, folly, and death.

Chapters 8–9 celebrate wisdom and give a final appeal to seek it. The metaphor switches from two paths to two feasts. The fulfilling feast of wisdom or the poisonous feast of folly.

So the beginning of wisdom is simply this—fear God and seek wisdom.

The question for each of us is this: Is this your fundamental posture in life? Have you come to Christ as your savior and king—and do you revere God. Has he become the center of your life and is his word the source of your wisdom?

2. Elementary Wisdom: A Portrait of the Wise and Righteous Life (10-15)

The second part of the curriculum is elementary wisdom.

This is chapters 10–15. This gives us a portrait of the wise and righteous life.

Everything is fairly simple in this section.

Even the poetry is simple—these are mainly contrasts between two kinds of people. It contrasts the wise and the fool, and the righteous and the wicked.

For example, notice the opening verses in chapter 10: “A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother. Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death.”

Over and over: this is how the wise live, and this is how the foolish live. This is how the righteous live, and this is how the wicked live.

This section focuses on our character and its consequences. We see how the righteous live, and how it works out for them. And we see how the unrighteous live, and how it *doesn't* work out well for them.

This whole section assumes that life is ordered. And in order to live wisely and well, you have to see this order. You have to see how the righteous and the wise live, and follow their lead.

Here's a brief overview of the chapters in this section.

- Chapters 10–11 give a portrait of the righteous and wise life. We see this in stark contrast to the wicked and foolish life. We see what motivates them, how they view money, and how they use their words. And we see how life turns out for them.
- Then chapters 12–13 emphasize several themes that lead us to live with wisdom. It focuses on having a listening posture, speaking with words that heal, and carrying out satisfying work.
- Proverbs 14 then contrasts, more directly than any other chapter, the wise and the fool.
- Then chapter 15 gives us wisdom for our emotions and words.

Elementary wisdom gives us a portrait of the wise and righteous life.

Do you have a clear picture of what wisdom and righteousness looks like for you? Are you pursuing the character of Jesus reflected in this portrait of the righteous life? That's what this section invites us to do.

3. Intermediate Wisdom: Navigate the Complexities of Life (16.1–22:16)

The third section is intermediate wisdom—from chapter 16 through 22:16.

Elementary wisdom presented the world as patterned and filled with clear-cut contrasts.

Now in intermediate wisdom, things get more complex. The poetry gets more complex. The moral issues get more complicated. The topics become more broad-ranging. We learn the skill to navigate the complexities of life. If elementary wisdom said, “life is ordered,” this section adds that life is also messy.

- Chapters 16 and 17 teach us how to live within the relational structure of the universe.

For example, chapter 16:1–9 focuses on God’s sovereignty and how to live within it. If you scan these nine verses, you’ll see the name “the Lord” in almost every one of them.

Then verses 10–15 focuses on kings.

And then the rest of chapters 16–17 focus on our social relationships. We learn to relate to leaders, family, friends, and neighbors.

- Then chapters 18–19 give us God’s wisdom for our relational conflicts. A representative statement here is 18:6, “A fool’s lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating.”
- Then chapter 20 through 22:16 give us God’s wisdom for various spheres of society. This shows us that the Bible doesn’t just teach about how individuals get saved—it also teaches about how entire societies can flourish. Proverbs shows us how the government should function, how family should be ordered, how to conduct commerce, and how to think about stewardship. Each sphere is important to a healthy society.

So, intermediate wisdom helps us navigate the complexities of life.

Have you gained the wisdom to do this? Here’s one way you know: In elementary wisdom, everything was clear—righteous and wicked, wisdom and folly, black and white.

But now in intermediate wisdom, we see the gray areas of life. We see that it takes sorting through and thinking and reflecting.

Those who are stuck in elementary wisdom never see the complexities. They are quick to judge. They are quick to condemn. They are quick to think they are in the right. Everything is simple and black and white to them. They love giving hot takes on social media.

But true wisdom recognizes complexity.

4. Vocational Wisdom: Learn to Work, Lead, and Influence Society (22:17-24:34)

Now in the fourth section, we move to vocational wisdom. This is chapter 22:17 through chapter 24.

Notice how this section begins in 22:20–21. The Father says to his son, “Have I not written for you thirty sayings of counsel and knowledge, to make you know what is right and true, that you may give a true answer to those who sent you?”

He is preparing his son to give an answer to those who sent him. Commentators note that this is probably a vocational situation. His son is going to be sent with a commission. He is gaining wisdom for his vocation.

This section is filled with advice for work. It prepares young men to become husbands, fathers, workers, judges, royal messengers, and community leaders.

The wisdom of this section is what is often missing in our churches and culture. We do a good job giving skills to get a job so they can make money. But we don’t do a good job preparing people to lead with character and virtue.

The first part of this section—from 22:17 to chapter 23 is mainly negative.

It is filled with lots of “don’t do this” and “don’t do that.” We can picture them like guardrails along the side of the path of wisdom. These guardrails keep you from driving off the road and ruining your influence.

For example—here is a ten-point summary of these guardrails:

1. don’t exploit the vulnerable.
2. don’t befriend the angry.
3. don’t chase wealth.
4. don’t neglect your craft
5. don’t gorge at a ruler’s table.
6. don’t withhold discipline from your children.
7. don’t let your heart envy.
8. don’t overindulge in food and drink
9. don’t neglect your parents.
10. don’t swerve into sexual sin.

Then chapter 24 moves to a more positive tone.

It shows us the Christian responsibility to influence every aspect of society.

This runs counter to how many people think about Christianity. Many people think it just gives forgiveness of sins and Sunday morning services. It is just for individual, personal piety.

But this chapter leads us to influence five areas of society. It shows us that Christians will be creating families, leading the military, serving in the government, fighting oppression, and leading in the courts. They are to influence society with wisdom and true justice.

Think about how different any nation would be if the Lord spread true revival. Do you know what happens when God spreads revival? Usually two things—not one.

1. First, people come to Christ and start to fear the Lord with trusting reverence. They are saved from their sins, and receive eternal life.
2. But second, they are also transformed to pursue justice and wisdom in all aspects of society. Social reform comes in the wake of true revival.

This is the fourth part of the curriculum: It teaches us to learn to work, lead, and influence society.

Have you progressed in wisdom to this stage?

Here's how you know: you no longer think just about growing personally—but influencing the culture around you. You recognize that loving your neighbor means caring for the people in your sphere of influence. It means, as Jesus said, being salt and light in the world.

5. Advanced wisdom: Leading with personal and public justice (25–29)

The fifth section is Advanced Wisdom.

This is about leading with personal and public justice. It is chapters 25–29. This whole section is especially focused on leadership, power, and authority.

As Proverbs progresses, the wisdom becomes increasingly complex and subtle. And it applies more and more to leadership roles and influence in society.

- Chapter 25 is about refining character. This is far beyond the simple contrasts we saw earlier—now it focuses on the subtleties of wisdom and folly. It shows not so much how we blatantly sin against people, but how our selfishness makes relationships hard. It shows us how we are sometimes annoying, or frustrating, or disappointing to people.
- Chapter 26 helps us read different types of people so we can navigate relationships wisely. It shows us several character-types to navigate. It shows us the fool, the sluggard, the meddler, the scoffing joker, the division-creators, the deceitful flatterer, and the schemer.
- Then chapter 27 leads us to navigate relationships—and especially friendships—well. It focuses especially on what we now call emotional intelligence. It exposes ways that our foolishness can wither relationships—for example, being emotionally explosive, or unfaithful, or insensitive, or contentious. And then it shows us how wisdom grows friendships—through caring correction, encouraging counsel, and faithfulness.

- Chapters 28–29 then especially focus on using power and authority with justice. This does not say power and authority are bad. They are neutral in themselves. What matters is the character of those who have power. Your character determines whether you gain and use it selfishly or for the good of others.

These chapters especially help us see is the way Christians are to influence the public square. Many people think that Christianity says nothing about the public square. But it says a lot. And we need its wisdom to lead and serve and speak wisely.

So Advanced wisdom is leading with personal and public justice.

Have you become the kind of person that people can rely on to lead with justice? Have you learned the subtleties of your selfishness? Have you learned to read people and navigate relationships wisely? That’s what advanced wisdom is for.

6. Embodied Wisdom: Living as a True Human, as Men and Women (30–31)

This leads to the sixth section in the curriculum, which is embodied wisdom.

The final two chapters are often called appendixes. But this is the culmination of Proverbs. The book began with the father calling his sons to seek wisdom. And then he took them through the curriculum. And now this is where it all leads. This is what it looks like to embody wisdom in life.

- Chapter 30 is the wisdom of a man named Agur. He is a model for living wisely.

In the first 9 verses he takes us on his journey to find true truth. He despaired of finding wisdom until he found it in God’s word.

Then in v. 10 to the end of the chapter, he gained wisdom by observing order in God’s world. You can see how he often grouped his observation into sets of four. He made lists of his observations. He poetically ordered his thoughts, which reflected the poetic order he saw in the world. He observed arrogance. He observed endless desire. He observed astonishing mysteries. He observed overturned social structures. He observed the surprising wisdom of little animals. And he observed those who walk with confidence. And he learned wisdom from all of it. He shows us how to live as a humble human.

- Then chapter 31 shows us what wisdom looks like embodied specifically in men and women. This is the wisdom that King Lemuel’s mother passed on to him. This shows us the Proverbs 31 man, and Proverbs 31 woman.

The Proverbs 31 man is the first 9 verses. This shows us true masculinity is not toxic. It is a blessing to the world. What is wise masculine leadership? It is exercising moral restraint for the sake of promoting justice, especially for the vulnerable.

Then the Proverbs 31 woman gives us a vision of true femininity. It is not the vision of the modern feminists, nor is it the vision of traditionalists. What is an example true femininity here? It is confident and joyful diligence for the sake of others—especially one’s family and the vulnerable. This woman is capable, strong, confident, and diligent. And all of this flows from her fear of the Lord—her trusting reverence in God.

The book began with a young man ready to launch into adulthood. In the end, he learns wisdom. He becomes a leader who embodies wisdom and promotes justice. And he marries a woman who embodies all the virtues of wisdom.ⁱⁱ

So, are you embodying wisdom? Are you living as a truly wise man or woman?

Have you moved beyond just receiving bits of wisdom and advice... to embodying it in life?

7. Incarnate Wisdom: Trusting and Following our Savior and Sage

This is the end of the curriculum in Proverbs, but it’s not the end of the curriculum of wisdom.

We have one more part. The seventh part is Incarnate Wisdom. This is about trusting and following our savior and sage. The whole book of wisdom ultimately points us to Jesus.

Proverbs is introduced as the wisdom of Solomon, the Son of David. This is wisdom from Israel’s king. It was given to Israel, but no one fulfilled this perfectly. All through this series, you may have felt discouraged at times. You want to pursue wisdom, but folly is deep within.

This is why Jesus came, and this book helps us understand who he is.

Jesus is the truly wise man.

- He grew in wisdom.

Listen to the gospel of Luke’s description of Jesus when he was young: “[And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him... And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers... And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man](#)” (Luke 2:40, 47, 52).

- He taught with wisdom.

He is not just the true prophet, priest, and king. He is the true sage.

His most famous teaching is the sermon on the mount—and that is a sermon on wisdom. His conclusion is drawn from the wisdom of Proverbs. He famously said to build your house on the rock of his teaching, not on sand. And he ended the sermon like this: “[And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand](#)” (Matt 7:27).

This means we don’t just build our lives on Proverbs, but on Jesus, who fulfills it. We receive his words, we build our lives on them, and we follow him.ⁱⁱⁱ

Many people have been drawn to Jesus because of the purity of his wisdom. We don’t often refer to Jesus as a genius, but he was. He was brilliant. Peter Williams recently wrote an excellent book titled, *The Surprising Genius of Jesus*.

- He embodied wisdom.

When people judged him as a fool, he said that his wisdom would be justified in his life. He said in Matthew 11:19, “[wisdom is justified by her deeds.](#)” In other words, he embodies wisdom. You see his wisdom by the fruit of it in his life.

- He is the epitome of wisdom.

He said that the Queen of South came to visit Solomon to see all his wisdom for herself. Then he said, “[behold, something greater than Solomon is here](#)” (Luke 11:31).

- This is why the Apostle Paul said that Jesus is not only wise—but *he is our wisdom*.

He said of Christians, “[you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God](#)” (1 Cor 1:30). What does this mean? It means that the fear of the Lord is the trusting reverence for Jesus. It is trusting and following him. This is the beginning and starting point of the wise life.

The gospel itself is the message of wisdom. Paul said that the message of Jesus is foolishness to the world, but it is the wisdom of God. He said in 1 Corinthians 1:23—24, “[we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.](#)”

- He is the culmination of the curriculum of wisdom.

The Apostle Paul, in some of his final words, reminded his protégé Timothy of this. He said in Timothy 3:15, “[from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings \[which is the Old Testament, including Proverbs\], which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.](#)”

So, as we follow the curriculum of Proverbs, we are learning the wisdom of Jesus. And as we follow Jesus, we are following in the path of Proverbs. Proverbs leads us to Jesus, and Jesus leads us in wisdom.

Reflections on using the curriculum for life

So, as we leave our series in Proverbs, here are a few final reminders.

1. First, if you have not trusted Christ, this is the wisest thing you can do.

Trust him, and revere him, and follow him. Receive his forgiveness for your foolishness and sin. And receive his Spirit to make you wise.

2. Second, enjoy the life of wisdom.

This is the good life. God is not holding back on us in any of his commands. Every act of disobedience is not just wrong, it is foolish. And every act of obedience to Jesus is the path of wisdom.

3. Third, remember that wisdom shapes all of life.

The Christian life is not a scattered collection of bits of advice. It is a comprehensive worldview. The whole of reality is created by God. He made the world, he ordered the world, and he designed the world. So we are to see reality and align ourselves to it.

There is no sacred and secular divide. All of life is sacred.
All of life is an opportunity to trust Christ and live with his wisdom.
Proverbs shows us that this covers our thoughts, our words, and our actions.
It relates to how we treat our parents, grandparents, children, and friends.
It covers government, and military, and leadership.
It covers our business dealings and the way we treat our parents.
It relates to how we treat authorities above us and animals below us.
It relates to poverty and legal policies and justice.
It relates to priorities and how we spend our time and what we do with our wealth.

Fourth, remember that it's a progressive journey.

If you don't have much wisdom now, or you feel like you've lived with folly, it's not too late. You can repent, trust Christ, and step on the path of wisdom. The beginning of wisdom is being humble enough to know you need it.

Fifth, as you grow in wisdom, pass it on to others.

Proverbs is the wisdom of a wise father to his sons who need it. The wise are those who don't hoard wisdom for themselves. The wise are those who intentionally make other people wise. The wise are the grandparents, parents, friends, and mentors who pass it on to others. Help other people grow in wisdom by following Christ and his word.

Sixth, let the wisdom of Christ become a bright light in our culture.

People are attracted to Christ when they see his wisdom for all of life. The wisdom of Proverbs and Christ reflect reality itself. This is why so many people find Christ so compelling.

Many people today are seeing the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of secularism. They are seeing how government and business and cultural leaders are disconnected from reality. They are forcing a view of economics and family and gender and sexuality that don't match reality. And many others are waking up to this and looking not for their truth, but for true truth. One way to be a witness for Christ today is to help people see true truth. Show them the reasonableness of the Christian faith compared with Marxism. Show them the reasonableness of the Christian faith compared to Islam, and especially radical Islam.

People have lots of intelligence. But they are lacking and looking for wisdom. AI is smarter than us. But it's not wiser. Proverbs and Jesus show us how God designed reality to work. Jesus alone can lead us into the truly good life. The truly human and humane life.

Finally, don't leave Proverbs behind.

Utilize this curriculum in your own life. Yes you can pick a Proverb at random, and read a Proverb a day. But use it as a progressively developing curriculum for character development. Walk through it like we did today in your own personal life. Walk through the curriculum with others. Use this as a curriculum for parenting your children.

So, we end the series on Proverbs with Jesus—the truest sage. And we are drawn to him because of his wisdom, and for his wisdom. So we worship him, and we receive from him.

ⁱ This progression is adapted from the work of William Brown, Chris Ansberry, and Paul Overland.

ⁱⁱ Peter Leithart noted how the beginning and end of Proverbs present a dramatic macro-structure of the son: “The son is a prince who must choose for his princess dame folly or lady wisdom. Which will he choose. In the end, we find out. “It is no accident that the Proverbs ends with a celebration of the excellent wife. In the drama of Proverbs, the excellent wife is Lady Wisdom from the earlier chapters. Her husband, the Prince, now sits in the gates of the city. The prince has successfully resisted the seductions of the adulteress, Folly. He has chosen well. Together, the Prince and his bride form the royal household.” Peter Leithart, *Biblical Horizons*, No. 43 November, 1992.

ⁱⁱⁱ As David Jackman said, “the call of OT wisdom to reorder our lives according to God’s instruction is now the call of NT wisdom to repent and believe the gospel with urgency, clarity, and focus. Christ is wisdom and we’re to build on his words and to follow in his footsteps. David Jackman, audio, *Preaching Wisdom*.