

The Intentional Pursuit of Wisdom (Prov. 1:8–3:35)

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life

Zionsville Fellowship | September 7, 2025 | Drew Hunter

Last Sunday we began a sermon series in the book of Proverbs.

We saw why all of us and our world today urgently needs the wisdom of Proverbs. We do not lack voices telling us how to make our lives better. The books and audio books, the podcasts, the YouTube experts. But it's not working well. Our culture is increasingly anxious and angry and depressed.

This is why we need the ancient wisdom of Proverbs. Proverbs is *the* book of wisdom. Wisdom is not just about help for decision making. The wisdom of God is a way of life.

Proverbs is not random bits of disconnected advice. It is a unified curriculum to shape our character. It is intellectual, moral, and practical—and it leads us to relate with wisdom toward God, others, and the creation itself. It is here to shape us into certain kinds of people.

Wisdom is about living along the grain of creation. It is seeing reality clearly and adjusting to it. It is acknowledging God designed this world, and we learn from him how to live well in it.

In the end, it is here to make us like Jesus. This book is framed as the wisdom from Solomon, the son of David, the king of Israel. Jesus has come as the one who is greater than Solomon, the true son of David, the king of the world. He is not just our savior, but a wise sage. He is the ultimate wise man. And this is why he lived an attractive, compelling life. The book of Proverbs is here to help us gain the wisdom of Jesus to live his way of life.

And the whole book's structure is shaped as a progressively advancing curriculum. We walked through this last Sunday, and it's on the handout you received. This is how we will approach the book in this series. We will not just trace topics through—we will follow the progressively advancing curriculum in this book. It starts with the beginning of wisdom, which is the first nine chapters.

We'll look at the first three chapters this morning, beginning with 1:8. Instead of reading it all at once; we'll read through it as we go.

Here is the main point of the father's first lectures: **You cannot live well without wisdom—so do everything you can to choose it, seek it, and keep it.** There is a clear progression in these first three chapters: choose wisdom, then seek it, and then keep it. We choose it by having a listening posture, we seek it with an active pursuit, and we keep it with intentional cultivation.

1. Listening Posture: The Urgency of Choosing Wisdom (1:8–33)

The first step to gaining wisdom is the listening posture that chooses wisdom.

This posture of openness to God’s wisdom is the main theme in the first section—which is the first nine chapters. It is a series of ten passionate speeches from a father to his sons. I think these nine chapters shaped my view of fatherhood more than any book I’ve read.

This father takes responsibility to lead his children to know God and know how to live well. I have been struck more than anything by his *conviction*. Many scholars refer to these ten speeches as ten lectures. That’s fine, but this is not a classroom setting. This is a domestic setting. And the father is not just communicating content; he is looking his sons in the eye and pleading with them to choose wisdom. Every child needs this. They need a mom and a dad to look them in the eyes and say clearly, “this is what I’m doing: I’m giving my life to try to give you wisdom to live well in God’s world.”

Verses 8–9 are the opening to the first plea, and they introduce these first three chapters.

It says, “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.”

Here is a dad, calling the son to listen to both his mom and his dad. Both parents instruct the children, and the father takes the responsibility to ensure that the son listens. Dads, you are to lead with both authority and affection. And you are to honor your wife’s instruction of the kids, and call them to listen to her.

Parents have the primary responsibility of educating to forming their children’s character. Notice, this does not say, “my son, listen to your teachers.” Or, “my son, you’ll figure it out.” Or, “my son, I’m going to be working all the time and so I’m just going to be providing money and then I’m going to be checked out when I get home.”

The *primary responsibility* for instruction in wisdom and character formation is the home. Every parent can thank God for the vocation of teachers in the church and schools. We thank God for school teachers Sunday school teachers, but they are not the primary disciplers of your children; you are. You cannot outsource that to anyone else.

And these opening verses don’t just apply to parents and children.

Proverbs also sets this up to put all of us in the position of the son here. We are all to take the posture of the son and listen to the father’s instruction in these chapters.

And why does this matter? Because of what he says here in verse 9: the instruction is “a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.” A garland is a wreath or crown

for your head. And a pendant is a chain around your neck. These are symbols of honor and probably also victory and success.¹ This is how you make it in life—by receiving wisdom.

From here, the rest of the first speech is about the urgency of choosing to hear wisdom. The father warns us, and then the wisdom is personified as a woman who also warns.

The father's warning is in verses 10–19.

Proverbs throws us right in the midst of a concrete example of where life can go if you lack wisdom. Let's read it together:

10 My son, if sinners entice you,
 do not consent.
11 If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood;
 let us ambush the innocent without reason;
12 like Sheol let us swallow them alive,
 and whole, like those who go down to the pit;
13 we shall find all precious goods,
 we shall fill our houses with plunder;
14 throw in your lot among us;
 we will all have one purse" —
15 my son, do not walk in the way with them;
 hold back your foot from their paths,
16 for their feet run to evil,
 and they make haste to shed blood.
17 For in vain is a net spread
 in the sight of any bird,
18 but these men lie in wait for their own blood;
 they set an ambush for their own lives.
19 Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain;
 it takes away the life of its possessors.

This is a pretty extreme example. The father is basically saying, "don't join a gang." He is starting out with an extreme example to alarm us about where life can go without wisdom.

And the key to understanding this story is *discernment*. That's what this father is teaching us. He isn't sheltering his son from the realities of a fallen world. He tells him what it's like, and he helps him live with discernment. This is what parents need to do for their kids—don't shelter them from the world, but give them discernment to understand and navigate it.

And all of us need to learn to see through situations and interpret what's really going on. You may not have people asking you to join a gang. But you always have people trying to shape your worldview and moral convictions. Music gives lyrics that express a worldview. Movies narrate stories that lead us to empathize and view certain things as good or bad.

News feeds are largely propaganda today; they manipulate facts to shape our outlook. We need discernment to see through it with wisdom.

The example the father gives is about the appeal of gaining wealth through injustice.

The group entices the son by promising belonging, and power, and wealth. Those are all good things in themselves. But the problem is the mindset of the gang: their approach is essentially unloving and selfish. Their view of life says, “your life for mine.” They love wealth, and so they use people to get it. This is the mindset of many aspects of our culture today. It says you can sacrifice others for the sake of your own advancement.

The insight of wisdom is this: it won’t work in the end. These people seek to take the lives of others, but they lose their own lives in the end. They don’t realize they spread a trap for themselves.

The insight here is that sin is not only evil, it is foolish. That’s what Proverbs will show us over and over. This is why the righteous and the wise are the same person in proverbs—because righteousness is wisdom; and sin is folly. Sin is not only wrong; it is crazy. Think of it like this: most foolishness is also sin; but all sin is always foolish. It may advance us short-term, but it will corrupt us and ruin our lives in the end.

So, the question the father asks us is this: who are you listening to? Are you able to see through the seduction and live with discernment? This radical example of a gang show us what is ultimately at stake.

After this warning from the father, we hear a warning from wisdom itself. Wisdom is personified as a woman. Let’s listen to her in verses 20–33.

1:20 Wisdom cries aloud in the street,
in the markets she raises her voice;
21 at the head of the noisy streets she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
22 “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
23 If you turn at my reproof,
behold, I will pour out my spirit to you;
I will make my words known to you.
24 Because I have called and you refused to listen,
have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded,
25 because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
26 I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when terror strikes you,

27 when terror strikes you like a storm
 and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
 when distress and anguish come upon you.
 28 Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
 they will seek me diligently but will not find me.
 29 Because they hated knowledge
 and did not choose the fear of the LORD,
 30 would have none of my counsel
 and despised all my reproof,
 31 therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way,
 and have their fill of their own devices.
 32 For the simple are killed by their turning away,
 and the complacency of fools destroys them;
 33 but whoever listens to me will dwell secure
 and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.”

Woman wisdom is always speaking to us.

We all go about our busy lives, and she is always there, always calling us to choose wisdom.

And she warns us if we don’t choose her: when life spirals out of control, she won’t help. If we reject her, she will laugh at us when our life doesn’t work out. She laughs because she is vindicated. She laughs because foolishness is absurd, and we rejected her when she was available.ⁱⁱ This is how life works—if you don’t gain wisdom now, you won’t have it when you need it.

We have to open ourselves to wisdom. We have to have a listening posture.

The second speech in chapter two moves from choosing wisdom to seeking wisdom.

2. Active Pursuit: The Promise of Seeking Wisdom (2:1–22)

So, second, chapter two shows us the active pursuit that seeks wisdom.

The opening call in the second speech is to actively desire and seek wisdom. The whole chapter is structure as one long sentence—it is an “if, then” sentence. *If* we devote ourselves to seeking wisdom, *then* this is what we can expect.

Let’s look at the “if” first. This is verses 1–4:

1 My son, if you receive my words
 and treasure up my commandments with you,
 2 making your ear attentive to wisdom
 and inclining your heart to understanding;
 3 yes, if you call out for insight

4 and raise your voice for understanding,
 if you seek it like silver
 and search for it as for hidden treasures,

Notice the various words used to describe the active pursuit.

Receive the words, treasure up the commands, make your ear attentive, incline your heart, call out for it, seek it like you seek for money. It is not enough just to be open to wisdom; we have to seek it like people seek wealth. If you do not actively seek wisdom—intentionally, purposefully, diligently—you won’t have it.

This is why some of us are not wise, even if we think we are. We are just going through life, seeking all sorts of things, and it’s not working. You have to seek wisdom.

Here's what it looks like with just one area of life.

Many people enter into marriage without learning about how to do it well. A good friend of mine, Dave Newton, is going to come in November to speak at our men’s retreat. I learned how to do premarital counseling from him. And one of the main things he advocated was having engaged couples read good books. Here’s his rationale: We pay thousands of dollars and spend hundreds of hours to take classes on economics and psychology and history in college. Why, then, would we walk into *marriage* unprepared? Buy scripture saturated books, read them, give yourself to them. Study the key biblical texts on marriage. Figure out how to do this well. It’s clear from divorce rates and unhappy marriages that people don’t have the wisdom for it. So, seek it.

The same would go for parenting. Many people get married and then start having kids without knowing how to raise kids well. So many just wing it. I remember when I became a dad, I didn’t know what I was doing. So I asked people I trusted to give me their best advice and best books on parenting.

We could say the same for investing. And friendship. And work. And balancing our lives. And learning how to study the Bible. All these require wisdom, and we won’t have it if we don’t intentionally seek it. This is why we have books on these topics in the resource center, and why we encourage members to learn from one another in the context of friendship.

And what are the results of diligently seeking wisdom?

This is the rest of the chapter. The first four verses say, “*if* you seek wisdom diligently...” and the rest of the chapter says, “*then* this is what you can expect.”

There are two main results. The first is that you will know God and gain wisdom. This is verses 5–8.

- 5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD
 and find the knowledge of God.
6 For the LORD gives wisdom;
 from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
7 he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
 he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,
8 guarding the paths of justice
 and watching over the way of his saints.

The second result is that you will know how to live well in God's world.

- 9 Then you will understand righteousness and justice
 and equity, every good path;
10 for wisdom will come into your heart,
 and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
11 discretion will watch over you,
 understanding will guard you,
12 delivering you from the way of evil,
 from men of perverted speech,
13 who forsake the paths of uprightness
 to walk in the ways of darkness,
14 who rejoice in doing evil
 and delight in the perverseness of evil,
15 men whose paths are crooked,
 and who are devious in their ways.

The rest of the chapter shows us the fruit of this.

This is what we can expect. We will be protected from corrupting our life through adultery.
This is verses 16–19:

- 16 So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman,
 from the adulteress with her smooth words,
17 who forsakes the companion of her youth
 and forgets the covenant of her God;
18 for her house sinks down to death,
 and her paths to the departed;
19 none who go to her come back,
 nor do they regain the paths of life.

The father returns to this warning of sexual immorality several times across his speeches. In chapter 5 he shows us how sexuality is a good gift and we fully enjoy it in marriage. In chapter 6 he warns about the consequences of lust and adultery. In chapter 7 he warns us about the nature of sexual temptation.

He returns to these topics more than any others. Why? Because they are particularly strong temptations and uniquely destructive. Lust, pornography, and sexual immorality aren't just wrong; they are foolish. They have corrupted so many lives and torpedoed so many marriages and families.

So the father doesn't avoid talking about it. Dads, you need to talk to your kids about this—in age appropriate ways, of course. But this is in the first nine chapters because this is basic wisdom. And so many younger men and women have no idea how to view sexuality as a good gift, and how to guard against temptation.

The chapter ends with the results of seeking wisdom in verses 20–22.

- 20 So you will walk in the way of the good
 and keep to the paths of the righteous.
- 21 For the upright will inhabit the land,
 and those with integrity will remain in it,
- 22 but the wicked will be cut off from the land,
 and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.

The question for each one of us is this:

Are you not just open to God's wisdom, but actively seeking it? We find it in Proverbs and in Christ and in all the scriptures.

And if you seek it, this leads to the final step of intentionally cultivating it. You can't just seek it, you need to keep it and guard it and live by it.

3. Intentional Cultivation: The Life of Keeping Wisdom (3:1–35)

This is the third chapter: intentional cultivation and the life of keeping wisdom.

What does it look like to keep, guard, and live with wisdom? We see four characteristics of the life of cultivating wisdom.

First, it is wholehearted. Notice the emphasis on the heart and desires in verses 1–4.

- 1 My son, do not forget my teaching,
 but let your heart keep my commandments,
- 2 for length of days and years of life
 and peace they will add to you.
- 3 Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
 bind them around your neck;

write them on the tablet of your heart.
4 So you will find favor and good success
 in the sight of God and man.

The first speech said to choose wisdom. The second said to seek it. And now he says, “don’t forget it... keep it.... don’t let it forsake you... write it on your heart.” And the promise is a life of peace.

Don’t just memorize proverbs and write them on cards; get them worked into your soul as convictions. The opposite is saying, “I know the Bible says this... but I still think I’m going to do something else.” Anytime you say, “I know what God’s word says is wise... *but...*” you’re drifting into folly. You cannot be half-committed to God’s ways and expect to live wisely.

Second, the wise life is a God-centered life.

Notice in verses 5–12 how God-focused all of this is. It is not just self-help secular wisdom. It is a life that knows, loves, and honors God as our wise creator.

We trust him with our heart, and we let go of our own sub-par wisdom. This is verses 5–8.

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
 and do not lean on your own understanding.
6 In all your ways acknowledge him,
 and he will make straight your paths.
7 Be not wise in your own eyes;
 fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
8 It will be healing to your flesh
 and refreshment to your bones.

To acknowledge God in all our ways is to honor him with our decisions. It is to live in a way that pleases him. It is to receive his wisdom, and then live it out. It is to refuse to say, “I know God says this... *but* I think I’ll go ahead and do this instead.” If you rely on your own wisdom, your path will be crooked. If you rely on God’s wisdom, your path will be straight.

And this is a moral vision of life. Notice how closely verse 7 connects trusting God’s wisdom with turning away from evil. We have to embrace God’s definition of what is good and what is evil—and we have to choose the good and reject the evil.

And what a promise in verse 8—refreshment and healing. When we live in our own wisdom, our emotions and bodies wither. We live with stress and anxiety and depression—and these end up affecting our very flesh and bones. We’re just beginning to see the connections between our mental and emotional dispositions and the consequences on our bodies. They are real. And the ancient wisdom of Proverbs says wisdom heals the body.

Trusting God, resting in him, living with peace calms our anxieties and stress and depression. It has not just psychological effects, but physiological effects. There is profound wisdom for life here.

This God-centered vision also connects to what we do with our money. This is verses 9–10.

- 9 Honor the LORD with your wealth
 and with the firstfruits of all your produce;
10 then your barns will be filled with plenty,
 and your vats will be bursting with wine.

This is not a promise that if you give generously, you will certainly be blessed. The book of proverbs gives probabilities, not promises. But this is how God often works. If you honor him with your wealth, he will take care of you. You do not give to him *in order to* get wealthy—that would be using God, not honoring him. But when we honor him, he cares for us.

This God-centered vision leads us to endure discipline with patience. This is verses 11–12:

- 11 My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline
 or be weary of his reproof,
12 for the LORD reproves him whom he loves,
 as a father the son in whom he delights

Living with wisdom does not mean we will not ever be foolish. It means when we're foolish, and God brings consequences, we receive those. He is treating us as his beloved sons and daughters. Wisdom means that when we are foolish, we receive his correction.

To cultivate wisdom is whole-hearted, God-centered, and third, it is wisdom-treasuring.

We treasure wisdom because it leads us to live well. When we live along the grain, we are truly blessed. This is verses 13–20:

- 3 Blessed is the one who finds wisdom,
 and the one who gets understanding,
14 for the gain from her is better than gain from silver
 and her profit better than gold.
15 She is more precious than jewels,
 and nothing you desire can compare with her.
16 Long life is in her right hand;
 in her left hand are riches and honor.
17 Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
 and all her paths are peace.
18 She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;

those who hold her fast are called blessed.

If you have wisdom, you have something far more valuable than riches. Many people in this area have a lot of money. But Proverbs says that wisdom is worth more than all of it.

If you have a large house, new cars, lavish vacations, and a big investment portfolio, but you don't have wisdom, you are poor.

But if you have little, but you have wisdom, you have more. You cannot buy the good life. Only wisdom can give you that.

Notice in verses 23–24 the description of this good life:

- 23 Then you will walk on your way securely,
 and your foot will not stumble.
24 If you lie down, you will not be afraid;
 when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.

Without God's wisdom, we stumble through life. We can't see where we're going. And our lives are filled with anxiety. If we lack wisdom, we lay our head down to sleep, but our mind is filled with anxieties. But the wise can trust God, and sleep well.

Finally, the wise life is the neighbor-loving life.

Wisdom leads to a life of love. Because this is what God is like, and so this is how he made the world to work. When God's wisdom enters into our hearts, we become like him. This is verses 27–32:

- 27 Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
 when it is in your power to do it.
28 Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again,
 tomorrow I will give it"—when you have it with you.
29 Do not plan evil against your neighbor,
 who dwells trustingly beside you.
30 Do not contend with a man for no reason,
 when he has done you no harm.
31 Do not envy a man of violence
 and do not choose any of his ways,
32 for the devious person is an abomination to the LORD,
 but the upright are in his confidence.

The main point is clear: wisdom leads us to live a life of love. We give what we owe. We don't betray the trust of a neighbor or friend. We don't pick fights and sue for no good reason. We regulate our emotions and keep our anger in check.

Implications

This is the wise life.

Across these three chapters, the father pleads with his son to *choose* wisdom, then to *seek* wisdom, and then to *keep* wisdom. We have a posture of listening to wisdom, we actively pursue it, and we intentionally cultivate it.

This is the beginning of wisdom. This all flows from what we saw last week—Proverbs 1:7 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom. This is a posture of reverent trust in the God who creates and saves. This is Old Testament language for sincere faith in Christ.

It appropriate to recognize that Christ has come as the wisdom of God incarnate. When he came, he said that something greater than Solomon had arrived. He was talking about himself. The wisdom of Solomon is great, but Christ is greater. Because he is the God who gives wisdom. He is the man who lived as the true and perfect sage. And he is the one in whom, Paul said, is hidden all the treasures of wisdom.

If you want to be wise, it starts with getting right with Jesus. Choosing him, seeking him, and keeping him. A posture of listening to him, actively pursuing him, and intentionally cultivating your relationship with him. The more you love Christ, the more you will become like him. Since he is the perfectly wise sage, this means the more you trust him, the more you become wise.

And his invitation is open to those who lived foolishly. The beginning of wisdom is opening yourself up to him. Receive his forgiveness, and receive his Spirit of wisdom into your heart. And then devote your whole self to following him and learning his ways.

ⁱ Bruce Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 187.

ⁱⁱ Derek Kidner wrote that this “is not an expression of personal heartlessness, but of the absurdity of choosing folly, the complete vindication of wisdom, and the incontestable fitness of the disaster” (Kidner, *Proverbs*, 58).