

The Wisdom We Need for a Fruitful Life (Prov. 12–13)

Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life

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Why is life so often so hard?

Why are relationships so difficult? Why do we walk away from conversations so discouraged—because of something we said, or what someone said to us? Why do we struggle to find joy and satisfaction in our work?

The book of Proverbs shows us why life is hard, and also how to learn to live well. It gives us wisdom for living well in God's world.

Now, modern people may wonder how this ancient text could really help us live well today.

Proverbs is an ancient text—it was written almost three thousand years ago. And it was written in an ancient culture. But we are modern people. We live in very different world. And we have access to knowledge at our fingertips—we can find anything out in moments.

So, why is it that we are all gathered there this morning to hear the wisdom of this ancient book? Because Proverbs is written not just for ancient people—but for all people. This is not giving bits of advice for how to navigate life in an ancient world. It's about giving us wisdom for living in God's world. This world was designed by God, and he designed us for this world. And Proverbs tells us how to live well in it.

Every culture needs Proverbs because every culture needs to know how God designed life. Every person needs Proverbs because every person needs to know how to live wisely.

And the starting point has always been the same: it is the fear of the Lord. It is a posture of trusting reverence toward God. It is respecting God and respecting reality as he made it—and then adjusting to live in line with it.

The difference between the ancients who first heard Proverbs and us is this: We have now seen wisdom incarnate. Jesus lived the wise life of Proverbs. He was the wisest sage who ever lived. So our starting point is trusting him. We admit that we have been sinful and foolish; we receive his forgiveness; and we receive his Spirit of wisdom to transform us. And then we learn to follow in his ways.

This morning we're in Proverbs 12–13.

These chapters emphasize five themes that lead us to live with wisdom: A life that endures, a heart that listens, speech that heals, work that fulfills, and a spouse that crowns.

1. A Life that Endures (12:3, 28; 13:6)

First, a life that endures.

Proverbs teaches us to see how character leads to consequences. If you want to live a life that works well, a life that endures, this is the path. This chapter is filled with examples this. We'll look at three.

First, Proverbs 12:3 shows us that wisdom roots and establishes us in life.

Isn't this what we want? How do we live a firmly rooted, stable life? How do we avoid being tossed around? It says, "No one is established by wickedness, but the root of the righteous will never be moved."

This contrasts two kinds of lives—those who are wicked, and those who are righteous. These are the two main characters in Proverbs. This verse clarifies that there are really only two ways to live—and they lead to two different outcomes.

The righteous person lives in such a way that they have roots. As you fear the Lord—which is a trusting reverence in God—you will be rooted. As you follow Christ, you will be like a tree planted in the ground. Your roots will sink down and give you stability in life.

The alternative is rejecting God and his design for the world. You live with sin and wickedness. What is the ultimate outcome of that kind of life? You will not be established, you will not be rooted, you will not have a foundation. The wicked are unstable—changing their minds on a dime, always upset about something, scheming for a better future. But it will not work in the end.

Verse 28 is similar.

There are only two paths: "In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death."

Proverbs 4 introduced us to the two paths: it showed us that the way of wisdom is like a path that gets brighter and brighter. But the way of foolishness gets darker and darker. Here we see that only one path leads to life. This is ultimately true in an eternal sense—the way of wisdom trusts Christ, learns the wisdom of Christ, and leads on forever.

The third example is 13:6.

This shows us the outcomes of the two paths: "Righteousness guards him whose way is blameless, but sin overthrows the wicked." Righteousness is viewed as a protector—it guards your steps and helps you live well. When you are on the path of righteousness, this righteousness *guards* your way.

As you walk in God's ways, you are walking in line with his design in creation. You will continue to accumulate wisdom, and it will help you live well in his world. You will be guarded from making disastrous decisions in life. But if you reject God and his design, then you will eventually be overthrown.

Here's what we're seeing: The righteous are like the man described in Psalm 1. Psalm 1 says the blessed person is the one who "is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment" (Psalm 1:3–5).

This is ultimately a picture of Jesus. He is the one who perfectly walked in the way of righteousness. His path ultimately led to the resurrection and to the life of the world to come. He is established and will never be moved. And he calls to follow him there. We first receive his grace and forgiveness for our failures; and then we receive his Spirit of wisdom to transform us.

So, how is your life going? How is your way of living working out for you?

Maybe you have been following Christ and walking in his wisdom for decades. And you see the outcome. You see that even through suffering and hardship, the Lord has helped you maintain stability. He has guarded you from foolish decisions.

Or maybe you have been following Christ, but it hasn't worked out as you hoped. Even the wisest person will have a hard time in life—God's word is ordered, but because of sin, there is also disorder. So Jesus taught us to lift the horizon beyond this life, and on into eternity. One day you will be resurrected and life will go well with you forever.

Or maybe you realize you have not been following Christ's wisdom. And this explains why your life has not been working well for you. Proverbs helps you understand yourself, and understand how life works. It invites you to repent of your resistance, trust Christ, and learn to walk in his way of wisdom.

This is the life that endures.

2. A Heart that Listens (12:1, 15; 13:10, 13–14)

Second, a heart that listens.

Wisdom begins with the humility to receive words of instruction and correction.

Proverbs 12:1: “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.”

This contrasts those who love discipline with those who hate reproof. Discipline and reproof are corrections. This happens when someone helps you see that you need to change. You need to course correct. You need to grow in an area.

This says those who love correction love knowledge, which means wisdom. Why? Because they care about living well in God’s world. If they are heading the wrong way, they want someone to help them. They are open and humble enough to reconsider their thinking and living.

But the one who hates correction is “stupid.” Stupid here is not an insult. It doesn’t refer to a lack of intelligence, but a lack of sense. They may be smart; but they are not wise. Plenty of people with multiple degrees are very smart, but they are fools. They aren’t open to correction. They think because they are experts in one field of study, they are experts at life itself.

So, do you welcome correction? Are you open to people bringing up areas for change?

This requires humility, a teachable heart, and an acknowledgement that you have room to grow. But if you are not open to correction, if you are always defensive, it shows you are prideful. It shows that you would rather live out of step with God’s reality than change.

This doesn’t mean that everyone who corrects you is actually right. Maybe they are wrong. But the wise are open to listen, and open to changing.

This is the point of 12:15 as well: “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”

A fool always assumes he is right, so he doesn’t think he needs advice from anyone. But a wise person knows that his way *may* not be right. So he is open to listening to advice.

Some of you do not realize it, but others around you see that you are closed off to advice. They see that you think you’ve figured everything out and they have nothing to offer you. And so they see areas in your life that are not working for you– but they are afraid bring it up. Because you are closed off.

Some of you as husbands are like this. You think that because you're the leader, you should just unilaterally decide everything. But just because God placed you as a leader doesn't mean you have the wisdom you need. Your wife may be wiser than you—and she is certainly wiser in some areas of life. God gave her to you to help you lead—to give you the wisdom you need to lead well. You bear the ultimately responsibility for the decisions, but this does not mean you don't need help making it.

Or you may be like this as a leader in the workplace. You are supposed to make decisions, and so you do. But you don't ask for input, and your decisions are not baked through. Good leaders seek input and advice.

Proverbs 13:14 motivates us to seek advice from those who are wise:

"The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death." When wise people speak about life, it is like a fountain of life—it is clear, refreshing, helpful, and satisfying.

And this is why we should ultimately be devoted to seeking wisdom from God's word. This is Proverbs 13:13, "Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself, but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded."

God is the source of all true wisdom. When we open the Bible, we are receiving wisdom for how to live in the world God made. And this will make us the kinds of people who have wisdom to offer others. This is why we want to be a church that immerses ourselves in God's word—personally every day, and together in groups and on Sunday mornings.

This is one of the ways we see the wisdom of Jesus.

Jesus is the ultimate wise man who humbly listened to his Father's words.

We get a glimpse of this in Psalm 40—which describes him talking to the Father. Here is what he says: "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear" (v6). What an image: The Father has given Jesus an open ear—Jesus has the humble posture of listening.

"Then I said, 'Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart'" (vv. 7–8). He listens to God's voice, and God's word is planted in his heart. And he walked with perfect wisdom.

This is the path Jesus walked and he invites us to follow. It begins with opening our ears to his word. It begins with receiving his words of grace and forgiveness; and then receiving his words of wisdom for life.

You actually cannot be a Christians without this posture. This is the posture we have when we first become a Christian. We say to God: I was wrong. I have lived in sin and folly. And your word corrects me. So I receive your forgiveness, and I'm opening myself to your wisdom.

And we are to keep this open posture toward God. And then also have this same posture toward others. Christians are to be marked by a humble teachability.

3. Speech that Heals (12:17, 18, 22, 25; 13:3, 5)

Third, the wise are marked by speech that heals.

The speech that heals is speech that is true.

Speaking the truth is about letting our words reflect reality. Proverbs assumes that there is not just *my* truth and *your* truth—but *the* truth. There is *objective* truth, there is *true* truth. Proverbs leads us to speak words that correspond to true reality.ⁱ Here are a few examples.

Proverbs 12:17, “Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit.” This is a simple contrast, and the setting is the courtroom. One gives honest evidence, the other makes stuff up. One has words that reflect reality, the other gives words that distort reality.

If we care about justice, then we must care about truth. Those two are separated too often in our culture—from people across the cultural and political spectrum. People have goals that they think are just—and they use falsehood to get there. But the wise use true words to get just outcomes. When your words accurately reflect reality, only then are they just.ⁱⁱ

And how does God view our speech? Verse 22, “Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who act faithfully are his delight.”

God hates lies. And so those who receive his wisdom also hate them. Look at 13:5, “The righteous hates falsehood, but the wicked brings shame and disgrace.” When we slow down and let these two lines interact, and we fill in the gaps, here's what we see: The righteous hate falsehood, and therefore when they speak, they bring honor. But the wicked are fine with lies, and so they speak them, and it brings shame and disgrace.

So it is *truthful* speech that brings healing. What does this healing look like?

Proverbs 12:18 shows us the power of our words: “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

Some of our words are like sword thrusts—they penetrate all the way to the heart of the person we speak to. We can break their spirit with one sentence. I remember when one of

my boys was a toddler, I was so frustrated that I yelled at him. And he looked at me in distress and said that I hurt his heart. He was right. He was experiencing a deep pain inside. It was a turning point for me as a dad.

We also have a joke in our family to draw attention to this. We don't allow anyone to ever say, "I'm just saying..." Whenever someone ever says something, and then follows it with, "I'm just saying..." it's not true. It is always a sign that they *know* they are not "just saying." It's their way of trying to deflect attention from how their words were hurtful.

Now, banning that phrase didn't quite work as I expected. Because almost immediately a new line came out. One of my boys said something rude to another son. He immediately sensed that he did it, and he knew our rule. So he said, "I'm just addressing it..."

The opposite are the words of the wise, which bring healing. Their words are like medicine.

We all need to think about the words we speak. And the emails we send. And the social media posts we put out there. And the texts we send. Every single one of them—they will either heal, or they will harm. We either tear someone down or we refresh them.

Of course, sometimes we need to be corrective, but even then—there is a way to offer correction that is healing and strengthening, and there is a way to offer correction that is condescending, thoughtless, and rude. We all know which is which when we receive them. The problem is that many of us don't realize it when we are the ones delivering them. We should all pause before we post something, send something, or say something corrective. Words are powerful.

What does it look like for your words to heal? This is 12:25: "Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad."

Many of us often feel anxious. And anxiety weighs us down and leads to depression. We're living in the most anxious and depressed era in history.

Those who are wise can tell when someone is anxious. And so they give them "good words" that make them glad. That's a broad category. It could include encouragement. It could include positive news.

For Christians, we know everyone ultimately needs to be reminded of the best news, the best good news, the hope that comes from knowing Christ. This is what our anxious and depressed world needs most. And it's what God's people have to offer: the message of Jesus's death and resurrection for sinners. The message of forgiveness of sins. The message of eternal life and hope.

One more on this theme of the power of words:

Proverbs 13:3 shows us the cumulative effect of living a life of speaking wise words. It actually emphasizes the power of *restraining* our speech, rather than running our mouth: “Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.” Wise people know how to put a seat-belt on their mouths. They do not speak impulsively. They do not just shoot off lengthy emails to vent their emotions. They do not just write and post on social media whatever comes to their mind. They guard their mouths. And the long-term result is that it guards them and preserves their life. But those who do not guard their mouths will speak folly, and it will have consequences.

We cannot think of this without seeing how Jesus embodied this perfectly for us.

He never lied. He always spoke in line with reality. He guarded his mouth. And his words brought healing to people. He spoke good news to those who were crushed in spirit. He called on the anxious to trust the Father. He proclaimed the good news of eternal life to those whose lives felt like death, and were headed to eternal death.

The way you and I will be able to speak words of truth and grace—will be by first receiving them from Jesus. Receive his words of grace, and mercy, and forgiveness, and wisdom. And then let that renew you to live a life of speaking truth and goodness to others.

4. Work that Fulfills (12:11, 14, 27; 13:11)

The fourth theme is work that fulfills—which is diligent work.

Proverbs 12:11 says, “Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.”

The main point is that if you work hard, you will have bread. Work leads to wealth. The wise understand this, so they work hard and gain wealth.

What is the opposite of working hard? It’s not mere laziness here. Do you see the contrast? It’s “he who follows worthless pursuits.” The contrast is not between doing things and *not* doing things. It is between doing the things that matter, and doing things that don’t matter.

Many people today are very busy. They are very diligent. But they are diligently pursuing things that don’t matter. They are wasting time rather than doing the things that matter most.

This actually is a form of laziness. Because they are avoiding the hard things that are most important; and they are busy doing the easier things that are less important.

Many of us do this even with our own work. We know what we need to be focused on for the day, but it's hard; so we do easier things that aren't as important. When we do this, we may feel *crazy busy*—but we are actually *lazy-busy*.

Proverbs 12:14 then brings our words and our work together: “From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man's hand comes back to him.”

Speaking wisely and working hard will return blessing—because this is how God designed the world to work. This is the life we are to pursue—a life where our words are few and true, and where we work good and hard—and this ends up leading to the life that satisfies.

Verse 27 reinforces the connection between our diligence and its outcome: “Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth.”

The slothful will not roast his game? Either because he did not go hunting, so he has no game. Or he got it, but he's too lazy to roast it. He's either a non-starter, or a non-finisher. Either way, this explains why he doesn't have the wealth he needs.

Some of us tend to be one or the other: we either don't start things, or we do, but then we don't finish. But the diligent has precious wealth—because this is the pathway God designed. Wealth is a good gift, and we gain it through starting and finishing.

Proverbs also connects our work to our wealth. It speaks about how we gain wealth, and it emphasizes the value of gaining it slowly. Work is in the background here in 13:11, “Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it.”

This is asking us a question: Do you want your wealth to dwindle, or increase? It is assuming we want it to increase. The assumption is that wanting wealth to increase is a good thing.

Okay, so how do you get your wealth to increase rather than dwindle? It depends on how you went about getting it in the first place. If you gained it hastily, it will dwindle; if you take your time to patiently accumulate, it will increase.

This is throwing shade on get-rich-quick schemes. Money made fast usually goes away fast. Why? Maybe because if you're the kind of person who gains it quickly, you are also the kind of person who wastes it quickly. But if you're the kind of person who diligently accumulates it, you will tend to be disciplined to keep it.

Proverbs gives a dignified view of diligent work.

This ancient wisdom is confirmed in modern studies. Arthur Brooks wrote a book called *Gross National Happiness*. He studied what makes people truly happy and satisfied. He listed the top four. He found that wealth isn't one of them—as long as you were not poor, as long as you had enough to live on, that was enough. But here were the four things that make people happy: faith, family, friendships—and fourth: meaningful work.

This is simply reflecting what we know to be true from Proverbs. It's how God designed us.

5. A Spouse that Crowns (12:4)

One final point: A spouse that crowns.

Proverbs is framed as wisdom for a young man who is will become a leader in the community—so there is wisdom about how to find a wife. And here it is in 12:4: “An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones.”

So far in Proverbs we've seen over and over how we are to pursue character development. Now it also says the wise will also make sure they find a spouse who also has character. Because the character of your spouse will end up feeling like a blessing or a curse.

This contrasts two kinds of wives:

One is called “an excellent wife.” The word for “excellent” refers to virtue. She is a woman who fears God and lives with wisdom. Today, she is a sincere follower of Jesus and she is growing in wisdom and character.

And what is the result of a man who has this kind of wife? She is “the crown of her husband.” This is about honor—since it's contrasted with a wife who brings shame. A Christ-following wife brings honor to a husband—and no, doubt, the same is true for a Christ-following and wise husband to a wife.

I experience this—I know that some people view me far more highly than they would if I wasn't married to Christina. They see that she is a radiant gem, and some of that honor gets transferred to me simply because I'm married to her.

But what is the opposite? This says, “she who brings shame is like rottenness in his bones.” A radiant crown on the head, versus rottenness in the bones.

Bruce Waltke has one of the best commentaries on Proverbs ever written. Here's what he said about this: This "suggests that the shameful wife robs her husband of social standing, and the noble wife strengthens his very being by giving him social honor and empowering him to rule the community (cf. 31:23). The ignoble wife invisibly saps his strength and vitality and deconstructs him from within."ⁱⁱⁱ

The phrase "rotteness in the bones" indicates decay. Waltke said, "as the decay progresses, he is slowly but continuously undermined in his inward happiness and outward usefulness... Marriage is no light matter; the wife either makes or breaks a man in his home and in the community."^{iv} I read that to Christina and she said it sounded very specific—almost like he's seen this up close in people's lives.

Again, the same would be true for a foolish husband who brings shame to his wife.

Why is this here? What's the point? It is encouraging a young man to find a wife of good character. He is saying: don't just chase outward beauty. Look for character, and think about the outcome. One will bring honor and inward joy; the other will bring shame and inward grief. Chose wisely.

And isn't it amazing when we think of what Jesus did?

Who did he choose for a wife? He chose us—sinners who have not lived well in God's world. And do we not see that so often Christians fail to bring him honor in the world? And yet what does he do? He did not choose a spouse who was already of noble character—he chose the foolish and unrighteous wife.

He forgives us of all our sins, he cleansed us, and he is renewing us. He is changing us and making us wise—and he will one day have us presented to him in radiant beauty. We are the kind of spouse who would be rottenness to his bones—but he is transforming us to become like a crown on his head.

Conclusion

This is the wisdom we need to live well in God's world.

This is the life that endures. It is marked by these key features: A heart that listens, speech that heals, work that fulfills, and a spouse that crowns.

Proverbs is describing the wise and good life. The problem is—it's describing the ideal life. It's the life we often wish we were, even though we are not. We often fail at every point here—we don't listen to correction. Our speech distorts reality and harms rather than heals. We are lazy with our work—even if it looks like we're crazy busy doing less important things. And we are often not a crown to our spouse—or if we want a spouse, we focus on the superficial and make compromises.

Which is why we are seeing that wisdom is ultimately about Jesus. He is not just the example for us; he is the savior for us. And his speech is true, and it heals. He gives the good word that makes our heart glad.

So, let's keep drawing near to him. Keep opening ourselves to his gracious correction. And if you have never trusted Christ, come to him as your savior and your sage. He saves you from your sin, and he makes you wise. Repent of your foolish rejection of him, receive his grace, and follow his wisdom.

ⁱ Tremper Longman summarized it this way: "the fundamental precept of the book is that words ought to reflect reality, the reality of the heart (16:23; 18:4) as well as the reality of what is out there in the world" (Longman, *Proverbs*, 278).

ⁱⁱ Longman, 276

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, NICOT, 521.

^{iv} Waltke, 522.