

Getting Smart • Proverbs 1:7

Most of us take for granted the ease with which we can pick up a book and read the words or grab a pencil and a piece of paper and write a note. We forget that most people in most places throughout history have been illiterate. It would be impossible for them to read a good book or to write down good ideas. That's why "proverbs" have become so popular throughout history.

Proverbs are short sayings that are easy to remember. They summarize powerful truth in a few words. In fact, the English word "proverb" comes from the Latin words "pro" which means "for" and "verba" which means "words". So a proverb is a substitute for many words.

One of the neatest books of the Bible is the book of Proverbs because it contains so much great truth in short sayings that are easy to remember. This 31 chapter Old Testament book tells us how to make it in business, when to sign contracts, how to get along with people, how to avoid sexual seduction and a wide variety of other practical advice. In fact, Proverbs is probably the single most practical book in the entire Bible. It's not a book about doctrine or theology but rather about everyday living and how to succeed.

Derrick Kidner, a British author, put it this way: "Proverbs' function in Scripture is to put godliness in working clothes." In other words, Proverbs is a book about how to succeed in everyday pursuits and problems and pleasures: on the street, in school and at home.

If Proverbs were being published today and sold at Target it would have a different name: How To Get It All Together In Life and Keep It That Way.

As we read through Proverbs, we start to

get a picture of the kind of person that God wants us to be. For one thing, we are to be "street wise". God wants us to never be fooled or tricked, never conned by other people.

In addition, we are to be "stable". When everything goes haywire, the "together person" stays cool. He sees through the whole situation; she never loses her temper or says anything stupid.

A "Proverbs kind of person" is someone who is smart. This person knows how to make money in good business deals, is clever enough not to get ripped off and sees when people are lying or cheating or bluffing. He or she has tremendous insights into people and into human relationships.

"Skill" is another important quality. She is good at what she does, whether that is raising a family or running her own business. He is respected as one of the best in his field.

And, as if there could be more, this is someone who is spiritual. Here is someone who not only makes it with success in this world but also walks with God . . . a person who is moral, upright, honest and respected.

How do you react to such a description? At first it may sound too good to be true. But inside we say, "That's the way I want to be! I wish I could be a winner. Sometimes I'm so stupid. People take advantage of me. I say and do all the wrong things. I'd really like to be that kind of person described in Proverbs."

Well, you can be! But it all hinges on the Proverb that is the motto for the whole book. The key, the motto, to all the Proverbs contained in the Bible is in Chapter 1 verse 7: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline."

Commit that to memory!

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God gives us a choice as to the kind of people we want to be and the kind of lives we want to live. Choice number one is to be smart. But to understand that, we have to first ask what “smart” is.

Two different words are used almost interchangeably in Proverbs. They are “knowledge” and “wisdom”. The word that is used here is the word knowledge. Compare that to Proverbs 9:10 where it says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

In our culture and in our language, we generally think of knowledge as information and wisdom as the use of information. However, this word for knowledge specifically means practice and experience.

Suppose you hear someone say, “That person really knows how to make money in real estate.” That doesn’t mean that they took a university course and read all the books and passed all the tests. It means that person does it. That person not only knows the facts, but can actually do it as well!

Someone who is smart (has knowledge and wisdom) not only has the facts for successful living but is also good at it!

Not too long ago I ran across someone who doesn’t want to be a Christian because he thinks that all Christians are losers . . . especially in terms of money and material things. I could have told him about some Christians who are astonishingly wealthy and powerful and yet are still absolutely loyal to Jesus Christ. But there’s a sense in which that would be misleading.

The biblical view of “smart” is someone who travels down life’s road recognizing that what is right and what pays often go together. But if it comes to a choice, the smart person will always choose what is right whether it pays or not.

“Smart” means satisfaction, happiness, peace, productivity, purpose. The smart woman knows that temporary pleasures may rob future joy. The smart Christian knows that to be a short-term loser may be what is necessary in

order to be a long-term winner. The smart father figures out that it’s better to turn down a promotion and hang onto his kids rather than be vice president of a huge company and have his children hate him.

We need to be smart all the time! Smart about health decisions. Smart in solving problems on the job. Smart in school. Smart in moral decisions. Smart about money matters. Smart in dealing with people. Smart in church matters, car repairs, the use of time, how we raise our children and absolutely everything else.

But how do we get smart? “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of “smarts”.

Let’s get some quick understanding of these terms. The expression “fear of the Lord” does not mean panic or being scared out of our wits. Rather, it means respectful obedience. It means that you take God very seriously and do what he wants.

When I was growing up, I feared my father. That doesn’t mean that I trembled every night at the dinner table. It means that I believed in him, that I trusted him, that I respected him and that I obeyed him. But there was a way in which I was scared of him as well! So, when I didn’t agree with him, I obeyed him, anyway!

Our generation doesn’t talk much about fearing God. We emphasize that God is love and forgiveness and mercy. All that is true and right. But he is also God! Smart people fear God. That means that they respect him; they trust him; they believe in him; they obey him. And, yes, they are also scared of him to the point of going along with him and obeying him whether they agree with him or not!

A second term we need to understand is this expression “the beginning of wisdom”. That doesn’t mean the first step of many. It’s not something you do and then go on to whatever is next. “Beginning” means “basic” or “primary”. It is the first principle governing all others.

If you’re going to be a commercial pilot you have to begin by learning how to fly an airplane. After that you can worry about licens-

ing, logging hours, applying for a job and so forth. Learning to fly may be the beginning of being a commercial pilot, but you had better not quit knowing how to fly if I'm going to fly with you!

The "fear of the Lord" is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom, but it is also the ongoing basis of all knowledge and wisdom. Forget to fear the Lord and sooner or later you're bound to crash!

Why is the fear of the Lord so important, especially in practical things like family or finances? The answer is that God is the Creator of everything and as the Creator of everything he understands how everything works. If we are out of harmony with the Creator it means that we will be losers in the long run.

When our youngest child, Jeff, was born, the labor time was so brief that the nurse almost delivered him before the obstetrician arrived. Everything went fine, though. The doctor arrived at the last minute and he delivered Jeff. A few minutes later I said something that was a class example of the way NOT to address an obstetrician. I said to him, "That nurse is great! I'm sure it didn't make any difference whether you were here or not." He didn't think that was funny at all. Instead he looked me in the eye and said, "That's right, as long as everything goes okay." In a situation like that you need a specialist.

God is a specialist. We may think that we can get along in life without him. And maybe we can, as long as everything goes okay. But everything doesn't go okay. Eventually there are crises that need the Specialist! God is the Specialist on human life, the world and heaven - - - because he created them all! Smart people know this and live accordingly!

Okay, so how do I fear God? It goes back to the father illustration. You have to know him and obey him to fear him. The way to know God is through disciplined Bible study, consistent

prayer, instruction and worship. Those who fear God and are smart and successful give top priority to Bible study, prayer, worship, learning opportunities and obedience . . . obedience in things like morality and baptism and ministry and money.

Get to know God. Proverbs 2:6 says: "For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." And in Proverbs 9:10 we read, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."

Want to be smart? "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

If you decide against being smart, the only other choice is to be a fool. And what kind of a choice is that? Who would choose to be a fool?

Take a look at the synonyms that Roget's Thesaurus lists for "fool":

buffoon, jester, clown, harlequin, zany, idiot, nitwit, halfwit, booby, numbskull, oaf, goose, blunderer, ninny, nincompoop, blockhead, dunce, simpleton, sucker, dupe, sap, chump, bonehead, fathead, meathead, marblehead, knucklehead, jackass, boob, dope. Any volunteers?

The Hebrew word means "hard", "thick" or "stupid".

But don't get the impression that the fool that's described in the latter half of Proverbs 1:7 is necessarily a complete jerk. On the contrary, it may be someone who has successfully been able to build an empire worth a billion dollars. She may be the President of the United States or the winner of a Pulitzer Prize. It's the

person who often succeeds marvelously in one area of life and fails miserably in another area of life. It's the guy whose life is always out of sync. It's

the gal that everyone initially envies but who blows life so badly that eventually everyone pities her.

Smart people fear God. That means that they respect him; they trust him; they believe in him; they obey him.

Jesus told a story in Luke chapter 12 of a man who was so loaded financially that his major problem in life was to build warehouses for his possessions. In his free time, when he wasn't worrying about building warehouses for all of his material possessions, he went to lots of parties. So his two problems in life were where to put his money and which party to go to.

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

Do you get the picture? The fool is not so stupid that he can't make lots of money or have a good time. But he is too stupid to see the whole tragic picture of what really happens to him! And frankly, being a fool is a choice too many people actually make!

What does the fool do? Well, the sage tells us that he despises wisdom. That is, he rejects doing things God's way. He thinks that he can figure everything out for himself. He's self-sufficient. He believes that he can ignore God's word and be a winner.

He despises instruction. You can't tell him a thing. He insists on doing all the talking and none of the listening. He will accept no answers from God or from godly counselors. You can't teach him anything at all.

Sometimes we look at people like this and they make a marvelous impression upon us. They are loud and dogmatic and self-confident. We wonder if they are right and we are wrong. Don't believe it for a minute. God says that those who lack his wisdom and his instruction are fools!

Let me tell you about two couples I know. They both faced serious marital and personal problems.

One couple decided to turn to the Lord and make him first in their lives. They received counsel. They studied the Bible. They turned their financial problems and alcohol problems and family problems over to the Lord and committed to obey and serve him. Their lives are completely different now. Not problem-free, but amazingly happy and balanced. A joy to behold!

The second couple decided that they would work things out by themselves. They really didn't need radical change from God. They didn't need any counsel or instruction. They could make it on their own. And they are miserable and probably will stay miserable for the rest of their lives.

Proverbs are so simple. They say it all in so few words when I've said it in so many.

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