

# A wisdom sermon with Dr. Lindsay Wilson

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[ 0 : 00 ] As we begin to look to God's word together, let us come before him in prayer. Lord God, please open our hearts to your word.

! Help me to teach faithfully and clearly from it. And help us all to be formed and shaped by your word so we can live in your world as your faithful people. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. For many people, proverbs in general seem very dated and irrelevant. A bit like the, what we call dad jokes, that you get in Christmas crackers.

These days we have something much more contemporary. We have memes, we have GIFs, we have YouTube clips or something else depending on your generation.

We associate proverbs with doting grandmothers or fossilly old grandfathers like me. Why did God cause a book full of proverbs to be included in the Bible?

[ 1 : 24 ] Well, proverbs deals with a range of topics not covered as much in other parts of the Bible. Things like work and speech and friendship, laziness and many other aspects of daily life.

So it fills out what we see in the rest of scripture. At the beginning of the book, the book of proverbs tells us what its purpose is.

To understand the world, to develop our character and to do what is right and just and fair. That's pretty valuable, isn't it?

Isn't that what we need in the world? To understand it, to develop our character and to act in a way that is right and just and fair.

But how should we interpret them not just as proverbs in the Old Testament, but as Christian scripture? Let me suggest a way forward.

[ 2 : 31 ] When we look at the book of proverbs, the kind of individual proverbs that will occur from chapter 10 onwards, are placed after some introductory words in chapters 1 to 9.

And we'll be looking at part of those in chapter 2. And these have been placed there to help us to understand how we are to read the proverbs that follow.

In a sense, they are the gateway that we must walk through before we come to understand the proverbs themselves. The first nine chapters of proverbs have three key ideas that are important building blocks for the rest of the book.

The first is to start with the right foundation. And we'll see the mention of the fear of the Lord in our passage. It is there very much in the prologue of the book of proverbs in chapter 1, verses 1 to 7.

The second key idea, if the first idea is a fear of the Lord, start with the right foundation. The second key idea is to have your character formed or shaped.

[ 3 : 50 ] That is, God is wanting to work on who we are, not just what we do. And the third key idea here is that he wants us to keep on choosing in our daily lives what is wise and to reject what is foolish.

So those three key ideas start with the right foundation, have our character shaped by wisdom, and keep on choosing wisdom and rejecting folly.

In chapter 2 that we'll be looking at today, we see all three themes at work, but there's a focus especially on the formation of a godly character.

That is, what kind of people should we be? Thank you.

Now, information is a good thing. I've spent most of my life in ministry sharing information with my students. Sometimes they talk about me inflicting information on them, but I shared a lot of information over the years.

[ 5 : 06 ] I like information and I like to share information. Did you know, for example, that the weight of all the ants on the earth is equivalent to the weight of all the human beings on the earth?

I don't know how they get their data, but I'm assured it's true. There are approximately two and a half million ants for every human being. Here's an Australian example for you.

Did you know that if you lift a kangaroo's tail off the ground, it can't hop? And for those who are interested in language, did you know that underground is the only word that both begins and ends with the letters UND?

Now, fascinating though all these facts are, merely knowing any of these things will not shape your life, shape you as a person, will not help you to move for Christ or serve him in his world.

Proverbs doesn't just give us information like that, but it helps us to know how to live, what to choose, what to strive for.

[ 6 : 27 ] So Proverbs isn't about making us better informed, but to help us be transformed. And that, being grounded in God, in the core of our being, means that our lives will make sense of the world.

So Proverbs includes a lot of information, but emphasises transformation or change. Of course, the background to chapter 2 is chapter 1.

And in chapter 1, verses 1 to 7, we have many of these ideas already explained. The most important of these is the motto of the book in chapter 1, verse 7, the sure foundation.

Where do you start? Well, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Now, the fear of the Lord is not a bad thing, but a good thing. It doesn't mean being afraid of God, but seeing God for who he really is and respecting him as God, treating him in the way that he deserves to be treated.

[ 7 : 46 ] If we build on that foundation, we will allow him to shape our character and reject the way of folly. Of course, the way of folly is one that treats God as of little value and thinks that it knows better than God.

So our foundational stance of the fear of the Lord in the book of Proverbs is the foundation of wisdom. And it's the only starting point that really counts for a life that's worth it.

Now, in the light of the Bible as a whole, we realise that respecting God as God means that we will want to have faith in the Lord Jesus. Now, we have a fuller picture of the nature of God when we read both the Old and the New Testament.

We need to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. And of course, there is no other foundation than that. So please don't read the book of Proverbs as if all it's trying to do is to make you a nicer person.

It wants you to start with a proper attitude to God, which for us means faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Since God has perfectly revealed himself in Jesus, the appropriate response to who he is and what he's done is to trust him as the foundation of your life and keep on persevering in faith as you live for him in your daily life.

[ 9 : 24 ] So grounding your trust in Jesus, parallel to the fear of the Lord, is a foundation of wisdom. And so Paul calls Jesus the wisdom of God.

Now, the rest of chapter one starts to talk about the danger of choosing to hang around with the wrong kind of people. One of the key examples of folly in the book.

One writer talks about it as avoiding gangs of young men. And the three big themes of Proverbs have already emerged in chapter one.

And they'll appear again in chapter two. Starting with the right foundation, the fear of the Lord, having your character shaped, and lastly, choosing wisdom and rejecting folly.

So let's now turn to chapter two. And I want to show you how this chapter focuses on the development of character.

[ 10 : 29 ] Verses one to eleven really speak about how a godly character is formed and why that is important. And you can see the flow of thought by the little words he uses.

After my son, in verse one, he says, if. And we find an if again at the beginning of verse three and verse four.

If, if, if. In verse five, we start with the word then. And so, verse nine also starts with the word then. And if you go further through the chapter you get some bigger words but the same kind of thing in verse twelve to deliver you.

In our version, wisdom will save you. And also in verse sixteen, exactly the same word will save you. And then you come to verse twenty to the word thus.

[ 11 : 35 ] Now, why do I point out these little words? Because they help us to understand the flow of the chapter. It draws our attention to the conditions, what we need to do in order to grow in a

godly character.

Then, in verses five to eight and then nine to eleven, points out the consequences in terms of our growth in character of fulfilling those conditions.

to deliver you or will save you in verses twelve and sixteen, talks about the outcome that will follow from this growth in godly character.

And thus, talks about the purpose of all this to have the good life. So, the passage as a whole is talking about what you need to do in order to grow in our character so that we'll be able to be defended against things that might tempt us in a wrong way so that we will enjoy the way of the good, the way that God intends us to live.

Well, let's look at each part in turn. First, the ifs, the conditions of verses one to four. The first one is about being willing to learn in verses one and two.

[ 13 : 06 ] If you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding. It's about accepting instruction on God's ways and God's world, storing them up in the sense of treasuring or valuing this instruction.

Character needs to be shaped by what God values. It requires not just an attentive ear listening but a heart, a heart applied to wisdom.

The heart is the Bible's word for the centre of our life, what really drives us, what energises us. And in Proverbs, wisdom is primarily skilful living in God's world in a way that makes sense of life.

Willing to learn what matters to God, what he says works in life. In Proverbs, that involves learning from the created world, the world around us, and from the instruction of those who teach God's ways.

So the first if is about instruction, the next two ifs are about the effort required. It's not a matter of sitting back, let go and let God hear, but rather strenuous, determined actions.

[ 14 : 34 ] Striving for wisdom is never a soft option. Being willing to work. Verse 3 calls out, talks of crying out for, raising your voice for insight and understanding.

There's a call for keenness, for energy, for great drive here. And in verse 4 it speaks of seeking, searching for the treasure of a wise character.

It reminds me a bit of Jesus' words about the pearl of great price. It's worth giving up everything for that treasure.

Seeking wisdom requires discipline and perseverance. Merely listening to a Sunday sermon is not enough.

So these are the ifs, these are the indispensable things we need to do. We need to be willing to learn, we need to be willing to put in effort.

[ 15 : 41 ] Being willing to learn and be shaped by God, being willing to work for what really counts. Wisdom, like many other things, doesn't grow on trees.

That was the mistake that Adam and Eve made. Wisdom requires effort. It needs to be pursued diligently, not half-heartedly.

But what flows from this? What comes in the first then passage passage from verses 5 to 8? The consequences in verse 5 are not merely growth in knowledge but in relationship.

We find another mention of the fear of the Lord and knowing God. So here both awe and respect and intimacy with God, closeness to God.

Remember that the fear of the Lord was the starting point back in chapter 1. Godly character begins and continues with this foundation as the outworking of a relationship with God.

[ 16 : 51 ] Being willing to learn God's ways, being willing to work hard to be like him will lead to a deeper relationship with God and an unfolding character which honors him.

And if you look at verses 7 and 8 it affects the way a believer lives. A blameless walk, paths of justice, the way of his faithful ones.

To know the Lord better is to know how to live better. It leads here to victory, to safety, to God's guarding and protection.

Do you note that there's a balance here? What you find in verse 5, that is wisdom, is what God gives.

You will find the knowledge of God for the Lord gives wisdom. Wisdom is a gift of God yet attained by effort.

[ 17 : 55 ] It's something that we have to work for and yet it is something that is freely! given. the way to miss wisdom is to regard so lightly the shaping that God gives that we don't bother to seek it.

It's half-hearted discipleship. But what this section says is that if we trust God he protects our way. Verse 8 he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones. But there is also a second then in verses 9 to 11 that comes at the beginning of verse 9.

Verses 9 to 11 show how God imparts the protection and help envisaged in verses 7 and 8. And it is through forming in us a shaped or godly character.

Did you notice that the verbs in verse 8 guards and protects are exactly the same verbs as used here in verse 11.

[ 19 : 13 ] Discretion will protect you understanding will guard you. Now who guards and protects us? Is it God or is it what in verse 11 looks like our shaped character?

And I guess what it is saying that God does it through the godly character he has formed in us. While God can directly intervene in life and does from time to time God often works through the changes he's made in our life.

How are we protected from the pathway of folly? How are we enabled to go on the pathway of wisdom? Through God shaping in us forming in us a new character a character grounded in the fear of the Lord a character committed to serving the way of wisdom and rejecting the way of folly. In a sense in whole Bible terms that's the work of the spirit who dwells within us to make us choose the way of wisdom rather than the way of folly.

You see Proverbs isn't just an advice giving book it's a character forming book. The best way to resist temptation is not to wait until you're tempted and then work out how do I resist this temptation but to prepare ourselves beforehand and what the Bible says here is that if we acquire a character of wisdom as we'll see it will give us the strength to resist those who seek to draw us away from the ways of God.

[ 21 : 13 ] It's a bit like cleaning our teeth. We don't sit back doing nothing in terms of oral hygiene until a cavity appears then we go to the dentist he would say why haven't you been cleaning your teeth?

Preventative work is very important but I'm not here to tell you about oral hygiene but to tell you about if you like the way to prepare for a godly life and God says the preventative work that we need to put in place to help us to resist temptation is to develop in us a god shaped character and as we are formed and shaped by god to live in his world we will be protected and guarded in this life.

The moral and spiritual dangers we face in this world are real and deadly and we must be careful to arm and protect ourselves with the means that god has provided.

The strength of a shaped character and a life centred on god starting on the right foundation and with the ongoing choice of pursuing wisdom and rejecting folly.

You can see why when proverbs talks about wisdom it's not just a matter of knowledge or information but it is of commitment of our wills and that's why character matters.

[ 22 : 48 ] Character used to be thought of as so old fashioned so establishment a thing of the past but now character is making a comeback in relationships in politics business more and more people are looking for people they can trust people with integrity in other words character is much more important than looks or money or status or reputation if we look on further into chapter 2 we will see in verse 12 and verse 12 to 15 that this shaped character will save us from two things firstly in 12 to 15 and then in verses 16 to 19 these are in fact the two key examples of folly that

Proverbs chapter 1 to 9 give in verses 12 to 15 it will save you from the way of evil and evildoers the wrong crowd groups of young men joining gangs and in verses 16 to 19 it will also save you from the adulterous which is if you like folly personified perhaps the clearest example of folly one writer calls them it will save you from devious men and deadly women they're both mentioned here and verses 12 and 16 start with the same word to deliver you and it's in our version will save you the subject of it is wisdom in the sense of a wise shaped character the word wisdom has been inserted to try to make that clear but we don't think of it as just knowledge will save you but wisdom in the sense of a shaped character and that leads of course to a final therefore in verse 20 but the two examples here of wisdom a shaped character saving us from joining the wrong crowd joining peers who would draw us away from

God rather than build us up in God and drawing us away from the adulterous woman someone who causes to compromise our values and standards and commitments of faithfulness to God and our spouse the purpose of all that we then see in verse 20 thus you will walk in the ways of the good and keep to the paths of the righteous and isn't that what we want to walk in the ways of the good or

the good ways keep to the paths of the righteous keep the righteous paths aren't we striving to live lives that are good meaningful righteous well the way to do it is not to start with verse 20 but to start back with the fear of the Lord as a foundation build on that the importance of a shaped character and then keep on choosing the way of wisdom rather than the way of folly so this good life this righteous life must be built on a godly character forming our character who we are on the inside who we are when no one's looking is a key way in which

God preserves and keeps us and enables us to serve him and others we are not it matters who we are not just what we do so God is not impressed by how we project ourselves when we come to church on Sunday God but God wants to look at our whole lives to see how we act in our family in our workplace in our community in our conversations with other people in our thoughts and our actions God wants to shape all of who we are for his kingdom now I hear many young Christians strive for the gifts of the spirit and I understand that that's a good thing although it should be said that each spiritual gift is only to be used from time to time and some spiritual gifts are only for certain people but if people want to be shaped by

God's spirit perhaps the more important shaping that takes place is striving for the fruit of the spirit love joy peace patience kindness goodness faithfulness gentleness and self control do you see how those nine different expressions of the fruit of the spirit are actually descriptions of a godly character a character of love joy peace patience kindness goodness faithfulness gentleness and self control all of the fruit of the spirit a godly character is for all followers of the Lord Jesus at all times and that's why this message of proverbs is essential for us today so what can we say in conclusion whether we've been followers of Jesus for a long time or have just come to know him or perhaps don't yet know him our task in life is not just to get information about

[ 29 : 05 ] God and his word that's the easy part of Christian living the real challenge is to be shaped into the person that God wants us to be it's easy to accept Christ's death for our sin and to acknowledge him as saviour but he wants us to continue on to follow him as Lord Lord of our whole life and that's going to involve learning skills about how to discern what's good and helpful but it's also a matter of having our character formed and shaped by God allowing God to work at what we're like deep down on the inside when no one else is looking you see character is never an optional extra just for those Christians who like that kind of thing it's absolutely crucial for all who want to live out our faith in the

Lord Jesus or who want to walk in his ways of good and to keep his righteous paths once we know God we need to work hard at developing that shape godly character knowing that God is at work in us by his spirit there are no shortcuts no easy alternatives we are called to work on who we are because God is working hard within us so friends the message of Proverbs chapter 2 is that we let the fruit of the spirit grow in us that we prune those areas of our lives that do no honour to God that we feed and nurture those parts of our lives that do advance God's kingdom and his will in the end character is really important character counts let's pray

Lord God we thank you that you have called us to yourself and made us new people in Christ but we thank you too that once we come to know you you are not finished with us but want to keep on working on us please help us to see the importance of character please help us to strive to become like the people you want us to be and please help us to cooperate with the work of your spirit in shaping who we are as well as what we do for we ask it for Jesus sake and for our benefit amen what do what do