

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Pursuit of Wisdom

Proverbs 2:1-11

Even if you've never heard of the Backpack Index, many of you have firsthand experience with what it tracks: The cost of school supplies. Over the last decade, the cost of required classroom supplies and school fees has nearly doubled. Though there has been a slight price dip in the cost of supplies for the 2018-2019 school year, the figures are still stunning. According to the Backpack Index, you can expect to pay \$637 for an elementary school child, \$941 for a middle school child, and \$1,355 for a high school student. For many folks, these numbers are comparable to an average monthly mortgage.

If you're one of the people who has gone into the back-to-school aisle and lived to tell about it, you may not have had much time to reflect on the overall purpose of your investment. You were so riveted on trying to locate 1.5-inch binders, glue sticks, and pocket folders with prongs that you didn't think much about the educational objective behind your shopping. You just wanted to complete your mission so you could get home and start sorting supplies.

When it comes to the instructional aim of your purchases, author Marc Prensky has written:

As I continue to delve deeper and deeper into the world of education and K-12 schools and how each needs to prepare our children for the 21st century, I find myself focusing on a single word with increasing frustration: learning.

That might seem strange. Pretty much everything you hear and read about education these days assumes that "learning" is the goal for our students. But it's not.

The real goal of education, and of school, is *becoming*—becoming a "good" person and becoming a more capable person than when you started. Learning is nothing but a means of accomplishing that goal, and it is dangerous to confuse the ends with the means.¹

Learning serves the larger purpose of becoming. There's some of that approach in today's Scripture passage from the book of Proverbs. Recall that the book of Proverbs has a lot to do with education and learning. Its purpose is to help people become wise and godly. In Proverbs, the learning objective isn't primarily to master a body of knowledge but to live rightly toward God and others. Instead of promising a diploma in a particular specialty, the opening verses speak of obtaining a degree in discernment: "For attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair" (1:2-3). So the question that drives the book of Proverbs is the question that drives the pursuit of wisdom in many other times, cultures, and places, namely, how best to live.

But living necessarily involves learning. And in the culture in which the book of Proverbs was compiled, a lot of the learning was a generational practice. There was no public school system. Fathers and mothers, teachers and leaders, would pass on their life experience and ancestral wisdom to their children. Particularly in the case of boys, this would include instruction in the Torah, God's laws and teachings. In fact, though the book of Proverbs could be used to add to the wisdom of those who were already wise and experienced, its primary audience was probably young, inexperienced males on the threshold of adult life.

"My son," says the opening of today's text, "if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, . . . (vv. 1-2). That conditional formulation, "if," appears three times in the opening verses of chapter two. "If you accept my words. . . ." "If you call out for insight. . . ." "If you look for it as for silver. . . ." So wisdom isn't just a given in life. It isn't something that just happens. Wisdom requires effort on our part. We have to strive to acquire it. We have to want it. We need to seek after it, pursue it, and pray for it.

In the movie *Yentl*, Barbara Streisand plays a young, unmarried woman who has an insatiable appetite for learning and wisdom within the Jewish faith. But the world of Jewish scholarship and sacred learning belongs only to males. So Streisand's character leaves home, changes her name, masquerades as an older boy, and gets accepted into an academy where they study the long history of discussion and interpretation of the Jewish law.

In one scene, Yentl and her father are playing a game of chess when she tells him how much she envies students of the Talmud. They get to discuss life and the mysteries of the universe while, as Yentl says, "I'm learning to tell a herring from a carp!"

[Yentl's father] tells her that men and women have different obligations "and don't ask why," but he finally gives in to Yentl's requests for another study session. Yentl is happy as she gets a large book from a well-stocked bookshelf. The father tells her to close the shutters.

As she's doing this she asks, "If you don't have to hide studying from God, then why from the neighbors?"

"Why? Because I trust God will understand. I'm not so sure about the neighbors." He reflects on her desire for learning: "Questions, questions. Even when you were little. Does a goat have a soul? What was before the universe?"

They laugh together, but he is very tired and goes to bed. Yentl, alone, takes a prayer shawl, puts it above her head in front of a bright lamp. Her upper body is mystically silhouetted as she prays: "God, oh merciful Father, I'm wrapped in a robe of light, clothed in your glory, that spreads its wings over my soul. May I be worthy."²

Yentl has a thirst for sacred wisdom. She knows how precious it is to examine and inquire about the will of God as revealed in the Jewish law. "If you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure" (v. 4). So when it comes to wisdom, there is an "if." It doesn't just fall into your lap. You have to pursue it.

But at the same time, wisdom is a gift of God. It's not primarily something we achieve. It's not a reward for completing a particular course of study. According to today's text, "The Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (v. 6). I once took a class at a school where that verse is displayed in beautiful artwork as you enter the portion of the library where the stacks begin. Before a student proceeded further into the rows and rows of books, it was important for him or her to remember the ultimate source of knowledge, and to reflect on the fact that the objective of learning isn't simply the intellectual storing up of theological information, but the receiving of God-given wisdom, in order to live rightly before God and others.

On another panel in the library was a second verse from today's text: "For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul" (v. 10). Here was another reminder that learning is about more than just accumulating information and processing mental data. In the biblical sense, wisdom is a gift of God that makes its way into the very core of your being, enabling you to conduct yourself rightly toward God and neighbor.

Learning feeds into living. And living feeds into learning. In fact, some of the deepest wisdom God gives us comes through our lived experience. We don't simply learn in order to obey. We actually learn through our obedience. Obedience itself becomes the school in which we acquire wisdom about how things work in God's world. So we don't just step back in order to analyze daily life. Instead, we enroll ourselves in daily life, and discover that our relationships, our work, our activities, our accomplishments, and our failures, are the classroom where God instructs us about his will, his plans, and his purposes. As Oswald Chambers has written, "Never try to explain God until you have obeyed Him. The only bit of God we understand is the bit we have obeyed."³

Our knowledge of God corresponds to our obedience to God. And our obedience to God corresponds to our obedience to Jesus. After all, Jesus is the wisdom of God incarnate. Jesus not only preaches and teaches wisdom, but embodies wisdom. From the Christian perspective, wisdom isn't primarily something but someone. The one in whom God's will is fully and decisively revealed. The one whom you need to know, personally and deeply. To know Jesus is to know wisdom. To follow Jesus, and to be obedient to Jesus, is to live a wise life.

Andrew Murray writes about how wisdom is embodied in obedience. He says: "We come to [Christ] asking Him to teach us the lost art of obeying God as He did. . . . The only way of learning to do a thing is to do it. The only way of learning obedience from Christ is to give up your will to Him and to make the doing of His will the one desire and delight of your heart."⁴ That pretty well captures the pursuit of wisdom.

According to today's text, if you pursue wisdom, "then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God" (v. 5). That great phrase "the fear of the Lord" captures the theme of the book of Proverbs. It expresses God's total claim on our lives and our total-life response to God. "The fear of the Lord" means religion in the comprehensive sense of your life, in its entirety, devoted to God's service. This is where wisdom and knowledge begin (1:7).

Yesterday, some of the folks from our church and our day care ministry gathered to participate in this year's backpack project, to help provide school supplies for some of the children in our community. That's because the pursuit of an education requires more than just a hungry mind and a heart to succeed. It also requires things that only Walmart, Target, or another retailer can supply. Things like scissors, pencils, erasers, crayons, composition books, and notebook paper.

I don't know if you bring many learning supplies with you when you come here on Sunday morning. I generally see lots of Bibles, some notepads, pens, highlight markers, and a smattering of tote bags. Whether you arrive weighed down or empty-handed, I do hope and pray that by the time you leave here, we've filled your disciple's backpack with a generous supply of wisdom, insight, understanding, and the knowledge of God. These are items you can't put a price on. They have an eternal value that can't be measured in dollars and cents. Their true worth will be evident in how much you follow a good and faithful path, living wisely, and doing what's right, just, and fair.

¹ Marc Prensky, "The Goal of Education Is Becoming." Education Week website. May 5, 2014. Accessed August 22, 2018 <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/05/06/30prensky_ep.h33.html>.

² *Yentl* (United Artists and Barwood Films, 1983) directed by Barbara Streisand. Summarized by Jerry De Luca.

³ Oswald Chambers, in *Run Today's Race*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35., No. 11.

⁴ Andrew Murray, in *With Christ in the School of Obedience*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 30, No. 13.