

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
June 6, 2021

## **Growing in Wisdom**

Proverbs 1:1-7

Last Sunday, I launched a series of sermons on Christian maturity. In that message, I spoke broadly about the importance of growing up spiritually. Coming to faith in Jesus Christ is one thing. Making progress in Christ, and being conformed more to the likeness of Christ, is another. God doesn't intend for us to remain spiritual infants. He gives us new birth in Christ to set us on the way of progress into spiritual adulthood. And along with new life in Christ, God gives us the fellowship of Jesus' followers, the church, as a community of learning, a household of faith in which we can be taught and nurtured in the way of the Lord.

In today's sermon, I want to begin exploring some of the marks of Christian maturity more precisely. What are some of the characteristics of a maturing follower of Jesus? What does it look like and feel like to grow up in Christ? Answering these kinds of questions can encompass a lot of spiritual traits. But as we journey through the month of June, we're going to focus on four aspects of Christian maturity. I want to acknowledge up front that in working on this series of messages I've been aided a lot by Gordon T. Smith, who has written a book titled *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity*. Smith is speaking of "saints" in the broad sense of how every Christian is called to a life of holiness, a life cultivated within the holy community of the church. On that basis, Smith lays out four dimensions of Christian maturity.

The first characteristic is wisdom, which takes us to today's text from the book of Proverbs. The book opens with a summary of its purpose. Its aim 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" (vv. 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.

This doesn't mean that holding the right theological convictions isn't important. The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about the nature and purpose of God, and how God relates to human beings and the entire creation. These underlying theological concepts come to expression in the sayings and teachings within the book. One person has compared these concepts to building blocks, "bricks in wisdom's house."<sup>1</sup> The book's goal is to put all these blocks together into a larger worldview, so that we'll know how to live within the world that God has made.

So from a Christian standpoint, spiritual maturity isn't just a matter of getting more and more of the right ideas about God into your head. It's also about how those concepts and convictions about God take shape in the way that you and I, as ordinary people, conduct our ordinary lives, in ordinary circumstances, on ordinary days. The book of Proverbs addresses very practical, down-to-earth matters of human existence, like family, friends, work, sex, money, and politics. It offers insight and instruction on how to plan and how to

parent, how to speak and how to spend, how to argue and how to age. Wisdom isn't a heavenly seminar far removed from where we operate. No, wisdom is acquired by studying the present world and paying attention to human experience.

Most of all, wisdom is grounded in what our text calls "the fear of the Lord." "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (v. 7). This link between wisdom and the fear of the Lord is something that comes up again and again in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. But what exactly does it mean to "fear" the Lord? Different readers have different interpretations.

One commentator has said, "At its most basic level, the fear of the Lord is the knowledge that God is God and we are not."<sup>2</sup> That's a good place to start. God is our Creator and Savior. We're totally dependent on him for life and salvation. We live in a world made by God. He alone holds the world and all its outcomes in his hands. So God has a total claim upon us as humans, and we're responsible for how we make a total life-response to him. A verse in the book of Deuteronomy captures this well: "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?" (10:12-13). To "fear the Lord" means that we're to acknowledge his presence and purposes in the world and in our lives. We're to devote life in its entirety to God's service.

In one scene from C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver are describing Aslan, the lion, who in the story represents Christ. They say to the children: "Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel nervous about meeting a lion." "That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just plain silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."<sup>3</sup>

In view of God's creative power and sovereignty, it's right that we respond with awe, humility, reverence, and to some extent fear. But not the kind of fear that leaves us paralyzed and unable to live in the kind of relationship that God intends for us. Not fear as in constant anxiety and terror. Rather the kind of reverential fear that trusts in God's goodness and love. The kind of fear that helps us remember our place in God's world, and how to live well in it. According to today's text, this "fear of the Lord" is the prerequisite to being a wise person.

Part of what this means is that wisdom isn't the exclusive possession of those who are older and more experienced. A young person can also be wise. By acknowledging the Lord, offering one's life to him in reverential service, and staying attentive to the Lord's instruction, those who are younger among us can exhibit wisdom, and grow in wisdom. As Gordon Smith points out, "There are few things so tragic as an older person who is not wise; to grow older and not wiser is to live poorly, to fail to achieve the purpose for which one lives."<sup>4</sup>

A few years ago, there was a news report about a group of senior citizens in Salt Lake City who discovered that their life experience could be a useful resource to others. For a long time they had gathered at a deli, but had grown tired of the same old conversation each week. Sure, they were sipping coffee and solving the world's problems, but they wanted to share their wisdom beyond just the seven of them. So they set up a table at a nearby farmers market and told people they were dispensing free advice. They even put up a large banner: "Old Coots Giving Advice—It's Probably Bad Advice, But It's Free." To their

surprise, people started showing up and sharing their problems. Where to find someone to love. How to balance work and leisure. How to keep the romance alive. They were especially struck by how many young people came to them with serious questions. One new mom wanted some advice on how to not mess up her kid's life. "You're going to mess him up a little bit and that's how they grow," they said. One member of the group, 69-year-old John Lesnan, said, "To be truthful I'm not sure that any of us can claim to have much wisdom, but it sure has been a lot of fun. Maybe all of us coots really do have more to offer than we thought."<sup>5</sup>

The first verse of today's text is actually the title of the whole book. In this case, it's not a banner stretched across the opening, declaring, "An Old Coot Named Solomon Giving Advice." No, this heading runs much deeper. It's an announcement that all that follows has Solomon, the father of David, as its spiritual fountainhead. And in the opening passage, we're not only told that the book's purpose is to help its readers become wise and godly. We're also told that that people at different levels of wisdom can benefit. The book of Proverbs exists "for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young." But it also points out, "Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance" (vv. 4-5). So though the book's primary audience was young, inexperienced males on the threshold of adult life, the prologue also makes clear that there's room and opportunity for both the young and the old, and all those in between, to be instructed in how to live wisely and well.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, one of their patterns of worship includes a point in the service where the worship leader, before the reading of Scripture, lifts the Bible high and calls out, "Wisdom. Be attentive." In our own understanding of the Christian faith, we do something similar by making the preaching and teaching of God's word so central to our worship, work, and witness. In order to gain wisdom, we not only observe God's world, learn from experience, and follow the example of others. We most of all give our attentiveness to the word of the Lord. His word has come to us supremely in the form of Jesus. For us, wisdom isn't confined to a text, a collection of sayings, or a body of theological knowledge. Wisdom is a person. The wisdom of God is embodied in Jesus Christ. And as your life is joined to Christ by faith, his way and his will take shape in you. God's own devotion to what is right and just and fair gets formed in your daily journey.

That's what wisdom is. It's a journey. "The fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom." Wisdom isn't something you develop on our own. Wisdom a gift of God, a gift that followers of Jesus are called to grow into. "Let the wise listen and add to their learning" (v. 5a). As you grow in wisdom, you develop spiritual maturity. You go deeper into the truth that all reality is God's reality. You grow in your dependence on God. You progress in your capacity for discernment, so that you make choices that are in keeping with God's will and God's ways, "doing what is right and just and fair" (v. 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "The Book of Proverbs." *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 34.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, Commentary on Proverbs 1:1-7; 3:1-8. Working Preacher website. July 12, 2015. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-o-t-wisdom-and-poetry/commentary-on-proverbs-11-7-31-8> (June 3, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Schifferdecker, Commentary on Proverbs 1:1-7; 3:1-8.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon T. Smith. *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Cathy Free, "Self-proclaimed 'Old Coots' offer life advice at farmers market. Their slogan: " It' Probably Bad Advice, But It's Free." *The Washington Post* (September 27, 2018). See also Steve Hartman, "They call themselves Old Coots and they have some advice for you. CBS News website. July 26, 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/old-coots-giving-advice-they-call-themselves-old-coots-and-they-have-some-advice-for-you/> (June 3, 2021).