

SKILLFUL LIVING
PROVERBS 1:1-7

INTRODUCTION

We are a nation that values education. Our state and local and national governments spend billions of dollars on education. Many students go deep into debt to get a college education, and thus student loan forgiveness has been a recent hot topic. People come from all over the world to study in American colleges and universities. Having a college degree is regarded by many as a key to career success.

One of the knocks on our state is that it ranks very low in terms of educational standards. In 2015 the state legislature enacted a \$1.1 billion increase in support for public education. That increase was eclipsed this last year when the legislature increased public school funding by 25%. Yet most evaluations show that student achievements have declined. Some of that is blamed on the pandemic.

We might all agree that education focused on reading and writing and math and science is foundational to a successful society. But beyond that what will young people be taught? The content of that part of education may will determine how a society turns out.

By almost all standards Germany had the best educational achievements in the world in the 1930s. Yet Germany produced one of the most evil societies in world history. A Harvard sociologist found that in the Nazi concentration camps the worst perpetrators of torture were those with the highest education levels. (*World*, 7/17/2010)

Socrates is regarded as one of the best of the classic Greek philosophers. He wrote in his work known as *Apology*, **“You, my friend--- a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens--- are you not ashamed of devoting yourself to acquiring the greatest amount of money and honour and reputation and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all?”** This ancient pagan Greek philosopher recognized the value of wisdom and spirituality.

Carl Henry was regarded by most scholars as the best evangelical theologian in America in the twentieth century. He wrote, **“Despite its pursuit of knowledge, our generation, snared in relativities, is stranger to wisdom. Wisdom... is no longer considered as the mind’s indispensable acquisition, even by most intellectuals.”** Not only is there a lack of wisdom in our world, but intellectuals don’t even care, Carl Henry argues.

Alexander Astin was an education professor at UCLA. He ran a project for many decades known simply as the Freshman Survey. In this annual poll taken of college

freshmen he found that in the early seventies the most cherished value of incoming students was **“developing a philosophy of life.”** By 1989 that value had dropped to ninth place, far behind the first choice, which continues to be the priority for incoming freshman today, **“being well-off financially.”** Commenting on this finding journalist John Johnson says, **“The consequences of such priorities is a society of intellectual giants who are pygmies in the art of living.”**

I spent a big chunk of my life in the educational system. An important priority to me was getting good grades. Academic success was measured in terms of grade point average. The fascinating thing is that when I went out into the world to find a job, no one ever asked me about my grade point average. In seeking employment in a church people were much more interested in character and wise leadership.

For the one who is interested only in knowledge there may be little in the Book of Proverbs that is attractive. But for the one who desires to know how to live wisely, there is a gold mine of endless riches. Having finished our study of the life of Abraham, I thought that it might be worthwhile to do a brief trip through this book before we return to the New Testament. Proverbs is classified as Wisdom Literature. It is typically included in this category with Job and Ecclesiastes. It has been about seventeen years since I have dealt with Wisdom Literature on Sunday morning. So to maintain a fair and balanced study of the Bible we will deal with Proverbs for a couple of months.

The benefit which we derive from this study will depend upon the kind of person that we are and the kind of person that we want to become. The passage that we are going to look at today, which serves as an introduction to the rest of the book, tells us about three kinds of people who exist in the world. We shall consider how these three categorizations might apply to us.

I. A.

(PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE TITLE) So let's look at v. 1 of #1 in the Book of Proverbs: **“The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel...”** This verse serves as THE TITLE for the Book of Proverbs. The first term tells us about THE KIND OF LITERATURE (I. A. THE KIND OF LITERATURE) with which we are dealing. The word for “proverb” in Hebrew originally meant “to be like, to be compared with.” Elsewhere in the Old Testament it is translated as “byword,” “discourse,” “taunt,” and “parable.” But its most common English translation is “proverb.” As such, it refers to a simple illustration that exposes a fundamental reality of life. It involves a universal, time-tested truth expressed in brief fashion.

It is important to realize that proverbs are not absolute promises. They overstate and oversimplify. So there are exceptions and limitations to the truths that they express. For example, one modern day proverb that we often use is: “Haste makes waste.” Most of us recognize that this proverb expresses a certain wisdom. If we hurry too much we are liable to waste time, energy, money, or some other resource. But another proverb that we sometimes quote is “He who hesitates is lost,” meaning that if we don't take advantage of an opportunity soon enough, it will pass us by. That also describes a

certain truth. Wise people will take advantage of opportunities that come along. If we wait too long, the opportunity may be gone.

On the surface these two proverbs may seem contradictory. But they each express a certain truth that is dependent upon their application in the right situation. Since there are so many situations which arise in life, the Book of Proverbs contains a lot of proverbs to address these diverse situations.

This book has a definite structure. Often the book is divided into seven sections. The first one consists of chapters 1-9. As we shall see, this section does not contain proverbs in the classic way that we think of them. Chapters 1-9 contain extended thoughts and more direct teachings. It is only in #10 that the short, concise sayings that we commonly think of as proverbs appear.

B.

Consider then letter B in the outline, THE AUTHOR of the book. (I. A. B. THE AUTHOR) These are the proverbs of Solomon, who was the third king of the nation of Israel and who lived around 1000 BC. First Kings #4 speaks about his great wisdom. In 1 Kings #4 vv. 29-32 (1 KINGS 4:29) we read, **“And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, (1 KINGS 4:30) so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. (1 KINGS 4:31) For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol, and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. (1 KINGS 4:32) He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.”**

As we go through the book, we will see that some sections were clearly authored by other people. It is stated right in the text. But Solomon seems to have been the primary author, and he may well have been the one who set about to collect and edit these proverbs. (PROJECTOR)

Some of these proverbs were probably composed by Solomon. Others may have been around for a long time. We know that there were proverbs in existence in Israel's history long before Solomon. There were collections of proverbial sayings in other countries of the Ancient Near East. Similar wisdom sayings have been discovered in the library of the ancient city of Ebla, which was in existence over 1300 years before the time of Solomon.

The proverbs that we have here bear the stamp of God's inspiration. The collection as we have it was probably not put into its final form until 700 BC, or shortly thereafter. For #25 v 1 speaks of the men of Hezekiah who transcribed the proverbs of Solomon. Hezekiah lived around 700 BC.

C.

Verse 1 further describes Solomon as the **“son of David, king of Israel.”** That description has significance in considering THE SETTING of the proverbs. (I. A. B. C.

THE SETTING) For these proverbs and the other proverbs of the Ancient Near East assume a setting of a royal family. Here in the Book of Proverbs it is a king who is teaching his son about life. The reason that sons are addressed and not daughters is that these proverbs were originally designed to prepare young people for leadership in government, and it was only males who would be allowed to serve as these leaders.

It is important to realize that these proverbs also originally assumed a setting in the home. For we see right here in v. 8 and in other verses later on that mothers are mentioned as having a part in the teaching process.

Later on, and maybe even in Solomon's day, the students were taught in schools. But the significance to us is that the proverbs we shall be studying deal with truths that we ought to be teaching to our children and grandchildren. They are not only truths that our children need to learn, but we need to grasp them as well.

Saul was the first king of Israel. Prior to him there had been no organized central government. By Solomon's time the need had arisen to train people for government service. There was no wiser man than Solomon to come up with a curriculum that would teach future leaders the basic principles about how to live life and rule successfully. So probably he began to compile the proverbs, many of which he had written himself.

II.

(II. THE PURPOSE) In vv. 2-6 we have a description of THE PURPOSE of the book. According to v. 2 this book was put together **"To know wisdom and instruction..."** The original word for "wisdom" here is *hokmah*. (HOKMAH) It is the most common word for "wisdom" in Proverbs. It appears 45 times. It is also the broadest term used to describe what we would call wisdom.

The original meaning of the word had to do with skill. In Exodus #35 Moses is talking about two men whom God has prepared to help build the tabernacle, the worship center which the Hebrews would carry around in the wilderness. In v. 35 (EXODUS 35:35) Moses says, **"He [the Lord] has filled them with skill [*hokmah*] to do every sort of work done by an engraver or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of workman or skilled designer."**

In the same chapter back in v. 26 the text (EXODUS 35:26) says, **"All the women whose hearts stirred them to use their skill [*hokmah*] spun the goats' hair."** Here the author is talking about skill in spinning goats' hair. Elsewhere in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, *hokmah* is used of the skill of sailors, singers, mourners, and other craftsmen. But when we get to the Book of Proverbs it is talking about skill in daily, godly living. Knowing this background of the word helps us to get a more definite picture of what Biblical wisdom is about. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Because *hokmah* is the broadest and most inclusive term for wisdom, the text goes on in the next few verses to elaborate and expand upon the meaning of wisdom by using other words that have narrower fields of meaning.

The next term in v. 2, translated as “instruction,” has to do with discipline and correction, especially verbal correction. It tells us that self-discipline is essential to acquiring wisdom.

The second line of v. 2 literally says, “**to discern the sayings of discernment.**” Wisdom involves the ability to look at the heart of an issue and differences at stake in choosing different options.

In v. 3 the word “instruction” appears again. It says that this instruction, or disciplined correction and training will deal with the fields of “**wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity.**”

Verse 4 continues to describe the purpose of the book by saying that it is to give prudence to the naive, and knowledge and discretion to the youth. This verse is an example of a common literary feature that we find used in the Book of Proverbs. You will notice that the majority of verses consist of two lines. Most of the time the two lines have some relationship with each other. This is called parallelism. In v. 4 the two lines seem to say very similar things. So this is considered an example of synonymous parallelism. The two lines are synonyms. We will see other kinds of parallelism as we go along.

One of the terms which v. 4 uses to give a further description of wisdom is “prudence.” This word has about it the idea of shrewdness and cleverness. It is success in knowing how to reach a goal. “Knowledge” is a fairly broad word. The term “discretion” has to do with prudent planning.

Verse 4 also introduces us to one of three kinds of people who are frequently described in this book. This is the naive individual. The ESV translation uses the word “simple.” The Hebrew word behind it originally meant “to be wide, open, spacious.” The idea is that the naive are open to all kinds of ideas. Chapter 14 v. 15 says, “**The naive believes everything.**” This person is not necessarily bad. He or she is just immature. If he, or she, does not learn wisdom though, Proverbs #14 v. 18 says that he will inherit folly.

As the second line of v. 4 indicates, the naive are often youth. Our younger children are naive. They are generally open to all kinds of influence. That is why it is so important that we instruct them when they are young and that we limit the negative influences in their lives.

But older people can be naive, too. New Christians are often naive. They are vulnerable to all kinds of influences. That is why too often new Christians get sucked up by cults. They are naive.

Even very educated people can be naive, because a formal education does not necessarily produce wisdom. Joe had PhD in psychology. He was head of the counseling department at a Boston-area college. When Joe's marriage broke up, his world came crashing down around him. Fortunately he lived next door to a Christian guy who cared about him. This Christian guy showed Joe how to have a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus. Joe invited Jesus into his life. But Joe was naive. For the next few years the Christian neighbor spent a lot of time with Joe, giving advice about how to make sometimes even simple decisions. But Joe grew in wisdom and at last report he had his own Christian counseling practice.

Perhaps there are a few of you here who, if you were honest, would recognize that you are naive. That's OK. Just pay attention to this book, because there are many goodies here that will help you to become wise. Many of us have children and grandchildren who are naive. This book can help us to know what we need to be teaching them.

Verse 5 introduces us to the wise man. This term is a noun form of the word *hokmah*. This is a second kind of person whom we will encounter in the world. To reinforce the idea that formal education does not guarantee wisdom and that wisdom does not require an extensive formal education, let me tell you about Joe's Christian neighbor. He was Don Moberger who has been one of our elders and heads up our prison ministry. He doesn't have a college education, but he is a wise man. He spent hours with Joe, the PhD guy, helping him to learn wisdom. It was Don that Joe was calling at all hours of the day and night, sometimes driving him crazy, for advice. Don was wise because he studied the Bible. The point is that we don't need all kinds of college degrees to be skilled in the art of godly, daily living. We do better to be students of this book.

What v. 6 says will characterize the wise man is that he is always learning. He is always on the lookout for good advice. He knows that he has never arrived, but that there is always more wisdom to be acquired. Hopefully we have a significant number of wise men and women among us.

Verse 6 concludes the purpose section with a statement about sayings and riddles. These appear to be terms intended to be synonyms for proverbs.

III.

In v. 7 we come to THE THEME of the book. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE THEME) This is the underlying lesson for all of Old Testament wisdom literature. For both in Job and Ecclesiastes we find exhortations to fear God. Here it says, "**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.**"

Fear refers not to abject terror or dread but rather to reverential awe. The object of that awe is the Lord. Here the personal name YHWH is used for God. It is the name used for God who established His covenant with Abraham.

It is the fear of YHWH which is the beginning of knowledge. The Hebrew word for “beginning” means not only “beginning” but also “chief part.” Both ideas may well be involved. The fear of the Lord is not only the starting point for true knowledge and wisdom, but it is also the ongoing necessary ingredient. One commentator expresses it this way, **“The fear of God is the soul of godliness.”** (Murray)

The Bible is telling us that true wisdom is impossible apart from morality, apart from the fear of God. That is what the problem is with modern, secular education. Morality is divorced, too often, from education. For the most part there is no religion in the public classroom. But apart from a personal God and moral absolutes there can be no real wisdom--- there can be no skill in godly, daily living. So it is that too often we hear stories today where teachers are telling their students that they can pick their gender.

The first line in v.7 is talking about the attitude of the wise. The second line is talking about the attitude of the fool. So we have here a second kind of parallelism common in the Book of Proverbs, called antithetical parallelism. The second line is the antithesis, or opposite, of the first line. The wise man fears God, but the foolish man despises wisdom.

The fool is the third kind of person whom we encounter in the world. There are three words for “fool” in Proverbs. This one is the most common. It means arrogant and flippant and mentally dull. The fool in this book is characterized as morally deficient, lacking in sense, generally corrupt, quarrelsome, undisciplined, overbearing, and lacking in the fear of God. Above all else he does not fear the Lord. Instead he despises true wisdom--- *hokmah*--- and instruction.

I spoke two weeks ago about Malcolm Forbes (MALCOLM FORBES). I pointed out that he was a very wealthy businessman and a smart guy. He died suddenly, and his son said that they never really imagined that his father would ever die. To refuse to make preparation for death, to refuse to fear the Lord, to despise true wisdom and instruction, is the mark of the fool.

The epitaph placed upon Malcolm Forbes’ tomb was this: **“While living he lived.”** While living he lived. What kind of significance does that message have? I suspect that heaven’s completion of that epitaph is **“While dying, he went to hell.”**

When I lived in Connecticut, I had a neighbor of sorts who had an office a mile up the street from where I lived and had my office. The guy’s name was Jack Welch. (JACK WELCH) He headed up this little business some of you may have heard of. It was General Electric. GE’s world headquarters are in Fairfield, Connecticut. Jack Welch was a very smart man. He had a PhD in chemical engineering. He also had a lot of business smarts. In 1981 he became the company’s youngest chairman and CEO. During his tenure GE stock rose 4,000%. That would have been a good investment if you could have seen it coming.

Early on he acquired the nickname “Neutron Jack” for some of the tough business decisions he made. But by 1999 *Fortune* magazine called him “the manager of the century.” In 2005 he wrote a book with his wife entitled *Winning*. In it he responded to a question about the afterlife. He wrote, **“So as far as heaven, who knows? I’m sure not perfect, but if there are any points given out for caring for people with every fiber of your being and giving life all you’ve got every day, then I suppose I have a shot.”**

That response reminds me of Malcolm Forbes’ epitaph: While living he lived. Jack Welch says that he gave life his all. King Herod could have said that. Adolf Hitler could have said that. If this comment from Jack Welch was all that we had to go on, we might suspect that he had the same fate and might fit into the same category of “fool.” For we who are Biblically literate know that entrance into heaven has nothing to do with caring for people and giving life all we’ve got. It comes from accepting the gift of eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ who died in our place on the cross.

But this may not be the end of the story for Jack Welch, who died three years ago. There is hope for fools. It turns out that toward the end of his life Jack, who was raised Catholic, began attending an evangelical church. His wife led a Bible study. In 2014 he told a Christian journalist that when he was in Florida he was in regular attendance at a Southern Baptist Church. He raved about the sermons of this pastor. **“I didn’t really understand the Bible before,” Jack said, explaining his upbringing was Christian in tradition and that he felt he understood the Bible now as something more applicable to his life.** (*Newsweek* online, 3/8/2020) His funeral was at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Manhattan, but one of the pallbearers was his Baptist pastor from Florida. So perhaps Jack Welch had a better outcome than did Malcolm Forbes. It is possible for fools to change. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The antithetical parallelism of v. 7 is a feature common to the Book of Proverbs. Mankind in the Proverbs is always being divided into two camps: People are wise, or they are fools. People are wise, or they are naive. People fear God, or they despise wisdom and instruction.

In a relativistic culture absolute alternatives are not well received. But God is absolute, and God is holy. Either people are followers of the true God, or they are not. Either they are doing God’s will, or they are not doing God’s will.

What kind of person are you? A fool? There is not much hope for you--- not unless you do an about face and decide to fear God--- not unless you are willing to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior.

A naive person? That’s OK--- as long as you are willing and ready to receive instruction from God’s Word.

A wise man or woman? That's great. If you are, keep hearing and increasing in learning. Keep acquiring wise counsel. And above all, fear God, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.