

## Common sense from Proverbs: The ladder of learning

### A Scripture study from *Caring*, part one of four.

“There is only one thing we cannot teach you,” I would often say to those in training to become Salvation Army officers. And it was a glaring one: common sense.

Will Rogers once said, “Common sense ain’t common.” That’s how elusive it is.

You either have good sense and sound judgment in practical matters—common sense—or not.

It’s the kind of thing that dictates you best stay on the curb until you see the walk sign. Or if you touch the hot stove, you will get burned. Or if you overconsume food, you will face health problems. Or if you travel a long distance across a hot dry land without any water, you will perish. It’s an endless list.

Someone once said, “In life, few men will align themselves with you. Even fewer will go to battle *with* you. Only a handful will ever fight for you when you cannot help them. Choose your friends wisely.” That is common sense in action.

Right smack dab in the middle of your Bible is a book filled with common sense—31 chapters of it to be precise. Covering every topic known to humankind, this collection of thought-provoking sayings has helped countless people through the ages. This book isn’t about arguing theory, theology, doctrine or other essential elements of the life of faith. The book of Proverbs’ sole purpose is to zero in on how we ought to be living in the time that has been allotted to us.

When God appeared to King Solomon in a dream, he asked Solomon: “*What do you want? Ask, and I will give it to you!*” (1 Kings 3:5 NLT).

His response was not for more riches and “stuff.” Solomon simply responded: “*Give me an understanding heart so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong. For who by himself is able to govern this great people of yours?*” (1 Kings 3:9 NLT).

We read later that God was delighted with what Solomon asked for. Thus, God gave Solomon great wisdom and discernment (see 1 Kings 4:29-32).



What follows in the book of Proverbs is a myriad of maxims, or short sayings, that give us insight into the human condition. In essence, they help us navigate our day-to-day and remind us how to live. Many were penned by Solomon with other authors also contributing.

These proverbs shouldn't be viewed as prophecies or end all dogmatic doctrines. Often, they are viewed as similes and metaphor rich in figurative speech. They shouldn't be read in a rushed pace but with space for reflection. Sip the words slowly and allow them to percolate and settle deep in your soul.

It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who once said, "Common sense is as rare as genius." May you then become brilliant in taking time to dwell on the rare, buried gems revealed in the book of Proverbs.

My hope is that these writings—a selection here and in the parts of this study to come from my forthcoming book, "Wisdom Revealed"—will bring you joy and inspiration on your life's journey.

### **The ladder of learning**

*"Once you stop learning, you start dying."—Albert Einstein*

"I think you need to talk to your lawn guy," so says a former neighbor of mine as he moseyed his way across the street to talk to me. "You got weeds growing there that shouldn't be growing this time of year," he points to something that looks like grass to me. "Yeah, you probably should get a new lawn guy why you're at it," he goes on with his unsolicited rail against my yard. Hands on his hips he looks at me and completes his lecture, "Yeah, I see them standing there smoking a cigarette a lot and not really taking care of your lawn."

In the last place I lived, I was fortunate to have a local reputable lawn care company that dutifully did their due diligence on my lawn every week in the spring and summer. There was usually a crew of three guys who pull up, unload their gear and get right to work. I never saw anyone smoking or standing still when I was around observing their work. They are always in constant motion, friendly, hardworking and usually on their way after 20 minutes. I'm a former yard guy, myself—my first job was mowing the neighbor's lawn for \$5 every Saturday. Back in the day, I pulled weeds for \$1.25 an hour, 40 hours a week for an entire year! So, I am sympathetic to their hard work and grateful I didn't have to break a sweat mowing in the hot Virginia summers.

Though I enjoyed talking to my neighbor on occasion and tried my best to love him, I did see in him that he was a walking definition of a know-it-all—a person who behaves like they know everything. No one likes a know it all. Especially if the so-called know it all doesn't know what they are talking about. Unfortunately, my neighbor was "that guy" at times, full of knowledge about every subject known to humankind and ready to let you know so, whether you liked it or not.

Sometimes the actual facts get mixed up with the myths. Like the part about the work crew, standing still and smoking. That comment had little credence with me. I don't know much about the wide variety of weeds, so you get no debate from me. I am still in the process of learning how nature works. I am

still open to learning. A high value of mine is to have a teachable spirit. But I do have little tolerance for over-exaggeration.

Much has been written and spoken in the past several years about finding one's purpose in life. Without having a sense of what one is living for, it's like being at sea in a boat without a rudder. We need direction. Goals. Something to aim for. To take target at. A reason to rise and shine each day with the sun and rest our weary bodies at nightfall. A foundational principle to living a life of meaning and purpose is the ability to discern and acquire knowledge about a wide range of topics. Maintaining a posture of lifelong learning sets an individual up for personal success and fulfillment.

The book of Proverbs starts clearly with its purpose in mind. Read Proverbs 1:1-7 and you'll find living a life on a godly path takes wisdom—the application of knowledge. “The book of Proverbs is a marvelous collection of wise sayings and instruction for living a useful and effective life. The collection forms part of the larger group of biblical writings known as ‘wisdom literature’—literature that gives instructions for living while pondering the difficulties of life,” according to the Expositors Bible Commentary.

What I like about Proverbs is its approach to the “so what” moments in life. And the writers are not afraid to pull any punches or hold back any refrains. They call it as they see it, and I am OK with that.

To the one who pays attention, Proverbs offers five steps, a natural ladder of progression on the pathway of learning.

## **1. A life of wisdom**

*The purpose of the book is quite clear: ...to teach people wisdom and discipline, to help them understand the insights of the wise (Proverbs 1:2 NLT).*

Wisdom doesn't come by swallowing a pill, attending a conference, listening to a podcast or rapidly reading a book on leadership. The acquisition of wisdom requires effort, to be sure, but the broader implications come to us when we place ourselves in the seat of readiness to receive such knowledge. The pragmatic collection of the wisdom we digest in our lives can lead to a life of discipline. Discipline leads to quality of our character, integrity in our daily dealings and a clear focus on our own life's purpose.

## **2. A life of doing the right thing**

*Their purpose is to teach people to live disciplined and successful lives, to help them do what is right, just and fair (Proverbs 1:3 NLT).*

Living a life of discipline takes intentional focus and effort. There is no quick and easy path to success. Discipline involves trial and error, which often means learning to cope with loss and pain. As Henri Nouwen wrote, “Discipline means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up. Discipline means that somewhere you're not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied. In the spiritual life, discipline means to create that space in which something can happen that you hadn't planned or

counted on.”

A disciplined life gives attention to doing the right thing. It certainly doesn't mean any of us are free of error or mistakes. That comes along with simply being human.

I served for many years in various appointments in the local Rotary Club. My proud association with this organization is deep. I was honored to be made a “Paul Harris Fellow,” which is a milestone in the life of a Rotarian. But one of the key guiding principles I enjoy most from Rotary International is its four-way test:

According to the organization's guiding principles, “The Four-Way Test is a nonpartisan and nonsectarian ethical guide for Rotarians to use for their personal and professional relationships. The test has been translated into more than 100 languages, and Rotarians recite it at club meetings: “Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? Will it be beneficial to all concerned?”

This is the result of living a disciplined life, keeping the welfare and wellbeing of others always in the forefront of our thinking.

### **3. A life of insight**

*These proverbs will give insight to the simple, knowledge and discernment to the young (Proverbs 1:4 NLT).*

Insight conveys this idea of being able to discern the true nature of a situation. Insight can run deep in our life journey. The Apostle Paul reminded the believers at Corinth and us that we will go through difficult times with hope that our experience will benefit others. *He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us (2 Corinthians 1:4 NLT).*

That is why it's so important to honor and value those who have gone before us. We all want to be known in this present life. Some people will do anything to get their “15 minutes of fame” to add to their legion and gain notoriety. When we pass from this world to the next, we want to be remembered. But what is it people will remember us for? How we pushed and pulled our way to known at the top? Or a legacy of authenticity, caring for others and seeking good in the world?

We must never forget previous generations. We certainly can learn from the mistakes of the misdeeds of others. But we must not stay there. We must take that insight and apply it to our current situations for the better.

### **4. A life of listening**

*Let the wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser. Let those with understanding receive guidance by exploring the meaning in these proverbs and parables, the words of the wise and their riddles (Proverbs 1:5-6 NLT).*

In Hebrew, the word used here is a verb that stresses the idea that the reader needs to pay attention. To attend to the words written. To monitor one's soul, lean in and truly hear what is being said.

We have a listening problem in our world. Often, we are so anxious to give an answer to an incoming question we fail to fully listen to what is being asked before we feel the need to blurt out a response. The old saying goes, "Talk and you say what you already know but listen and you learn something new."

A story is told of Calvin Coolidge attending church one day by himself as his wife was unable to go with him. When he returned home, he went up to where his wife was resting to see how she was doing. She assured him she was fine and asked him if he enjoyed the sermon. He weakly replied, "Yes." To which she followed up with a question, "What was it about?" "Sin." She further inquired, "What did the minister say." "He was against it."

This verse is an encouragement to explore and seek understanding from the wisdom of those who have much to teach, and to learn how to think clearly and critically. It's important to find mentors and guides along our path.

My wife and I are enjoying exploring the world around us, which involves being intentional with our time and making sure we get to see various sights. Sometimes when we visit a National Park, we seek out the experience of a park ranger to give us insight into our location and more importantly, ask for directions to see even greater things before us.

The more we are open to listening, the more we learn and the better the person we can become. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Every man is superior to me in some way and from him I can learn." Listening gives us humility, which only expands our understanding.

## **5. A life with fear of the Lord at its foundation**

*Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline* (Proverbs 1:7 NLT).

When the term "fear of the Lord" is used here, it does not mean we should be afraid or shy away from God. The opposite needs to occur. We are to draw near with a sense of reverence and an overwhelming spirit of gratitude in the presence of our sovereign God. His mercy, goodness and love flow within the sphere of his care and grace. He longs to embrace us, chase away our fears and set our feet upon the solid foundation of his character. This fear leads us to be firmly established in the truth of God's love and reality.

This verse provides us with the opposite perspective as well. There exists those who will not embrace the truth of God. They will proclaim his nonexistence and would rather rely upon human nature and understanding as the sole scepter of truth. The word "fool" appears throughout the book of Proverbs more than anywhere else in Scripture. A fool is easily discovered. His main ingredient is being deficient in sound judgment or good sense.

We want to be people known for good character, making the right decisions, caring for others and living a life of integrity. We can easily slip into the life of being a fool if we have no sense of direction or markers to guide us. These verses act as a guide to help us chart the course in life and offer us the know-how to stay on that course to live a life full of truth and grace.

### **A time to reflect**

- Read Proverbs 1:1-7.
- What comes to mind when you think about these verses in the context of a ladder of learning?
- What do you value the most and why?
- How do you maintain a teachable spirit?
- What is the “so what” of this section of Proverbs to you?

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