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Back to School: Class Syllabus

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TEXT: Proverbs 1:1-7 (ESV)

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth—Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Let's see if you can figure out from these clues what I'm going to be speaking about today. First, it's something that the alcoholic asked for in the Serenity Prayer. Also, it's something that we hope our children will exercise as they go off into the world on their own. It's something that kings and leaders have prayed for in the past and even now in the present time. It's something all of us wish we had more of. So what am I describing here? If you thought or said wisdom, you're right. What a valuable thing it is to have wisdom working in one's life. I have, on more than one occasion, personally prayed for it, as James tells us to do in his New Testament letter. And God wants us to have wisdom. In fact, we can find instruction on wisdom in our Bibles in the Book of Proverbs, for instance, in Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon, in Proverbs, the Book of Proverbs. These were compiled long ago by the spirits leading to offer God's people observations and insights for living wisely. When we talk about wisdom, it's having practical skills for living life. Well, that's wisdom. Choosing the right course of action

for the desired result in everyday living. You could say that in the Book of Proverbs, God is offering his people a class for gaining wisdom. So I thought it'd be valuable to sit in on this class and pick up a few bits of valuable wisdom from God during the next few Sundays.

Today's passage that was read earlier serves as the syllabus on this first day of class. There are three parts to this introduction. First, we meet the teacher who put the class curriculum together. His name is Solomon. He was the son of King David, Israel's greatest king. Perhaps you remember the story of Solomon's Great Prayer for Wisdom as he stepped into his role as the King of Israel. And God was pleased by his prayer. Solomon soon had an international reputation for his wisdom as well as his wealth. We are also given the subject matter in this opening verse: Proverbs. The subject matter is proverbs, short, pithy sayings that give truths. Next, the purpose and goals of the class are laid out for us in verses two through six. In studying these Proverbs, one will first come to know wisdom, which I described as practical skills for godly living as well as. They'll come to know instruction, which means discipline and teaching, and they'll gain an understanding of the upcoming words of insight in the rest of Proverbs about living out one's life. Next, he or she will receive instruction in wise dealing in righteousness, justice, and equity. In other words, the student in this class will learn ethical training for living in the community, in doing the right things, in a relationship with other people. This class is also intended to teach prudent behavior, knowledge, and discretion in order to develop good common sense and sound judgment.

Students will also increase in learning and obtain guidance in studying the words of the wise and their riddles. In this book, they will become more learned and enlightened in knowing which way to go as they face the various decisions and choices one must make in life. And by the way, notice the audience. This class is for the immature and the mature, the simple, the youth, and seniors because we're never too old to grow in godly wisdom. And now we get to the class's foundation. Its starting point. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Knowledge and wisdom are used interchangeably in the Book of Proverbs, so we'll just use it as the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This statement is the key to all that follows in this book. It's what sets this wisdom apart from any other ancient wisdom. And we learn that it's based primarily upon a relationship with God. I mean, the big idea here is that wise living starts. With a relationship with God. This course in wisdom is not simply a self-help thing, but it's God-based. It's based on the fear of the Lord. The Lord

is the covenant name of the God of Israel. Remember, it's the name He told Moses when Moses asked about God's name during the burning bush encounter. Its intention is to teach us how to live wisely as God's people at work and home and in all our other various life settings.

And its goal then is to make us more set apart for the Lord. As wise representatives before all the other peoples of the world. So we will do life his way, believing his wisdom is above all. And the only way that's going to happen is, first, having a personal relationship with God. And that relationship is described here as one that contains an element of fear. Talks about the fear of the Lord. It's an often-used phrase in the Bible. The fear of the Lord is talked about as reverence and awe and humility, such as Isaiah had in his vision of the Lord in the Jerusalem Temple, which you can read in Isaiah six. Or it's described as dread and terror before the Lord, like the sailors had in Jonah's story during the storm at Sea. When Jonah explained that the storm had come from God. Or there's concern and anxiety of Moses at the burning bush, getting his call to set God's people free from Egyptian slavery. In the New Testament, there is a man named Cornelius, a non-Jewish man, an Italian who chose to fear the Lord of Israel, and he worshiped the Lord and gave alms obediently to the poor. And he prayed a lot. He had the fear of the Lord, according to Acts. We see that there is then in this phrase both a rational and an emotional aspect to this relationship with the Lord God of the Bible.

What comes to mind, by the way, when you think about the fear of the Lord? It's not something we talk about much. Certain snapshots come to mind as I think about the fear of something. My father, for instance. I loved him, trusted him, felt safe with him, and yet I also feared him. I knew not to push him too far or cross the boundaries he set for me. Another snapshot is a police officer. I feel safe in his or her presence, for instance, when I'm at a big gathering with police around. But because of his or her uniform, given authority, and the gun hanging on the hip, there's a bit of fear that strikes within me. And I strive to be polite, cooperative, and behave myself. Or the highway patrolman, say you're driving down the highway, maybe a little bit over the speed limit or even under it. And you see this patrol car sitting on the side of the road or in the center between the lanes as you're coming from the opposite direction, and fear sets in. That causes me to automatically touch my brakes, whether I'm going the speed limit or not. Of course, my last snapshot is confirmation class, my small catechism written by Martin Luther, in which I'm told that we are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.

So, putting Scripture in my snapshots together, we can see that to fear God is to stand in a subservient position before Him, to surrender, to humbly acknowledge your sinfulness and weakness, and dependence upon Him. It's recognizing that He is God, and you're not, and submitting to His authority over you. It's believing that He holds the key to real living, and there's no true knowledge, truth, and wisdom to be found without first bowing the knee to Him alone. It's a willingness to humbly trust and obey Him because you know that He is the source of real wisdom to make one's life work as it was intended to work. The fear of the Lord is to love what the Lord loves and to hate what the Lord hates. And that's the beginning of real wisdom for living, Solomon says.

Now, Solomon often uses what's called an antithesis statement to follow up the first statement of the Proverbs, something that is opposite of the first. He does so here. Notice after this foundational proverb, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," Solomon then writes, "Fools despise wisdom and instruction." In other words, Solomon is saying there's another way to go, but it's a foolish way to go. Go with God. There are some who don't care about wisdom and discipline or God for that matter. They actually scoff at God, saying, "I don't need God. I can get by fine without Him." And our proverb calls them fools. In another proverb, Solomon says, "The fool says in his heart there is no God." And the apostle Paul talks about these kinds of people in Romans chapter one, claiming to be wise, they became fools, exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images and other gods, giving in to their lusts and desires. And that's a destructive and deadly thing to do, Paul points out.

So there you have it. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Which one are you? Are you on the wisdom path with God or on the pathway of the fool? Jesus once told a story about a guy who was so full of himself. He was a successful farmer who was blessed with a major bumper crop, and he began to talk to himself a lot. Probably he was his favorite company after the great harvest. He started congratulating himself about his great crop, talked about his barn, his grain, and goods, which he could store away safely in his new barns for the future. And he said to himself, "Self, now relax, eat, drink, and be merry." God was totally off the radar screen of this man's life. Well, that very night, death came knocking on this man's door. And after he was laid in the ground, God made a pronouncement upon him and his life, calling him a fool. "For who gets all this now?" He asks. And Jesus said

to those listening to his story, "So is the one who is so busy laying up treasure for himself and being godless."

The fear of the Lord is the beginning, the prerequisite for real wisdom. So if you're wondering how does one enter into that relationship with God, the answer is simply this: Jesus. God has made his wisdom known to us in the person of His son, Jesus Christ. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, we're told. And the word in the Greek is logos, which is a wisdom term for that day when John was written, and God's wisdom was shown ultimately at the cross, though it looked like foolishness to the world. It was there that the penalty for our sin was paid, and the way back to a relationship with God was established once and for all through Christ's atoning death. And so the apostle Paul could write to the Colossians that in Christ lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. So if you're looking for some real wisdom in your life that can help it work better than it has, know that God is the one who holds the key. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and that relationship comes through trusting and following His incarnate son, Jesus Christ, the savior of the world.

It happens for us when we lay aside the wisdom and pursuits of this world and turn to the risen Savior who says, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' And He promises then to welcome you with open arms. And that, my friend, is the beginning of practical living of wisdom. Godly living. And ask Him in. Then go to Jesus.

But perhaps you are a believer already, and you are simply wanting to grow in wisdom as a God believer. Well then, welcome to class. Proverbs has wonderful and wise words to enrich your life. Your assignment for next week is to read through Chapter 13 of Proverbs. Read it slowly. Pause and chew on the message of each proverb. Roll it around in your head a bit. Don't be in a hurry and see what you find. What will be revealed. And next week we'll be taking an in-depth look at one of those proverbs from Chapter 13. I hope you'll come back and worship with us next week. Let's pray.

We thank you, Lord, for your words of wisdom and insight that you offer us in your Word. By the power of your Spirit, help us to trust in you with all our heart, for you, with reverence, awe, and humility, and walk in your ways to the glory of your holy name. Amen.