

Preaching: Rhys Lamont
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The Fear of the LORD

Well, we turn this Lord's Day again to the Proverbs, as last week and this week we go to Proverbs 1, verse 7. These first seven verses in the Proverbs are Solomon's gateway for the reader into the wisdom of the book of Proverbs. If you're just casting your eye over these first seven verses, and we'll read through them in a moment, three points here are noticeable.

Firstly, in verses two to three, we are given the purpose statement through the book of Proverbs. We read there: "To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding, to receive instruction in wise behaviour, righteousness, justice, and equity."

As I said in a brief introduction to the Proverbs last week, Proverbs is a collection of often short, pithy sayings which teach principles, truisms, or wisdom sayings all about the way that God's world works. So the question this morning is: Do you wish to be a man or woman of wisdom? It needn't matter how far along in life you are. Do you wish to grow into this person? Do you wish to be able to discern well and with justice? Do you wish to be able to give instruction to others in the way of truth? Do you wish to know right from wrong, to be equipped with the tools to function in the world as God would have you walk? Then the Proverbs are given to us for this purpose.

Secondly, we notice in this prologue, these first seven verses, we are told for whom especially the book of Proverbs is given. There are three categories of people here who are addressed. You'll notice first that the naive, or we might say the simple-minded, is addressed—those lacking sense and wisdom. Second, there is the youth, or we might say the inexperienced. Third, there is the wise seeking to increase in their wisdom.

So we read from verse four: "To give prudence to the naive, to the youth knowledge and discretion. A wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire counsel to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles."

The third point noticeable in this prologue is its conclusion, which is really a glorious entrance point into the book as a whole. This verse is like a gateway, a rite of initiation, that you may read the rest of the book of Proverbs. Until we

have first passed through it and accepted its teaching, we can profit nothing. That is verse seven, which is of interest to us this morning.

So we read again: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."

If you're familiar with your Bibles, you'll immediately recognize that this theme of fearing the Lord is one that we find repeated elsewhere. Job, writing well before Solomon's time, wrote: "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; to depart from evil is understanding." The psalmist wrote in Psalm 111:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do his commandments; his praise endures forever." And again, the psalmist writes in Psalm 112:1: "Praise the Lord! How blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments."

So the fear of the Lord is our theme of consideration this morning.

In our modernized world, we are critically reliant on electricity. Should, for example, our national grid fail at any point and not be recovered, it's hard to imagine many people would survive at all, given humanity in the developed world anyway has all but forgotten how to live without electricity.

For us, the ladies, how long do you think you'd last without your blow dryer? For you hair, it might not be too long; you may not want to be seen in public ever again! We have all but forgotten how to live without electricity.

Now, one critical function to all electrical systems—and you can talk to Adriaan about this afterwards for more—is what we call an earth. An earth is a means of rechannelling any overload of excess power into the ground itself; it's like a safety mechanism. Without an earth, many of our household electrical items would be unsafe to use. Proverbs 1:7 is a little like the earth of Proverbs, the scripture, even, it is the believer's earth themselves. This is the earth of all true Christian religion.

Why? Because when we are first reminded that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the first thing it is telling us is that the Proverbs, and by extension the Bible, is not a book of moral-isms or to-do isms. There is no ladder of wisdom sayings which, if you do, will take you to the pearly gates. That's a ladder that doesn't exist; only Jesus can take you to heaven.

This is not a book of trinkets and nice ideas to improve your life, and Solomon reminds us at the outset that until one has the fear of God, in other words, the true knowledge of God, the salvation of God, to have reverence for God, relationship with God, man cannot and may not truly profit from the knowledge, the wisdom contained in this book.

I might explain it this way: Your neighbour, your family member who doesn't yet know the gospel of Jesus Christ, while there might be great temporal profit for them to receive a book like Proverbs and to read it and try to apply it, there might be temporal profit in that, putting the things they find into practice to become better parents, better workers, better citizens, or whatever. Solomon's first reminding us that it is only once they have the fear of God that there is any true profit in knowledge and wisdom.

For only in the fear of God does wisdom have its start, its beginning. In Proverbs 9, it says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." You see, knowledge of God, who He is, His works, His glory, His power, His love, His wrath, His grace, that only is true understanding. All else is false knowledge, leading only to pride, arrogance, man-centeredness, and idolatry.

So let's continue by first asking: What is this proverb saying exactly before I draw one key application from it? What is this proverb saying?

First of all, then, what's the plain nature of this passage? Well, you'll notice it has a very natural form to it. First, there is a positive affirmation: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Positive affirmation. And then there is a negative contrast: "Fools despise wisdom and instruction."

So we can start by considering these two facets. First, the positive affirmation. When we read this first half of the verse, there are two questions which naturally come to mind. First, what exactly does it mean to fear the Lord? And secondly, in what way is the fear of the Lord the beginning of knowledge? Those are two questions we must answer.

So first, what does the Bible mean by the fear of the Lord? Perhaps some of you will remember the 1995 Rugby World Cup. I was only one, so I don't remember it. Jonah Lomu and the All Blacks were playing the English in one particular game. Jonah Lomu steamrolled the English defense, and in that immortalized iconic footage, I want you to recall as Lomu half-stumbled defender Mike Catt head over heels as Lomu headed towards the try line.

Now, we could forgive Mike Catt for a moment having this sheer moment of terror as all 120 kilograms of Jonah Lomu hurtled towards him and crashed into him. He never stood a chance, really—a moment of terror, surely. Now, I ask you this: When the Bible speaks of the fear of God, does it mean a little bit like the prospect of getting steamrolled by someone twice your size? Is that what this fear is referring to? Or is it perhaps like a son hearing his father coming up the stairs to punish him for his disobedience? Is it that kind of fear? Is it fear when a soldier runs out of ammunition in a close-quarters battle? Is it the fear that many women feel as they walk alone in unsafe cities? Is it fear like that which Adam and Eve felt as they hid from the Lord in the garden after their disobedience? What is the fear of God?

Well, when the scriptures speak in this way of possessing the fear of God, it is a way of describing true religion, of possessing true faith, of having a relationship with God. To have the fear of God is to know God—not just any God, but here identified in the Hebrew text by His covenantal name, Yahweh. In our present time, to fear God means to know Christ.

To have the fear of God is, as another has said, affectionate reverence for God. It is to joyfully bend the knee to God, to submit to the will of God. It is to celebrate His decrees and His laws and not trash them. It is to be concerned about those things of which God approves and those things that He hates. To fear God is to fear His frowning and delight in His constant smile towards us. It is to know, as another has said, that God's blessing is for us the greatest good, and His cursing would be our greatest peril.

To have the fear of the Lord is to know your place in view of the eternal, all-knowing Creator—to have a proper disposition of that which is true of God and that which is true of man. It is to know that we are accountable to God, who made us for Himself, and only the believer by faith has this fear of the Lord.

But then the second question is: In what way is the fear of God the beginning of knowledge? As in our passage, does this mean it is impossible to know things until you have the fear of God? Well, not at all. Not at all. But let's first make an observation. This word translated "beginning" here, while it is a perfectly adequate translation for readability, we must understand the underlying Hebrew word. I was fascinated when I looked at it. The root word here is a form of one of the first Hebrew words I remember learning at university, which is "rosh," meaning head or chief.

So the idea here is of the chief part, or the highest end, or the starting point. Another has put it this way: The fear of God is to the beginning of knowledge like the alphabet is to writing itself. The moment they stop using the alphabet is the moment that you cease writing. Without the alphabet, you have no writing. It's a little bit like that in relation to the fear of God and to knowledge.

In the same way, to not know God, to not have the fear of God, is to be left only with empty knowledge—empty knowledge for it does not serve its intended end of glorifying God.

So there is the positive affirmation. Let's consider now the negative contrast. The negative contrast says: "Fools despise wisdom and instruction."

So this further question arises here: Who is the fool who will despise wisdom and instruction? Is the fool in view here a simpleton who's not particularly bright? Is the fool a way of describing the village idiot who, no matter how many times he gets caught out, simply won't learn? Is that who this fool is? Not at all. You see, this has nothing to do with intellect but everything to do with the condition of the heart.

The fool is one without the fear of God. The fool is a man who might have a top 1% IQ, but he will not yield to Christ. Not only do they lack the fear of God, but for many, as the Psalmist says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1). You see, it's the sinner in his sin and his ignorance and arrogance in which the wisdom of God, especially in the preaching of the cross, appears to him as foolishness.

So the scripture calls such a one the fool, and they don't think it to themselves, of course, yet they reject God's wisdom and instruction. The fool refers to those who are perishing and do not yet know the way of the cross. In 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul says: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." The fool is unrepentant; they are unyielding to God in Christ.

The one of whom Paul will say in Romans 1: "For even though they knew God, they did not honour Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools."

So we've now considered generally the meaning of the text and its two parts, but now we need to see how it applies specifically. I just have a singular heading here. I had about four of them, but that would take an hour, so we're doing one—one key

application. There are a number of applications that can be made, not least of which would be that to know God, as the born-again Christian does, is of such eternal value that the knowledge of God makes all other potential knowledge fade away in importance. There is one application that is along those lines; however, for time's sake, the key deduction that I want to make here, leaving us with a singular point of application to go home with, is this: The fear of God turns knowledge into worship, and in its absence, idolatry. The fear of God turns knowledge into worship, and in its absence—that is, the absence of the fear of God, knowledge becomes idolatry.

Now, listening along, you might now wish to say to me: "Isn't the knowledge generated by man, isn't it that knowledge that has given us skyscrapers and highways and buildings such as this, advancements in agriculture, great machines, and all the rest? Isn't this evidence of true knowledge?" Many of you will have noticed that it is those who have produced such technologies as this through knowledge who do not fear God, and yet look at all that they have managed to achieve. You might say something's not adding up here.

Well, in one sense, it is a true knowledge, but not in the biblical sense. Why? Because whether it's Elon Musk's rockets to Mars or Thomas Edison's light bulb, if man is only out to build and create for the glory of man and thereby withhold his worship from God, then his knowledge becomes a fountain of pride, and his wisdom a source of arrogance. All gifts, all knowledge come ultimately from God, and when God is not worshiped for the many gifts that He gives to man, they become spoiled like rot, and they shall stand to accuse him in the judgment.

You see, the use of knowledge and wisdom which does not lead to worship becomes to man another tower of Babel. Remember in Genesis there, for self-deification, the self-promotion. Man says, "Look at what I, by my intellect, can produce." The arrogance that is in man, the arrogance! Think of the words of King Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon before the Lord brought him low. The text of Daniel reads in Daniel 4: "The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'"

You see, he had not the fear of God; he worshiped self and not the God of heaven, who bestows power and gifts to man as He sees fit. I make this deduction in confidence because the proverb here only credits one type of person as in possession of true knowledge and wisdom. All others, though they may have extraordinary insight, powers, and abilities, have only empty knowledge and a false wisdom, for they do not point glory back to God.

Instead, it's the one who fears the Lord who glorifies Him in their knowledge and understanding, who has true knowledge. While our knowledge—I speak for myself—while our knowledge might be unimpressive in comparison to many in the world who do not have the fear of God, if that knowledge you have leads you in worship. It is nonetheless of true and immense value because it finds its way back to God.

In this way, God makes the wise in their own eyes to be a fool, and He makes the simple to be wise. Consider, to illustrate, an astronomer. Maybe think of the Hubble Space Telescope. An astronomer peering through his telescope into distant galaxies—all is well and good, but if he has not the fear of God, then while for sure he can see the stars, he does not truly see the stars, does he?

Oh, he has the capacity to deduce certain facts, form a scientific hypothesis, but until he has the fear of God, his knowledge is empty, for the ultimate end of that knowledge must be to worship God. For Genesis 1 says "He made the stars also", you see, man is commanded to worship and to say with the Psalmist: "I will meditate on all your work and muse on your deeds.." (Psalm 77).

So that's the application of knowledge: to meditate on all God's work, the things which God has done, the knowledge He has given me, His work. The one without the fear of God who withholds his acknowledgment of God and his praise—his knowledge becomes as nothing; it is dross to be burnt up on the last day.

Now, I might apply this point to us all here this morning. If you know Christ this morning, you are among those who fear the Lord. But certainly, as I am the first to admit, we all fall far short of that ideal manner in which we ought to walk before Him. We ought to have more fear of God than we do, but we don't. We do not have the reverence of God that we ought. We are far too casual about the worship that He commands us. We tolerate sin that His word condemns. We neglect His word itself. We do not think upon the cross of Calvary in ways that we ought, where our redemption was accomplished.

You see, the Lord is intimately aware of every detail of our lives and all of our ways. Think of David, who wrote in Psalm 139: "You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you understand my thoughts from afar." We can't hide from God, even in our minds.

This week, this last week, I've been reading the Dutch Puritan Wilhelmus à Brakel in his writings on the knowledge of God as a topic. He says this: "God perceives and knows your heart in its spiritual frame. He knows what is concealed in it as well as what can issue forth from it. He knows your thoughts, vain imaginations, and contemplations upon both habitual and spontaneous sins. He is cognizant of all the motives of your actions, whether it is your objective to end in yourself, to get your own way, or to harm your neighbour. He is aware of all the hatred and contempt you foster for your neighbour, your wrathful emotions, as well as all your envy regarding your neighbour's prosperity. In sum, God truly perceives all that transpires in your heart, even though you may neither discern it nor be conscious of it."

As I read these words this week in preparing for this message, I realized something else the Lord knows about us that's not mentioned here. The Lord knows every gift, every skill, every talent, every insight, every ounce of knowledge that He has given us. The Lord knows it. He knows all the knowledge that we have obtained through the faculties He has given us, and it's through these things that you and I have obtained knowledge, proficiency, our wages, our livelihood—it's all obtained through knowledge, and God knows, for He has given it to us.

So now I ask: Do you fear the Lord? When was the last time that the knowledge that you have—which just helps you get through life, which has provided your sustenance—when was the last time that caused you to break out in thanks and worship of God? Remember that the proper end of knowledge is to be utilized for worship. That's why Paul says: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father" (Colossians 3:17).

So that means in the cowshed, as farmers milk their cows, or in the shearing shed, as you're using your knowledge to create your means of wealth and sustenance—are you worshipping God in it? Are you giving thanks for the knowledge and talent that He has

given you and left at your disposal to use? Are you pointing it back to Him, or are you in your heart pondering upon your own ability to learn and all the faculties that you have developed, skills that you have acquired? Or are you giving thanks to God for them?

You see, if we will not do this, and we will not yield our knowledge to worship, their knowledge will become to you a source of idolatry. Why? Because only in the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Do not be like the fool who does not fear God and just despises the wisdom and instruction of the Lord.

Let's pray.