

Gleaning Wisdom from the book of Proverbs, #3--

"The Two Feasts"

Prov. 9

--CEFC 10/7/18;

"There are three rules for writing the novel,"

said author Somerset Maugham.

"Unfortunately," he lamented, "no one knows what they are."

And I'm sure what Maugham says about writing the novel,

could equally be said in today's world about living life.

There is great confusion about what the rules ought to be.

For a long time in our Western culture,

for many, the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament

used to function as essential rules for living,

but no more.

They have become little more than the Ten Suggestions, if that.

So what has replaced them?

That's hard to say.

Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, in a best-selling book,

offers his *Twelve Rules for Living*—

They include some rather quirky things like—

Rule 1: Stand up Straight with Your Shoulders Back.

Rule 5: Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.
(That one is actually very interesting.)

Rule 11: Do not bother children when they are skateboarding.

Rule 12: Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street.

Yes, I would say,

you really have to read the book to understand what he is getting at.

So, what are your rules for living?

How do we decide what they will be?

Are there really any rules at all?

How are we to navigate ourselves through life? //

There is an explosion of information and knowledge in our day,

as never before in history--

We are bombarded with data from all directions, constantly.

With just the click of a button, we have access to whole libraries from around the world,
and Wikipedia alone seems almost unlimited in its scope.

Tap a few keys, and you can view a home page
 originating in some office in Timbuktu.
 Ask Google or Alexa a question—almost any question—
 and you can get an almost immediate answer.

Never has there been such a gluttonous feast
 of information available to us.
 But what does it all mean?
 How can you put it together such that it can guide you into a good life?

Never has there been such a gluttonous feast
 of information available to us—
 but, sadly, never has there been
 such a famine of wisdom.

We seem to be a culture wandering in the dark,
 searching for what makes for real human flourishing.
That seems to be something that not even Google can tell us.

Such a state confronting us who live in this technological age
 was voiced prophetically by the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay
 writing just before WWII¹--

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
 Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
 Of facts. . . . they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
 Is daily spun, but there exists no loom
 To weave it into fabric.

Where is the loom to help us sort through all this stuff that comes to us,
 and to give it some kind of order?

How do we make value judgments
 about what is important and what is trivial?

What are the guidelines that can guide our lives?

How can we live our lives successfully?

How can we keep from making a mess of it all?

And what a mess we can make of it--
 I think of the words of a review of a book published a few years ago
 entitled *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, by Walker Percy.
 The reviewer comments that in this book the author was
 "thinking about who we are and how we got into this mess."

"What mess?" the reviewer asks.

"Basically, the fact that everything we engage in--
 science, art, pleasure, wealth, politics, war--

¹ Huntsman, *What Quarry?*, her last volume before World War II, came out in May, 1939.

is conducted without any real knowledge of what or whom
we are doing it for.

We have lost sight of ourselves . . .

When we are children we see things more or less as follows:

Cows are to give milk. Mountains are to climb. Cars are to ride in.

Germs are to be sick with.

Children draw houses with a face at every window.

(How could there not be a face?--windows are to look out of.)

And people?

Policemen are for helping us cross streets,

farmers are for growing food,

fathers are for making a noise in the shower and going to work,

mothers are for smelling nice and maybe going to work.

As we grow older,

our perception of the physical world becomes more complex. . . .

Man, lacking a sense of himself,

lacks any sense of relation to the cosmos, Percy suggests,

and is therefore capable of perpetrating

almost any foolishness or horror upon both.

Artists and scientists are OK

as long as they are out exercising their transcendence;

when they come home at night, they are as screwed-up as anyone else.

The beauty or knowledge that they are quarrying for

just does not enlighten them much."²

"How it is possible," Walker Percy asks, "for the man who designed Voyager 19,
which arrived at Titania, a satellite [of the planet] Uranus,
three seconds off schedule
and a hundred yards off course after a flight of six years,
[how is it possible for that man] to be
one of the most screwed-up creatures in California—or the Cosmos?"³

Yes, we are increasingly "Lost in the Cosmos"

in desperate need of a self-help manual.

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" --T.S. Eliot asked

as he decried the *Waste Land* of modern technological life--

this Information Age in which we now live.

Knowledge is bursting out of the seams,

but where is Wisdom to be found?

Where is the loom to weave our information into wisdom?

²Richard Elder, in a book review in the *LA Times*, 6/5/83; cited in Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge*.

³ *Lost in the Cosmos*, p. ??.

As we look to the book of Proverbs,

in many ways we expect it to function as a sort-of self-help guide for life.
It is full of warnings and encouragements, and tips of all sorts--

Do you want people to think you are clever?

Keep your mouth shut until you have something to say.

Do you want to be a friend of the king?

Let your speech be gracious and love a pure heart.

Do you want to stay in the good graces of your neighbor?

Don't bless him too early in the morning.

Some people view the Proverbs as a divinely inspired

Poor Richard's Almanac, giving pithy truths for wise living--
like "Beggars can't be choosers,"
or "Penny wise, pound foolish,"
or "A stitch in time saves nine."

The book is filled with little nuggets like that--

generalizations that reflect the observable patterns of life.

But, as we have stressed already in this series,

the wisdom of Proverbs is more than simply a precursor of Ben Franklin.

There is something deeper to the book of Proverbs.

That dimension comes out especially in the introduction of the first nine chapters.

In the Bible, wisdom is knowing the right road to the right destination,

coupled with the determination to take that road.

In other words, the wise person knows the lay of the land.

They anticipate road blocks,

they avoid the ditches,

they steer clear of the mud.

They know the best path.

But more than that, they know where they should be going in the first place.

Lots of people know how to get to places that, in the end,

aren't really worth going to.

You can be a very successful thief,

but you would never call a thief wise.

The wise person not only knows the best path

but also discerns the right destination,

the place that will ultimately lead to a good life.

But this wisdom is not just an intellectual matter—

for the wise person has a heart inclined to take that right road to the right place.

Not everybody does.

This is biblical wisdom.

This kind of wisdom is built on the conviction that

this world is created by a good and righteous God

If they disobey, they get punished;
 if they stay up too late, they will be tired in the morning.
 If they eat too much chocolate, they will get sick.

Wisdom consists in knowing and following
 those rational rules that govern human behavior.

But in the Proverbs, no wisdom can be merely secular--
 for at its heart, all wisdom is God's wisdom.

It begins with the conviction that God as Creator had a plan, a purpose in creating us--
 he designed us to live in a certain way.

When we follow that design we prosper,
 when we don't, we self-destruct.

And God has so constructed the world, that our choices have consequences--
 and living wisely has its reward.

That's why "Lady Wisdom" says in Prov. 8:35--
"whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the LORD. --
"But whoever fails to find me harms himself;
all who hate me love death."

Wisdom is all about being in touch with reality.

It is all about knowing how the world works, and living accordingly,
 accommodating yourself with that reality,
 going with the flow,
 living with the grain of the universe.

Or as Cornelius Plantinga puts it, in a memorable phrase,
 the wise "tear along the perforated line."⁴

That's why I advise kids to listen in class and to do their homework—
 that's living in line with reality—
 the way things are supposed to work.
 It makes life so much easier.

One of those realities that we need to respect is our own bodily existence—
 as human beings we are more than just minds—we have physical bodies—
 our bodies are part of who we are.

And our bodies are unmistakably created male or female.
 That reality is embedded genetically in every cell of our bodies.
 Biblical wisdom says that we are designed this way for a reason,
 and this design is good.

Men and women are designed differently to complement one another—
 as husbands and wives,
 as fathers and mothers.

We are wise when we seek to live in harmony with that natural reality—
 as we think of our sexual identity, for example.

⁴Not the Way It's Supposed to Be, p. 118.

We'll talk more about that next week.

And recognizing reality begins with the most important reality of all—
the reality of God.

That's why the Bible affirms over and over that
the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.

If God is the creator,
and if he created us to live in his good world,
then we will prosper in his world when we live according to his design.
Therefore, it is always wise to learn from him
and to trust him in all that he says.

Prov. 3:5-8—"Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.
This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones!"

Living according to God's design means that there is a moral dimension to wisdom
that almost seems foreign to our ears.

To choose what is morally right is to be wise,
and to choose evil is always foolish.

The one way leads to life;
the other to death.

This morning we consider a passage
that brings out this moral dimension of the choice for wisdom very clearly--
Proverbs 9—

I invite you to turn there in your Bibles--
In this passage we find the picture of two feasts prepared by two hostesses,
the two women we were introduced to last week--

Lady Wisdom and Madam Folly.
They each call out with an invitation to join them at their table
and to partake of the feast they offer.

The invitation is given to all by each.
The inevitable choice of which to attend is ours.

The chapter is arranged in perfect symmetry
with the first and the last six verses describing the rival feasts,
while the centerpiece of vv. 7-12 gives character sketches
of typical products of the two opposing camps--
the mocker and the wise man.

And at the heart of it all, in v.10, is the heart of wisdom itself--
the fear of the Lord.

Proverbs 9--

I. First let's look at *the Two Hostesses*--

Prov. 9:1—"Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars.
 She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;
 she has also set her table."

Wisdom, with industry and effort, has built a house;
 she has prepared a place to host a great feast.

Commentators have had field day in concocting theories
 on the significance of the seven pillars of this house.

"They have linked with, among other things,
 the seven days of creation, the seven planets,
 the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven sacraments,
 the seven beatitudes, the seven churches in Revelation,
 and even the seven liberal arts!"⁵

The role of wisdom in creation in the previous chapter
 gives some credence to the cosmic view,
 suggesting that the home of wisdom is the world which she has made,
 but perhaps the easiest view is simply that the pillars (and the perfect number seven)
 point to the spacious and enduring character of her dwelling.

Hers is a magnificent house, built with her good sense and sagacity,
 with ample room to accommodate all who would accept her invitation
 to this royal meal of steak and spiced wine—
 a rich and sumptuous banquet.

In contrast to the labor and care of Lady Wisdom
 in preparing for her guests by building her house
 and by hewing its pillars
 and by setting her table
 is the casual and brash way Madam Folly sets about
 soliciting her clients--

v.13-- **The woman Folly is loud;**
 [the NIV11 describes her as "an unruly woman"]
 she is undisciplined and without knowledge.
 She sits at the door of her house,
 on a seat at the highest point of the city,
 calling out to those who pass by,
 who go straight on their way.

Both are seated at "**the highest point of the city**"—
 That is the traditional location for places of worship,
 suggesting the religious overtones of this picture.
 Which of these two figures represents the true God,
 and which is an empty idol?

⁵ Aitken, p. 90.

And in contrast to the public feast Wisdom offers,
Madam Folly suggests the possession of a kind of secret knowledge
gained illegitimately.⁶
She simply alludes to the attraction of what she offers,
with all the enticing lure of forbidden fruit--
v.17--"**Stolen water is sweet;**
food eaten in secret is delicious!"⁷

"Forbid a fool, and he'll do it directly," the saying goes,
and Madam Folly uses this to full advantage to draw her patrons.

How many childish pranks,
teenage acts of arson,
or illicit sexual engagements have had this perversion of defying a prohibition
as the main attraction!¹⁸

II. But when we consider *the two invitations*

we see a very similar guest list--
v. 4 and v. 16 are identical.

"Let all who are simple come in here!"
she says to those who lack judgment.

On the other hand, Madam Folly seeks "the simple" as those most easily enticed
by her seductive offer--
those who don't seem to know better.

⁶ So Longman, *The Fear of the Lord*, p. 23.

⁷The water here may refer back to the water of 5:15 which served as an image for sex, transforming Folly's feast into an orgy.

⁸cf. Prov.20:17--"Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man,
but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel."

⁹ So Longman, *The Fear of the Lord*, p.22.

In fact, this invitation goes out to everybody--to all of us.

You have to realize that you are being invited
to these two feasts every day.

You are constantly being wooed by Wisdom, but also by Folly--
in the way you spend your money and your time,
in the things you think are important,
in the things that capture your heart--
in every area of your life, whether you realize it or not,
you are responding to one of these two invitations.

Their contrasting voices are calling out to each of us.

III. The middle section of the chapter, as we mentioned,
gives a picture of the two types of guests who frequent the two feasts--

A. First, there is the mocker (or the scoffer [ESV])--He is noted for his closed mind--
he is hostile to any rebuke or correction.
He is unteachable,
and in his pride, he is offended by any attempts that are offered.

v.7-- "Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult;
whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse.
Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you;

The mocker is the worst kind of fool.

B. On the other hand,
there is the wise man--He is always teachable and ever-progressing,
invariably appreciative of any efforts
to help him grow in wisdom and knowledge.

v. 8—"Rebuke a wise man and he will love you.
Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still;
teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning."

The mark of wisdom is a humility to know that there is always room
for improvement and progress.

None of us has arrived,
we should all welcome correction.

The person attuned to wisdom will always long for more wisdom. /

Two pictures, then—
one of hardened pride,
offended by any criticism;
the other of a pliable humility,
eager to be molded by the truth.

The telling difference between them is found
in how they respond to correction and instruction.

v.12--**If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you.
if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer.**

This reminds us, in the words of Derek Kidner,
that "Your character is the one thing you cannot borrow, lend or escape,
for it is you."¹⁰
And you will bear the consequences that character brings with it.

IV. That leads to a final point as we consider the *Two Results*--

Lady Wisdom offers this promise--

v.6—"Leave your simple ways and you will live;"

It is the promise of life--life in all its fullness.

This is true human flourishing;
living as God intended us to live.

Madam Folly offers what is sweet and delicious at her table,
and from the outside looking in,
those who eat at that table may appear to be having a grand time.

But look at v. 18--

"**But little do they know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of the grave.**"

Things are not as they seem—
behind the façade of celebration
is the sad reality of lives wasted,
and wasting away.

The book of Proverbs isn't simply a handy guidebook for worldly success.
It is much more than that.
It offers a choice on which depends one's life or death.

We have before us two feasts, which represent the two ways,
the two paths down which we can walk through life—
the way of wisdom and the way of folly.

Life rarely seems quite so simple.

Our modern tendency is to blur any clear distinctions
between right and wrong, good and bad,
turning everything into a fuzzy gray.

This clear-cut division may strike some as too neat, even simplistic.

But the Bible insists that not everything is gray--
some things are black and white.

¹⁰Kidner, *Proverbs*, p.83.

We are confronted here with the fundamental choice of all of life--
echoed in the words of Moses to the nation of Israel
as they were about to enter the promised land--

**Deut. 30:15—"See, I set before you today life and prosperity,
death and destruction.**

**For I command you today to love the LORD your God,
to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws;
then you will live and increase,
and the LORD your God will bless you
in the land you are entering to possess.**

**But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient,
and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them,
I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. ...**

**This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you
that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.
Now choose life, so that you and your children may live
and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice,
and hold fast to him.
For the LORD is your life, ..."**

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction."

And what is the fundamental difference between these two ways?
Look at Prov. 9:10—which sets forth the foundational theme of the book--
**"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**

The choice of wisdom is the choice to align oneself with God and his ways;
to trust in his goodness
and to submit to his wisdom in the design of his creation.

Notice the identification of the wise man and the righteous man in v. 9—
**"Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still;
teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning."**

There is more to Biblical wisdom than simply obeying the law of God,
but certainly, it is never less than that.
The righteous course is always the wise course;
Sin is always foolish.

The book of Proverbs could be described as a self-help manual.
But ultimately the help it offers is not based on self at all,
but on the God who stands over against our individual selves.
Again, Prov. 3:5-8—"Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.

This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones."

The Lord himself must be the starting point of wisdom for living,
for he created life; he sustains it; and he has a purpose for it all.

No, I can't give you twelve rules for living life,
but I can give you the most important one--
Live life in the fear of God.

I urge you to make the wisdom of Proverbs a part of your life--
as you daily make a conscious choice to walk the path of life,
to attend the feast of Lady Wisdom,
to live wisely in the fear of the Lord.

Let me remind you of the words of wisdom of our Lord Jesus--
"Enter through the narrow gate.
For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction,
and many enter through it.
But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life,
and only a few find it" (Mt. 5:13,14).

We live in an information age, a media age,
an age that confuses style with substance,
image with reality,
the trivial with the truly important.

We desperately need wisdom--
Where is the loom we need to weave the fabric of information into wisdom?

And the Bible points us to just what we need—
it is the wisdom of God.
the wisdom of God built into creation itself.
The rational order that we see in physics
points us to the deeper social and moral order
that relates to our human activities
and our human purpose.

There is a divine design in the way we are made to live in God's world.
And that design is good—it leads to our flourishing in God's world.

We fool ourselves if we think we can decide for ourselves what that design should be,
or even if we think we can discover what it is.
For that design is not something that can be discerned
simply through observation,
it also to be received through revelation—
as it includes the moral order given to us in the Word of God.
The law of God is an expression of the wisdom of God
and we neglect it to our peril.
Without it we become fools.

That wisdom must begin with the fear of God.

with the fundamental conviction that God alone

knows how we are created to live,
and God alone can determine what we are made for.

And ultimately, this fear of the Lord

must lead us to see that God's wisdom—

how we are to live,

and what we are to live for—

is found supremely in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ—

"**who has become for us wisdom from God—**

that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30).

Jesus lived supremely in the wisdom of God.

And that wisdom of Jesus comes with its own invitation--

"**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest.**

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,

for I am gentle and humble in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

This morning, if you have answered that call—

if you have responded to his voice,

and said Yes to his summons,

then he invites you to his feast--

he invites you to come to his table--

Come--eat of the bread, drink of the cup--

which show to us his broken body and shed blood.

This is wisdom's table--

the place where you recognize your foolishness in turning away from him
and you discover the wisdom of God found in the cross of Christ.

Come to this table, in the fear of the Lord.

Prayer, as servers come forward—

Gleaning Wisdom from the Book of Proverbs, #3
Oct. 7, 2018

The Two Feasts (Proverbs 9)

We live in an information age, with a feast of knowledge, but unfortunately a famine of wisdom. Where is wisdom to be found? This morning we go to the book of Proverbs to consider two figures who host two meals, and each invites us to their table. Which we attend is a decision of life and death.

I. The Two Hostesses

II. The Two Invitations

III. The Two Types of Guests

IV. The Two Results

"Enter through the narrow gate.
For wide is the gate and broad is the road
 that leads to destruction,
 and many enter through it.
But small is the gate and narrow the road
 that leads to life,
 and only a few find it." (Mt. 5:13,14)

Response Questions:

**The Choice We Must All Make:
The Two Feasts
(Proverbs 9)**

1. How can our vastly increased access to information actually make us less wise?
2. Where do people go these days for “rules for living”?
3. How is the book of Proverbs different from Ben Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, with its compendium of pithy truths for successful living?
4. How would you define “wisdom”? How is biblical wisdom distinct from “secular wisdom”?
5. Why is “the fear of the Lord” foundational for biblical wisdom?
6. Why is biblical wisdom compared to living “according to the grain” of the universe, or to “tearing along the perforated line”?

7. Where does this sermon specifically expose sin or unbelief in your life? How does it specifically call you to change your thinking, redirect your affections, alter your behaviors, and trust your Savior?