Sunday Sermon Notes

The House That Wisdom Built

Proverbs 9:1-9 · English Standard Version

When a particular kind of help is needed, a particular kind of person is asked. A question about mental health goes to a therapist or a psychiatrist, not to a financial advisor. A question about money does not go to a mechanic. Parenting trouble might send a person to a book, or to a grandmother who did it well. A health problem goes to a doctor. Nobody picks a random person to consult when there is a specific need. The consulted has to match the need. There is, however, one source of guidance that is helpful, appropriate, and transformational for everything a person faces, in every area of life where any question arises. The Bible calls that source **wisdom**, and the book of Proverbs is where it is most fully described.

Proverbs is often read as a book of scattered, unrelated verses, and some of it is that. There are also five longer passages in which wisdom is described, always as a woman, and nobody seems puzzled by that. Those passages show five things about her. She begs to help, watching a person go through life in the wrong direction and asking, “please, will you listen? I can help you.” She has something to offer, a store of wisdom for whatever the trouble is, because God used his wisdom in the creation of the world and continues to operate the universe according to the principles of wisdom. When God made the world, wisdom was with him as a master workman, so that the world runs on wisdom’s blueprint. Follow it and things work; go against it and things breakdown, because you are going against the way God made the universe to work. Wisdom, though, is more than a cosmic power. She has built a house and set a table and wants you to come for supper, which is to say she wants a relationship. And she is embodied, finally, in the worthy woman of Proverbs 31, a literal woman in her home, relating to husband and children and servants and merchants and money. Wisdom wants to help, has something to give, and wants to bless you.

The House She Built

Proverbs 9:1–6 describes the house. Wisdom has done three things, and they are a progression.

She has built a house and hewn out seven pillars, load-bearing columns that hold up the roof. She is the architect, the general contractor, the carpenter, and the woodworker, from the design to the construction. A house means stability and security. Wisdom provides a life that holds still. Foolishness provides uncertainty and drama, always another problem coming from somewhere, a roller coaster of life’s highs and lows. Roller coasters are fun at an amusement park. Nobody wants to live on one, eating supper and trying to sleep while the track drops into a death spiral. That is what foolishness is. Wisdom says, let me give you stability, a life of peace.

Proverbs 9:1
"Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars."

She has also prepared a feast. The text says she has slaughtered her beasts, which means she has butchered her own meat, prepared it, and cooked it. She has mixed her wine, probably with spices to make it taste better rather than with water to stretch it for a crowd, and she has set her table. This is abundant joy and provision. Wisdom is not bringing bologna and crackers on a paper plate. She is setting out food that tastes good, sustenance that is also a pleasure. The writer is piling up the skills, carpenter and butcher and cook and businesswoman, because he wants us to see that wisdom is a Swiss Army knife. There is nothing faced, no question, no problem, no difficult person, that wisdom does not help with. She is Martha Stewart in the best sense, the one who can set a Thanksgiving table and rewire an antique lamp and demonstrate the safe use of a chainsaw in a single program.

Wisdom sent out her maidens, which means she has servants, which means she is wealthy and knows how to make money, keep it, hire people, and delegate. She is a businesswoman and a master organizer, and she is using all of it to come find you. Wisdom is available and accessible. She is not like a secret recipe. A person can want fried chicken that tastes like the famous kind, or baked beans that taste like the brand, or a drink that tastes like the cola, and be told that the formula is a secret, because successful people often keep the method to themselves. Wisdom does not. She sends servants from the highest places of the city, calling to the naive to turn in, because she wants to give away everything she has.

Proverbs 9:4
"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who lacks sense she says,
"Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed."

How Wisdom Is Gained

The invitation is addressed to the naive and to the one who lacks understanding, which is to say it is addressed to us. Wisdom is gained in a particular order.

It is only for those who admit they need it. A person who reads the invitation and says that it is for the naive, and that he is not among them, will never have it. Wisdom is for the one who says that he needs all he can get. Jeremiah knew that a man's way is not in himself, that it is not in a man who walks to direct his own steps. We like to act as though we know. We act more informed than we are, especially about something we are supposed to know, because it is embarrassing to admit ignorance. The better posture, when asked about something unknown, is to say that we do not know, and when we do know something, to say so and then ask to be told more. The posture is always one of

learning. Do not lean on your own understanding. Do not be wise in your own eyes. There is a reason Jesus healed the blind, the deaf, and the lame. He wanted us to see that apart from his help we cannot see, cannot hear, and cannot walk in the right way on our own. As long as we are proud and act as though we know everything, wisdom will not come.

> **Jeremiah 10:23**
> *"I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps."*

Then a person has to choose wisdom. It is available and accessible all the time. Choosing is the part that gets skipped. About a quarter of American adults never do any exercise of any kind, and the reasons are familiar: they hate to run, they won't lift weights, the gym costs money or is out of the way. None of those things is required. A person can open the front door, walk outside, and be exercising. All that is required is the decision to do the thing that needs to be done. Wisdom works the same way. It has to be chosen.

The Bible does not leave the method for obtaining wisdom unclear. Wisdom comes from God, so the attitude toward God mus be right, and then the asking is simple: if you lack wisdom, ask him. It also comes from the Word, for Paul said that the sacred writings can make a person wise. And it comes from company, from being around people who have wisdom and will share it. The question is how often. Since the imagery is food, the answer is the answer to how often a person has to eat. Nobody has lunch and declares himself fed for the week, planning to eat again next Sunday. We do exactly that with wisdom. Church provides a meal of it, and then the week goes by without prayer, without the Word, and without the company of wise people, as though a lackadaisical approach were enough. Food does any good only when it is taken regularly. Wisdom is the same.

Forsaking folly and living means that wisdom must be the way a life is actually lived, not a subject that was studied once. A college humanities class, an art appreciation course taught by someone who did not know art, can be finished and never used again, not a painting remembered, not a word retained. A high school typing class turned out to be the single most valuable class a person ever took, because typing is what their day is made of. Wisdom is not art appreciation. It is not a subject learned and then set aside. It is financial literacy, and driver's education, and home economics. It is something used every single day, because it is practiced every day.

Proceeding in the way of understanding means continuing in it. Wisdom is not a college degree, finished and then left behind. It is not a diet. The biggest problem with going on a diet is that a person decides to lose twenty-five pounds, eliminates foods, endures what he does not like, and then, having lost the weight, goes back to what he was doing and gains it all back. That is not wisdom. Wisdom must be consumed constantly, like food.

The Woman of Folly

Proverbs 9 sets a contrast beside Lady Wisdom, and the similarities make the differences sharper. Beginning at verse 13, the woman of folly is boisterous, naive, and knows nothing. She sits at the doorway of her house, on a seat by the high places of the city, calling to those who pass by, people who are trying to make their paths straight and whom she will not leave alone. Whoever is naive, she says, let him turn in here. To the one who lacks understanding she says that stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. She does not say that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

The picture is a midway, the kind of strip at a carnival or a seafood festival where a person walks past game after game and food after food, and at every one of them someone is calling out to come play, come eat, come try this. A midway is full of ways to lose money, get fat, and walk out with things that are not worth anything. A friend at a carnival started playing a game and walked away with a large stuffed gorilla that had cost him three hundred dollars, but really onl worth forty dollars. That is what midways are for, and that is what Lady Folly is for.

The stakes can be higher than a stuffed animal. A young woman in high school, naive and unaware of how life works, went to a carnival with friends, caught the eye of a worker, and was caught by his. He told her to leave home and come with him, and she did. She did not know that he was a criminal and a substance abuser. She did not know she would end in poverty, living when she had a place to live in a tent or in a tractor trailer the carnival had divided into four parts, one of which was theirs. She walked off with a man she met on the midway and ruined her life, because a midway is full of deception, and so is Lady Folly.

What she offers is the claim that stolen water is sweet, that being bad is more fun than being good, that doing what is forbidden is more fun than following the rules. Most of us have been given a hard time for being a rule follower. Breaking the rules feels, in the head, like the more enjoyable thing. Celebrities who are already rich get arrested for shoplifting a pair of ten-dollar shoes, and the reason is the same claim. Folly says breaking the rules is more fun. What she does not say is that the end of it is death, and that following foolishness is falling into it.

Proverbs 9:18
“But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.”

Concluding Thoughts

What has to be known at the end of the day is that wisdom is found only in Christ. During his ministry Jesus said that something greater than Solomon was here. The Queen of Sheba traveled hundreds of miles to experience the wisdom of Solomon, and Jesus said that he was greater than Solomon, and that he was standing right there, and that they would not listen. He is greater than Solomon because he is the wisdom of God, and because in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. If wisdom is to be gained, it will be gained through Jesus. That means praying for his wisdom, letting his word dwell richly, and being around his people, the ones in the body of Christ who know his wisdom and will share it.

We began with wisdom as the answer to every problem, every issue, every question, every confusion. Wisdom is the answer, which means that Christ is the answer. Whatever the confusion or the bewilderment or the question, whatever the problem or the brokenness, Christ is the answer. The invitation is to come to him in humility and in obedience, seeking him, confessing inability and wickedness and worldliness, and allowing him to give his wisdom.

Colossians 2:3
"In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."
