

# How to Live Well (Proverbs)

**Big Idea:** Fear God, get wisdom, apply wisdom, and remember Jesus, the ultimate wisdom.

What would you say to someone just starting out about how to live well?

I wonder if you would say something like this 45-second commencement speech:

*Dear graduates,*

*Today marks a significant milestone in your life. You have worked hard to reach this point, and I am proud of each and every one of you. As you leave this chapter of your life behind, I want to remind you that the world is waiting for you.*

*You are the future leaders, innovators, and change-makers. You have the power to make a positive impact on the world. It won't always be easy, but I urge you to never give up on your dreams. Believe in yourself and your abilities.*

*Continue to learn, grow, and challenge yourself. Don't be afraid to take risks and step outside of your comfort zone. Remember that failure is not the end, but rather a stepping stone towards success.*

*As you embark on the next chapter of your life, carry with you the lessons you have learned and the memories you have made. Take the time to appreciate the little things in life and cherish the ones you love.*

*Congratulations, graduates. I can't wait to see the incredible things you will accomplish in the future.*

That was only 45 seconds, but it contains so much of what we're told these days about how to live a good life:

- The world is waiting for you.
- You have so much potential.
- Believe in yourself.
- Continue to grow.
- Take risks.
- Be grateful.

These are the messages that we hear almost constantly in our day. I guarantee you'll hear some of these messages this week. If you buy a self-help book, these are almost certainly the messages you're going to read.

But what does the Bible say? Does it agree with these messages, or is there a different and better way to live?

That's why I'm glad we're looking at the book of Proverbs today, because it gives us God's answer about how to live well in this world.

## **An Introduction to Proverbs**

We're going through the Bible in a year. Right now we're in one of the high points of Scripture. Israel is at peak prosperity. Solomon is king, and he's reigning over Israel. God has already given him so much wisdom. Last week we saw that God asked him

what he wanted, and Solomon prayed for wisdom. In response, God said to him, "Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you" (1 Kings 3:12).

God's promise to Solomon came true. In the next chapter, we read:

*And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men .. and his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. He spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles, and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kings 4:29-34)*

There's so much in this description. Solomon's wisdom transcends both geographic and chronological boundaries. When it says that he spoke of trees, beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish, it's not just saying that Solomon was an environmentalist. It's portraying Solomon as a [new Adam](#). "At the heart of the king's duty is the tending and extending of a garden."

Today we're going to look at some of the proverbs that Solomon left us. We're going to look at the book of Proverbs, one of the wisdom books in the Bible. It's a book of practical advice on how to live.

# How to Live Well

So what's the message of Proverbs?

The goal of Proverbs is to give us wisdom – practical skill for living – in the world that God has created. It wants to help us think and act wisely. As the Bible Project [says](#), it's a guide for flourishing and thriving in God's world.

One of the best things you can do is to read Proverbs regularly and to begin to memorize the Proverbs that are relevant to your life. Proverbs is meant to give you short, memorable phrases that will stick in your mind. What we're going to do today is a poor substitute for actually reading and meditating on the content of the book.

But let me give you a quick overview. Let me try to summarize the main messages of Proverbs on how to live well. What is the message of the Bible on how to live well in this world?

Solomon wants us to understand four things:

## **One: Fear God.**

Look at Proverbs 1:7: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."

If you're going to memorize one verse from the book of Proverbs, this is it. This is the message of the whole book in one verse. This is the first and organizing principle for everything else that follows. It presents a stark choice before us:

- One is to be a fool. How do you know you're a fool? You know you're a fool if you're above instruction – if you're too good or too busy for it. Don't be a fool.

- What's the opposite? It's to fear God.

That's it. It's a binary choice. It's one or the other. You can be the wisest person alive, but if you don't base your life on fearing God, you're still a fool.

In other words, living wisely on a horizontal axis depends on relating well to God on a vertical axis. If you want to live skillfully in the world, the place to begin is not with learning skills and techniques for living wisely in the world. The place to begin is with getting your relationship with God right. Everything else rests on that. To paraphrase Bruce Waltke, What the alphabet is to reading, notes to reading music, and numerals to mathematics, the fear of the LORD is to wisdom.

This is where the wisdom of the Bible departs from all the advice you'll hear in all the self-help books and commencement speeches. If you want to live well, you have to start with God. You have to fear God. This is a recurring theme throughout the whole book. It's the primary message of this book. If you miss this, you miss the core of what it means to live well.

So what is the fear of the Lord? It means having such a big view of God that it controls your life. Fearing God means that we recognize who he really is. John Piper [says](#):

*The sheer majesty of God, as well as the holiness, and justice, and power, and wrath of God, cannot be approached in a cavalier spirit. It would be insane to think we can just stroll up to the Creator of the universe and have a cavalier spirit. We are blind if we think we can do that without trembling.*

When we realize that God is majestic, holy, just, powerful, and wrathful, bigger than anyone or anything else, then that will become the North Star of our lives. God's bigness will become the controlling principle of our lives. We're not talking about a cowering fear. We're talking about becoming humble and teachable, standing in awe of

God's holiness and sovereignty, "acknowledging our own littleness, distrusting our own thoughts and willing to have our minds turned upside down" (J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*).

This is the place to begin. Let me ask you: do you fear God? Have you come to the point in your life where you realize that having a right view of God is the thing that you need most in life? That what you need most is a desire to honor God?

If you want to live well, this is the place to start. Base your entire life on fearing God.

## **Two: Get Wisdom.**

The first 9 chapters of Proverbs have one agenda: to convince you that your main goal in life should be to pursue wisdom. This is not something that should be one of your priorities. This should be the main priority in your life.

Take, for instance, these words from Proverbs 4:5-9:

*Get wisdom; get insight;*

*do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.*

*Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;*

*love her, and she will guard you.*

*The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,*

*and whatever you get, get insight.*

*Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;*

*she will honor you if you embrace her.*

*She will place on your head a graceful garland;*

*she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.*

What is the best thing you can get in your life? The most important thing you could possibly acquire is wisdom. How do you get wisdom? Proverbs pictures wisdom as coming for you. "Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice" (Proverbs 1:20). Wisdom isn't hard to find. It's looking for you. So how do you get it? You simply receive it. You listen to it.

Derek Kidner says that this passage is saying, "What it takes is not brains or opportunity, but decision. Do you want it? Come and get it." You have God's wisdom right here. It's free for the taking. The only decision you have is: will you receive it?

During the coronation of Charles III earlier this month at Westminster Abbey, the new King was given a lot of things: a scepter, orb, crown, and a sword, and more. But he was also given a Bible. As he received this Bible, he was told, "Receive this Book, the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God."

That same wisdom – the most valuable thing the world affords – is free for the taking. Make the main pursuit of your life the pursuit of the wisdom contained in this book. It is the most valuable thing that you could ever own.

This is a matter of life and death! This is no trivial matter. Fear God, get wisdom.

### **Three: Apply wisdom.**

The heart of Proverbs is chapters 10-29. These chapters contain 375 short, pithy sayings that apply the fear of God and wisdom to every topic you can imagine: family, work, community, friendship, words, sex, marriage, money, anger, forgiveness, food and alcohol, and more. These proverbs are short and easy to memorize. They're meant as a reference that we can turn to time and time again as we face various issues in our lives.

The key to using this part of Proverbs is to realize that they're general statements. They're not promises. They describe how things generally work. Life is complicated, and things don't always turn out as we expect, but these proverbs give us a general idea of how we should live.

That's why it's so important that we master the content of these chapters. We should read them proactively. We should also search them for wisdom as we encounter different circumstances in life. We don't just need to get wisdom. We need to apply God's wisdom to every part of our lives. I encourage you to major in this book and let it guide your life.

Fear God. Get wisdom Apply wisdom. There's one more lesson that Proverbs gives us.

## **Four: Look beyond Solomon to Jesus.**

Proverbs is amazing. Solomon is amazing. But even Solomon, the wisest human in history, failed to live according to his own wisdom. 1 Kings 11 records that Solomon turned away from the Lord and worshiped other Gods.

*And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods. But he did not keep what the LORD commanded. (1 Kings 11:9-10)*

If Solomon was wise and still messed up, what hope is there for the rest of us? But there's good news: in Matthew 12:42, Jesus said, "Behold, something greater than Solomon is here."



The truth is that nobody has ever followed God's wisdom perfectly, including Solomon, and we won't either. Nobody has – except for Jesus. Pursue wisdom, but ultimately pursue the One who is the wisdom of God, the One who gave his life for us, the One who is “stronger than Samson, wiser than Solomon, and more devoted than David ... in him, we find help” ([Garrett Kell](#)).

We need God's wisdom. But more than that, we need grace for when we fail to live up to God's wisdom. That's why we need Jesus. **Fear God, get wisdom, apply wisdom, and remember Jesus, the ultimate wisdom.** And then, my friends, you will live well.

Thank you, Father, for showing us how to live. And thank you for giving us a Savior who helps us when we fail to live as we should. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.