



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

This way forward

GOD'S WISDOM, NOT OURS
Proverbs 3:1-8; 13-18 and Philippians 4:4-7, 19

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“Trust in the Lord with all thine hearts; lean not on your own understanding”

Proverbs 3:5

Opening Prayer

O Thou who art the source and ground of all truth, the Light of Lights, who hast opened the minds of people to discern the things that are, guide us today. Give us the grace to choose the right books and to read them in the right way.

Give us wisdom to abstain as well as to persevere.

Let the Bible have proper place; and grant that as we read we may be alive to the stirrings of Thy Holy Spirit in our souls.

(John Baillie, “Wisdom and Foolishness, #174.1” in ed. Dorothy Stewart, *Christian Prayers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 368.

It is a joy to be here at FPC, this wonderful church with such a strong mission and calling to follow Christ. Thank you for this opportunity to bring you a word on this college Sunday. Tom thanks for allowing me to preach, but according to Tom and his brothers when they were growing up I spoke to them in sermons so I guess that I have had a lot of practice. You are very blessed to have a vibrant college group under the excellent leadership of Penny Wright. As Tom may have told you I was the Protestant chaplain at Columbia University in NYC in the 1970s in the midst of the radical/political movement. I had formed a committee with the newly appointed RC chaplain, the new staff of Intervarsity and Campus Crusade, the Episcopal chaplain and 6 others to plan a series of outreach events called “Jesus Week” in May 1972 on the CU campus. The bombings had just taken place in Cambodia and the students were holed up on campus in Hamilton Hall in protest against these bombings. The president of CU called me to say we could not go ahead with Jesus Week as we were having evangelistic meetings outside at the Sundial at the center of the campus with mikes etc. President McGill was afraid the students would take over the microphones for their radical political causes. We decided to hold an all night prayer vigil that Jesus Week might go ahead and the next morning negotiated with the students to leave Hamilton Hall. They left, much to the president’s surprise. Jesus Week opened with Jesse Jackson, then head of PUSH, and David Read, pastor of Madison Ave. Presbyterian Church, NYC. And a whole week of speakers, films, and events. Subsequently an article appeared about this week-long series of events in *Parade Magazine* and I was described as the mini-skirted Jesus Freak!! But enough of all that -

Being college Sunday it seems appropriate to reflect on education and learning and as people of faith what this means. The college group has been studying Philippians 4 this year which emphasizes God’s continual care of us as Paul prays that, “the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” It is interesting that both mind and heart are mentioned in Philippians, which is the same as in our Proverbs text. Education is not just to impart knowledge but wisdom. Proverbs, which is part of the wisdom literature, addresses the central issue of higher education, i.e., discovering truth through our learning. What are the central points of our passage?

1. Keep God’s commandments in our hearts.
2. Follow mercy and truth, loyalty and faithfulness.
3. Trust in God.
4. Lean not on our own understanding.
5. Pursue God’s wisdom.

1. Keep God's Commandments

In our society, there are not that many people who know God's commandments, much less keep them. Let us take the Ten Commandments. As Sam Levinson joked years ago about the Ten Commandments, some people are looking for guidelines for living, others for the difference between right and wrong, but most people are looking for loopholes.

God gave the Ten Commandments to a newly forming nation, i.e., the Israelites, so they could know what God expected of them. The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with stories of God's dealings with humankind and what the Lord requires, as Micah (6:8) says – to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. Much could be said on this, but it provides the foundation for what follows about our knowledge and God's wisdom. In other words, wisdom is tied to service and is not simply referring to intellectual prowess.

God's commandments are built on certain moral values. Do we still follow those values? In a recent Gallup Poll in 2015, when asked what is the most important problem facing our country, 49% cited economic concerns, and for non-economic concerns, the decline in ethics, morality, religion, and family ranked as the fourth most pressing problem.

⁽¹⁾ USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll Results "Most Important Problems which Face Americans, 2015.)

What are college students' values today? There are several ways of looking at this. The Higher Education Research Institute published the following finding "74.6% of college freshman stated this is their reason for attending college was to make more money. (Institute of Higher Education Research Institute 2016), but they also seem to want to find an outlet for what professor Alexander Astin, the founder of the survey, called their "higher selves."

⁽¹⁾ Rebecca Trounson, "Poll Says College Freshmen Lean Left," 28 January 2002 (<http://www.passyourdrugtest.com/1-28-2002-news.htm>).

Although volunteerism peaked in 2004 at 31.2% and in 2010 is down to 26.1% ("12 Reasons Community Service Should be required in Schools") college students are still seeking for ways to serve others.

A general national sample of 15,000 college students has demonstrated a strong demand for more support to the religious and spiritual needs and expectations of college students by their institutions, and a high percentage of students from public and private institutions reported strong convictions such as believing in God (79%), believing in the sacredness of life (83%), having an interest in spirituality (80%), searching for meaning and purpose in life (76%), seeing spirituality as a source of joy (64%), and seeking out opportunities to grow spiritually (47%) (Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA 2007, research on College) In another scientific survey of 1837 college students from 27 states and 38 different colleges in 2013, the majority of the religious and spiritual students said that it was necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values.

(American Religious Identification Survey Principal Investigators Barry and Ariela Keysar. Religious, Spiritual and Secular: The Emergence of three distinct world views among American College Students: A report based on the ARIS 2013 National College Student Survey)

2. Do Not Forsake Mercy and Truth, Loyalty and Faithfulness

Keep loyalty and faithfulness, two virtues, in short measure today. *Loyalty* disappears when it may cost us a promotion, or money, or our own prestige, or when we no longer care for or love the person.

Faithfulness is covenanting with another no matter what; standing with another person; pledging ourselves to be always available. The covenant relationship is marked by *hshed*—steadfastness.

Some translations render these words mercy and truth, acknowledging God as the source of all truth. Christ said, "I am the way, the truth, and the light. No one comes to the Father but by me."

Do not forsake truth. *Truth* – Pilate’s question to Jesus, “What is truth?” Now the question is, can we even know the truth.

The virtue of truth as honesty may be in short supply today. “A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article quotes a NAS/Zogby (National Association of Scholars/Zogby International) national poll reporting that ‘nearly three-quarters of those [students] surveyed said professors most often taught them that, “What is right and wrong depends on differences in individual values and cultural diversity.”’ In addition a 2014 survey stated that about 75% of college students admitted to cheating on exams at some point in college. (Academic Cheating Fact Sheet)

Our call as Christians is to a different set of values. We are to know the truth, love the truth, live the truth, etc. So we are to bind ourselves to truth, mercy, loyalty and faithfulness. How do we possess these virtues; how do we follow these virtues – by trusting in God, “Trust in the Lord” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

3. Trust in the Lord

We should place this truth in the midst of our post-modern doubts, in our deconstructionism. God goes before us—in front of our doubts, illuminating our path. For God will grant us understanding, truth, and yes, even wisdom.

Perhaps you noticed that the writer keeps repeating the word “heart” each time. For the Hebrews the heart is not only the seat of emotions but true knowledge. So it is not simply intellectual knowledge but what has moved us at the inner core of our being.

4. Lean not on your own understanding – Do not rely on your own insight

When we try to make sense out of our lives, we often end in a muddle. How complex life can be as we face various choices and decisions, getting along as best we can. For many of us now we are entering the age of integrity, as Erickson called it, where perhaps we have learned how dependent we are on others and on God to do what is necessary. When we are faced with the mystery of life, it is here we “experience the infinite distance of [our] being from that which is the ground of [our] being” as Paul Tillich expresses it.ⁱ Why? Because as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12: “We see through a glass darkly...then face to face.” On our own we are often behind a veil of ignorance.

5. Pursue God’s Wisdom

The last section of our Scripture for this morning is connected with pursuing God’s wisdom—the Truth of Life, the goal of all learning. When we realize the limits of our own insight then we turn to God for wisdom, the Truth of Life. Here we come to the crux of what the whole book of Proverbs is about—God’s wisdom. A marvelous book that illuminates this is *Light in a Spotless Mirror*, edited by James Charlesworth and Michael Daise.ⁱⁱ It is an exposition of how we understand God’s wisdom both in the Jewish wisdom literature and its flowering as *logos* in the Gospel of John. It seems no happenstance that wisdom is personified by the feminine in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and the Jewish Wisdom Scriptures. “She is both ‘a reflection of eternal light’ and ‘a spotless mirror of the working of God.’ She is nothing less than ‘an image of his goodness.’ She passes into human souls ‘and makes them friends of God (Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-27).’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Interestingly, the Johannine writings shift from the feminine *Wisdom* to the masculine *Logos*. Wisdom cannot be synthesized because it is defined by life experience; it does not command but persuades. Wisdom, like Logos, existed before the creation of life and earthly and interstellar space. Both Jesus and

Wisdom symbolize light and mirror. (John 8:12: “I am the light of the world.”) Lady Wisdom is sent into the world as is Jesus, *anōthen* (not only again, but from above).^{iv}

For the Christian, Jesus possesses “all the proper good and true excellency of understanding. Wisdom was a thing that the Greeks admired; but Christ is the true light of the world. It is through him alone that true wisdom is imparted to the mind. It is in and by Christ that we have righteousness. It is by Christ that we have sanctification: we have in him true excellency of heart as well as of understanding and the bestowment of all happiness and glory.”^v

Find Wisdom – The Truth of Life – The Goal of all our Learning as well as of Life

Tillich writes, “It was a confirmation of this vision [of God’s wisdom] for me when a few weeks ago I met some well-known astronomers, physicists, and biologists, and they expressed passionately their conviction that by increasing the knowledge of our world they increased the awareness of the eternal wisdom in the structure of the universe. They rejected a science which gives knowledge without wisdom and a theology which neglects the divine wisdom that shines through man’s knowledge of nature.”^{vi}

This is college Sunday and we should remember that for college students a thirst for knowledge should be preeminent, true scholarship should be pursued, and facts translated into insight. Our knowledge and contributions are important. God gave us minds to use so we can pursue God’s wisdom.

Wisdom can exist even in those who are illiterate which I learned in Brazil in the 1960s as a Presbyterian missionary. We led bible studies in the “mato” (deep forest) in the interior. We taught reading thru reading the Bible since the highest education of most of the people in our area was 3rd grade. However, despite very little formal education, many of these people had wisdom; they saw into the heart of the biblical message. One vivid illustration of this wisdom was from several men in the bible Study group who were converted and wanted to be baptized in our church. The Sunday came and they appeared with their whole family in tow saying they all were ready to be baptized. Since we had never met their families, much less talked about their Christian faith, we were skeptical about this. One husband then cited Acts. 16:33 or was it I Corinthians 1:16 when he said that the Bible teaches, that “he and his whole household were baptized.” So we baptized them all. This concept of the whole household had another interesting application when Tom was baptized in Campinas, Brail. We invited about 7 couples to our house for lunch but instead of 14 people we had over 30 as everyone brought “their whole household” we needed the miracle of loaves and fishes to feed them all.

We must remember that knowledge and wisdom are two different things. T.S. Eliot got it right when he wrote the following lines in “The Rock”:^{vii}

O perpetual revolution of configured stars;
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying! The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness; Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance.
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the Life we have lost in the living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information.

In today's rapid information age, we feel overwhelmed with the amount of data we can obtain with the click of a mouse or iPhone button. How can we assimilate it? I know in my field of bioethics, ethical dilemmas increase with the new scientific discoveries which seem to expand every 2-3 months.

While our knowledge continues to expand, however, our ethics lag behind. As Saul Bellow wrote years ago, we live in an age of moral interregnum where we have used up all the old values without replacing them with new ones. Our knowledge has outstripped our ethics, never mind our theology, which often is stuck in the nineteenth century.

Part of the difficulty is that we confuse knowledge and wisdom—true scholarship contains both—but we often settle for sound bites instead of insights. “Wisdom is present in teachers who are aware of their limits, in dealing both with truth and with their pupils, who ask themselves again and again whether or not wisdom shines through the knowledge they communicate! Wisdom is present in students who ask, in whatever they study, the question of the principles behind it and of its meaning for their lives. Those are wise students who realize both the necessity and the limits of all learning and the superiority of love over knowledge.”^{viii} We have forgotten that God takes the foolishness of the world and makes it wisdom. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:20 says this clearly: “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

So our call is to seek God's wisdom. At any age and stage of learning to go on the uncharted roads, i.e., the road less traveled, as Frost puts it. Trusting in the Lord with all our heart and leaning not on our own understanding; embracing God's wisdom not ours and the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep our minds and hearts in Christ Jesus our Lord.

ⁱ Paul Tillich in Clyde E. Fant and William M. Pinson, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching: an Encyclopedia of Preaching: Vol. 10*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1971), 90.

ⁱⁱ James H. Charlesworth and Michael A. Daise, *Light in a Spotless Mirror: Reflections on Wisdom Traditions in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 2.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 92-96.

^v Jonathan Edwards in Fant and Pinson, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, 70.

^{vi} Paul Tillich in Fant and Pinson, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, 87-88.

^{vii} T.S. Eliot, “The Rock,” *Collected Poems 1901-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970), 146.

^{viii} Tillich in Fant and Pinson, *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, 91.