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God's Twitter: Wisdom for Life Proverbs 1: 8 ff.

We continue this morning with our summer sermon series in Proverbs, “God’s Twitter.” For the next three months we are going to be chewing on little chunks of wisdom found in this ancient book. Last week I challenged you to read one chapter of Proverbs a day for the whole summer. I met one woman in the Starbucks line who said, “I’m reading my Proverbs.” How many are doing so? Great!

Today, we are going to talk about how we pour wisdom into the lives of our young people. To get us started, I thought I’d interview someone who has been doing just that for decades, now. Doug Burleigh is a Presbyterian pastor and a member of this congregation, along with his wonderful wife, Debbie. Doug has been involved in a number of different ministries throughout his career but one in particular is very dear to him.

Fifteen years ago, God gave Doug a vision to reach the next generation of leadership in Russia. Working with the Billy Graham Crusade in Russia shortly after the fall of communism, Doug gathered together in Omsk, a city in western Siberia, 300 young people from the 15 new countries of the former Soviet Union and spent a week with them focusing on the marching orders that Jesus gave his disciples. Out of that week 10 groups of young people were formed and sent back to their countries with the goal of living faithfully Jesus’ way. Today, these groups have expanded and are having an impact for the Kingdom of God in all of the former Soviet countries. Doug returns to Russia several times each year to teach and encourage hundreds of young leaders to the work of Christ.

Doug, in the course of your lifetime you have come to know scores of influential political and religious leaders from across the world. Yet you chose to focus your ministry in the former Soviet Union on young people. Why is that?

You travel to Russia several times a year for training and encouragement. What are you training them to do?

How are these young leaders living out their faith in their everyday lives? Can you give examples? What is the ripple effect of this ministry?

We’re studying the book of Proverbs. This book is primarily addressed to young people, seeking to provide them with wisdom for skillful living. What words of wisdom would you offer to the young believers who are gathered for worship here this morning?

Turn to our text for the morning... Proverbs 1:8. But just keep your finger there. How would we sum up the purpose of Proverbs in one word? Wisdom. Wisdom is the skill for living. It’s the ability to take what you know and put it into practice in the right way at the right time with the right attitude. But before he even writes a single proverb, he tells us the key to wise living. Do you remember what it is? V. 7: “The fear of the lord is the beginning of knowledge...” The key to Proverbs...the key to wise living...is the fear of the Lord. It is acknowledging that God is God, that he has the right to tell us how to live and, ultimately, it is about a word that we hate; **submission**. When we really submit to God’s authority in every area of our lives, then we will be living wisely.

But **assuming** that we are doing that...assuming that we are ready say, “You are God, I stand in awe of you, I bow before your authority in my life,” ...what is the next thing we must do to become wise? What verb? If you hope to become a wiser person, what must you be willing...and happy...and eager to do?

Well, we discover it in the very first word of verse 8. Do you see it? “Listen!” What is that word in Hebrew? Mexico men, what is that word in Hebrew! Yes! “Shema!” It is the same word that starts the most important verse in the Jewish faith. “Shema Israel...Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.” After his introduction, Solomon’s very first word is a word that is going to make every Jewish reader sit up and take notice! Shema! Listen!

Do you want to be a wise person? Do you want to live skillfully? The most important thing you can do is to fear the Lord. The next most important thing you can do is listen! Really learn to listen. The ability to listen...really listen, not just hear... is the single most important skill you can develop if you want to live wisely. Husbands, do you want to have a wise marriage? Learn to listen! Employees, do you want to have a wise career? Listen! Really listen to what your boss is saying. Bosses, do you want to have a wise career? Listen...really listen to what your employees are saying.

By Wednesday night, we had finalized the budget to be presented to the Session the next night. I thought were done. But Thursday morning, one of our staff leaders came back to me and said, “I really don’t have peace in my spirit about this; I think we can do better. Will you let me work on it for an hour and bring you a proposal?” I said yes. Later, we had a special meeting, she made her case...and persuaded me... and we changed direction...because we really listened to her wise counsel.

Are you a good listener? **Listening is not just not-talking so that someone else can talk.** Often, we treat the time that someone else is talking as an opportunity for us to prepare our next response. **We aren’t listening; we’re reloading!** But the ability to really shut up...really focus in...really pay attention to what is being said ...really try to understand where they are coming from... it is the greatest wisdom tool in life.

But there are a lot of voices in this world. To whom do we listen? Solomon starts with what the most important voices in every person’s life: **“Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction...”** If Proverbs is primarily a parenting guide, we shouldn’t be surprised to hear that dad is the lead instructor. The Bible, from beginning to end, portrays the father as having primary responsibility for spiritual and moral leadership in his family. That is one of the key principles of Men’s Life; men must step up to their God-given call to servant leadership within their family. **And our unwillingness to lead our families spiritually is one of the most common male deficiencies.** Just like our first father, Adam, we tend to go passive. We pull back. We ignore our spiritual responsibilities to our wives and to our children.

So, to the fathers and grandfathers here this morning, I would simply ask this: when was the last time you spoke words of spiritual wisdom into your children’s lives? When we got back from Mexico, I decided to find out if Cooper knew what the greatest commandment was. So one night when I was tucking him in, I asked him. “Cooper, what is the greatest commandment.” He knew it...and we talked about it. Now that is not the same thing as saying, “How was your day, Son?” That kind of a conversation is intentional. It intentionally turns the hearts and minds of our children towards God and God’s way of living.

So, men, I will ask it again: when was the last time you had an intentional spiritual conversation with your children? When was the last time you initiated a conversation about something you were learning in your Bible study or at church? Or when was the last time you brought up a situation at work that was disturbing and asked them what they would have done in that situation? Or listened as they told you about something that happened at school and then turned the conversation towards a spiritual principle?

Dads...grandpas...you have no idea the spiritual influence you wield. Even if you don't do a very smooth job of it, if you will try...if you will just try to speak words of spiritual wisdom into the lives of your kids...you have no idea the difference it will make in their futures. **One more time, then: men, when was the last time you had an intentional spiritual discussion with your children or grandchildren?** Will you promise yourself right now that you will initiate such a conversation before the day's end?

Now, it's no surprise...given the male-dominated society of Solomon's time...that the father would be named as a provider of wisdom. In those days, it was the son who carried on the family tradition and it was the father who was primarily responsible for preparing his son to face the world...which makes the next half of the verse so astounding; "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction...and **do not forsake your mother's teaching!** They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck."

Do not forsake your mother's teaching? Do you realize how revolutionary that was? One commentator claims that this inclusion of the "mother's teaching" as essential in the moral upbringing of a child was almost nonexistent in other wisdom literature of the time. Yet Solomon says it twice. Moms and grandmas, you, too, have an essential and irreplaceable role to play. You, too, have a unique perspective on wise living. Ideally, then, it is the father and mother... together... in spiritual stereo... speaking spiritual wisdom and instruction into their children's lives. Ideally, it is the combination of male and female perspectives that provides balanced, wise instruction for life.

But what if it isn't ideal? What if mom is a single parent? Or a widow? How do we provide stereo wisdom in that case? Here, beloved, is where the Church steps in. Here is where we can come alongside single parents and say, "We want to help you speak wisdom into the life of your kids." We do it when we teach Sunday School. We do it when our Men's Life groups signs up as in our Middle School program. And we do it one by one.

Sheila Mischke, our wonderful Mission's Director, lost her husband, Hal, earlier this year. Her Rachel is a senior facing all of the things that a senior faces plus the loss of her daddy. Two weeks ago, a Chapel Hill man invited Rachel to go to Ben and Jerry's. He listened as Rachel shared all of the "pressure points" in her life right now as she prepares to graduate...all with the added layer of complex emotions because of the absence of her dad. After listening for a long time, this said, "Rachel...do you know what the work of God is?" After a couple of guesses, he quoted Jesus from John: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." Then they talked about what it meant to believe in Jesus and His promises. When Rachel returned home, she was full of peace and joy...and the new wisdom that this man spoke into her life. One of the greatest privileges we have as church members is the chance we have to play spiritual parents to each other's children. My kids love Jesus because Cyndi and I taught them to. But my kids also love Jesus because you...hundreds of you...taught them to, as well. Thank you!

You might say to me, "Pastor Mark, this text is directed more to the children than the parents. As long as you are telling us to speak into their lives, why don't you tell them to listen?" All right, kids...listen to your parents! How's that? Seriously, kids... listen to your parents. It is good for you! But here's the deal, parents: most kids today don't listen because most parents don't speak. Not this way. We tell them what to do. We talk at them or past them. We ask about superficial matters. But too many parents today fail to speak intentional wisdom into their children's lives.

Chap Clark, Fuller Seminary Professor in Youth Ministry, says that although "everyone" thinks peers are the most dominant influence in a youth's life, his experience/research shows that the most important influence in kids' lives are...wait for it... their parents. The second most important influence are what he calls "committed adults" ...like the guy who took Rachel for ice cream and listened, talked and cared, *and* like the wonderful grown-ups who are working in our youth ministries at CHPC.

Let me say this as clearly as I can parents. There is no one who will have more influence in your kids' lives than you...if you leverage your influence wisely. Your kids are wired by God to want to hear from you; to learn from you. Now, you can certainly squander that by ignoring them or by being a hypocrite or by lecturing so much that you never take the time to listen to them. But if you are wise in how you speak wisdom into your children's lives, you will change their lives, forever.

Sermon Discussion Questions

1. As a reminder, why is 1:7 the key to understanding all of proverbs?
2. Pastor Mark argues that, assuming 1:7, 1:8 is the next most important verse for wise living. Why?
3. How do you define the first word of that verse? Describe why we can hear and not really listen. On a scale of 1-10, how gifted are you at listening? Why?
4. Think back to your childhood. Can you give examples of how either or both of your parents spoke wisdom into your life? If so, what was the impact on you? If not, why not? And what have you had to do to overcome that deficit?
5. Pastor Mark spoke of the two most important influences upon kids. What were they? (Parents and then "Committed Adults") How well have you leveraged your influence as a parent? What could you do to improve upon that if you view it as deficient?
6. How would you define "Committed Adult?" Have you ever filled that role in the life of a young person? Describe. If not, how might God use you in that way?