

“How Do I Make Life Work? Pursue Wisdom...”

A couple of years ago I wanted to learn more about digital photography. I already had a digital camera so I went to a bookstore to find a book to help me out and it was perplexing, so many books, so complicated, so confusing! Until I found one book that did the trick. Can you guess what it was called? **Digital Photography for Dummies**. Pretty amazing stuff.

It's very interesting to me how this series of books has taken off. It started in 1991 with the book *DOS for Dummies*. And from that point on it just exploded. These self-education books are being bought up by people like you and me who want to know more about a particular subject. There are over 1,000 different titles with new ones coming out all the time. There are about 150 million dummies books in print--it's amazing. I went to Amazon.com and checked out a few of the titles. *Chemistry for Dummies, World History for Dummies, Dog Training for Dummies, Wine for Dummies, Meditation for Dummies, EBay for Dummies, Gardening for Dummies, Feng Shui for Dummies, Bioinformatics for Dummies [I don't even know what that is!], MySpace for Dummies, Dating for Dummies, Relationships for Dummies and even Sex for Dummies*.

What is the deal? Why are these so popular? One customer said, “I buy them because they take the intimidation out of the learning process. Whatever the subject matter, they spell it out to me in simple terms. They make the complex understandable, so that even a regular guy like me can ‘get it.’”

Well, the same thing is true about the book of Proverbs in the Bible. It takes the ageless, priceless wisdom of God himself and makes it understandable and accessible to regular people like us. You don't have to have a seminary degree to grasp it. It doesn't have a whole bunch of theological jargon. It's the most down-to-earth book in the Bible. Proverbs puts important truths for everyday life right there at eye-level so we can all reach them.

Today we're starting a brand new message series called “Making Life Work.” It's going to be a journey into the book of Proverbs and I'm excited. Because I've discovered this practical book of the Bible all over again and how it speaks to you and me about living lives today that work.

Take out your notes and studyguides...

Before we get into this we need to understand that the Proverbs are **not** promises, we need to remember that, instead they tell us how life really works. They point out that, generally speaking, people who are godly, moral, hardworking, and wise will intersect with lots of rewards. How did the writers of Proverbs know this? Well, they learned it from a lifetime of experience. They were people like you and me who sought to walk with God, who tried to pursue wisdom, who fouled up and learned a few hard lessons. They saw the successes and failures of others and wrote down what they learned so that they could share them with others—with you and me.

And this is practical stuff. Check this out. **“A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing” (Proverbs 20:4, NIV)**. You don't plow, you don't eat! How about this one, **“The Lord abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight” (Proverbs 11:1, NIV)**. The Lord hates cheating and loves honesty.

Proverbs is this powerful book where we find the wisdom of God laid out clearly in ways that ring in our ears, and stretch our minds, and strengthen our souls.

Proverbs is about teaching us wisdom. But what is wisdom? Here's a working definition: **Wisdom is what is true and right combined with good judgment**. Other words in the Bible that relate to wisdom are discerning, judicious, prudent, sensible. These may not be very glamorous words, but listen, they are words you can build a life on.

The first section of Proverbs has a central theme, and that theme is: **pursue wisdom**. It's written from a father's perspective as he instructs his sons. He says, **“Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention...Get wisdom, get understanding...Do not forsake wisdom...Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding” (Proverbs 4:1-11, NIV, excerpts)**.

In verse after verse the father calls his children to seek wisdom and then he tells them why...Because it pays off in the end! **“Happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding, for wisdom**

is better than silver, and her revenue is better than gold. [Wisdom] is more precious than jewels...Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor..." (Proverbs 3:13-17, NIV).

According to this, people who arrange their lives around the goal of gaining God's wisdom will receive rewards that go beyond anything they can imagine! You think you want silver? Wisdom is better! You think you want gold? Wisdom is better! You think you fame, fortune, achievement, power? Wisdom is better!

There are so many people who don't have dazzling talents, or awesome credentials or charismatic personalities but they've have succeeded in industry, government, academia, the church. How did they do it? They handled themselves wisely over a long time. They applied the wisdom of God that we can find here in Proverbs. Wisdom about taking initiative (which is what we're going to talk about next week), wisdom in speaking the truth in love, managing anger, cultivating compassion.

Unfortunately people with true wisdom are becoming more and more rare. One example is the businessman who said that his business was going so well that he couldn't hire salespeople fast enough to take all the orders coming in to his company. "The only problem," he said, "is that so many of my new sales people act weird."

"What do you mean by weird?"

"Well, they do stupid things and get themselves in trouble. They shoot themselves in the foot. They don't show up on time. They don't call the people waiting to hear from them. They don't charge fair prices. They don't treat people courteously. They don't admit mistakes when they make them. They don't cooperate with their co-workers. They just act weird and eventually I have to fire them! They could be building a successful career, establishing financial security...Instead they force me to let them go. I'm not asking a lot, but how can I tolerate wierdness?"

You see, this man's bottom-line complaint is that he can't find enough wise people. The wisdom of God gives us a navigational system that will keep us steering in the right direction. Proverbs 2:11-13 says, **"Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked [people], from [those] whose words are perverse, who leave the straight paths to walk in dark ways" (Proverbs 2:11-13, NIV).** Wisdom, God's wisdom, offers us direction for a life that works!

To get us ready for this journey into making life work we need to get on the same page with some definitions. The writers of Proverbs say that the opposite of wisdom is foolishness and that the opposite of a wise person is a fool. Now, today the word fool sometimes means somebody with low intelligence, but that's not what it meant in Proverbs. In biblical usage a fool could have a very high I.Q. and be successful. What makes them foolish is that they ignore God's wisdom and often end up in ruin.

Folly is what the Bible calls the actions of a fool. The Bible doesn't pad the truth here. It warns that the path of the fool is a downward spiral that just creates more folly and ends in destruction. For example, **"The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise [person] listens to advice" (12:15).** And, **"a fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control" (29:11).** Or, **"A wise [person] ...shuns evil, but a fool is hotheaded and reckless" (14:16).**

I went looking for a video illustration of foolishness and for some reason I came upon this from *Talladega Nights; The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. **[VIDEO: Ricky Driving blindfolded, 60 seconds].**

That's pretty funny stuff! But there are some stories we hear about foolishness that are so sad they make us cry. Those times when people make bad decisions that make life hard, that waste precious time or money. Foolish decisions we make that hurt people we love, that cause us to lose sleep, friends, jobs. Foolish decisions that tear apart families, burn up hopes and dreams, riddle people with guilt and shame.

Foolishness makes life hard. You know it and I know it. Just ask the single mom whose husband foolishly decided to leave her for another woman. Or the couple who decided it was O.K. to live beyond their incomes, to have luxuries they couldn't afford, and ended up losing their cars and their home...their dignity. Then there is the man who could never control his temper. He chose to let his anger out on anybody who crossed his path, including his boss. That foolish decision cost him his job.

Foolishness is no laughing matter. Because when we give in to foolishness life doesn't work. It makes life hard, lonely, bitter, empty. But that's not the way God wants it. Jesus said that he came so that we could have life and have it to its fullest (John 10:10)! He offers that fullness of life, a life that works, but we have to do our part. And our part is to pursue wisdom, God's wisdom.

You know, it almost seems like we have a definite tendency toward foolishness! Almost like we're born with it! How many of us have been playing in a sandbox with our kids and watched in horror as they all of the sudden take a big fist full of sand and dump it in their mouth?! Yuck! Why do they do that? Curiosity? Are they hungry and there's the sand? It's really a simple gratification of an impulse.

Parents and teachers, Proverbs tells us that we have the responsibility of methodically imparting wisdom to their kids and driving foolishness out of them!

You see, what the Bible teaches us in the Old and New Testaments, in the writings in Proverbs and teachings of Jesus is that the foolish gratification of impulses will lead to a sick society. We see people gratifying their sexual impulses by engaging in promiscuous sex and adultery; we see people acting out twisted desires for power through rape, child sexual abuse and domestic violence. We see people trying to have what isn't theirs through embezzlement, stealing, cheating in school and fraud. We see impulse buying, which leads to indebtedness and financial ruin. We see people making impulsive commitments they don't keep and wrecking relationships.

Proverbs says that this is nothing but childish folly and that it's time for us to grow up and follow the path of wisdom **because then life can really work!**

Bill Hybels, the inspiration for this message series, tells about a time he was stranded in an airport for most of a day. He struck up a conversation with a man in the waiting area and the guy was furious at God because he thought that God had given him more than his fair share of pain in life. The guy poured out his life story to Hybels and he listened very carefully.

The man blamed God for everything that had gone wrong in his life. When the guy was finished, Hybels said, "Wow, that's quite a story, but could I ask you a couple of questions? You said your former wife turned into a horrible, evil person. I wonder what your relationship with her was like before she turned evil. How did you treat her? Were you good to her? Were you faithful to her? Or did you, perhaps, do some stupid things that might have added a little bit to the demise of your marriage?" He admitted that he had done a few stupid things.

Then Hybels asked, "And about your tens of thousands of dollars of debt and your tax problems with the government—a simple question here. Did you ever let your spending get a little out of hand? Did you ever spend more than you earned? Did you ever buy anything foolishly or impulsively?" He admitted that he had.

Then Hybels said, "Now you're frustrated because no one will give you a job. Just a question. Were you a model employee? If I called your last three employers, would they be sorry about losing an employee as great as you?" Well, he'd been fired from his last job because he had lost his temper a few times and told his boss where to go!

That's when Hybels told that man that he was a pastor. Hybels said, "I don't think it's fair to blame God for any of the problems you're blaming him for. The Bible says, 'If you sow folly, you will reap heartbreak.' It seems to me that you've sown plenty of folly, and now you're getting a predictable return. My counsel is to enroll in the school of wisdom today." Hopefully that man did.

That's what we're going to be doing in this sermon series...enrolling in the school of wisdom. In fact, I had two people contact me this week whose lives are in deep crisis mode, their lives just aren't working and I know that their stories are just the tip of the iceberg. As I talked to both of them it just broke my heart. Maybe life just isn't working for you, or maybe it's going OK but you know it could be better. Let's enroll in the school of wisdom together so that we can make life work.

Do you want to begin the process of acquiring something that's worth more than gold? We start by gaining the knowledge that there's a God who is powerful and personal and head over heels in love with each and every one of us! A God who has extended his hand of forgiveness to us through Jesus Christ. He says, "Come on, take that hand, and I'll help you make your life work!" That's where we start.

I wish the Bible didn't use words like folly and fool because I don't really like to think of myself as a fool, but sometimes I am. In the past I've made bad decisions about relationships, I've wasted time and money on foolish things, I've been careless with people's hearts, I've said things that wounded others. And I've paid the price every time. But I know that enrolling in the school of wisdom has paid off. There are lots of potholes and traps I've avoided because of God's wisdom.

In what areas are you foolish, prone to folly? Do you lose your temper easily? Do you shave the edges of legality in the marketplace? Do you have relational problems? Do you not work or study as hard as you should? Do you spend money on frivolous extras? Are you undisciplined? Do you lie or shade the truth? Are you proud, glad that you're not like certain other people? Do you struggle with sexual temptations? Then enroll in the school of wisdom. Over the next several weeks we will enroll together and let God change our lives.

We're at the beginning of an adventure in growth. The messages we're going to encounter together are full of wisdom, not because of my words and thoughts, but because they are full of truths from God's heart. I hope for all of us that this series will mark a time in our lives when we turned from folly to wisdom and found treasure that is better than gold.

And for today that is the Good News! In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am deeply thankful for Bill Hybels book on Proverbs "Making Life Work" which has been the inspiration and a great resource for this series.