

“Living Shrewdly”
Proverbs 1:2-7; Job 38:34-37;
Matthew 15:10-30

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You should be shrewd. That idea of shrewdness is not one that I often think about in relationship to scripture. And yet, as we’ve been working our way through the prologue of Proverbs and seeing how the thoughts play out throughout, in the very first little bit we heard the prologue talk about wisdom as wise dealings, justice, righteousness, and equity. Then the very next verse, it says “teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young.” Part of encountering wisdom is to be taught shrewdness and to have knowledge and prudence.

The first piece of that is “teach” and as I try to understand a passage I often think about the words that are used and I recognize that the words that are translated there are words that started out in Hebrew. So there is sometimes a little help in looking back and seeing what kinds of connotations some of those Hebrew words might have had.

So I started with the word “teach.” I found a very joyful way of thinking about teaching. One of the definitions for “teach” was “the gracious bestowal.” That is the idea that when somebody teaches, we are receiving a gift that is given. As the gift of wisdom is taught to us, there’s a certain grace that is bestowed on us. I just thought that was a wonderful way of thinking about teaching.

Then it goes on: teach about “shrewdness.” So I looked up what shrewdness is all about. There is this idea of perceptiveness, astuteness, being able to see a situation for what’s really happening.

“...to the simple.” We’ll get back to that.

Then it goes on to talk about “knowledge and prudence to the young.” Knowledge. When I think of knowledge, I just think of facts. You just have to have a set of facts. But in the word behind it, it really is more about having the ability to discern, to tell the difference, to be able to use what you know or what you perceive. So if we’re shrewd enough to be able to perceive what’s going on, we will be able to use that to think about it and come up with some kind of knowledge.

To have prudence is to have forethought, to be able to think ahead. What is the result of what I’m saying or thinking?

So I can see how this might work in a relationship. Maybe a father and a son are talking together. Maybe we have ancient Hebrew folks in the time of Jesus—say, Isaac and Jacob. Isaac is the father and Jacob is the son.

Jacob comes to his father and says, “Father, why is it so hard to figure out what is the right thing to do? It just doesn’t seem like it

should be so hard. It should be simple. We should just be able to know what's right."

The father turns to him and says, "Our wisdom tradition suggests we have to work at it. We have to think and pay attention to what's there. We have to be shrewd, to have astuteness and perceptiveness. We have to learn to think about it and create the knowledge we need to think ahead, to have prudence and forethought."

Jacob says, "Father, that seems kind of complex. It's hard. I have great opinions. Why can't I just tell people what those are?"

His father says, "Well, here's what our tradition says about that. Proverbs 18:2 says "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing their personal opinion."

I don't know how this conversation between father and son would go after that, but it's interesting what the wisdom tradition is teaching. It goes on in Proverbs 15:32: "Those who ignore instruction despise themselves, but those who heed admonition gain understanding." As much as there are times when I don't want to have to learn anything new, the tradition is suggesting it's valuable. Those who heed admonition gain understanding.

Proverbs 15:14: The mind and heart of one who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feed on folly. It feels like this tradition is inviting us to recognize that some of this takes an ongoing work of understanding, of allowing ourselves to be instructed, to learn from the situations and from the scriptures, to let God's voice continue to speak into our lives.

So maybe Isaac would have said something like that to Jacob. We might go on and think how he might have continued that teaching.

He might have said something like, "You know, Jacob, that in our tradition there was a really wise king names Solomon and he used this very thing. He was able to perceive from situations what was going on and then come to a knowledge and have foresight to see what might happen.

"You might remember the story about two women who came to him. The child of one of them had died and now the women were arguing about whose child remained alive. They came to Solomon for him to decide who should have the child. Do you remember what Solomon did? He must have perceived what was going on to some extent. There maybe was a slight difference in the way the women presented their stories. He said to the guard standing there, 'It seems fair that if both these women want this baby we

give each of them half, so let's cut this baby in half and give half to each.' One woman stood back and nodded her agreement. The other jumped in front of the baby and said, "No! Give the baby to her and save its life.' That, of course, is when Solomon said, 'Now I know who the real mother is.' He used that ability to discern to create the knowledge he needed and he had the foresight to make a good decision."

"Father, I've heard that story a hundred times. That was Solomon. He was a great king. He was really wise. I'm not Solomon and I never will be."

"Still, son, I think there are places in your own life where it might have worked. Can you remember last summer when you were with Esau and Nathan, and you all were sitting on the side of the field looking over at Mel's watermelons? Now, Mr. Mel loves his watermelons, but Esau was trying to get you guys to go and steal one. Remember what Nathan did? Nathan walked away. He said, "No way! I'm getting out of here.'

"But you stayed and listened to Esau as he said things like, 'Are you going to be a chicken like Nathan and walk away? I double-dare you to go get one of those watermelons. I bet you can't do it. I bet you're too afraid.'

"Now how could you have applied this to what was going on there? You could have stopped and looked at the situation and maybe wondered why Esau was so eager to get YOU to go get the watermelon, what it was that he was trying to do, how he was asking you to take all the risk and let him reap all the benefit. Maybe you could have thought then about our tradition and what it tells us about stealing and you could have put those two together and come up with a good idea about what you should do—follow Nathan.

"Now I came along just in time, overhead what was happening, and got you out of there. But what would have happened if you had stolen that watermelon? Do you have the foresight to know? Do you have the prudence to know what would have happened had you stolen it?"

"Maybe nothing."

"Maybe, this time. But you know if you had been caught, there are real consequences. And you know Mel would have been so sad. And if you hadn't been caught and you thought it was something you could do again, it would have been worse the next

time. You see, this really does apply to our lives, in our daily walk through them.”

“All right. I kinda see it.”

It’s the attitude I have sometimes, too. I kinda see it. If I have to.

But I don’t think it stops with these passages in Proverbs. I think our story of Jesus today is about the same thing. He says what’s inside is what matters. The decisions we make and the words we say are what matter. The way we live our lives matters.

Do you notice what the very next thing that happens is? Something comes out of him about how he’s living his life. He says, “I think I’m just here for the children of Israel,” and then he calls the Canaanite woman a dog. This is what he grew up with. This is part of who his community was. This is what they understood. But what happens to him? I think he’s astute. He notices something. He notices something that’s more important than what he’s learned from his community. He notices that she has faith, and that’s what’s important. He recognizes her faith. He is able to assess the situation. He’s able to take that situation and see that what he had learned from his community needed to be modified because he had met a woman of faith who was a Gentile. I think he saw what that meant, because if we go on a little bit, after he does the healing for her, does it say he only healed the people of Israel who came to him? It says they brought the lame, people who were mute, all kinds of people. He makes no distinction; he heals them all.

He is the one we learn from. I think he’s showing us this very thing: how we pay attention, how we discern from paying attention, how it works with God’s way of leading us. What’s important to God is faith, trust, a willingness to come.

It’s interesting, that idea of teaching the simple. It could be “open-minded” and youth could also mean “naive.” Which means there has to be this openness to allow God to teach us. I think we see Jesus being open enough to see something new, to recognize God at work, and how God would be at work through him. It’s the same thing we are asked to do, to see how God might be at work and how God might be at work through us because the foundation of it all is our awe of God.

So the question is, of course, am I more like Jacob and not want to try? Do I think it’s too hard? Am I just tired? Or can I hear this guidance that asks us to pay attention to what’s going on around us, to think about and discern how it fits in what God would call us to be and do, to see what it means to do it, and to live it out?

Are we shrewd, discerning, prudent? It’s part of following Jesus, I think. We have a God who will help us as we try to do what he calls us to do. It just feels so easy to say, “God, you do it all.” Here it feels again that we are called to be part of what God is doing and to let him lead us through this way of being into the fullness of life. Amen.