

“Living and Learning”

Proverbs 1:1-7; James 1:5-8

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The only evidence of life is growth, according to Thomas Scott. If this is true, and I believe it is, how alive are you? What do you know about God, life and yourself that you did not know a year ago or last week? What difference has it made in your life?

Perhaps one reason I like Proverbs so much is that it promotes growth. You cannot read it without confronting the need to learn.

Proverbs is a part of the Old Testament known as Wisdom Literature. It contains the teachings and writings of some of Israel’s wisest people, including Solomon. It is comprised of short and simple statements that relate to behavior and relationships.

Proverbs is a book about life that exalts wisdom, the content and goal of the sage’s teachings. According to them, wisdom is the art of good living. It is a practical word that refers to the skillful mastery of life. A wise person is one that knows how to pilot safely through the confusing experiences of life.

Our text this morning reveals several things about wisdom that I wish to highlight and the first is this. **Acquiring wisdom is a life-long process.** “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” Solomon wrote.

“Beginning” has a dual meaning. It refers to the starting point of a journey and the foundation of a building. Both imply that more is to come.

I wish that acquiring wisdom were instantaneous and automatic. Last week I talked about the toll that aging takes upon our bodies. Wouldn’t it be nice if knowledge and wisdom naturally accompanied the loss of hearing and eyesight? How happy we would be if smart pills really existed. I don’t think they do, though. I have heard of medicine that enhances memory, but none that increases knowledge.

Acquiring wisdom requires a lot of effort and reflection all our lives. None is too old to learn or wise to become wiser. There is no limit to learning and as long as we are here, we need to be expanding our horizons and understanding. How do we do this?

This process begins, according to Solomon, when we realize that we don’t know everything and at times lack the discipline to act upon what we do know. “A fool despises wisdom and discipline,” the sage tells us. Our individual experiences and power alone cannot meet the challenges of life. They are too great and only a fool would deny this. We must look beyond ourselves for insight, understanding and ability to pilot through confusing experiences.

It was with great sadness that I read of the recent death of M. Scott Peck, the best-selling author of The Road Less Traveled. He was a writer-psychiatrist who helped popularize self-help books with a spiritual dimension. I especially appreciated and valued his words about the need to learn and grow. “I make no distinction between the mind and the spirit and therefore no distinction between the process of achieving spiritual growth and achieving mental growth,” wrote Peck. The need to grow was a theme of Peck’s writing and he placed that responsibility upon each of his readers.

So where do we look in order to learn and grow? “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Solomon knew where to look, didn’t he? For him, wisdom began with a deep-seated reverence for and recognition of the holiness of God. It is to acknowledge that God’s way of living, arranging priorities, relating to others, handling problems, conflicts, challenges and temptations is best. It is to seek His heart, mind and will when making decisions and ask for His help to follow where He leads.

Why would a person turn to God to make sound decisions and right choices? Do you recall that 1950’s television show starring Jane Wyatt and Robert Young, “Father Knows Best?” It was a show about a family that lived in a dream world where children’s problems were always solved in thirty minutes because their parents were so wise and capable. To be sure, that world existed only on television. Most problems take longer than thirty minutes to resolve and no parent has all the right answers.

However, I can say without reservation that our heavenly Father truly knows best and will lead His children in the right direction. He can be trusted to help us overcome challenges and problems so we can live up to our potential. The God that created the world knows best how to live in it. Trust Him.

He is also anxious to help us along our journey. James has been referred to as the Proverbs of the New Testament. Listen to what he writes about this subject.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think that he will receive anything from the Lord. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does” James 1:5-8.

My favorite part of James’ advice focuses upon God’s eagerness to grant wisdom “without finding fault.” He does not scold us for not knowing, get frustrated over us asking the same question repeatedly or rebuke us for not taking His advice previously. Like a responsible, patient and loving parent, He gently teaches and guides. I think this attitude and style of teaching inspire the confidence in God that James demands.

How does God teach us? I think He does so in a variety of ways because I think He uses every opportunity to help us learn the art of good living. He speaks to us through the lives of those in the Bible as we analyze their relationships with Him and others and the consequences of their decisions. He does the same as we observe the actions of those around us. I’ve always appreciated the quip, “Anyone can learn from his or her own mistakes. Wise is the person that can learn from the mistakes of others.” How true!

There is no doubt that God speaks to us through our own experiences. I’ve come to a deeper understanding of life after reviewing decisions and absorbing the consequences. As a matter of fact, I consider no experience a waste or failure if it teaches me something about life that I did not know.

Dr. Marvin Tate, an Old Testament scholar, says that wisdom is both learned and received. Certainly we grow by examining others’ lives but there are times when God teaches us apart from any experience, our own or others. He speaks through His still, small voice and we hear and respond. These times are precious. I have a feeling that God wishes they were more frequent than they are.

If the only evidence of life is growth, how alive are you? What do you know about God, life and yourself that you did not know a week ago? Who is your role model for learning and growing?

One of my role models is Jackie’s dad. He passed away five years ago at the age of eighty-six. He was the youngest eighty-six year old I knew.

One of his many traits that I admired was his insatiable curiosity about life. He loved to learn.

He expanded his vocabulary by learning a new word each day. I shall never forget the day I walked into his home and he asked me if I knew what balderdash meant. Of course, I did not so he proceeded to tell me. It was his new word for that day.

When he was sixty-five, he bought an electronic organ and learned to play it. At the age of seventy he took up golf. Around his table for coffee breaks or meal times, he opened the discussion about religion, politics and the latest in current events. What a great role model he was for Jackie, our children and me.

For whom are you a role model for living and learning? If you were to tell your family around the lunch table today one thing you know about life that you did not know last week, what would it be? Just how alive are you?