Ready to Listen

First in the series,**“God’s Word: Guide for Daily Life”**

# Scripture: Prov. 1:1-19

# Key idea: If we are willing to listen, the Bible will help us build wholesome lives today.

# Intro:

If you were to choose keywords to describe American culture, the words action and accomplishment come immediately to mind. We are a culture that likes to keep moving and get things done.

In contrast, one of the keywords that described ancient Hebrew culture was wisdom. A group of books from the Old Testament are commonly grouped together under the title, “wisdom literature.” These include, Job, numerous Psalms especially Psalm 1 and Psalm 119, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. The heart of this literature is the book of Proverbs. The goal of the wisdom tradition is to help us learn how to live well, successfully and wisely.

Instruction in how to live wisely is certainly something we could use in contemporary America. Yet we very seldom read the book of Proverbs. Most of our Bible reading is in the New Testament. Certainly the New Testament is a great place to read. But Proverbs is a treasure trove of wisdom for everyday life. So I’d like us to take a few moments this morning to dig into Proverbs chapter 1 and see what it has to teach us.

# One purpose of the Bible is to give wisdom.

The first thing I want us to grasp at the very beginning of chapter 1 of the book of Proverbs is the purpose statement that Solomon is giving us. It is a purpose statement for his writing and teaching. But I think it could be more than that. By implication, I believe we can apply this same purpose statement to the Bible as a whole. If I were to ask you, “What was God’s purpose in giving us the Bible?” How would you reply? There’s undoubtedly more than one right answer to that question. In fact I think there are several huge purposes that God had in mind in putting his story together through the various authors, a story that has resulted in our Bible – 66 books written over many centuries but all telling one coherent story.

## Key purposes of the Bible

God has at least three key purposes for giving us the Bible

* Revelation of Himself -- This would be my first purpose for the Bible. Without the multifaceted story that the Bible relays to us, we would not know who God is. But since we have the Bible we do know about our heavenly Father.
* Knowledge of the way of salvation -- The second purpose that I would note is that the Bible has been given to us in order that we might be saved. The Bible reveals to us that as a human family we were alienated from our creator. Without the Bible, we would have no way to know how to bridge the gap between us and God. But because of the stories that have been passed down to us by the sacred writers, we know that God is been at work for hundreds of years to provide for us a way of salvation, a way of reconciliation, a way to draw near to God.
* Wisdom for living – this would be my third reason why God has given us the Bible. God is interested in the human race. This conclusion comes from these verses in the book of Proverbs, the purpose of which, according to Solomon is:

 for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight;
for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
doing what is right and just and fair; Prov 1:2-3

So God wants us to live successfully, wholesomely and harmoniously upon the earth that he has created. He realizes that if we are left to our own devices we are unable to achieve that goal. The Bible is part of his instruction for us, instruction about love, wisdom, holiness, what is right and just and fair, in order that we might live together well and care for the world that he is created.

James in the New Testament also believed that we needed wisdom from God in order to live well together in society.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.
James 3:13-18 NIV

## Who can get wisdom from the Bible?

According to Proverbs 1, four groups of people specifically profit by learning wisdom from God through God’s Word.

* Simple - this refers to those whom we would call naive, not worldly wise, not experienced in life who need instruction and warnings.
* The young - Hebrew poetry is developed by parallelism and the young are referred to in parallel with the simple. Most but not all of the simple are the young in age. Certainly, those who are young especially profit from biblical wisdom.
* The wise - Solomon expects that those who already make decisions well based on knowledge of principles and experience will improve even more as they read and take to heart biblical teaching.
* The discerning - The word used in parallel to the wise are those who are discerning. This word refers to persons who are smart and knowledgeable. This usage emphasizes the fact that one can be knowledgeable without being wise. So it is very important to add wisdom to our knowledge.

## What does Solomon mean by wisdom?

We should ask what kinds of things Solomon thinks are gained by his wisdom. He lists some of them in this Proverbs 1.

* How to live prudently. The Hebrew word means to behave in ways that cause us to prosper, to have success and to act circumspectly or properly as well.
* Doing what is right and just and fair - The parallel line in the Hebrew poetry lists these three explanations. Here’s what it means to live prudently to Solomon. It means that we are doing the righteous things (the right things), that we’re working for justice and that we are doing what is fair to others.
* More learning for the wisest -- I’ve already mentioned that Solomon expected that even the wisest would learn more both in knowledge and wisdom from his writings and from the other Proverbs that he had collected. Certainly this is true of all of us when we study the Bible as well. We are always to be growing.
* Help in interpreting the Bible -- the last thing that Solomon notes is truly surprising for the Old Testament. Solomon hints that one of the things that will be gained by the study of the Proverbs (and by extension the Bible) is a greater ability to understand the Proverbs (and by extension the Bible) (verse 5, 6).

Let the discerning get guidance— for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. Prov 1:5-6

#  To receive wisdom, we must reverence God.

The obvious question to all of us is, “How do we receive wisdom?” That’s a good question for all of us to contemplate.

## We tend to seek knowledge without wisdom

But I would like to advance one word of caution. Our temptation today is to confuse wisdom with knowledge. We simply seek to learn more facts and think that will automatically give us wisdom. Well, it is true that good decisions require information as a base. And the more background information we have, the more likely the decision will be a good one. So gaining information is not a bad tactic. But it is still not the same thing as wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to know how to use information, to weigh principles, to choose amid conflicting priorities, to consider human relationships and come up with the best decision. This is a different skill, a different ability than just plain knowledge of the facts. It is wisdom. It is what Proverbs highlights.

## Where does wisdom begin, according to Proverbs?

Wisdom begins with the fear of God. Here in Proverbs 1:7, the key phrase uses the word “knowledge,” probably to avoid using the word wisdom twice since the word wisdom is in the contrasting parallel second part of the verse.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction. Prov 1:7

However, the same verse is found with the word “wisdom” two other times in the “wisdom” literature of the Bible.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. Prov. 9:10

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. Ps 111:10

So I’m quite certain that is the way we should remember it. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Can you say it with me? “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

The lesson is clear. **The skill of making good moral decisions based on knowledge and principles is God-given.**

## Why do we need God for wisdom?

Wisdom is a characteristic of God and so wisdom is learned from him. He is the source. He is the source of truth. He is the source of love. He is the source of wisdom. Being related to the source is the way to receive all three of these gemlike virtues. Without God, we tend to be influenced by our selfishness or worse, by our enemy’s perversions.

Consider the words of the prophet Isaiah:

 The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with his justice and righteousness. He will be the sure foundation for your times, a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is the key to this treasure. Isa 33:5-6

Or the conclusions of the prophet Daniel:

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his.
He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others.
He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.
He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him. Dan 2:20-22

For us as Christians, this truth comes even more easily since the New Testament clearly teaches us that Jesus is the incarnation of the wisdom of God. We as followers of Jesus Christ gain wisdom also from him.

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength…It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 1 Cor. 1:22-25, 30 (Also Col. 2:2, 3)

Jesus’ example helps us learn wisdom. His attitudes, and choices as well as his teachings instruct us. His Holy Spirit in us also guides us into the wiser path.

# How to "listen" to the Bible's instruction

What are some practical how-to steps for receiving instruction for our own lives through the Bible? Here are seven practical steps that I hope will help you to deepen your relationship with God and with his Word. They are steps I have learned about in my reading and that I use personally as well.

## Pray first

Prayer as we approach the Bible has several purposes. First of all, we are seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit. So it is appropriate to pray and acknowledge our dependence upon the Holy Spirit and ask for his help. Secondly, since this is a spiritual quest, our hearts must be properly prepared. If there is unconfessed sin in our lives, this will be a barrier to our receiving whatever God wants us to receive from his Holy Word. So one of the proper prayers of preparation is to confess our sins. A third purpose of prayer in preparation for reading God’s Word is simply focus. Our minds need to settle in, to leave behind the distractions of the day, and be prepared to think about what it is that God would place upon our hearts and minds as we read. Sometimes we need to pray about things that are greatly on our mind first, and leave them with God, to lay our burdens down, so to speak, in order to be able to proceed with our reading.

## Read the Bible prayerfully

The next thing to do is simply to read. It is hard to say exactly where one should read. I do not recommend the random opening idea though people of done it and found help. I prefer going to a favorite section of the Bible that God often uses in my life. For me it is often somewhere in Isaiah 40-66. For many people, going to the Psalms is a staple. Others prefer using a list of recommended verses for various situations in a person’s life. Another great and proven way is to simply read the passage that is already chosen for your devotional reading that day. God has a wonderful way of using scheduled devotions in our lives. But the key is to be reading the Bible on a regular basis.

One of the best ways to practice listening [to God] is to read the Bible until the Lord speaks to you. Say to the Lord, "What is it you want me to hear today from your word?" The Lord will personalize his Scripture to you, and it will be just what you need for that day. P. 153 Listening for God by Marilyn Hontz

## Expect God to speak to you through his Word.

We need to have a positive expectation that God will speak to us. The Bible clearly tells us that it is God’s purpose to communicate with us.

The Lord confides in those who fear him;
he makes his covenant known to them. Ps 25:14

And in the New Testament

 He [the Holy Spirit] will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. John 16:14 NRSV

However, we should not be expecting something novel but rather an application of Biblical truth specific for your life.

The number one way God guides us is through the word, the Bible. Whatever we believe we hear from the Lord must align with his written word. We do not read the Bible expecting to find new revelations. No, we read it for the Lord to tell us how to personally apply what he is already said in his word. The word of God is our primary source of guidance!
P. 157 in Listening for God by Marilyn Hontz

## Intend to Obey

Determine ahead that what you learn through the Bible you intend to put into practice. God is unlikely to reveal himself to someone who has no intention of acting on the guidance anyway. God reads hearts. He works with pliable and loyal hearts.

## Don’t be afraid to ask questions

As you listen, ask the Lord questions. For example: Whom do you want me to pray for? Is there something you would like to reveal to me about my own heart? Is there someone you want me to send an encouraging note to? Lord Jesus, what do you want me to do today that will make a difference for eternity? Such questions are a great way to begin your day of listening to God. P. 155 in Listening for God by Marilyn Hontz

## Spend a moment in quiet thought after you read.

In this time, God can give you ideas and impress things upon your mind.

Example from Marilyn Hontz, p. 153.

## Watch for confirmations

God has a way of confirming his messages to us. Maybe a friend will speak of the same idea. Maybe there will be a great song on the radio with the same thought. Maybe the same verse will come up again within a day or so.

# Conclusion

Throughout my wife’s and my ministries We’ve tried to put into practice the idea of reading Scripture and allowing it to speak to us both concerning our spiritual lives and concerning the daily events and needs that face us. In March 2013 I knew that I was retiring from my full-time position as pastor at community Wesleyan church in Kirkville New York but I had no idea what I would do for a living in just a few months. I knew that my wife and I were hoping to move to Connecticut, but we knew that our pension and Social Security was inadequate for the expense of living in Connecticut. I also have a habit that when I am reading and meditating on Scripture and God impresses of verse upon me as particularly applicable to my situation, I write the date next to the verse. As I was studying for this message, I noted in my Bible the date March 9, 2013 written next to this verse. Apparently, this verse had been God’s assurance for me in those times of uncertainty.

Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! Isaiah 30:18

As you know it was just a little more than a month later, on April 13, 2013, if I recall correctly, that JoAnne and I interviewed with district superintendent Kenneth Kieffer and with your PPR committee and the determination was made that I would be your next pastor. It was God’s gracious compassion upon us to provide us with a home and some additional income and I pray that it was also God’s provision for you to provide you with an experienced leadership team at a crucial time in your church’s history.

But I am not finished, after the interview and haven’t shared this with anyone other than my wife until now, God gave me two more verses. And when I say God gave them to me, I mean in my reading they were impressed upon me as particularly applicable to me and to us. These verses are marked in my Bible with the date April 19, 2013 just six days after I interviewed to become your pastor.

Consider now, for the Lord has chosen you to build a house as the sanctuary. Be strong and do the work…Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the Lord is finished.
1 Chronicles 28:10, 20

I already thought those were amazing verses to be given to me prior to coming to this pastorate. When I arrived, I found a church with many hopeful signs but also greatly in need of new life. Then two weeks after my arrival our church received a very significant estate gift, the kind of gift that is transformative in the history of the church. It necessitated that we immediately begin the process of long-range planning something which you as a church had never had the luxury of doing before, but something which I had done several times before, in my previous churches. Since then we have been able to do much in the process of physical rebuilding and we are looking forward to even more development in the future. In addition, God is sending new friends into our community of faith to build it up and renew it for the future that he has planned for it. And I am so excited to be a part of it. I believe God is in it. He gave me those promises when the only people I had even seen in this church were those on the pastor-parish committee. That is why I’m confident in the work that God is doing through Copper Hill United Methodist Church.

Friends, God wants you to be confident in your life as well and he will encourage you and the things that he sets you to do as you read in his Word and allow it to speak to you.