

# Get Wisdom

by John Piper

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*Getting wisdom is the practical knowledge to attain lasting happiness, and it begins with the fear of the Lord and consists in humbly doing God's will as we perceive it in Scripture and as we perceive it in life.*

**Duration:** 29:16

**Scripture:** 1 Kings 3:16-28, Proverbs 2:6, Proverbs 4:8, Proverbs 9:10, Romans 12:2, Colossians 1:9, James 1:5

**Topics:** "Seeking Wisdom", "Faith Formation"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of seeking wisdom in order to find true and lasting happiness. He acknowledges that people may pursue temporary sources of happiness such as material possessions or worldly pleasures, but these will ultimately leave them feeling empty. The speaker encourages listeners to prioritize wisdom and suggests that reading classic books, particularly those related to theology and faith, can be a valuable way to gain wisdom. He also highlights the need to seek wisdom on a daily basis and emphasizes that it is a lifelong pursuit.

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## Transcript

Today, I want to talk about getting wisdom. Now, I've been set onto this topic by the thought that many people are nearing the end of school, some permanently, others just to get ready for next year. So, the title of the sermon is Get Wisdom.

I believe that all men have this in common, namely, that we all want to be happy. Now, not all of us agree on how to find that happiness or where it comes from, but we do agree that we want it. I think that's common ground for all humankind.

And that's not a bad thing. That's a good thing. That's the way God made us.

Evil is not wanting to be happy. Evil is seeking and finding that happiness in the wrong places. And goodness is seeking and finding that happiness in places that please and honor God.

I can conceive of a world in which we might be called upon to sacrifice our happiness for God's glory. But that is not the kind of world in which we live. That is not the way God has created and ordained the laws of this world.

God has established a world, on the contrary, in which the more we do right through faith in Christ, the happier we will be eventually. There is a connection. We don't live in a world where we have to choose

between seeking our happiness and seeking God's glory or doing right.

They go together. That's the way God has created the world. The more we choose to glorify God, the happier we are going to be in the long run.

Now, of course, that does not mean that there is no place for discipline or self-denial. He who would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me. If you try to save your life, you will lose it.

And if you lose your life for my sake and the gospel's, you will find it. But you notice that in that text, self-denial is a means to saving our lives. Nobody wants to lose his life.

Therefore, stop trying to save it in this world. Deny yourself and you will find it. Therefore, what sets Christians apart from the world is not that we have forsaken this universal quest for happiness.

What sets us off is that we seek it and we find it in a different place than the world does. And I think that's very important because sometimes we get confused and think that what God is really calling us to is to abandon that quest. And our heart cries out, no, I can't.

Nor are we asked to. We've learned from Jesus this. Remember, he was the one who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.

So we've learned from him that to get to the joy, we may have to suffer with him. But we ought not to become self-pitying because, as Paul said, I count the sufferings of this present time as unworthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed to us in the age to come. So there's no point in pitying ourselves, nor should we ever be proud that we are suffering for Jesus' sake.

Because, Paul said, our suffering works patience and patience works approvedness and approvedness works hope. Hope that someday this suffering is going to be righted and more than that will make us all the happier. So you can't boast simply because it's all turning out for your good in the end anyway.

So I take it to be a great and wonderful and liberating truth that God made me to be happy. And I find great help in thinking about the Bible as God's guidebook to joy. Isn't the Bible a divine prescription how to cure us from all unhappiness in the long run? Now, the medicine that the Bible prescribes is not always fun to take.

It might involve suffering. But the cure, the cure that it brings is infinite and eternal joy at God's right hand. Now the point of the message this morning is get wisdom.

And I hope you'll see in a minute what the connection between that is and this truth about our happiness. We ought to bend all our efforts as humans to get wiser tomorrow than we were today. Do you ever think about the movement of your life in those terms? Tomorrow I want to be a wiser person than I am today.

I can remember often it struck me as I was a young Christian. Still am young in comparison to some people. And I would say, look, there's a 65 year old person.

Someday, God willing, I'm going to be 65. That means 30 years yet to live. When I'm 65, will I have 30 more years worth of wisdom in my head and in my heart? 30 more years worth of patience? It's a little frightening to me to think about it sometimes.

But I pray that it happen. Now I don't want to just speak to students who are in school this morning or just to graduates. Today is Bethel's graduation, a high time in the life of many people.

I just want to take this as an occasion to address all of us as students, as people who feel a burden to go on with God and grow in wisdom. I want us to somehow break loose of the notion that getting wisdom and understanding is locked into formal education. We need to hear that today, I think.

We have so professionalized and institutionalized life that we easily fall into the notion that we are dependent on some professional or some institution if wisdom is to get into our head or some understanding in some sphere. You can see this in the tendency to equate continuing education, for example in the pastorate, with taking more courses. I don't see those as necessarily connected at all.

I think that wisdom and understanding are something that you go after in a daily, lifelong quest. And I'll try to give you some practical ways before we're done as to how to go about that. I want to stress that we should never be content, graduates, students, and those of us long out of school, never be content with the wisdom gotten yesterday or the wisdom that you could get in a course.

Proverbs 4.4 says get wisdom, get insight, and it is not addressed only to people who are in school, is it? It's addressed to all of us. Now, that may be God's plan for you, to go back to school. There are some invaluable things you can get from formal education.

But for most of us, that's not God's plan. I don't ever expect to go to school again. My schooling has been so valuable.

It's given me all the tools I need to sit in my study and grow to beat the band if I just had time to do it. I don't want to sit in any more classes. Many of us are in that position.

What that means, then, is that this command has to be fulfilled day by day in life or not be fulfilled at all. What does it mean, then, to get wisdom? Why is it so important? And how can we do it? Let's start with the question, why is it so important? Now, we've already seen at the beginning that all men desire happiness. Everybody in this room wants to be happy, however you define it.

Wants to be fulfilled, complete, joyful, authentic. I think wisdom is important because it is the practical knowledge by which we attain lasting and true happiness. Listen to these texts from Proverbs.

Proverbs 3, 13. Happy is the man who finds wisdom and the man who gets understanding. Proverbs 24, 13.

My son, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. Know that wisdom is such to your soul. If you find it, there will be a future, and there will be hope, and you will not be cut off.

In other words, if you find wisdom, you will find the means for making your way into a hope-filled, happy future. Proverbs 19, 8. He who gets wisdom loves himself. In other words, do yourself a long-term favor.

Get wisdom. Get wisdom. And then Proverbs 8, 32 sums it up beautifully.

Here's wisdom speaking, and she is eloquent. And now, my sons, listen to me. Happy are those who keep my ways.

Happy is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor with the Lord. But he who misses me injures himself.

All who hate me love death. That's an eloquent statement about the importance of wisdom. If we don't make it our aim to get wisdom, we will suffer injury and ultimately death.

Proverbs 16, 16. To get wisdom is better than gold. To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.

It's a matter of life and death. It is an ultimate question whether we will set ourselves the lifelong task of getting wisdom. It's the pathway to ultimate and lasting happiness.

And now, I want to stress that it's ultimate and lasting happiness that we're talking about. I need to stress that and emphasize it because the Proverbs teaches, and your own experience, of course, teaches you this fact. Proverbs 15, 21.

Folly is a joy to him who has no sense. In other words, there is a joy to be had in this life quite apart from God and God's wisdom. You can find a kind of happiness.

Our thirst for ultimate happiness is so strong that if we don't find it in God because we lack the wisdom to seek it there, we will find it in substitutes. We will make it our aim to get happiness. Terrorists may find it in shooting presidents and popes.

Scholars may find it in trying to publish books. Musicians may find it in cutting a million records. Executives may find it in climbing the corporate ladder.

Athletes in breaking all kinds of records. There are endless ways in this life by which you can find happiness. Drink, drugs, sex, suntans, television, tubing, eating, talking, walking, etc., etc.

And all these things bring a kind of happiness to the people that seek them, but it's not lasting and genuine happiness. It's not what God made us for, and therefore the happiness that comes only from these things will leave us void. There will be that aching sense that there's got to be something more.

And the whole world has that aching and they don't know why, because they're only seeking their happiness on that horizontal level for which they were not created. And therefore the wisdom to attain the ultimate, the lasting happiness, is tremendously important. Now, second question, what is it? What are the characteristics of the person who has wisdom? You all know the first characteristic, one of the verses you learned way long time ago.

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, or to turn it around, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. The wisdom that leads to life and ultimate joy begins with knowing and fearing God. And if you were here two Sundays ago, you'll remember, and I'll sum it up, that fearing God means fearing to run away from Him, fearing to seek our refuge or our joy or our fulfillment anywhere but in God.

It means keeping before us that fearful prospect of depending on anything but God for our happiness. And so the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom in two senses. Not only is it the first step in the wise way, but it is the beginning of wisdom in the sense that a spring is the beginning of a river.

Everything flows out of the heart that fears the Lord that leads in a wise direction. Let's look at some examples. In Proverbs 11-2 it says, When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.

In other words, a person who is wise will be a humble person. The proud person does not fear the Lord. He does not want to depend on the Lord or subject himself to the Lord for his happiness, and therefore he can't even get to first base in wisdom.

But a person who fears the Lord, who is totally depending on him for his mercy and his fulfillment rather than running away to other things, that person is going to be humble. And humility is the first step to all other aspects of wisdom for this reason. A person who is proud does not want to admit that he's wrong or that he needs to grow up.

The humble person, on the other hand, is ready to take counsel, ready to be advised, ready to change if he's shown wrong, always eager to grow. They're two fundamentally different approaches to life and you can see that humility opens the way to vast growth, pride cuts off the way to growth, which is why most proud people are puny people, little people, shriveled up people inside. Humility, unlike pride, and this is very important too, does not recoil when it's commanded to do something.

I think it's a sign of pride if when we're commanded to do something we bristle. And it's a sign of humility that when we're commanded we humble ourselves. Now the reason that's important on the pathway to wisdom is because of what Moses said in Deuteronomy 4, namely that the commandments of God are our wisdom.

He says, Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them, keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples. And Jesus said the same thing about his words, didn't he? He said, Everyone who hears my words and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock. So a good definition of wisdom is hearing and doing the word of God and being humble enough so that you don't recoil and react negatively and rebelliously when that comes.

So there's a kind of syllogism that I want you to remember. Premise number one, God's word is a divine prescription for our ultimate happiness, a cure from unhappiness. Premise number two, wisdom is the practical knowledge that enables us to attain that happiness.

Conclusion, therefore wisdom is hearing and doing the word of God. But now the only people that can do that are humble people who rely on God for help and who fear seeking their happiness in anything but God. And so the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the source of all true wisdom.

But now something more has to be said. I don't think that's a complete definition of wisdom for this reason. Aren't there lots of circumstances in life that you run into every day in which you can't think of any specific word from God to apply to that situation? And so if you just define wisdom in terms of applying a word of God to a situation and then doing it, you're going to run out of it because the Bible is not so full that it has a specific word for every single encounter.

Let me give you an example of that from Scripture to show you what more wisdom must be. You all know this story, one of my favorite Bible stories. One day, King Solomon was in his courtroom and two prostitutes came to him.

And the one prostitute said to Solomon, King, we both live in the same house and a week ago we both had a baby. And last week, she rolled over on her baby in bed and smothered it. And she got up in the middle of the night and she took my living baby out from my arms and put her dead baby in my arms and went back to bed with my living baby.

And when I got up in the morning, I saw this isn't my baby and she won't give me my baby back. And the other prostitute said, No, the living baby is my baby. And Solomon the King said, I'll settle this matter.

Bring me a sword. And a sword was brought to the king. And he said, Cut the living baby in half and give half to one woman and half to the other and that'll settle the dispute.

And the mother's heart yearned for her son. And she said, No, let her have the baby. Do not kill the child.

And the other woman said, No, it'll be neither mine nor yours. We'll cut it in half. And Solomon said, Give the child to the first woman.

She is its mother. That is a beautiful story. That is a great tale.

And here's the way the Bible ends up in 1 Kings 3. All Israel heard the judgment which the king had rendered and they stood in awe of the king because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to render justice. In other words, there was no biblical guideline for what to do when two women bring you a child and both claim it. Where are you going to go for help? Therefore, we must add that wisdom includes a sensitive judgment or discernment.

How to perceive the right in situations where there is no clear guideline from Scripture. We have to know how the fear of the Lord works itself out in those daily circumstances that the Bible doesn't deal with. And this is what Paul was calling for in Romans 12 too, isn't it? Where he said, Don't be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind in order that you might test and approve the will of God.

In all those places where there is no clear word from God. You've got to have a kind of mind that is so in tune with God that you can discern what's right. And Paul prayed for his churches in Colossians 9, I don't cease to pray for you that you might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom.

Spiritual wisdom. We've got to have that in addition to a humble willingness to follow the commands of Scripture. Now, I don't think they're separated.

You know that the way to get that spiritual wisdom is by saturating your minds with the revealed word of God. They come together. So in summary then, when the Bible says, Get wisdom.

It's referring to that practical knowledge of how to attain true and lasting happiness. And it begins with the fear of the Lord and it consists in humbly doing God's will as we perceive it in Scripture and as we perceive it in life. And now finally, I want to give you five brief instructions as to how to get this wisdom.

These have been really helpful for me to think about again. And I think they all come from Scripture. I'll try to show that they do.

Step number one. We must desire it. Hunger for it.

Long for it. Proverbs 4, 8. Prize her highly and she will exalt you. She will honor you for your embrace.

Those are not cheap words. When you prize something and you embrace something, you love it intensely. And therefore, wisdom has to be valuable to us.

We have to want it and crave it. Otherwise, we will not get it. Second, since wisdom is found in the Word of God, we have to apply ourselves to meditate upon the Word and study the Word of God.

And I want to add to that this. Not only applying yourselves to the Scriptures firsthand, but also giving yourself to read the finest wisdom of the best students of the Word for the past 1900 years. Read great theological books.

Books that distill the wisdom of God down and help us gain a sense of the sweep of God's revelation and insight into the true meaning of Scripture. It would be folly for us all to start from scratch when there's so much help to be had in great books. And now I want to give you something really encouraging because I know what goes through many of your minds when I say that.

I don't have the time nor the ability to get anywhere with that kind of literature, if you're talking about great books of theology. I don't believe that's true. Great books are always great because they're readable, not because they're obscure.

Obscure books are not great books. Now, here's the most encouraging thing I can think to say to you this morning. My pastor told me four years ago, it changed my life.

Here it is. Suppose that you can read about 250 words a minute. Now, that's not real fast.

Most of us can do that. 250 words a minute, okay? And suppose that you set aside 15 minutes a day to read a great book, a classic, or some book that you've been longing to read that would help you grow in your wisdom, your understanding. Now, 15 minutes a day for 365 days is 5,475 minutes a year.

Now, you multiply 5,475 times 250 and you get 1,368,750 words that you could read in a year at 15 minutes a day. Now, an average book has about 350 to 400 words on a page. So we take 300 to 400.

So we'll take 350, which is kind of in the middle, and divide that into 1,368,750. And you know what you get? 3,910. Almost 4,000 pages a year.

An average book has about 200 pages. You see the implication of that? You could read 20 books by this time next year setting aside 15 minutes a day. I tell you, when I heard that, I ran home, I sat down, I got out my calendar, I looked for that 15-minute slot, and I found it just before supper at 5.15. Because I diddle away that time every night.

And I set myself to do it, and I read Jonathan Edwards' Original Sin, which is a fat book, in two months at 15 minutes a day. And then I went on to C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald and lots of other things I'd been wanting to read and read gobs. All that reading that I said, there's no hope, I don't have time for it, I don't have any space to fit it in, was now getting done because there was a 15-minute slot that I was using that had formerly been thrown away.

There is hope. You people who think that there's no hope, there is. You have 15 minutes.

Say the 15 minutes just before you go to bed at night. Go to bed. Pick out a great classic like John Calvin's Institutes or Martin Luther's Bondage of the Will or Commentary on Galatians or John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress or Jonathan Edwards' Religious Affections or some great book you've just been itching to read

and say, oh, there's no way, and read it at 15 minutes a day.

A big tree can be chopped down with lots of little chops. That's a great incentive, I think, to get wisdom. And then third, we'll just briefly cover these last three, we must pray because wisdom comes from the Lord.

And then fourth, we must think of our death very often. Teach us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom. Nothing purges us of folly like thinking of our death.

And then finally, we must come to Jesus. In him are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Solomon spoke wisdom.

Jesus is the wisdom of God. Others had spoken truths. Jesus is the truth.

Others had made promises. In him, all the promises of God are yes. Others had offered forgiveness.

Jesus bought it. Therefore, in him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. A person who loves and trusts and follows Jesus has and owns the treasure of lasting and true happiness.

And therefore, when the command comes to us, get wisdom, it means first and foremost, come to Jesus. Come to Jesus, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And now may the wise God fill you with his godly wisdom that you might enjoy now and forever the true and lasting happiness that is found in him.

Amen.

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