

The Lips of Knowledge Are a Precious Jewel

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the unparalleled value of knowledge and wisdom over material wealth, encouraging believers to seek and share it actively.

Scripture: Proverbs 1:7, Proverbs 3:13, Proverbs 8:10, Proverbs 20:15, Isaiah 50:4, Hosea 4:6, Romans 15:14, Colossians 3:9, Colossians 3:16

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Seeking Wisdom"

Description

John Piper reflects on the value of knowledge as highlighted in Proverbs, emphasizing the importance of seeking wisdom and understanding over material riches. He delves into the significance of desiring the 'lips of knowledge' more than any material possession, stressing that knowledge is essential for spiritual growth, discerning God's will, and transforming into Christ-likeness. Piper encourages listeners to not only seek wisdom from others but also to cultivate knowledge within themselves and share it with others, as speaking knowledge can bring immense joy and blessings.

Transcript

Proverbs 20:15

I think I inherited from my mother a love for the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. They were well marked on the india pages of her Bible and she quoted them to me often. I think probably they loomed large in her life because I was her only son and there is no other book in the Bible that speaks of sons and mothers as much as Proverbs. Prov. 1:8: "Hear, my son, your father's instruction and reject not your mother's teaching." Prov. 10:1, "A wise son makes a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother." Prov. 23:22, "Hearken to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old." Verse 25, "Let your father and mother be glad, let her who bore you rejoice." Prov. 29:15, "The rod of reproof gives wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother." My father was away from home most of the time and so my mother bore the unbelievable burden of rearing my sister and me alone, as mother and father as it were. So she schooled herself in this most practical of all Biblical books and worked incessantly for my good. So when I spoke at her funeral I read these words from her book: "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed..." (Prov. 31:26-28).

So I have a special place in my heart for the Proverbs and I suppose I read them with a bit more intensity because somebody I loved very much loved them so much. Perhaps you will find me coming back to them again and again on special occasions. The special occasion today is the concluding service of our Celebration of Education on the 200th birthday of the Sunday School. And the proverb I want to think about with you is Proverbs 20:15, "There is gold and abundance of costly stones; but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel."

If you took the words, "the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel," by themselves you might conclude from this proverb that the reason knowledge is as valuable as jewels is because when you have knowledge you can get rich more easily. That's true. You can. Proverbs 24:3-6 says:

By wisdom a house is built and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is mightier than a strong man and a man of knowledge than he who has strength; for by wise guidance you can wage your war and in abundance of counselors there is victory.

In other words brains are better than brawn when it comes to winning wars and filling a house with riches. That's a fact of life and so the proverbs say it. But saying it is a fact of life is not the same as saying we should devote ourselves to filling our house with riches. There may be other reasons that the "lips of knowledge" are a precious jewel than that knowledge can be used to get rich.

In fact, Proverbs 20:15 can't have this meaning. Notice the contrast in the two verse halves: "There is gold and abundance of costly stones; but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel." If the wise man had wanted to say that the "lips of knowledge are valuable because they help you get gold and gems, he would not have contrasted abundant gold with the value of knowledge. But in contrasting the two he is saying, there is a value and beauty in the "lips of knowledge" which surpasses the accumulation of gold and gems.

So Proverbs 20:15 fits into the category of what we learn from several other places in Proverbs. For example, Prov. 3:13-18:

Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gets understanding, for the gain from it is better than gain from silver, and its profit better than gold, She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

So the "lips of knowledge" are valuable not because they just multiply riches. There is a gain, but it is better than gold or silver.

(Parenthetically I should caution against reading our contemporary distinction between wisdom and knowledge into the usage of these words in Proverbs. We say "knowledge" is an awareness of facts and "wisdom" the ability to use that knowledge for helpful ends. But I don't think that the Hebrew *da'at* and *hokma* have that distinction. They are often simply interchangeable. For example, Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, fools despise wisdom and instruction." Cf. 9:10). So in my discussion of the "lips of knowledge" I am not making a distinction between knowledge and wisdom.)

Another example of how the value of knowledge contrasts with that of riches is in Proverbs 8:10,11: "Take my instruction instead of silver and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels and all that you may desire cannot compare with her." Therefore, when Proverbs 20:15 says, "There is

gold and abundance of costly stones; but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel," I conclude that what is being taught is this: No matter how much gold or how many gems you have the "lips of knowledge" are still more valuable. And since gold and gems surely represent the most valuable material things the wise man could think of, we may state the teaching like this: the lips of knowledge are more to be desired than all material things.

To feel the impact of that simple statement we need to run before our mind's eye the things we desire so that we can feel what sort of allurements they have. For example, I've desired very strongly lately to have a book, *The Mystery of Providence*, by John Flavel, published in 1687. Glen said last Wednesday he desires a new car. You may have your eyes on a pair of skis or a new fall fashion or a special meal at a restaurant. What we all should do with these and dozens of other desires is let them arise in our hearts and then ask ourselves honestly, Do I desire the "lips of knowledge" that much? Do I desire the "lips of knowledge" lots more than I desire to have my book or car or skis? Probably what we find is that none of us is interested in our own happiness nearly as strongly as we should be. Our most vigorous desires go out after things that have no comparison in value to the "rare jewel" of the "lips of knowledge." "Nothing can compare with wisdom," the Bible says (Prov. 8:11; 3:15). But do we seek her with an intensity worthy of her value? Isn't it astonishing how we Christians let the world determine what we desire, and what we devote ourselves to obtaining? The "lips of knowledge" are more to be desired than all material things. I have prayed that God will use this message to cause that desire to well up inside us all and overtake all our desires for material things.

There are at least three ways in which the lips of knowledge can be valuable to me or desired by me. First, they can be valuable to me in that you have them and I want to listen to them. "The lips of knowledge are a precious jewel" implies that we should desire to be around people with wisdom. Incalculable benefit comes from finding a wise teacher and soaking up all you can from his "lips of knowledge." A second way the "lips of knowledge" can be valuable to me is if I have them. We should not only desire to listen to the lips of others but to become wise ourselves. But this second way to desire the "lips of knowledge" is really two ways: you can desire the joys of knowing and you can desire the joys of telling your knowledge to others. So the three ways that the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel are 1) their value to listen to, 2) the value of having knowledge for one's private life and 3) the value of speaking knowledge to others. Let's look at these one at a time.

First of all "the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel" to me when I find them in another person and so I seek to listen as much as I can. C.S. Lewis had the "lips of knowledge" and still speaks through his books. I have read almost all of his theological and fiction works, I think. And if you offered me 10 million dollars right now in exchange for what I learned from C.S. Lewis I wouldn't consider the offer ten seconds. I would reject the gold and keep what I have learned. Jonathan Edwards had the "lips of knowledge" and still speaks through his books and sermons. I can remember many Sunday evenings in Germany sitting in our black rocker and savoring several pages of wisdom in his book on the Religious Affections. They taught me and they moved me. I came to feel ever more deeply that no possessions could compare to sitting at the feet of people who have the "lips of knowledge."

Someone may say, the only teacher I need is God, the Holy Spirit. The words of man are vain. God's words are a precious jewel but man's words are a rusty nail. People that talk like that, to use the words of Paul, have a zeal for God but it is not according to knowledge. According to Ephesians 4:11, when Christ ascended into heaven he gave teachers to His church. As offensive as it may be to people who measure their devotion to God by how private it is, nevertheless God intends for His people to grow in knowledge

by listening to human teachers who have the "lips of knowledge." The original example for all church life is given in Nehemiah 8:8, "And they read from the Book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." Human teachers are commissioned to take God's revelation and give the sense so others can understand it. It is a plain fact that we all have different skills in reading. One person reads and sees nothing very exciting. Another person reads and sees relationships and implications and insights. God intends for us to help each other see what we've seen.

I would let you cut off my hands and feet before I would let you take from me what I learned under the teaching of Daniel Fuller at Fuller Seminary. Not because I value the words of men but because his words opened the Word for me like no one ever had. So the "lips of knowledge" are a precious jewel to us when we can listen to them or read what they spoke. So seek for them more than for silver or gold and search for them more than for hidden treasure (Prov. 2:4). And when you find the "lips of knowledge" listen long and listen deep.

A second way that the "lips of knowledge" are more valuable than gold is when you have them yourself, and more specifically, first of all because to have knowledge is so valuable, and then second because to speak knowledge is so valuable. I may have given the impression that the only people who have the "lips of knowledge" are the profoundest teachers. That's not the meaning of the proverb. The book of Proverbs summons everyone to get knowledge and speak wisdom.

Knowledge is valuable to have first of all because life and death are at stake. God says through Hosea 4:6, "My people perish for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to Me." People perish for lack of knowledge. They stumble along in the darkness of their daily lives and wake up to find themselves rejected by God. Here's the way Jesus put it in His day, "Woe to you lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering." People can be kept out of the Kingdom of God because they lack knowledge. So it follows doesn't it, that if the Kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field which a man sells all he has to buy, then the knowledge which we need to enter that Kingdom will also be worth more than all the material things in the world, which is what the Proverb says. Life and death are at stake.

But not only that, knowledge is valuable to have secondly because just life is at stake. How we live depends in great measure on what we know, especially what we know about God. Paul prays for the Philippians like this (1:9f):

"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness."

In order to approve what is good and be pure in our lives Paul says our love must be accompanied by lots of knowledge (cf. 2 Peter 1:5). You can't just have a zeal for God, you have to know God in order to please Him. You have to know the way His mind works, what He values and what He hates and why. Paul prays for the Colossians like this (1:9-10):

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him bearing fruit in every good work ...

In order to please the Lord you have to know His will. You have to get acquainted with His way of thinking. So knowledge is valuable because you can't do God's will without it. Of course, that assumes that you value doing God's will. You won't love and crave knowledge as a means to doing God's will if you don't love and crave God's will. Isn't one of the marks of a Christian that he wants to be Christ-like? I think that means that a Christian will love to do God's will, because Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me." Usually we think of needing spiritual nourishment in order to do God's will. And that's true. But Jesus also says doing God's will is spiritual nourishment. You've all felt at times in your life, haven't you, the exhilaration at the end of a day when you overcame temptation and did God's will. It's encouraging and strengthening and life giving. It is food. When we discover that, the will of God ceases to be mere duty. Few of us consider eating a good meal a duty. Therefore the knowledge that you have to have in order to do God's will like that becomes tremendously valuable and desirable. It is a precious jewel.

I think I could easily be misunderstood here if I don't clarify how knowledge helps us do the will of God. It would be a misunderstanding if you think I mean only that when you stand at a fork in the road you have to know which is God's prong and which is sin. That's true. But God's will doesn't always present itself as a fork in the road which we can think over and then choose. In fact, most of our behavior all day long isn't like that. Most of our behavior springs out of our heart and mind with little or no prior reflection. We respond to situations and people all day long immediately with whatever is welling up in our heart. Sometimes we respond sinfully (e.g., bitterness, grumbling, impatience, resentment, spite, arrogance) and sometimes we respond righteously (sweetness, thankfulness, patience, encouragement, forgiveness, wise counsel). How does knowledge help us do God's will when we are acting so spontaneously?

In Colossians 3:9,10, Paul says "Do not lie to one another seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." In order to bring forth from the mind and heart spontaneously attitudes and actions which accord with God's will, there has to be a renewal of the mind and heart. There have to be some deep changes of what we love and value and cherish and long for. Paul says this happens in or by knowledge. When the wonder and beauty of Christ and the gospel ceases to be a churchly platitude and explodes in our awareness with the radiance of the glory of God, we get changed. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord are being changed into his likeness ... " There is a knowledge which changes us. And it is "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Therefore, the "lips of knowledge" are a precious jewel because when you have the knowledge of God you have the keys of the Kingdom and the key to transformation into Christ-likeness.

Now finally, "the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel" because while having knowledge opens the door to eternal life and the joy of holiness, speaking knowledge gives you the doubled joy of taking someone with you through that door. It is a nourishing joy to do God's will, but that joy is compounded when we can speak a word of knowledge to help another to God's will. "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

I think the "lips of knowledge" are a vast and largely untapped resource in the local church. If it is valuable to listen to the "lips of knowledge" and it is valuable to have knowledge, and if it is indeed more blessed to give than to receive, then how tremendously valuable, how powerfully desirable it is to speak with the "lips of knowledge." Paul wrote to the Roman church, "I am satisfied about you my brethren, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another" (15:14). And he wrote to the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one

another in all wisdom..."

Everyone of us has the "lips of knowledge" on some occasions. God teaches us something, for our good and for the good of our neighbor, colleague, friend, roommate, employee. There is a beautiful word in Isaiah 50:4 that everyone of us can follow. And it is a good summary of much of what I have said. Isaiah says,

The Lord God has given me the tongue (or lips) of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary. Morning by morning he wakens my ear to hear as those who are taught.

First, he has to listen to the "lips of knowledge;" then he has knowledge, then he speaks with the "lips of knowledge" in order to sustain with a word him that is weary.

Let's be like Isaiah all the time. Let's go after the knowledge of God with more gusto than we go after all material things and then let's unzip the "lips of knowledge" and speak to each other of these things and sustain each other on the phone, in the car, over meals, in the office, in the church halls. Because, "There is gold and abundance of costly stones, but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel."

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