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WISDOM’S PASSIONATE CALL: A SERMON ON PROVERBS 1:20–33

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I WONDER IF YOU CAN IMAGINE two different scenarios with me. First, picture a teenager sitting in the living room with her dad and mom. We overhear one of her parents speaking: “I’m really concerned about this. If you keep doing this, you’re going to face some terrible consequences. You’ll get in trouble with the principal, your coaches, your teachers—and here are the consequences we’ll give you as well.”

Second, picture this same teenager sitting in her car along the side of the road, surrounded by police cars. The lights are flashing, reflecting off the glass. An officer leans down to her window and says: “I’m really concerned about this. If you keep doing this, you’re going to face some terrible consequences. I’ve booked several kids into the juvenile detention center, and let me tell you—your life will never look the same after that.”

Which of these two scenarios feels heavier—more pressing? Which seems more likely to get the attention of or “wake up” the teenager? Now, of course, young people here today, I pray that you aren’t dismissive of your parents when they sit you down to talk to you. I hope it doesn’t take a police officer to get you to pay attention. But things get “ramped up” when we move out of the living room venue with our parents to the venue of an encounter with the law, don’t they?

Let’s see how these scenarios relate to our passage. Proverbs 1:8 begins in the living room:

Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. (Prov 1:8–10)¹

1. All Scripture references in this sermon are from the ESV unless otherwise specified.

But our passage ups the ante—now wisdom is a full-blown, Old Testament prophet. A John the Baptist figure. A covenant prosecutor, calling down a message of weal and woe!

I'd be highly surprised if any of us this morning thinks that wisdom is not all that important. I suspect all of us agree that wisdom is valuable. Most people would probably claim they want it—at least when speaking in polite company. They may at least long for the diminished stress levels and the increased sense of peace that comes with wisdom. And yet they're not *really* willing to go “all in” on the quest for wisdom. What can change that unfortunate state of affairs?

In this passage, God *calls us to take the quest for wisdom more seriously*. He arrests our attention with this intense portrait and personification of wisdom calling out. And as we consider these verses, we'll note three things:

- First, The Prophetic Call of Wisdom
- Second, The Silence of Rejecting Wisdom
- Third, The Calamity of Rejecting Wisdom

The Prophetic Call of Wisdom

Listen to the opening verses of this passage:

Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks. (Prov 1:20–21)

What a scene! Here we have a bustling city, the din of commerce, traffic, and the general sounds of urban busyness and activity. It's like downtown Chicago, hanging out by Cloud Gate (i.e., “the Bean”). Tourists are snapping selfies. Locals are hustling to work or brunch. The Grant Park Symphony Orchestra is rehearsing in the background at the Pritzker Pavilion. You get the idea.

But amid all the hubbub stands a woman—wisdom herself! And what is she doing? The following verses show that she's a street preacher, out making a plea to be heard. She's a prophetess, pronouncing a prophetic indictment upon the people milling about.

And here she stands, in the prominent places of the town. Two things stand out to me about her location. First, notice that she's actually gone *out to* her audience rather than sit back and wait for them to come to hear her. Unfortunately, the sense we get from this passage is that people aren't all that interested in hearing her. They're too busy with the selfies and brunch plans. But wisdom still won't be deterred.

But there's a second thing to consider. These public places—the ancient equivalents of the markets, the stock exchange, the law courts—where she is preaching are not only the backdrop of wisdom's call, but they are also the place where wisdom is valuable. Indeed, the places where wisdom is *needed* in 2022! Certainly, wisdom is needed in our families. We need wisdom in our parenting,

marriages, finances, and a host of other decisions that go into our day-to-day lives. And indeed, wisdom is needed in our churches as well. But wisdom is also needed in the public square—in business, law, and politics. In media, education, entertainment, and the arts. Can you imagine how our society might look if leaders and public figures heeded the call and pursued wisdom?

In verse 22, wisdom's speech begins in earnest. Listen to who she addresses:

“How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?” (Prov 1:22)

The Hebrew poses some translational challenges, and scholars and commentators offer some alternatives. However, what we have here in the ESV is fine for showing us something fascinating about who wisdom is addressing. The simple ones are addressed directly. They are invoked with the 2nd person: “you.” On the other hand, the scoffers and fools are simply mentioned in 3rd person. It speaks of *their* scoffing. The verbs imply that *they* hate knowledge. It's not that wisdom has nothing to say to the scoffers and fools—in fact, verse 32 will show fools sharing the same fate as all who neglect wisdom's call. It's just that here, scoffers and fools aren't so much being *addressed* as they are being used to wake up the simpletons.

The simpleton may have been sitting back thinking to themselves: “Well, I sure could be worse. I'm not some kind of rebel.” And yet here they're lumped together with two explicitly rotten groups to prove a point. They aren't in some kind of position to look down their noses at supposedly worse people.

According to Proverbs, being a simpleton is not *necessarily* sinful in and of itself. The fact that simpletons aren't rebelling against God with the same intensity and intentionality as scoffers and fools is not missed by the Israelite sages. But being a simpleton is not thereby neutral. Look, if you decide to remain a simpleton—if you choose to just stay on the fence and not heed the call of wisdom—if you try to just get wisdom by osmosis rather than by attending to the wisdom taught in Scripture, then the prophetess is letting you know that you've already begun to take a side. Remember the words of our Lord himself in Matthew 12:30: “Whoever is not with me is against me.”

Hence the urgency of wisdom's call: “How long!” You see, the simpletons are not doing okay. Their simplicity is not just a lack of *great* things, like a piece of apple pie that's merely lacking vanilla ice cream or a dollop of whipped cream. No! The simple are on a dangerous track!

The expression “How long?” is not common in the Old Testament. When they use it, the prophets and psalmists are usually venting their exasperation. “How long?” refers to how absurd it is that whatever is in question here has been going on for as long as it has!

But just what is the problem in the present scenario? What's got the prophetess all worked up? Answer: the direness of the situation! That's what! You see, folly has terrible consequences. The indecisiveness of the simpletons, their awkward and naïve behavior, their contentment with simplicity, and with lack of self-control—all

these things will ultimately lead to the same place as those who outright *hate* wisdom! The following verses will show just how.

The word “if” in verse 23 of our ESV (cf. NIV, CSB) softens wisdom’s call a bit more than is appropriate. Several other translations highlight her urgency by translating it like this: “*Turn at my rebuke; Surely I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you.*” (NKJV; cf. NASB.) This seems more natural as a command—the prophetess is exhorting these simpletons to turn, not just giving an invitation or portraying a hypothetical situation. She’s got something essential for them, something highly valuable, and she wants them to have it!

If you’re here this morning and you see that you’re just coasting along in life: at school or work, in your parenting or your marriage—you name it—you’re just going with the flow. Maybe you don’t see full-blown wreckage littering the sidewalk when you look back at the path you’ve traveled, but you do see scuffs and dings and broken branches and skid marks—little problems that you’re sort of hoping are going to take care of themselves and not become big problems. If that’s you, then wisdom is crying out to you this morning, urging you to listen! She’s offering you something of tremendous value!

But before the wise advice she begins to dole out in Proverbs 2–31, prophetess wisdom warns against two consequences of ignoring or rejecting her call. Let’s turn to our second point in this passage.

The Silence of Rejecting Wisdom

Silence. Sometimes it’s peaceful—contemplative. Some people love waking up early in the morning just for the silence. We live in a world with so much noise: phone dings, horns honking, kids arguing downstairs, the washing machine churning or thumping inexplicably!

My office at Mid-America Reformed Seminary is regularly plagued by a “buzz” from the HVAC system. I often have it where someone walks into my office to talk to me about something and then breaks off their sentence and looks around with a scowl, blurting out in utter bewilderment: “What is that noise?!” I’ve learned to tune it out, mostly. Although when it stops after a particularly long spell, I find myself experiencing a sudden sense of calm and peace coming over me!

But silence isn’t always this way. When one of our kids was taking their sweet time to be born, the hospital staff was surprisingly reticent about information and advice about what was going on and what our options were. I remember that when we first got to the hospital, one of our nurses was a Christian and was intrigued to hear that I was a pastor and Ph.D. student in Old Testament. We had a pleasant conversation while my wife was getting settled in, and I was able to answer several of her questions about the Bible. After a few hours, however, the “silence” from the nurses was not only *not* peaceful, it was downright agitating! I even remember snapping at the nurse at one point, saying: “Look, if you have Old Testament questions, I’m happy to talk. I’m the expert in that department. But we’re asking labor and delivery questions of *you* because *you’re* the expert! We don’t have the

answers we need; *you do!*” The silence was angering because we felt absolutely helpless!

Well, in verses 24–25, wisdom describes one scenario of neglecting her call:

Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof. (Prov 1:24–25)

It's not like wisdom was playing “hard to get.” She's not off in some off-the-beaten-path setting. A year ago, I was looking through one of my classical music email groups and learned that one of my favorite operatic tenors—Javier Camarena—was in the middle of a recital in downtown Chicago at some small theater of which I'd never heard. Had I only known! I would have rearranged my schedule and dropped everything to attend!

Well, wisdom isn't off in an obscure venue that wasn't adequately advertised on social media. Remember, we saw in verses 20–21 that she's amidst all the hustle and bustle. Verse 24 shows her gesticulating, stretching out her hand. She's calling out advice and warning, counsel and critique, and yet she's being outright ignored.

Perhaps the passers-by just assume they'll listen to her later when they have more time. But the thing is, she's not out here preaching indefinitely. The concert is only booked for a limited number of nights, and then the house goes dark.

I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. (Prov 1:26–28)

Hear that? Calamity is coming. The small problems aren't so minor anymore. The dings are getting bigger, and the skid marks on the sidewalk are increasingly erratic. The issues aren't fixing themselves. The chilly breeze we thought we could cinch our coat against has become a blizzard. And now the passers-by are finally looking for advice! They say, “Okay, wisdom—I'm ready now. Come on out and give me a hand!” But what do they hear? Silence. Not peaceful silence, empty silence. Alone silence. “Figure-it-out-yourself, chump” silence.

In so many parts of our society, those who have rejected God's wisdom are now facing the consequences of his silence. LGBTQ+ ideology didn't just appear out of nowhere. Today's political polarization, with its accompanying conspiracy theories, isn't a wholly inevitable state of affairs. Online doxing, canceling, and digital bullying: all these things exist because people are groping in silence.

Is it any wonder that staggering numbers of people live in social media echo chambers? Religious echo chambers. Political echo chambers. Ideological echo chambers. Liberal echo chambers. Conservative echo chambers. Is it all that surprising? You see, those who have thrown themselves at their own preferences and ignored the wisdom God offered are now finding the silence deafening. But rather

than seeking God’s wisdom where God’s wisdom can be found, they prefer listening to their own ideas echoing around their feeds, chasing those likes and thumbs ups and retweets from others parroting the same things they already think—stubbornly prattling away without nuance or balance, communicating in soundbites, memes, 280-character tweets, and 15-second TikTok videos.

Friends, we have a message to share with the world—a gospel message of the person and work of Christ the King and Redeemer. We also have a message of wisdom found in Scripture to share with them. Scripture speaks into the silence of their families, their workplaces, and their identities. But you know what? It also speaks to *our* families, *our* workplaces, and *our* identities. Let us drink deeply of God’s wise words to us in Scripture!

The Calamity of Rejecting Wisdom

In verses 29–30, wisdom describes a second scenario of neglecting her call:

Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD,
would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof (Prov 1:29–30)

I wonder how many passers-by would admit that they “hated knowledge.” Probably none of them would agree with that accusation. How many would admit that they would have *none* of wisdom’s counsel or despised *all* her reproof? You can almost hear them retort:

Aw, come on! I liked *some* of your ideas. You know, honoring people who bear God’s image, being quick to listen, slow to become angry, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. I just don’t like that narrow-minded stuff about salvation being found in no one else besides Jesus, that God’s word in Scripture is infallible, inerrant, sufficient, authoritative.

But the truth is, by refusing to heed God’s wisdom, the passers-by show a deeper rejection of the God who gives that wisdom. And how does this all fare for these folks? Does woman wisdom just shrug her shoulders and say, “Oh well, I tried. At least they weren’t *hostile* to my message.” No—we read back in verse 26 already that “wisdom laughs at their calamity.” This is precisely what is happening in Psalm 2:4–5, where God himself mocks his enemies. God laughs at them, holds them in derision, speaks to them in his wrath, and terrifies them in his fury.

It’s not that wisdom is sadistic—some crazy psychopath lady with beady eyes and frazzled hair. No, it’s that those who *reject her* are the mad ones. Those who view the pure gold of her wisdom with “ho-hum” indifference are the crazy psychopaths! Remember verse 23—wisdom longed to pour out her heart, words, and wisdom to these simpletons. Her pleading, instruction, and advice were meant to *help* these people: to do them well and to lower their stress, to increase their peace and contentment!

But their indifference to wisdom was nothing less than an act of aggression against wisdom. And now the hens have come home to roost:

Therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them. (Prov 1:31–32)

They now reap what they've sowed. Of course, this doesn't mean that all who ignore or reject wisdom immediately die or lose all they have. Saint John, Indiana, is full of lovely homes with good-looking families who have no interest in cracking open God's Word. And yet, in his grace and mercy, in his patience and longsuffering, God does not immediately execute his judgment against their sin and folly. At their best, happy and whole as these homes might appear, they have only a *proximate* happiness, not an ultimate one. It's a flimsy, pragmatic happiness that can fail at any moment. And at their worst, some of the most put-together family portraits in Saint John are broken to the core. They are flailing in silence and longing for meaning in life beyond the next school year or little league season or election or paycheck. May we be so richly blessed to be placed in their paths that we might get to know them, show them the hope that lies within us, show them what it means to struggle with the same things they do (parenting, work, bills, etc.), and yet struggle *with the confidence that God has given us wisdom in his word*.

For all of us here this morning—wherever we see ourselves on pathway of life—whether we feel like we're doing alright, or limping along, or even if we feel like we're off in the ditch with our wheels knocked off, and our headlights smashed—no matter who we are, notice how the prophetess ends her speech. You see, this isn't all doom and gloom. This isn't the tragedy where everyone dies in the end:

But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster. (Prov 1:33)

Here that? Look what she's promising. It's what everyone wants, right? Peace and security, no more fear? This is why Revelation 21 is a favorite passage for so many of us. That tremendous promise of no more tears, death, mourning, crying, or pain. Wisdom's instructions, her words, and her speeches—here in our passage and throughout the entirety of Proverbs—all have one goal: *to help*. To help the simple become wise. To help them to live skillfully. To help them to know how to relate rightly to God and others. And this is all for their own good. For their well-being and peace of mind! One must never forget God's motives for the sharp words he uses in Scripture. He speaks this way because he's gracious and compassionate. He's slow to anger and abounding in love. He loves his dear children, and that's why he warns them.

The New Testament tells us that Christ is the truly wise man. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30 that Christ is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. So we can pursue wisdom, scour God's Word, and implement sweeping

changes in our lives and homes because Christ has borne the ultimate penalty for our folly and given us the status of those who are perfectly obedient in him. And so we don't need to cling to the masks that make us look all put-together to those around us. Instead, we can admit our folly and our ongoing struggles and ask for prayer, advice, and counsel from those around us.

God has given us his Spirit and is working wisdom in our lives in concrete ways, fully knowing that we cannot figure it all out on our own. So, let's turn to his Son and his Word and pursue wisdom without dread of disaster. Amen.