

Is Wisdom Really Better Than Gold?
Reflections on Proverbs 2 and Its Educational Implications

*And to man He said:
'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
and to depart from evil is understanding.'
Job 28: 28*

Introduction

51-36-10-45-31-37. This set of numbers appeared on a Quick Pick purchased by Robert and Beverly Chody in an Austin food market on Wednesday, March 7, 2001, less than three hours before the close of lottery ticket sales that day. By these numbers, Robert, who is an Austin police officer, and his wife Beverly, a customer care representative for AT&T Wireless, won the largest Texas Lotto jackpot prize ever, valued at a grand total of 85 million dollars. The Austin couple chose the Cash Value Option, and on Thursday, March 15, 2001, received a check from the Texas Lottery Commission for \$51, 214, 323. 00.

With the odds at about 1 in 20 million, how lucky can you get! When they won the lottery, Robert and Beverly said that it really did not change them, and that they even planned on keeping their day jobs. Assuming they make some wise choices, they will never have to worry about money another day in their lives. They can buy whatever they want to buy, go wherever they want to go, and do whatever they want to do. It seems they have it made!

Now there is no need for a show of hands here, but how many of you wish you had won that lottery? How many of you would love to be in the Chody's shoes? How many here would like to be one Texas's newest **multi**-millionaires? Probably in our heart of hearts, many of us would love to have won that 85 million dollar lottery and be set for life (at least financially)!

Well, if that is the case, I have a little challenge here for you, a test of your value system, if you will. Is money life's greatest good, or is there something more

valuable than the wealth our world has to offer? If so, what is it? How does *wisdom* compare with money in terms of its ultimate worth? For example, if you had to choose between riches and wisdom, which would you choose? What if in this hand is a winning lottery ticket worth 85 million dollars, guaranteed. But in the other hand is wisdom. These are your two options, and you must choose one OR the other, not both. Which would it be? Wealth or wisdom? Gold or good judgment? Silver or sagacity? Prosperity or prudence?

This challenge is not meant to suggest that there is anything inherently wrong with money or even lots of it. Not at all. As Proverbs 10: 22 affirms, "It is the blessing of the Lord that makes rich, and He adds no sorrow to it." To the pure, all things are pure (Titus 1: 15). Nonetheless, this little test may, indeed, disclose our priorities, reveal what we really love and desire, and perhaps even expose an idol or two in our lives (cf. 1 John 5: 21).

As you are thinking about this dilemma, this moral and spiritual quandary I have put you in, let me read to you three additional passages from the book of Proverbs that get to the heart of the issue. The first is Proverbs 3: 13-15. "How blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding. For its profit is better than the profit of silver, and its gain than fine gold. She is more precious than jewels; and nothing you desire compares with her." Next is Proverbs 8: 10-11. "Take my instruction, and not silver, and knowledge rather than choicest gold. For wisdom is better than jewels; and all desirable things can not compare with her." The last passage is Proverbs 16: 16. "How much better it is to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is to be chosen above silver."

Now this is not the first time a challenge and choice like this was ever placed before a child of God. In 1 Kings 3, we read that in Gibeon, God appeared to Solomon in a dream at night, saying: "Ask what you wish for Me to give you" (v. 5). Solomon's wish was God's command, Aladdin-like. Whatever he wanted he could have. Now this was a test in disguise, because it would reveal the contents of Solomon's heart. Without missing a beat, however, Solomon made his choice: "So give Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people to discern between

good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Thine?" (v. 9) In other words, the great King of Israel's golden age asked for wisdom.

Now listen to God's immediate response to Solomon's choice: "And God said to Solomon, 'Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself *long life*, nor have asked *riches* for yourself, nor have you asked for the life of your *enemies*, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a *wise and discerning heart*, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you'" (1 Kings 3: 11-12). Then God throws in a little bonus: "And I have also given you what you have not asked, *both riches and honor*, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days" (1 Kings 3: 13).

In light of God's blessing of Solomon's decision, and in light of advice from the book of Proverbs in general, and over against the misleading, erroneous value system of our culture that places such a high priority on wealth as the greatest good and key to happiness, I would like to defend the claim from Proverbs 16: 16 that "*It is much better to get wisdom than gold, and to get understanding is to be chosen above silver.*"

Now before we go any farther, I want to make it clear very briefly what the word "wisdom" means, and what its true scope really is. The primary OT Hebrew and NT Greek terms for wisdom (Heb: *hokmah*; Grk: *sophia*) denote "skillfulness" or even "success."¹ In a nutshell, wisdom is skillful, successful living. But in order to live skillfully and successfully, a person must first know God and how He has designed the world and life within it. By His word, wisdom and law, God has made things to be a certain way in every department of life — physically, morally, socially, and culturally. There is an objective, divinely ordained reality that we must understand and with which we must reckon. Living wisely, then, means living in accordance with God's order for the world. It means going with the grain of reality and not against it, which is stupidity and foolishness, for those who live against the

¹ *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd edition, s. v. "Wisdom," pp. 1244f.

grain of reality are sure to get a splinter! Reality is what you run into when you do something wrong (Dallas Willard). So, as one theologian defined it, “wisdom is ethical conformity to God’s creation.”²

Now the operative word here is creation, for it is in relation to the whole world and its multifaceted aspects that wisdom is needed. Wisdom is not limited in range or scope to the personal and spiritual realms like home and church, though it pertains significantly to these important domains. Rather, it branches out to embrace all of life everywhere in the marketplace and the public square, as the content of the book of Proverbs itself indicates clearly. The areas of life in which God’s wisdom is needed and to which it applies are as diverse and as important as business, education, politics, art, journalism, plumbing, agriculture, romance, marriage, child-rearing, law, economics, science, technology, scuba diving, and golf, etc. Wisdom applies to each of these areas and more and is cosmic in its import. This is what I believe St. Paul wants us to recognize in this prayer for generous wisdom for the church at Colossae:

Col. 1:9 For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask *that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*, Col. 1:10 so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in *all respects*, bearing fruit in *every good work* and increasing in the knowledge of God; Col. 1:11 strengthened with *all power*, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of *all steadfastness and patience*; joyously Col. 1:12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

In this light, I would also like to argue that a desire and decision on your part to pursue wisdom and understanding over gold and silver as a primary focus in life has tremendous educational implications and benefits for you as students. Indeed, this choice and pursuit of wisdom ought to be at the center of Christian higher education and the goal of your studies. All your classes, indeed, everything about your college career, ought to assist you in becoming a wise and understanding person. In his book *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis, based on a thought from

Aristotle, said that a real education ought to make a student love and hate what he ought. One of the most important things you ought to learn to love while you are in college is wisdom. What you ought to learn to hate is foolishness. You ought to be inspired to become lovers of wisdom, to become genuine Christian “philosophers” in a general sense, for “lover of wisdom” is what the term “philosopher” literally means (*philein* + *sophia* = philosophy/er)!

Conditions for Obtaining Wisdom

Now I would like to support this claim that wisdom is better than gold through a brief overview of Proverbs 2. This chapter presents the priceless benefits of seeking wisdom and helps us understand its profound relevance for Christian education. It begins by spelling out *the conditions for obtaining wisdom* in the first four verses, and then goes on to present two consequences, two protections, and a final positive result from this overall process. But before I read these first four verses that tell us what we must do to be wise, let me bombard us with a few leading questions:

- What kind of content, what kind of input, what kind of material are you *receiving* into your mind? Is it the *sayings* of the wise?
- What do you truly *treasure*, what do you love and cherish most dearly in your heart? Is it God’s *commandments*?
- What are you *listening* to most carefully? What are your ears truly paying attention to? What gets your attention? Is it *wisdom*?
- How is your heart *inclined*? Toward what does it tilt? What does it gravitate to naturally? Is it *understanding*?
- What are you *crying out* for because you want it more than anything else in the world? When you raise your voice, why do you raise it and for what? What are you literally screaming for out loud, or in the silence of your heart? Is it *discernment*?
- What do you *desire*? Who do you *seek*? What are you really after in your life, what is your true quest, what do you consider to be your life’s goal or

² James Fleming, *Personalities of the Old Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1939), p. 502.

greatest good? What are you *searching* for more than anything else? Is it *discernment, understanding and wisdom*?

Now let's listen to what the teacher of wisdom in Proverbs 2: 1-4 says about how these questions ought to be answered:

Prov. 1: 1 My son, if you will *receive* my sayings, and *treasure* my commandments within you, Prov. 2: 2 Make your ear *attentive* to wisdom, *Incline* your heart to understanding; Prov. 2:3 For if you *cry* for discernment, *Lift your voice* for understanding; Prov. 2:4 If you *seek* her as silver, And *search* for her as for hidden treasures, then you will discover....

It is a fact: because of the way God made us, because we are passionate and needy creatures, every human being *receives, treasures, listens to, inclines the heart toward, cries out for, lifts up the voice, seeks and searches* for something. According to this passage, that something for which we do these things ought to be the sayings, the commandments, wisdom, discernment, and understanding of God. We are vigorous creatures, indeed, we are “verbivores” (cf. carnivores and herbivores) who should devour God's word (Robert C. Roberts).

But no one forces us to seek and search for and devour these things. We can seek and search and devour other things if we wish, if we choose to do so. In fact, many if not most people do wish and do choose to seek and search for things other than wisdom — things like gold and silver, for example.

This is especially true for young, aspiring, American university students. According to William Willimon and Thomas Naylor in their book *The Abandoned Generation*, business majors at Duke University had one mandate and one mandate only for their professors: “Teach me how to be a money making machine.”³ Students in disciplines other than business often have the same desires as well. Wealth is

³ William Willimon and Thomas Naylor, *The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 65, quoted in Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 79.

perceived as the only real justification for higher education. For students like these, college is nothing but a “passport to privilege.”⁴

On the other hand, *if* we want to know the sayings and the commandments of God, if we want to be wise, if we wish to be understanding, and if we desire to be discerning, *then* we must fulfill the conditions for obtaining wisdom set forth in Proverbs 2: 1-4. Wisdom is not possessed accidentally or automatically, or if we are slothful or lazy. Rather, wisdom is possessed only when we choose it deliberately and pursue it passionately. The intense language of these verses point out the importance of desire, choice, effort, and discipline. Wisdom is the *effect* of a previous *cause* to obtain it. If and only if the requirements specified in verses 1-4 for the attainment of wisdom are fulfilled, then and only then will the profound results of verses 5-22 follow. In this matter of wisdom, then, we “reap what we sow,” and what we will reap if we sow is specified in the next eight verses of this chapter.

Two Consequences of Seeking Wisdom

Look, then, at Proverbs 2: 5-8 for the *first of two important consequences of seeking wisdom*.

Prov. 2:5 Then you will discern the fear of the Lord, and discover the knowledge of God. Prov. 2:6 For the Lord gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding. Prov. 2:7 He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, Prov. 2:8 Guarding the paths of justice, and He preserves the way of His godly ones.

This first consequence is what I call “spiritual wisdom,” and it consists of at least these three things. *First and foremost*, it entails a reverent relationship with God and a solid comprehension and embrace of who He really is and what He is really like. It means getting to know Him in all His majesty and glory, love and justice, holiness and mercy, transcendence and immanence. This knowledge results in the cultivation of a genuine awe, reverence, and respect for Him as the Creator, Judge, and Redeemer of the world. He is the infinite reference point and

⁴ Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, p. 13, etc.

explanatory principle of the entire cosmos. Only God makes the world make sense. This kind of fear and knowledge of God results from the pursuit of wisdom.

Second, it results in understanding about the whole world and all of life within it. God reveals to us the answers to the deepest human questions and provides solutions to the riddles of the universe. We learn that God is the Creator and Maker of Heaven and earth, and this world is His very good creation. We understand that we as human beings are made as His very image and likeness and possess remarkable dignity, value, and worth. We recognize that God intended us for fellowship with Himself spiritually, for relationships with one another socially, and for having dominion over creation as its cultivators, caretakers and stewards culturally. We know that the human condition is characterized by rebellion and guilt which God has judged rightly by death. We understand that God has provided a comprehensive solution to this world and human dilemma through Christ crucified, resurrected and ascended, and through the gift of His Holy Spirit. We grasp how God nurtures and equips those who believe through the ministries of the church by Word and sacrament. We know that one day Jesus Christ will return and complete His redemptive work through a general resurrection and judgment, usher in His kingdom in its fullness, and make all things new in the new heavens and a new earth. In God's gift of wisdom, we know who He is, what the creation is, who and why we are, what has gone wrong, and what the remedy is. In His wisdom, God imparts an entire vision of life to us! As the mason says in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*: "The highest wisdom is but the one science of explaining the whole creation and humanity's place in it."

It is no wonder, then, that the *third thing* of which "spiritual wisdom" consists is a divinely wrought protection and preservation. Those whose lives have been made whole by their relationship with God and His truth are guarded and preserved from threat and error. As the text states, "He is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice, and He preserves the way of His godly ones."

Is this "spiritual wisdom" worth more than 85 million dollars to you?

The second consequence of seeking wisdom is found in verses 9-11 where we read these words:

Prov. 2:9 Then you will discern righteousness and justice and equity and every good course. Prov. 2:10 For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; Prov. 2:11 Discretion will guard you, understanding will watch over you.

I call this second consequence “moral wisdom,” and it means that we will know how to behave wisely in our fundamental roles in life. Knowing God and being privy to His comprehensive truth should make a big difference in how we actually live. Wisdom unites knowledge and real life, and to be wise is to relate and act well. It means skillful, godly living characterized by appropriate behavior, intelligent words, and competent deeds. This would include real prudence as a husband or wife, son or daughter, brother or sister, roommate and student, boyfriend and girlfriend, employer and employee, church member and citizen, colleague and friend. How we need wisdom in each of these significant domains, and according to our text, this is just what wisdom provides:

Righteousness refers to behavior that corresponds to God’s moral standards.

Justice means we know how to treat others fairly and appreciatively.

Equity denotes that we understand how to deal with others impartially and honestly.

Discretion is the ability to make responsible judgments in relationships and matters of truth and error.

Understanding is the insight and good sense that will serve as guard and guide.

All these traits lead to “every good course” of action, since God’s wisdom dwells in our hearts out of which flow the springs of life. There is no doubt that this world of ours, indeed, our homes, churches, places of work, communities, and various institutions would be a far better places if they were filled with people who possessed these virtues. As the book of Wisdom 6: 24 states, “In the multitude of the wise is the welfare of the world.”

Is this “moral wisdom” worth more than 85 million dollars to you?

Protected From Two Catastrophes

If the conditions for obtaining wisdom in Proverbs 2: 1-4 are met, then spiritual and moral wisdom are the results (Prov. 2: 5-11). But wisdom not only showers these blessings upon us, but also *protects us from two catastrophes*, as the next eight verses in Proverbs 2 teach.

Many people have as their motto: *Live and learn*. They proceed rather thoughtlessly and recklessly into life, making some pretty big mistakes along the way. They are enrolled in the school of hard knocks where they get their teeth kicked in. But often they have a very difficult time recovering from their stupid blunders committed in this exacting school.

The book of Proverbs, however, suggests a different philosophy. Its motto is not *Live and Learn*. Rather, its motto is *Learn and Live!* That is, first get wisdom, knowledge, and understanding, live by it faithfully, and save yourself from many a pain and pang. *Wisdom wants to rescue us from making a train wreck out of our lives*. This is especially true when it comes to the threats posed by experimentation with personal evil and sexual immorality. Notice first of all that Proverbs 2: 12-15 explains how wisdom saves us from wickedness and its consequences:

Prov. 2:12 To deliver you from the way of evil, from the man who speaks perverse things; Prov. 2:13 From those who leave the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness; Prov. 2:14 Who delight in doing evil, and rejoice in the perversity of evil; Prov. 2:15 Whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.

Now notice that Solomon says that wisdom delivers us from sexual sin, especially adultery in vv. 16-19:

Prov. 2:16 To deliver you from the strange woman, from the adulteress who flatters with her words; Prov. 2:17 That leaves the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of her God; Prov. 2:18 For her house sinks down to death, and her tracks lead to the dead; Prov. 2:19 None who go to her return again, nor do they reach the paths of life.

Involvement in evil and sexual immorality, according to Proverbs, is nothing but pure stupidity and foolishness. The former sin is characterized by perversity, darkness, crookedness, and deviousness. The latter vice culminates in cursing and

death. Chances are high that we need look no further than our own experiences, or the experiences of family members, relatives and friends to bear this out. Or if you find no cogent examples there, then check out the tumultuous lives of our celebrities or the characters in daytime soap operas for illustrations. In any case, the results of imprudent activities in regard to evil-doing and sex are not happy ones. As Paul states in Romans 2: 9, "There is tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil." Galatians 6: 8 echoes this teaching in these words: "For the one who sows to his own flesh [sin] shall from the flesh [sin] reap corruption."

But wisdom is the safeguard to these wrong doings and their tragic results. As Job 28: 28 states, "And to man God said, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.'" There is simply no substitute for holiness and righteousness all the days of our lives! One major moral mistake, however, can change the course of our lives forever. Let the fear of the Lord and His wisdom keep us from it. *Learn and Live.*

Is the kind of protection that wisdom provides from the catastrophes of evil and sexual immorality worth more than 85 million dollars to you?

The Positive Purpose of Wisdom

But the overall purpose of wisdom is positive, not negative. It not only protects us from something, but it promotes something extraordinarily beneficial as Proverbs 2: 20-22 affirms:

Prov. 2:20 So you will walk in the way of good men, and keep to the paths of the righteous. Prov. 2:21 For the upright will live in the land, and the blameless will remain in it; Prov. 2:22 But the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be uprooted from it.

In contrast to the way of evil, and in contrast to the sexually immoral, God wants us to walk in goodness and righteousness. Along these lines, I remember a story that our esteemed University founder Dr. Fred White told in an address he gave on campus a few years back. He said that when he was young and because he was small in stature, he used to admire the *BIG* man. When he got a little bit older, and had completed his education, he then admired the *BRILLIANT* man, the

man of keen intellect and mental sharpness. But when he became older and wiser still, he no longer admired the *BIG* man or the *BRILLIANT* man. Instead, he admired the *GOOD* man, the man who is wise and who does what is right.

That is the kind of person I believe God admires too! He wants us to be good, not in a superficial, showy way, but in a way that reflects the depth and distinction of His own righteousness. This, then, becomes the source of blessing in our lives! That's why it says in v. 21 that the upright and the blameless will live and remain in the land. Living and remaining in the land was a sign of covenant blessing, of God's pleasure and favor. Only the foolish, the wicked, the treacherous would be removed from the land as a sign of cursing and judgment. So God's blessing depends on our covenant faithfulness and righteousness, and the fruitfulness and benefits of such a wise way of life are beyond estimation.

Is the reward of becoming the right kind of person through wisdom worth more than 85 million dollars to you?

Conclusion

Proverbs 2 presents the benefits of seeking wisdom. If the conditions of vv.1-4 are met, two consequences follow: we will develop spiritual and moral wisdom. We will be protected from the two catastrophes of evil and immorality. By His wisdom and grace we will be good and we will be blessed. *How much better it is to seek wisdom than gold, and to get understanding is to be chosen above silver!*

This quest for wisdom and for understanding ought to be at the center of Christian higher education. I have known a few students on this campus over the years who have made the quest for wisdom central to their academic work. DBU graduate *Christi Hemati* laid out this vision for her college career in these terms:

The college years are critical since so much of who I will be, what I will be, and how I will live is being shaped. I want to be shaped by the viewpoint that grows out of the Word of God, and on that basis allow every class I take, every book I read, every friend I make, and every experience I have to shape my life and deepen my love for God.

One of my all time favorite DBU grads is *Matt Henderson* who made these important educational discoveries:

My eyes have been opened to see God in every aspect of life such as business, politics, education, art, sports and so on. I used to think there were some things that God was more involved in or pleased with than others. But in Genesis 1, we see God's life-long task for man, the cultural mandate, civilization! Christians must not separate from, but participate in the work and activity of society...Christianly!

Rachel Barsness as a DBU student expressed her vision of education in worldview terms:

Developing my Christian worldview has been the *catapult* of my faith and I am just beginning to tap into the power God gives to transform my life and the world around me. It has provided a grid of truth by which I can evaluate every belief and issue I encounter. I can engage my culture, share my faith with non-believers more confidently, and live in the fullness of the humanity that God originally created me to enjoy.

DBU alumna *Alisha Barker* wrote these words in a paper on Martin Luther's view of education:

Obviously, Luther takes education very seriously, as should we. We must seek a knowledge of God and the various disciplines so that we will be prepared to be virtuous members of the church and our nation. Education will benefit the city because it will create wise, learned, and honorable citizens. Education will benefit the church because it will form Christians who know and can interpret the true Word of God and spread the gospel.

Our contemporary culture does not encourage us in the pursuit of this kind of wisdom, though this was a goal in life and learning for centuries. It is interesting that today we speak of *ancient wisdom* and of *modern science*, just as we do *not* speak of *ancient science* or of *modern wisdom*. We modern or postmodern denizens seem to be interested in many things other than wisdom. This is not good. It reminds of these short, but famous lines from "Choruses from the Rock" by T.S. Eliot:

Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the *wisdom* we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Wisdom is a lost virtue. But it need not be this way. We can still choose to make it a priority. But there are many competitors. If you had to choose between wealth and wisdom, like Solomon did, what would it be? May God give us the grace

to choose a wise and understanding heart. Who knows what else He may provide, if we make the right choice!