



## **BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Win the Day!**

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Many years ago, back in my previous ministry, I got a phone call one day from a financial advisor that had moved to town, was new in town, was a believer, attended a different church, but basically was offering his services. He wondered if he could help with newlyweds or premarital couples, just as a service helping to get them set up on a budget and get their finances straight. I thought that might be a helpful resource, so I set up a lunch with him. We met, and one of the first things I said was, “Just tell me a little bit about yourself.” And he chatted about this and that and pretty soon the conversation had moved to the struggles in his marriage and all the stress over finances and all of the credit card debt and all this financial trouble. He was going down fast. Finally, he looks at me and says, “Pastor Clark, can you help me?” And I think what I said is, “I can connect you with someone who can help you.” But what I’m thinking is, “There’s *no way* I’m going to have you advise young couples on how to handle their finances when you, yourself, can’t even manage your own finances!”

Now I think we get this! If you’re a business owner, you’re probably not going to take advice from someone who just bankrupted his own business. If you’re a parent, you’re probably not going to take advice from someone who’s never had children or take marriage advice from someone who just crashed his or her own marriage. I assume we’re not going to take relational advice from Hollywood celebrities that move from one level of dysfunction to another. But it does raise an interesting question: *Who DO we listen to?* On any given day there are hundreds of voices telling you how to live your life. There’s this sobering reality that you only get one shot at life. You only get one chance to be sixteen. You only get one chance to be thirty. You only get one shot at life, so everyday matters. So how do you ensure that you live your life with the utmost skill in order to fulfill the purpose for which you were created?

That’s what we want to talk about today and over the next couple of weeks. If you have a Bible, turn with us Proverbs, Chapter 4. Now there are some real challenges to preaching through Proverbs. The most obvious challenge is that of all the books in the Bible it is by far the easiest to understand. When people are reading through the Bible, the average person finally gets to Proverbs and they say to themselves, “This is finally one book I can understand!” Because it’s pretty straight forward—they’re just simple proverbs—it leaves the challenge for me: *What do I say?* I mean, it’s pretty obvious! It just means what it means. The other challenge in trying to preach it or teach it is that it’s just not organized around any sort of an outline or progression of thought. It’s just, by and large, a collection of proverbs. So how we’re going to do it is just take a chapter at a time and go through it. I’m going to make some comments here and there, and the rest of it’s pretty straight forward, I would say. The way the material is organized is what they would refer to as a “household model”. In other words, it’s organized around the idea of a father sitting down with his son, basically offering proverbs (wisdom) to his son. Of course, ultimately, it’s God the Father teaching His children. But there’s also a model here that says that ultimately,

we, ourselves, learn to live with skill and then pass that on to the next generation and to the next generation. And that's also part of the teaching here. So, verse 1:

Hear, O sons, the instruction of a father,  
And give attention that you may gain understanding,  
For I give you sound teaching;  
Do not abandon my instruction. (\*NASB, Proverbs 4:1-2)

You'll see that throughout this proverb, and all the proverbs, there's this message to listen and learn in order to gain understanding. Verse 3:

When I was a son to my father,  
Tender and the only son in the sight of my mother,  
Then he taught me ... (Vs. 3-4a)

Basically, you have the father saying, "This is how I was taught. This is what my father taught me. I've tried to live this way, and now I want to teach you." So, you have this generational model. We probably wouldn't think much about the reference to son, but it's helpful to understand that in the Hebrew and in the Jewish lifestyle, to be a son went far beyond just genetics. To make this statement, "*I was my father's son*," is really a reference to obedience. In that culture, to really be a son meant that I listened to my father; I obeyed my father, and now I'm passing this on to you—so much so that in the Jewish culture, if a son rebelled to a high enough degree, the father actually disowned him. It was this sense of saying, "You're not my son because you won't listen to me; you won't obey me." So, what he's saying is, "I was my father's son", meaning *I listened*, and *I obeyed*, and now I'm passing this on to you, *my son*. Almost everybody believes this is Solomon speaking, so the father would be David, the great King of Israel. And David then is saying, "I was taught by *my father*, and now I'm passing this on to *you*." He also makes a reference to his mother, which would have been Bathsheba.

So, there is a reminder here that failure is not final. No matter how many ways you've messed up, it doesn't mean you're out of the game. Yes, David and Bathsheba messed up! It was an unfortunate, adulteress affair that had all kinds of consequences. But the reality is, if you look at the scope of David's life from the beginning to end, he was a remarkable man of faith—without question, the greatest king in the history of the Hebrew people. The Bible itself describes him as "*a man after God's own heart*". We have this habit of taking this failure and having it define the entirety of David's life, which just isn't correct. It was a failure; it was a mess, but it by no means defines the entirety of his life. There should be hope for *all* of us in the realization that David and Bathsheba could come together and still say, "We have sought God's wisdom and to live that way, we are seeking now to pass it on to you." 8:39

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Verse 4:

Then he taught me and said to me,  
"Let your heart hold fast my words;  
Keep my commandments and live;

You'll see this several times in this proverb. But the idea of the point of skillful living—the point of wisdom—is in order that we might live, in order that we might live life to its fullest. I think there's a tendency to think that the choice is that I can live it up *or* I can follow God. I would say that's a lie from the enemy. I would say it this way: *If you want to really live it up,*

*listen to God...because God's wisdom is the way of life.* This is the way to get everything that your soul longs for, to get all that God wants you to experience in life. Verse 5:

Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!  
Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.

Acquire carries much more than just the idea of *purchase*. It carries the idea of *highest value*. In other words, if you have to sell *everything* in order to acquire *this*, it's because *this* is so valuable. It is the idea of pursuing wisdom with all your heart, that it *is* my highest value. We have a tendency to consistently talk about how busy we are. I understand that. Everybody's busy. Fine! We'll get that out. But the reality is that *everybody has time for that which you truly value*. So, the idea of acquiring wisdom is that it's something that really matters to me; it's something I value. Basically, Proverbs chapter 4 is not dispensing the wisdom. It's starting with: *First you have to want wisdom!* That's step one in the process. It has to be of value for you.

Now let's define terms. You have the terms wisdom and understanding. There's this couplet of terms that show up again and again in Proverbs and Psalms. They're a familiar couplet. The idea of wisdom is basically *seeing with discernment*. I like to move it out of that vague terminology and bring it down to: It's actually talking about *skillful living*. If you bring wisdom down to its most practical language, it's: *How do you live life with a high degree of skill?* So, the idea of wisdom is that of discernment. What does that mean? Understanding carries the idea of implementing that—in other words: *Then how do I do that?* I understand what skillful living looks like. Understanding it, then, is *How do I actually execute that in everyday, ordinary circumstances?* You'll see those words again and again here through Proverbs.

Acquire wisdom! Acquire understanding!  
Do not forget nor turn away from the words of my mouth.  
"Do not forsake her, and she will guard you;  
Love her, and she will watch over you." (Vs. 5-6)

It's interesting that the discussion turns to the idea of wisdom being like a lover; it's the imagery of someone passionately pursuing a lover, and if you love her, then there's great benefit in that. Verse 7:

"The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;  
And with all your acquiring, get understanding."

It's the idea that if you want to live with a high degree of skill, it starts with *wanting passionately* to live with skill. You have to want it! The question is: *How badly do you want it?* Wisdom does not necessarily come with age. As the years go by, the only guarantee is that we get older. There is virtually no guarantee that we get wiser. As a matter of fact, I've known 50 and 60 and 70-year-olds who are still very foolish. I've also known 16-year-olds who are very, very wise. We have this saying that "Hindsight is always 20/20". I would suggest to you that is absolutely *not* the case! I see this all the time. It's *not* 20/20. I can't even begin to tell you how many people I see who continue to make the same foolish decisions again and again and again and again! Hindsight is *not* 20/20! Some people just don't get it! They didn't get it when they were 20; they don't get it when they're 40; they don't get it when they're 60! So, wisdom is not automatic. That's what the text is saying. The beginning of wisdom is to *want it...to want it*

*badly...to passionately* pursue it. Again, verse 8 reminds us that it's like one who would pursue a lover.

"Prize her, and she will exalt you;  
She will honor you if you embrace her."

The language there is actually not just to *pursue* her, but that you love her, you hug her, and literally that you cuddle up with her. It's this romantic image of pursuing wisdom, like wisdom is a lover and you're pursuing with all of your passion to hold her and to hug her and to embrace her.

You know, love makes us do funny things. I remember way back in the early 80's, I was a student at the University of Nebraska. I lived right down by Lincoln High at 24<sup>th</sup> & B. Patty lived right up here at 48<sup>th</sup> & Highway 2. I was a student paying my own way through school. I didn't have any money. My only mode of transportation was a motorcycle. I had a little Honda 360, and those were great motorcycles, although in the dead of winter, it was somewhat problematic! But *I was in love!* So three or four times a week, in the dead of winter, I would put on my coveralls; I'd put on my mittens; I'd put on my scarf; I'd put on my helmet; I'd put on every layer I had to, and I'd putter on my motorcycle from 24<sup>th</sup> & B all the way out here to 48<sup>th</sup> & Highway 2 in order to see the woman I loved! Now, nobody made me do that. It wasn't a rule; it wasn't required. I did that because I was crazy in love! That's basically the imagery the psalmist is using—that we have that level of passion, that level of focus, that level of determination to pursue and understand and execute wisdom in order to live our lives with great skill. Verse 9:

"She will place on your head a garland of grace;  
She will present you with a crown of beauty."

The Hebrew word used for crown is not like a king's crown. It's referring to what they would have called a *victor's crown*. In other words, you get to the finish line; you win the race, and you get the victor's crown. The idea is that you pursue passionately wisdom like a lover in order that, when you get to the finish line, wisdom puts the victor's crown on your head and basically celebrates a life well lived.

Now I would guess that every single person in this room would say, "I understand; you only get one shot at life—and when I get to the finish line, I want to be able to look back with a deep sense of satisfaction and know I ran my race well." How do you do that? You passionately pursue wisdom in order to live skillfully. And the promise of verse 9 is that, if I do that, when I get to the finish line, wisdom herself will place this victor's crown on my head and say, "Well done!"

There are basically three discussions here. Some refer to them as three lectures. I don't prefer that terminology. It's verses 1 through 9, 10 through 19, and 20 to the end. So, the second discussion, verse 10:

Hear, my son, and accept my sayings,  
And the years of your life will be many.  
I have directed you in the way of wisdom;  
I have led you in upright paths. (Vs. 10-11)

I think it's helpful to stop and think about that statement, I have led you. This is the imagery of a father saying to his son, "I haven't just talked about skillful living. I have lived skillfully before you, and I am inviting you to follow my lead." There is this reminder of the sobering reality of actually living that out before your children as a parent. I think for us who are parents, the goal should be to be able to lay out every area of our lives, both private and public, and say to our children, "Here it is and I'm inviting you to follow my lead and live skillfully." It would be equally true with anyone that you're mentoring or discipling or leading. The idea is that you are demonstrating for them how to live out these great truths from God skillfully, in a very confusing world, in such a way that they can follow. If there is anything in your life, publicly or privately, that prevents you from laying it all out in front of somebody else and saying, "Hey check it out; I'm inviting you to follow my lead," then *deal* with it! That's a really helpful way to think about it. Whatever it is that would prohibit you from doing that—*Deal with it*, in order that you might live skillfully and then teach others to live skillfully as well.

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So, one of the questions we're wrestling with and Proverbs chapter 4 is who do we listen to? Who do we listen to that advises us in how we live our life? one of the things that Proverbs 4 reminds us is we have to be skillful if we're going to teach others how to be skillful, something that's passed down from generation to generation. And one of the points of emphasis is this has to be something we value. It doesn't just happen. I understand we're all busy. I hear people talk about it all the time, but it's also true, everybody has time for what they think is important. So, do we value wisdom? Do we value living skillfully? You have to want it. You have to pursue it. The proverb talks about pursuing it like a lover, with great passion and energy.

I know sometimes people think wisdom comes with age. I would say that's not necessarily true. I know a lot of people that are older and they're just older, they're not wiser. And I've also known some really young people that had a lot of skill and wisdom. I also hear people say things like, "Hindsight's always 20-20," and I'm just going to tell you after 38 years of being a pastor, it's not! I'm amazed at how many people look back and still don't get it and keep repeating the same mistakes. So that's a really important point to consider in Proverbs 4. So, do we really want to live skillfully and how much do we want it and how important is it to us, and are we willing to pursue it in order to gain the skill that's going to deliver the life that our soul longs for.

So, one of the interesting things about this proverb is, it mentions in verse nine the Victor's Crown. It's not talking about a King's crown. It's talking about at the end of a race, getting a wreath or a crown that really carries this idea of someone who has run a good race in life. And at the end God gives them their reward. I think it's sobering to think about the fact that you only get one shot at life. There are no do-overs. And so, we have to do everything we can to run well for the Victor's Crown. And part of what the proverb talks about is a father saying to his son, "You need to follow my lead. You need to live skillfully as I live skillfully." And I think a good question to leave us with is to think about if there's anything in your life that would prevent you from saying to someone else, "Follow me live like me." If so, then you need to address that and change it so that we have the freedom to say to others, "Follow me as I seek to show you how to live skillfully."

So, one of the ways to process this is that you need to think about: *Who are the voices I listen to?* And you need to start by thinking: *What kind of a life do I want? What kind of a marriage do I want? What kind of a parent do I want to be? What kind of a business owner do I want to be? What kind of a life do I really want before God?* And then find those people who are actually living that way. Learn from them. Listen to them. Allow them to speak into your life.

So that's my challenge for today. It gives you something to think about, and we'll be back in the Proverbs next week.