“Honor Your Elder / Seek Wise Counsel”

Genesis 9:18–25 and Proverbs 1

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Tomorrow night I have been invited to speak at Cru, and the topic I was given is “Honor your elder / seek wise counsel.” When I read that, my mind immediately jumped to Proverbs — in particular, chapters 1–9. This is, to my mind, one of the major themes of the entire book. Tonight, then, is part of getting ready for that conversation. Some of you may have heard me teach in Proverbs earlier this year, so parts of this may be familiar territory.

The theme raises three basic questions that I want to work through. What is wisdom? — because if I am going to seek wise counsel, I need to know what wisdom looks like when I find it. Why honor one’s elders? And how does one actually go about honoring elders and seeking wise counsel? What does it look like in practice?

What Is Wisdom?

Before we can talk about why we should seek wisdom or how to get it, we need to answer the foundational question: what is wisdom?

Here is my definition, in the most basic and broad sense: **wisdom is the ability to do something well.**

Consider the evidence. In Exodus 28:3, the Lord gave the builders of the tabernacle wisdom — the ability to make things well. Exodus 35:34 speaks of wisdom as the ability to teach others. Solomon had wisdom in how to organize and lead people. David had wisdom in how to play the harp and compose songs. Joab, David’s general, was wise in the art of war. And Ezekiel 27 speaks of the wisdom of sailors who know how to read the sea and handle a ship.

Wisdom, in each of these cases, is a capacity — a developed ability to do something with excellence. And what does developing that kind of ability require? It requires knowledge. It requires practice — deliberate, disciplined practice. It requires experience. It requires doing something over and over again until it becomes second nature. Wisdom is the summation of all these things. At some point, the carpenter, the sailor, the doctor, the teacher becomes wise — not because wisdom fell on them, but because they pursued it.

Now, let me bring that general definition into what I am calling biblical wisdom. When Proverbs 16:16 says, *"How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver"* — what kind of wisdom is in view? I believe it is two things, deeply interrelated and woven together: the wisdom — the ability — to live in right relationship with God, and the wisdom — the ability — to live life well.

Think about what that looks like in a person. Can you picture someone who lacks that ability? Someone who simply is not wise about life? The picture is not hard to draw. They do not listen to instruction. They cannot control what comes out of their mouth, and because of that, they damage relationships and squander opportunities. They are hot-tempered and run people off. They have a cavalier attitude toward sin — they treat doing wrong as a kind of joke. They do whatever they feel like doing, and they cannot understand why things keep going badly for them.

Now picture the other kind of person. Someone who is genuinely wise, someone who is a good example of living life well. They are careful with what they say. They commend and seek knowledge. They manage their temper. They give thought to their steps before they take them. They see danger coming and move to avoid it. They are someone you actually want to be around — someone whose life you want to learn from.

How does a person become the second kind and not the first? And are some people simply born that way?

No. Remember: wisdom is an ability, and abilities are developed. They are grown, learned, and practiced. They do not simply arrive. It is worth pausing over the fact that even Jesus grew in wisdom — Luke 2:52 tells us so. Wisdom is not a static possession; it is a living thing that grows.

So how do you get it? How do you develop, over time, the ability to live life well — a life that is flourishing, that overflows to others, that knows joy even in hardship? Proverbs 9:10 names the starting point: *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight."*

Notice that the fear of the Lord is called the *beginning* of wisdom — the first day of school, not graduation day. What that phrase is saying is that before you can open the book and start learning, you have to know there is a book. People who reject that there is a God tend to live as though wisdom is simply whatever is right in their own eyes — as though there is no Creator who has designed life to be lived in a particular way. To fear the Lord is to recognize exactly that: He has created life to be lived a certain way, and living that way leads to a life well lived. That is where wisdom begins.

But where does it go from there? James 1:5 is direct: *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."* And Proverbs 2:6: *"For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding."* The

Lord gives us wisdom through the leading of his Spirit and through his Word. If you want to be wise — if you want to develop the ability to live well and to live rightly before God — growing in the knowledge of Scripture is absolutely central.

But there are other sources of wisdom as well. A healthy church community. Wise friends. Family. Good teachers. And — and here is where we are going — elders.

Why Honor One's Elders?

By this point, you may already be able to answer this question yourself. You honor your elders because they are a source of wisdom you do not yet have. And honoring them is how you open yourself up to hear what their lives are teaching. If contempt gets in the way — if you have already decided that an older person has nothing to offer you — you will not be able to hear anything they say.

There is also a clear command in Scripture on this point. Leviticus 19:32 says, *"You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD."* And in passages like Isaiah 3:5, Lamentations 5:12, and Deuteronomy 28:50, contempt for the elderly is treated as a mark of a society under divine judgment. When older people are shown contempt, something is horribly wrong in the culture. Society is sick.

And like all of God's commands, this one is given for our good. The good that comes from honoring elders is wisdom.

Let me illustrate this with a story from Genesis.

The Consequences of Contempt: Genesis 9:18–25

The context is the aftermath of the flood. Noah and his sons have come out of the ark, and life is beginning again.

> *The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed. Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent.*
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> *And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers."*

This is a strange story, and it raises an immediate question: why is Canaan cursed? What did Canaan do wrong? As far as we can see from the text, nothing. It was Ham who sinned. So why does the curse fall on his son?

Before we can answer that, we need to understand what Ham actually did. There are details in this story that the text does not fill in for us, but the sequence makes the nature of Ham's action plain. He sees his father's nakedness, and then he goes out to tell his brothers. He is not going to them out of care or concern. He is not saying, "Dad's in trouble — come help me." He is saying, "You have to see this." He is mocking his father. He is presenting this as a spectacle. He is holding up a drunken old man for his brothers to look at and laugh about.

Notice the order: first he sees, and then he tells. And he takes it outside. What happened privately in the tent, he carries out into the open.

It is also important to recognize that in the Bible, "seeing someone's nakedness" is not a neutral phrase. It is the language of exposure, shame, and contempt. When Jeremiah grieves over fallen Jerusalem in Lamentations, he says that all who once honored her now despise her because they have seen her nakedness (Lam. 1:8). Habakkuk pronounces a woe on the man who gets his neighbor drunk in order to gaze on his nakedness (Hab. 2:15). Ham's sin is not that he stumbled onto something shameful. His sin is what he does with it — he lingers in it, and then he spreads it.

Shem and Japheth respond in deliberate contrast. They take a garment, lay it over their shoulders, and walk backward into the tent so that they can cover their father without seeing his shame. Everything about their action is careful and reverent.

So now we come back to the question. Why is Canaan cursed?

Remember: wisdom is a learned ability. And a large part of learning any ability is seeing it modeled — watching someone who has it, staying close enough to observe what they do, absorbing it over time. We learn by example, not just by instruction.

Ham's contempt for his father has not merely wounded Noah. It has established the posture of his household. Contempt is an attitude of the heart that says: you have nothing to teach me. You have nothing to give me. There is no wisdom you can pass to me. The moment Ham adopts that posture toward his father, who is going to suffer for it? His son. Canaan. Ham's contempt of Noah does not stop with Ham — it reaches forward into the next generation. The son who had no chance to learn wisdom never received it, because his father refused to honor the source.

I see this pattern as a pastor. A young person grows up in the church. They know the Word. They know what a life well lived looks like. But then — for whatever reason — they leave. They go to college, get married, have children, and church just gets crowded out. And they do not raise their own children in the faith. The one who did wrong is that son or daughter who knew but walked away in contempt. The ones who suffer are their children, who never even get the chance to know. That is the ripple effect of contempt for wisdom.

There are other stories in Scripture that show the other side of this — what happens when someone does honor their elder and seek wisdom. Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12 is a sobering counterexample: he rejected the counsel of the older men who had served his father and chose instead the advice of young men who had grown up alongside him, and it cost him most of his kingdom. Ruth clings to Naomi with those famous words — *"Where you go I will go"* — and Naomi's counsel in Ruth 3 shapes the entire course of what follows. Elisha refuses to leave Elijah's side again and again in 2 Kings 2, and the result is that when Elijah is taken, the mantle — along with a double portion of the spirit — falls on him. In each case, staying close to the elder is inseparable from receiving the wisdom.

How to Honor Your Elders: Proverbs 1

Now to the final question: how do you actually do this? What does it look like to honor your elders and seek wise counsel?

To answer that, let's look at Proverbs 1. Chapters 1–9 are framed as a father speaking to his son — which means the book itself is an elder passing wisdom down to the next generation. Proverbs is, in its very form, a model of what we are talking about.

Wisdom is for everyone, and no one graduates.

Solomon opens by saying the book was written *"to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth"* (v. 4). The "simple" here does not mean stupid — it means open, untested, impressionable, easy to persuade. That describes most of us at eighteen or twenty. We are open, and that is not a bad thing, as long as we are being opened by the right voices.

But then verse 5 says the book is also for the wise: *"Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance."* The word translated "guidance" is literally "steerings" — from the rope a sailor pulls to steer his ship through shifting winds. You never outgrow needing it. Wise people are wise precisely because they never stop listening.

Wisdom starts with a posture.

Verse 7: *"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."*

This is the motto of the entire book, and it sets up two roads from the very first page. One person bows before God and begins to learn. The other treats instruction as worthless. The fool in Proverbs is not someone with a low IQ. His problem is his posture. He will not be taught.

That is Ham exactly. Contempt says, "You have nothing to teach me." And whoever says that has cut himself off from wisdom before he has even started — and cut off his children along with him.

Wisdom is learned from listening to the right voices.

Chapter 1 introduces three voices, and every one of us lives at the intersection of all three.

The first voice is your parents (vv. 8–9). *"Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching."* The word "hear" here is *shema* — the great Old Testament word for hearing that carries the weight of obedience. It means to hear and to do. And notice how Solomon describes their instruction: it is *"a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck."* The world tells us that our parents' guidance is a cage. Solomon says it is a crown.

The second voice is the enticers (vv. 10–19). *"My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent."* The word translated "entice" shares the same root as "simple" in verse 4. The simple man is open and persuadable; the enticer is the one who works that opening. Proverbs is deliberately playing on the connection. The one who has not yet been formed is exactly the one most in danger of being formed the wrong way.

The father then lets us hear the enticers speak for themselves, so that his son — and we — can recognize the pitch: *"Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us ambush the innocent without reason… we shall fill our houses with plunder… throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse."*

Hear what that invitation offers: belonging, adventure, danger, wealth, brotherhood. That is how enticement always works. It never pitches itself as evil. It pitches itself as a shorter road to something that is actually good. The father's answer is not a sophisticated argument — it is physical: *"Hold back your foot from their paths"* (v. 15). Sometimes wisdom is not a thought. It is a step not taken.

The third voice is Wisdom herself (vv. 20–33), and she is not hiding in a corner.

> *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.*

The city gate is where the elders sat. Wisdom stands in the most public, most trafficked, most visible place in town. Notice the contrast: the enticers pulled the young man into a corner, into concealment. Wisdom stands in the open square. Evil works through secrecy. Wisdom works in the light.

Her first words are a lament: *"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?"* The phrase "how long" — *ad-matay* in Hebrew — is the cry of the prophets, the cry of the psalmist. It is the voice of a love that has waited a long time.

She addresses three figures, each at a different stage of resistance. The simple ones have not yet refused wisdom — they have simply come to love their untested openness. They prefer to remain impressionable rather than to be formed. The scoffers have moved past indifference into active contempt — they mock the reverent and treat the fear of the Lord as something quaint. The fools have hardened further still; they do not merely ignore wisdom but hate knowledge. Three postures, each worse than the last, and Wisdom looks at all three and cries, *How long?*

And then — here is the hinge of the entire speech — she makes an offer:

> *If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you.*

"If you turn" — the Hebrew verb is *shuv*, the great biblical word for repentance, for turning around and going the other direction. The same verb the prophets use when they call Israel back to the Lord. Wisdom is calling for repentance. And what does she offer in return? *"I will pour out my spirit to you."* This is the vocabulary of Joel 2 and of Pentecost. To pour out one's spirit is to give oneself — to communicate one's inmost life. Wisdom is not offering a transaction. She is offering herself. She will not hoard it. She will not gatekeep. The door is open and the invitation is extravagant.

And where does this offer of wisdom come to us? Back in verses 8–9, it comes through an elder. Someone who has it, and who would like to give it away.

Putting It Into Practice

So how, concretely, do you honor your elders and seek wise counsel? Proverbs 1 has been pointing us in a direction. Let me be specific about what that could look like.

Start with the fear of the Lord. Wisdom begins with recognizing that God has designed life to be lived a certain way — and that you are not the starting point.

Listen with the intent to act. *Shema* — not passive hearing, but hearing that moves toward obedience.

Ask someone twenty or more years older than you to coffee this month. The key to learning is asking, and a question is how you open the door. Try these: What do you wish you had known at my age? What would you do differently? How did you get through your hardest season?

Before a major decision — a major, a job, a relationship — ask at least two older believers what they think.

Call a grandparent this week, and instead of just checking in, ask them to tell you a story.

Stay close. Ruth said, *"Where you go I will go"* (Ruth 1:16). Elisha said, *"I will not leave you"* (2 Kings 2:2). Wisdom is caught by proximity over time, not extracted in a single conversation.

And one more thing worth saying: honoring your elders does not mean accepting everything uncritically. Being old does not automatically make someone wise. Test what you hear against Scripture. But go in ready to receive, not ready to dismiss.

Ham had a father who had walked with God through the most catastrophic event in human history. He had seen the faithfulness of God up close. And Ham looked at him and thought, *you have nothing for me.* His son paid the price for that contempt.

Do not make that choice. The wisdom you need is closer than you think — sitting across the table, answering the phone, walking into the room. All it takes is a posture that is willing to hear.