Proverbs 8:1-4; 22-31

“Wise Beyond Years

One fine day, four people were flying in a small, four passenger plane: a pilot, a minister, and two teenagers, one of whom had just won an award as being the “Smartest Teenager in the World.” As they were flying along over a deep and wide canyon, the pilot turned to his three passengers and said, “I’ve got some bad news, and I’ve got some worse news. The bad news is we are out of fuel. The plane is going down and there is no good place to land it safely.

The worse news is I only have three parachutes on board.” This of course meant that one person would have to go down with the plane. The pilot continued. “I have a wife and three children at home. I have many responsibilities. I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to take one of the parachutes.” And with that, he grabbed one of the chutes and jumped out of the plane. They watched the chute open and then the smartest teenager in the world spoke next.

“I’m the Smartest Teenager in the World”, he said. “I might be the one who comes up with a cure for cancer, or AIDS, or solves the world’s economic problems. Everyone is counting on me!” And so, the Smartest Teenager in the World grabbed the second parachute and jumped. The minister then spoke up and said, “Son, you take the last parachute. I’ve made my peace with God, and I am willing to go down with the plane. Now take the last parachute and go.

“Relax. Reverend,” said the remaining teenager. “The Smartest Teenager in the World just jumped out of the plane with my knapsack.” (Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks, p. 182) Is there a difference between wisdom and knowledge? Knowledge is knowing that a cobra’s venom can kill you in minutes, wisdom is knowing not to poke one with a stick. Can you have knowledge without wisdom? Does wisdom become a product of the aging process? Not necessarily. We have an idiom in which we say, “Out of the mouths of babes”.

Patrick a ten-year-old is quoted as saying, “Never trust your dog to watch your food.” Wise words. Michael, age 9 said, “Never tell your mom her diet isn’t working.” Joel, age 10 said, “Don’t pick on your sister when she is holding a baseball bat.” Finally, Ellen, age 9 said, “Never try to baptize a cat.” It would seem that knowledge and age do not immediately equate to wisdom.

The book of Proverbs is part of the bible we call “Wisdom Literature”. Attributed to King Solomon, who is reported to have been incredibly wise, the book explores the nature and source of wisdom. The book of Proverbs even goes as far as to personify wisdom, to make it sound and act like a real being. He refers to wisdom as a her, and many of you ladies might be inclined to say, “But of course!”

As such, wisdom is portrayed as calling out; shouting from the mountain tops, the city gates, and where roads meet. Implied here is that wisdom must be therefore acquired. It does not come naturally to us. There is a real sense here that if we want wisdom, we must actively listen for it. We must want it. There is also a real sense of humility implied here. There must be an acknowledgement that we are not wise on our own. Knowledge, and the accumulation of knowledge is a great thing, but the more we have, the more inclined we are to think we are wise.

Laura and I enjoy the antics of the cast on a show called Big Bang Theory. We watch a group of friends, who in most cases would be considered geniuses. They know a great deal about things I will never understand, but they continually get into trouble for not being wise. Their grasp of theoretical physics and cosmology, cannot help them maintain healthy relationships, or cope with their individual and collective anxieties.

Baptist preacher, Vance Havner once said, “If you lack knowledge, go to school. If you lack wisdom, get on your knees! Knowledge is not wisdom. Wisdom is the proper use of knowledge.” James 1:5-8 covers this subject well. *“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.”*

James’ point is clear; if we want wisdom, we can and should ask God for it. And how God delivers this wisdom to us is amazing in its variety. We can certainly find wisdom in his Word, the Bible. God can also give us wisdom through other people, and through experience. Haven’t we all learned a thing of two from the dumb mistakes we have made, or the mistakes we see others make. We also learn from the good other people do.

Although, often we only come to realize our acquisition of wisdom later on, we must be attuned to it speaking to us. We must recognize that God can use everything, and anyone, to school us in wisdom. My mother used to go on about how one of my first jobs as a teenager helped prepare me for ministry. I worked at a high end women’s fashion store called Nyman’s Ladies Wear, in downtown Brantford.

Essentially, I was the “gopher”. In other words, “go for this, go for that”. I was their delivery boy, janitor, and errand boy. The store itself was staffed entirely by women, with only the store owner being a man. The women who worked there were also older women for the most part, some just working part time to make ends meet with their meager pensions. The atmosphere of the store could be tense and competitive. (They were paid a base rate plus commission).

I was often regaled by one staff member about the laziness or unprofessionalism of their colleagues, or how they stole a commission; only to have a few minutes later, another staff member returns the favour on the first gossiper. The seamstresses, and the sales staff, had a cold war going on that might make the NATO minister’s blush. They hardly spook to each other, all with one woman, with a very strong personality, keeping the peace, and running a tight ship as the manager. My mother said, “What a perfect environment to train a pastor!”

Wisdom speaks: at home, at work, in the world, in friendships, while shopping; frankly all over the place. The only question is, are we listening? Proverbs also tells us that wisdom speaks the truth. Wisdom says, “I have trustworthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right.” All of us can understand the value of trustworthiness. In an interview with David Letterman, President Jimmy Carter shared an anecdote of a translation problem he encountered in Japan.

Carter was speaking at a business lunch in Tokyo, where he decided to open his speech with a brief joke. He told the joke, then waited for the translator to repeat it in Japanese.

Even though the story was short, Carter was surprised how quickly the translator could retell it. He was even more impressed by the reaction of the crowd. Carter thought the story cute, but was awestruck by the outright riotous laughter that ensued. Carter was very flattered by the reaction. After the speech, Carter took the translator aside to ask how he told the joke, as clearly he told the joke in a much more hilarious way than he did.

The translator responded that what he said was, “President Carter has told a very funny joke. Please laugh now.” Politicians are always being criticized for not telling the truth. One little girl asked her father, “Daddy, do all fairy tales begin with ‘Once upon a time’?” He replied, “No there is a whole series of Fairy Tales that begin with ‘If elected I promise to’.” Politicians aside, what about us? Do we tell the truth? Are our words trustworthy?

The wisdom of God is trustworthy. It is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. One of the best ways of making sure we speak as much truth as possible is for us to use scripture. This was Jesus approach when he was tempted for forty days in the wilderness. Psalm 119 reads, “Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee.” When God’s word resides in our hearts we cannot help but speak the truth.

Wisdom also fears God. Verses 12 and 13 read, “I, Wisdom, live together with good judgement. I know where to discover knowledge and discernment. All who fear the Lord will hate evil. That is why I hate pride, arrogance, corruption, and perverted speech.” When Robert Morrison, the first missionary to go to China around 1807, disembarked from his ship in a Chinese port, the captain said, “So you think you are going to make an impression on China.” Morrison quietly replied, “No, sir, but I believe God will.”

Morrison was a man who clearly feared God, meaning that he trusted him. Fearing God means holding God in great respect and trusting God fully. In another passage of Proverbs, we read, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.” (Prov. 3:5-6) Or how about this gem? “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.” (Prov. 9:10)

As I quoted before from Havner. “If you want knowledge go to school. If you want wisdom get on your knees.” The lack of wisdom in this world, I believe, is direct result of an unwillingness to fear God. Like I mentioned when we looked last week at the tower of Babel, we longed to “make a name for ourselves”. We want to be the center of the world’s attention, or at least of those around us, and some will do anything to achieve that.

Notoriety from being notorious. There is a very odd trend that has been building for some time now. Celebrities who use their notoriety to champion causes. Sometimes the cause is a good one like Bono’s work to end poverty, but Bono claims to fear God. He has said as much many times. His faith is important to him. But often a celebrity will speak to something, or push a cause that they have no knowledge about, and certainly no wisdom in.

Every time a hear of a movie star spouting off, I always wonder, “why should I listen to you?” Just because you made a gazillion dollars playing someone else, does not make you wise. Especially, if you think the source of your wisdom is yourself.

The Independent news organization in their web addition of August 2014, reports that celebrity endorsements actually do not enhance fund raising efforts. The article goes on to argue that the celebrities who get involved in causes, usually only do so to make the public think more positively about them. In other words, even their altruism is self-serving. Paul reminds us that “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.” (1 Cor. 10:31)

Proverbs also tells us that Wisdom produces good fruit or good gifts. Verse 19-21 read, “My gifts are better than the purest gold, my wages better than sterling silver! I walk in righteousness, in paths of justice. Those who love me inherit wealth, for I fill their treasuries.” I am stating the obvious when I say that we like the good things of life. And in terms of the world we are very well off you and I. See globalrichlist.com.

Most of you are familiar with the story of the rich young rule in Luke 18, who comes to Jesus and wants eternal life. Jesus tells him to sell everything he has, give it to the poor and follow him. The rich young ruler walks away because he had great wealth and he didn’t want to give it up. We understand from this story that he made the wrong decision, but there is an unsettling caveat to this story.

No matter how rich that young man was, he could not in his wildest dreams-ride in a car, have surgery of any kind, turn on a light, buy penicillin, watch TV, use an indoor bathroom with running water, fly in a plane or talk on a phone. If he was rich, then what are we? We already know the answer to that. Matthew 16:26 reads, “What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?”

Then there are these very familiar words we looked at recently from 1 Timothy 6:9-10. “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

Wealth can bring a great many things in this life. You know the phrase, “Money can’t buy happiness.” Well I heard someone say in response to that, “I would still rather be miserable in my mansion than happy in my shack.” I don’t know about that. Riches are great on many levels, but they cannot buy eternal life, and eternity is coming for all of us. If we are blessed with many material things, we need to thank God who bestowed them on us.

We need to value the treasures of heaven, and our lives need to bear fruit that God is the ruler of our hearts. Wisdom produces good fruit.

There is an old joke about a meeting of religious leaders, where suddenly an angel of the Lord appears. The angel speaks to the one leading the meeting and says that because of the man’s unselfish and exemplary behavior, God will reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, wisdom or beauty. Perhaps influenced by Solomon’s same choice, the man replied that he would select wisdom.

“Done!” says the angel, and then the angel was gone. Now all heads at the event turn to the leader, who is now surrounded by a faint halo of light. There is a whisper rippling through the assembled group. Finally, someone shouts out, “Well, say something wise.” The man looks up and with a tear in his eye says, “I should have taken the money.” No he shouldn’t have. He made the right choice choosing the wisdom of God.

The wisdom of God will do things for us that nothing else on earth can do. God’s wisdom is always calling to us, everywhere we go. But are we listening?