

**Sermon Transcript from June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016  
How Wisdom Leads Us to the Good Life  
Pastor Mark Sayers, Reality San Francisco**

[Introduction]:

We have been in a series, you guys, called "The School of Life" where we have been studying the Old Testament wisdom literature and learning what it has to say and how we live a good and wise life as followers of God. Today, we are honored to have a special guest, Mark Sayers, with us. He's the senior pastor at Red Church in Melbourne, Australia. He's an accomplished writer on many subjects, including the intersection of faith and culture. He's a dear friend to us and he is a wonderful man. Church, would you give a warm welcome to Pastor Mark Sayers?

[Mark Sayers]:

Good morning. I wanted to start by opening the Scriptures and today's book, which we're looking at in a meta framework. The book of Proverbs. We're just going to begin at the beginning at Proverbs 1:1. So, if you would like to turn, flick through your screen or however you do it, let's turn to Proverbs 1:1.

**"The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:**

**"For learning what wisdom and discipline are; for understanding insightful sayings; for receiving wise instruction in righteousness, justice and integrity; for teaching shrewdness to the inexperienced, knowledge and direction to a young man—a wise man will listen and increase his learning, and a discerning man will obtain guidance—for understanding a proverb or a parable, the words of the wise, and their riddles.**

**"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and discipline."**

I guess my main argument this morning is that you should read the book of Proverbs. It seems obvious, but the book of Proverbs is this container of wisdom is something which we have become isolated from. We live in a time of so much information and obsession around intelligence and smartness. And yet, in the midst of this growth of information and smartness, at the same time, we have neglected what it is to be wise. Proverbs is also interested in not just wisdom, but it sees wisdom as a tool or a pathway to reach what is the good life. This model of living in which humans discover and experience meaning, happiness and joy.

The good life is presented to us continually in a way that it's never been presented to us before in advertising. You see it on your social media feeds. It's presented to us in media. If you look at the world and the chaos that we so often see in the world and the divisions, be they politically, religiously or socially, is often driven by different concepts of what the good life is. And our quest for the good life also exposes a truth in the world that humans are deeply religious. Even those who would not ascribe to the name of religion find themselves operating in religious ways. Probably the greatest project ever and the most vigorous to remove religion from the public sphere happened in the Soviet Union.

In 1917, when the Bolsheviks started their revolution, one of their goals was to eliminate religion. Karl Marx said that religion was the opiate of the people, something which prevented humanity from reaching its goal of an egalitarian, equal society and so it must be wiped out. Churches were blown up. There was a thing called The League of the Godless that was started. In churches which were able to continue, posters were put up on the walls. But, the bizarre thing was, in this great move against religion, a kind of surrogate religion grew up. Instead of the icons of Christ and Mary and the Church fathers, you would see pictures, icons if you'd like, of Lenin, Engels, Marx, Mousie Dung.

Stalin created something which Khrushchev later called "a cult of personality," where the face of Stalin hovered over so much of the culture. When Lenin died, one of the engineers of the revolution, they entombed his body in a mausoleum in Red Square and people would go and look at this the way that people had in the past of saints and their relics. There's something in humans. Scripture says eternity is written on the human heart in the book of Ecclesiastes, another wisdom book. So, I desire to find a good life, an end of history, where what we deeply desire happens is so part of us it's like our skin and our hair and our bones.

So, what wisdom is is this set of instructions. It's this road. It's a guidebook of how to get there. But, one of the main reasons I want to encourage you to read the book of

Proverbs is that the book of Proverbs undermines so many of the assumptions that we have about the good life. A hundred years ago, the average person would be exposed to, in their lifetime, approximately the amount of information that would be included in one edition of the New York Times. If you think about us today, we're not looking for information, we're struggling not to drown in information. We have every single bit of information at our fingertips. Often, at night, we find ourselves, an hour later, looking at information we never intended to.

I experienced this recently in preparing for a sermon. I looked up something to try and find some bit of Biblical history and then found myself on a webpage, I'm ashamed to say, about the top celebrities in Hollywood who use too much fake tan. I didn't intend to get there, but somehow there's people writing information like this. And it tells you something about information. That when you find yourself getting more information than you ever need, it tells you that information is easily found and consumed. It's junk food. Now, sometimes, it's important junk food. If you're going to get surgery, you want the surgeon to have the intelligence to know what to do. You want them to know that stuff.

But, increasingly, we eat it up. Wisdom is different than intelligence. Wisdom is something which must be lived. Intelligence is consumed; wisdom is lived. Douglas Rushkoff talks about information today is stepping into a river where it's coming at you like a rushing gush of water that overwhelms you. Wisdom is like a container which you keep and cherish and hold. Wisdom must be lived. It has a communal element. It challenges us. It even disciplines us in a way that information doesn't.

Increasingly, we take information and simply put it into these silos of preexisting biases that we have. Today, as I watch the news break out of what happened in Orlando, you see people as the trickle of information comes out quickly try and put it in one of these categories. One of the classic ways we have of doing this in the West is these categories of left and right. When the events happened, people were quickly speculating that it must be someone on the right. Then information comes out and people are very interested in the shooter's ethnicity and his religious beliefs and his ideology. And we take this event, which involves real people with names and faces and loved ones, and we want to reduce that down to a caricature put easily into a silo of information so that we can deal with it.

Wisdom doesn't let you do that. Wisdom calls you on your stuff. Wisdom draws you into something greater. A vision of the good life which you don't control. A vision of the good life that you don't control.

Proverbs, instead of allowing us to drown in it like information, takes us away from this realm which is increasingly developing in our world where we can live these lives where we put the information into this silo, disconnected from actual reality. In my country, when we had a terrorist attack. It was a cafe in Sydney. This particular person took some people hostage and you saw this happen where people were trying to work out what the exact situation was going on. People were trying to put it in these two silos. And then, an ISIS flag appeared in the windows of the cafe. And I was watching this in this safe sphere up here where people were talking in this entire media sphere about all the information around this event. Then I went to pick up my daughter from elementary school. The media was talking about these divisions in our nations. The place of Islamic people.

And I went to pick up my daughter from school and I was sitting in the hallway and watched this incredible interaction where a mother came in and these women gathered around her newborn baby. One woman looked very normal. Classic white Australian. This other woman came in and she had shaved sides of her head and tattoos. And this other woman, in Islamic veil, came in. And they all stood around this baby, smiling, talking. What I experienced at that elementary school that day was completely different from what the information sphere above me was telling me. Wisdom tells us that there's this very different world which exists and it's actually the world in which we live.

In this world, things actually matter. It's relational. In this world, there are actually consequences. You can't easily put things in a box. We increasingly have a situation in the West where, because of this information sphere that hovers above us all the time that we can retreat into, we're pushed away from the fact that the decisions that we make have consequences. Our vision of the good life means that we want it now but we put off the consequences.

Proverbs challenges us about our prejudice towards time. We live in a time where no one says it openly. We actually would be repelled if we said this out loud. But, the ways that we talk about our progressive Western cities, like a San Francisco or a Melbourne, where I'm from, is that we think we have reached an apex of human amazingness. We would

never say this, but we think that we've progressed to this time where we are so cosmopolitan and sophisticated that if the rest of the world was like us, there'd be no problems. What we're actually saying when we see ourselves of beacons of tolerance, progressiveness, sophistication, is that we're making a backhanded insult.

If we think these Western, sophisticated cities are the smartest, most balanced, rounded people in the world, what does that say to people who don't live in those cities? What does that say about the worldview, the lifestyle, the wisdom of the indigenous people of my country and yours? What does it say if we think we are the most progressive, enlightened people in the world? What does that say about people living in Dakar, Senegal?

What Proverbs does is it takes us from this mythology that we are, in many ways, the most enlightened people in the world. Sure, we maybe have access to more information, maybe we're more educated than people have ever been in history, but Proverbs is like a time capsule. What makes Proverbs different from information is that information is only worth something at that exact moment. The guy on Twitter in Pakistan who was the first person to tweet that the assault was happening on Bin Laden's house there, he was the most valuable information person in the world at that moment. Literally, when people discovered this out, his Twitter followers just went through the roof. I looked him up not so long ago and he's still trying to ride off this moment. But, no one cares anymore. The information was only key when he tweeted, "Gun shots going off. Helicopters."

No one cares now. You can go watch the movie, buy the book. Sorry buddy. You're important for about 15 seconds of fame there. Information of what time the train's coming or that plane is leaving is so important to you. A boarding pass is like this thing you hold onto like it's worth gold for that 15 minutes before you jump on your flight. But then, later in the flight, it's look a bookmark. And then, after that, it's at the bottom of your bag and then it's in the trash can because it's utterly irrelevant.

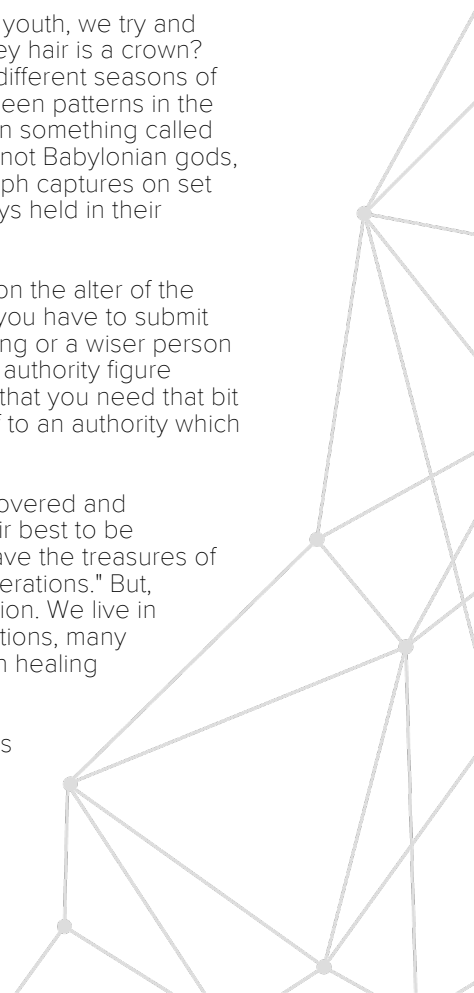
Wisdom is something which challenges our prejudice towards time. It speaks into our youth obsession. We, as a culture, and in cities like mine and yours, see ourselves as moving towards tolerance. But, we perpetrate – sorry, I have a slight throat thing when I say the letter "P," I can't say it. So, just bear with that. Which is not good when you're speaking about Proverbs. Anyway, we'll keep going.

We live in a culture which is youth obsessed. If we're youth obsessed and we cherish youth, we try and hold onto youth, we fear aging, what does that say about Scripture's injunction that grey hair is a crown? That there's an experience which comes with life? When you've been through all the different seasons of life, the ups and the down, when you've seen the arrogant rise and fall, when you've seen patterns in the world, when you've buried your friends, welcomed new babies into the world, you gain something called wisdom. But, in our obsession with youth, in our temples, our Westfields, our idols are not Babylonian gods, they're perfectly sculpted mannequins pressed into a permanent youth. The photograph captures on set how most beautiful Marilyn Monroe will always be her radiant best. James Dean. Always held in their youthfulness.

But, Proverbs tells us that so often, when we sacrifice wisdom, we sacrifice the future on the alter of the present. Proverbs also challenges us because it exposes our autonomy. To be wise, you have to submit yourself to a form of authority. The language in the book of Proverbs is from a wiser king or a wiser person speaking to mostly young men, but also this passage is to young women. It's an older authority figure teaching someone who admits that they don't have it all together. Proverbs is not like that you need that bit of information so you Google it, it's an ongoing relationship where you submit yourself to an authority which actually knows what you don't.

So, we have a culture in which we live out a radical individualism, but one that is not covered and challenged by wisdom. Institutions, as they exist in human history, are designed at their best to be receptacles of tradition; to pass them down through history so that generations can have the treasures of the people who came before them. Evan Burke called this "the partnership of the generations." But, we live in a time, because of our autonomy, in which we want to tear down any institution. We live in the time where even our leaders herald the fact that they want to come into the institutions, many of which need healing, but come into those institutions with hand grenades rather than healing hands.

We need wisdom because it exposes our autonomy. We need wisdom because it tells us that we don't have it all worked out. Dallas Willard tells the story, in his book "The



Divine Conspiracy," of a class at an elite university. And the class is an ethics class. He tells how there's a young woman in the class being bullied and abused by a couple of young men who were getting the highest grade in ethics in that class. In which these men, sitting there every day, studying ethics, are living in the most unethical way. Because, the kind of wisdom that Proverbs is talking about exposes our autonomy. And I think one of the biggest challenges to this is that when we look at the news and when we see events like what happened overnight in Orlando, for humans, it's this reminder that we don't have all the answers to this world.

In one of the other great wisdom books, the book of Job, which I think Dave spoke on last week, apologies if I'm wrong on that. At the end of that book, there's this incredible passage that's brought to life in the recent Russian film *Leviathan*. A telling of the Job story in the life of a Russian man living in the Bering Strait who has his family home passed down to him. The local mayor decides to take his home. The story is an indictment on the state of corrupted Russia. At the end of the movie, as he's questioning God drunk, he approaches a monk, an Orthodox monk, in the street. And the monk says to him this verse:

Job 41, **"Can you pull in Leviathan..."** – Leviathan representing the Biblical idea of chaos, of evil, of a world which threatens to overwhelm us.

**"Can you pull in Leviathan with a hook or tie his tongue down with a rope? Can you put a cord through his nose or pierce his jaw with a hook?"**

When we look at the world, whether it's what transpired overnight in Orlando, the first accounts seeming to indicate this was committed by a young man inspired by an ideology of the good life in which a caliphate is created in Syria and in Iraq. When we look at the world and the situation in those countries of Syria and Iraq, when we look at the corruption across the globe, the increasing chaos and violence breaking out, we realize that we, as humans, don't have the wisdom to deal with it. At the end of the book of Job, Job is confronted by God saying, "Can you deal with Leviathan? Can you answer this giant chaos and evil in the world? You can't."

So, wisdom says to us, in cities which see themselves often having all the answers, sometimes to a church which thinks through its own religious striving that we can answer all of the chaos in the world, "You don't have the answer. You need God's wisdom."

So, Proverbs invites us into this vision of wisdom which is not just something which we put on an Instagram post or on a little book in a bookstore near the counter where you can take it home and have these little aphorisms and put it on your refrigerator so that you look wise and balanced. This is a wisdom which is needed for the entire world because creation groans. This is a wisdom needed because the world longs for God's shalom and we cannot capture Leviathan through human effort. We need leaders, we need cities, we need people, we need churches, we need believers who are defined by God's wisdom.

So, Proverbs presents wisdom to us in a world where we live in an abundance of choice, and abundance of information, it offers two paths. It brings the complex down to the binary. It describes wisdom as the choice between two women. It almost uses the plot device of a romantic comedy. It's like a bad Meg Ryan movie from the 90s. Wisdom is presented between the choice of a seductive woman, who says to the young man who's being instructed – if you want to turn to Proverbs 5:3. It presents the opposite of wisdom, foolishness, not as a bumbling idiot, but rather as this woman who beckons.

**"Through the lips of the forbidden woman drip honey, and her words are smoother than oil."**

There's something seductive about foolishness, the binary opposite of wisdom. Have it now. Put it on credit. The arrogant have always fallen, but you won't. You don't have to think about others. Just go for yourself. That moment in us when our flesh rebels against the Spirit, and in that moment they get that flash in your head that maybe you can be the first one to pull this off in human history. That the rules that others fell under don't apply to you. So, we're pulled into this fleshy world.

Proverbs 5:4: **"In the end she is as bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go straight down to death; Her steps lead straight for Sheol, the Hebrew place of the dead. She does not consider the path of life; She doesn't know her ways are unstable."**

So, we can understand from this that what marks the woman of foolishness is that everything she touches is death. Death. A destruction. An acidic eating of anything that

is good. She appears beautiful and alluring and attractive. But, as soon as you get kissed, it's as bitter as wormwood. It's almost a kind of poison that slowly is released in your body. So, it tells us that we are going to be presented continually in the choices that we make in life with decisions which are ultimately foolish. And because wisdom can be absent from the super smart, the super smart, the super sophisticated, the super informed, can be foolish.

It's really interesting that this set up of how the book begins is of speaking to a young man. People have speculated on this. Some people say, "Look, this is just the time that that's what they did."

But, this is for everyone. Leon Kass, in his book about wisdom, says that there's a special message here for young man. And part of the reason is this: as Kass says, it's because young men are stupid. I saw a graph and it literally had accidental deaths and at 16-17 it goes up. Early 20s, it's so high. 25? Your brains are not fully built until you're 25. You're driven by adrenaline and stupidity. It comes in early.

I've got twin boys who are five. I was drying one's hair with the hairdryer and, across our double bed, out of the blue, my other twin, Hudson, just appears with a yell like, "Agh!" Jumps, does this somersault out of nowhere and then smashes onto the ground. My other twin, Billy, then goes crazy and they're just screaming and yelling. Men, so often, have this ability to turn anything into a soccer riot in seconds. The biological setup of males, the fact that we can sire thousands of children until we're old means that there's a different dynamic going on. Women have to think through things differently.

So, for the young man, if you're a young man in this room, this is a kind of medicine you absolutely need. In contrast to the seductress who will allure everyone, but particularly the young man, there's the counterpoint of the woman of wisdom. Proverbs 9:1. And what's really interesting is that it doesn't posit the seductive, sexy woman against, I don't know, the professor. She's another woman and she's also alluring. She's beautiful.

**"Wisdom has built her house; she has carved out her seven pillars. She has prepared her meat, she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table.**

**"She has sent out her female servants, she calls from the highest points of the city:**

**"Whoever is inexperienced, enter here!"**

**"To the one who lacks, she says,**

**"Come and eat my bread and drink the wine I have mixed."**

Now, think about this. This is an ancient world context. You're going to a woman's house. You don't go to a woman's house you're not related to. You don't go to a young, attractive woman's house that you're not related to. Particularly one who's laying out a sumptuous feast of food; who's preparing meat which you only are able to afford at moments of banquet. You don't do that unless there's some kind of sexual overtone to the story. Wisdom is desirable. You notice the seductress of foolishness on the street because she's over accessorized. But, as soon as you kiss her, her poison is set. But, the woman of wisdom has a deeper kind of beauty going on. She's just not going to fall for your simple one line. You have to pursue her. You have to court her. You have to win her.

Information is tossed out everywhere. Proverbs is telling us that wisdom is something that we have to pursue. The language of marriage begins to evolve where, as this woman of wisdom is describe, then we have these marriage overtones. Wisdom must be something that you enter into a lifelong, monogamous, covenantal relationship with. And this is so key. Because, what Proverbs unwraps for us is that at the beginning of creation, if you look at chapter 8, as God is creating the physical elements of the world, as He's making the sea, as He's making the Andromeda system in space, as He's creating the platypus – it's an Australian animal – the physical things of the world, at the same time there's another structure being created in the universe.

Proverbs 8:22. This is lady wisdom speaking: **"The Lord made me at the beginning of His creation, before His works of long ago, I was formed before ancient times.**

**"From the beginning, before the earth began."**

What this is saying is that, in the world, there are the physical structures of things that we see; wood, elements, stone. But, equally present in the world, equally important, equally following a set of rules, although not seen from a material sense, is wisdom. God has created the entire universe and the laws of wisdom are part of that universe, woven into creation. So, when you don't follow wisdom, when you choose the path of foolishness, you go against the grain of the universe. It exists but it cannot be seen. We can see the affects of it when people choose actions that are not wise. But, you have to dig into the ground.

Scripture talks of it like digging down and finding jewels. We must become miners looking for the jewels of wisdom deep in the ground. Wisdom is flesh. It's real. It's lived. Wisdom is personified as the woman of wisdom in Scripture. It must be lived, practiced, modeled. It requires a humble posture. It reconnects people, bringing the generations together. It's something that's lived in communities of faith.

Ephesians 3:10 says, **"The church is the multifaceted wisdom of God in the world."**

So, when moments, which will develop now as a tragedy like what's just occurred, have occurred is that there will be countless opinions, countless interpretations, countless commentary. And that's the best of it. This will be used to inflame bigotry, this will be used to exclude people, this will be used in all kinds of ways which are foolishness. And the Church's place in this is to be a community which actually displays wisdom.

As Ephesians says, wisdom to the world, which is that multifaceted wisdom in the world – I'm just going to read it, you don't have to turn to it. It says this:

Paul says, **"I was made a servant of this Gospel by the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of His power. This grace was given to me, the least of all the saints, to proclaim to Gentiles the incalculable riches of the Messiah and to shed light about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God, whom created all things. This is so God's multifaceted wisdom may be now made known through the Church, the rulers and authorities in heaven."**

We only can discover God's wisdom in Jesus. Jesus is wisdom in human flesh. Some of us sit here this morning and you know well the pain, the bitterness of the kiss of the foolish lady. You sit here holding inside decisions, impulses, desires that have led you into situations where you full well know the effects of that death, that dragging your feet into Sheol. And you hold that this morning and you want wisdom, but you know that your life has been marked by the foolishness. And not a foolishness which is a lack of intelligence, but a foolishness where you have followed that fleshly sense of the foolish.

And Paul, who did that more than anyone, actively opposing the Church, is only able to speak of the multifaceted wisdom of the Church when he first prefaces it that the grace of God has come to him. But, for those who find themselves marked by foolish decisions this morning, Jesus says, "Come to me. My burden is light. Give up your autonomy. Give up trying to do it yourself. Give up trying to be intelligent and solving everything just through that."

Matthew 12:42, Jesus says that something greater than Solomon, the writer of the passage I just read to you from Proverbs, something greater than Solomon is here in Christ. Corinthians says Christ is God's wisdom. Colossians says all the treasures and knowledge of wisdom are in God. So, at moments like this, when there's personal tragedy in the room, when there is national and corporate tragedy, we only must turn to Christ who, in His life, lived out the aphorisms, the little sayings, of Proverbs in a way which shed glory across the world.

If you're someone here today who feels paralyzed by choices ahead of you in your work, in your relationships, in the whole architecture of decision making in your life, Jesus is the person to look to. Jesus is the person to enter into relationship to. Jesus is the wisdom of God. But, to be with Him, we must humble ourselves. We must put aside our autonomy. We must let the work of Proverbs happen in our hearts so that we may follow Him.

Let's pray.

God, we're the smarted people, probably, to live in history in terms of what we know; in terms of the information before us. But, perhaps we're also the most foolish people. We desperately desire You to come to bring us Your wisdom. We thank You, God, that You gave us Your Son, who is Your wisdom. All the treasures of knowledge are in Him. We particularly think of this time watching the news. We pray, Father, that Your multifaceted wisdom can

be on display in this city through Your Church.

I particularly pray for this church, Father, for Reality here in San Francisco; this coming together of all these individuals. People who are here because they're moving to, fully engaged in, living out Your wisdom in the world. I really want to pray, Father, for people this morning who know all too well the effects of foolishness, who have made those decisions that now hurt them and hurt others. I pray, Father, that in the time coming now that You'll begin to minister to them.

So, Father, help us to be wise. In Your name, amen.