

Series: Making Life Work in a Screwed Up World

Sunday July 31, 2011

ARMLOADS OF LIFE

Proverbs 1, 8

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1. Anyone here who's ever, in your entire life, done something *really* stupid? I've got a *lot* of entries in the *Stupid Journal*. If you were to ask my family about their favourite, it would probably be the day I was working on the ceiling fan in our bedroom. I was changing a bulb—and raised my head to get a better look. **BAM!** I went down! I hadn't actually thought about turning it off...! So there I am, bleeding from a cut over my eye—my eye turning black and blue—and they thought it was *funny!*

-Sometimes you survive your lack of good judgment. Sometimes you don't. Some of you are familiar with a TV series—and a movie simply called **Jackass**—where guys have become cult stars by doing risky, crazy things. Rick Dunn,

[pic] one of the stars, left a bar a few weeks ago at about 3 a.m. with a friend—and never made it home. They figure his Porsche was doing about 130 mph when it hit a guardrail in Pennsylvania **[pic]**. And he wasn't the only one who died; the person who was riding with him was killed instantly as well.

-You've got to be careful whose hands you put your life in. The truth is, if you trust the wrong *anything* it can kill you. The wrong medication; the wrong driver; the wrong pilot; the wrong information; the wrong neighbourhood; the wrong doctor--or the wrong lover. Life is fragile; it doesn't take too many wrong decisions to bring it to an end.

-But, the Bible says that there is a far more serious error with consequences that affect—not just your life, but your soul. It's trusting the wrong source of *wisdom*. Not just wisdom for making everyday decisions; wisdom for making *ultimate* decisions--decisions about what's real and what's not; what's true and what's not; what brings life—and what doesn't.

-So, here's the question: Where do you go for direction on how to make life work? I think you would agree that we live in a screwed up world—so, what's the center line down your highway?

- a. This morning we are starting on a study of the book of Proverbs. If you read what this book has to say about itself, it almost sounds a little arrogant. It says that whether or not you follow its wisdom will affect your reputation, your character, your friendships, your children, your job—*everything!* Listen to his except—taken from *The Message*:

"Wealth and Glory accompany me--also substantial honour and a Good Name. My benefits are worth more than a big salary, even a very big salary; the returns on me exceed any imaginable bonus. You can find me on Righteous Road--that's where I walk--at the intersection of Justice

**Avenue, handing out life to those who love me, filling their arms with life--
ARMLOADS OF LIFE." (Proverbs 8:18-21 MSG)**

- b. Now, it might help if I lay some foundation here on what a **proverb** is—and give a kind of overview on this book to lay the foundation for where we're going. Wisdom, as it's portrayed in this book and throughout the Bible is **not** about a person's IQ—or how much they know.

- Wisdom is the ability to make **right decisions**. And it's not philosophy or theory—it's **very** practical. Wisdom is the ability to look at life—and discern what the **right** thing—the God-honouring thing is--to do.

-The other person talked about a lot in the book of Proverbs is the **fool**. There's an entire message coming on this—and I don't want to give it away—but a **fool** is not someone with a **low** IQ. A fool doesn't have a problem with his brain; he has a problem with his heart--his **will**. To be a fool is to be in rebellion against God—the source of all wisdom. Folly is moral depravity and spiritual blindness and relational stupidity.

- c. There's another important distinction that you need to know about. It's what a proverb **is**—and what it **isn't**. A proverb of any kind is a short, memorable saying that encapsulates wisdom. There are **many** different kinds of statements in the Bible—but let's talk about three, for the purposes of understanding this book:

*There are **laws**—or commands that I'm always supposed to obey.

*There are **promises**—guarantees, really, of what God will do—or of what will happen.

*Then there are **proverbs**. A proverb is a catchy, memorable description of the way things are, generally speaking.

-Let me give you a few statements from the Bible—and you tell me which category it's in—law, promise, or proverb.

*This one's from Deuteronomy. 6:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart.

Which is it? (law)

*Another statement from Romans 8:

Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Which is it? (promise) Any exceptions to that? Absolutely not!

A generous person will prosper.

Which is that—law, promise, or proverb? It's a **proverb**—Proverbs 11:25. Some people are generous—and prosperous; but some generous people are poor, and remain poor.

-The reason why it's so important to make this distinction is that it's easy to treat proverbs as if they are guaranteed formulas for success in finances, relationships, or parenting. In reality, they are wise observations about how to live in God's world—and under His leadership.

- d. Another distinctive characteristic of Proverbs is that they are designed to make you think. You don't want to skim this book—because if you do, you'll miss all that it has to offer. Let me give an illustration of that:

Put your outdoor work in order and get your fields ready; after that, build your house. (Proverbs 24:27 NIV)

-Now, is the meaning of that crystal clear to everyone here? Maybe not. In an agricultural culture like that one—farming was **income-producing**. House-building was **income-draining**. What it was saying is—**Don't spend money you don't have!** If I were to put it in a catchy way in our culture, it would go something like, "Get a job before you buy a Corvette!"

- e. Another thing you'll find about the Proverbs is that sometimes they seem to contradict each other. For example:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you yourself will be just like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes. (Proverbs 26:4-5 NIV)

-They **seem** contradictory—but each actually addresses a limited slice of reality. We can err in two different ways, depending on our personalities, right? How many of you would consider yourself **impulsive**—like—you would tend to just dive into things? Well, Look **before you leap** would be speaking to you. How many of you would err on the side of being too cautious. Ready...aim...aim...aim...aim...aim.... Well, the **He who hesitates is lost** might fit you.

-You could see sayings like these as bookends on two extremes.

2. So. Why do we need a **whole book** of these wise sayings? Well, there's a **very** important theological reason. Want to know what it is? **People are stupid!** Now, that's not the whole truth about us—and about me, but it is **certainly** part of it. There are things that we **know** will destroy our lives, wreck our chances for happiness, and sabotage our hopes for living in a way that matters. Yet...**we do them anyway!** **Really smart people** do dumb things. The news features their stories **every single day!** And yet...we refuse to change.

-For example: Anyone here know a hot-tempered person? There's a **lot** in this book about anger—and it's destructive just about every arena of life. We **know** that, right?

If you were to ask a hot-tempered person, “So, how is **just letting it fly** working for you—you know, with your job, your health, and your relationships? I mean—is regularly releasing the pressure valve helping you to find the peace, the intimacy and the joy you crave?” What do you think the answer would be?

-But, strangely enough, we **keep living that way**. I’m not sure who said it—I think it came out of AA—“The definition of insanity is doing the same things over and over—and expecting different results.” We sometimes sing a song here that goes, **My Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art mine. For thee, all the folly of sin I resign**. And the truth is—sin is **folly**. Part of growing up—and growing spiritually—being **wise**--is understanding the stupidity, the **folly** of sin. That thinking you can sin—and not suffer the consequences—is to play the fool. See, the deal with all foolishness is that **it doesn’t work! It doesn’t deliver what it promises. EVER!**

- a. Sin, at the core, is rebellion; it’s saying, “I know what God says—but **I know better**. I know what God says being life and peace and happiness and meaning--but **my way is better!**”

-And that’s why this book says this just seven verses in:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7 NIV)

-When the Bible uses fear in this context, it’s talking about **deep respect**—not **fight or flight**. For example—I have a **deep respect** for table saws. One day, years ago, I took a chunk out of my thumb with one. And I’m not afraid of them—but I **respect** them. **A lot!**

-It’s possible to be reckless with truth—not respectful of it. For example. People in our culture talk about **my** truth—and **your** truth. It’s funny, when people are on the witness stand in a trial, truth is called **THE truth**. Now, some truth can, in fact, be categorized under **opinion**. But when it comes to what it takes to have and keep a relationship of love with God and others—and what it means to do what is just, good, wise and right—this, friends, is not up for grabs. To fear God—to show deep respect for God—is to honour what He has said about life on this planet. He won’t **force** you to do that—it’s just being **wise**.

- b. For example. Any pilots here? Any **aspiring** pilots? Let’s say you want to learn to fly a plane. An instructor takes you on—and teaches you how to do a pre-flight check, how to take off, how to land, how to not stall out, how to find out where you are, how to read the instruments. When you’re flying a plane, following instructions is **not** a matter of it being **your** truth or **their** truth. It’s not like you can coast off to the side of the road and call CAA on your cellphone!

-The giver of **all** life, mine and yours, says that this wisdom—if you’ll listen, if you’ll treat it with respect—offers **armloads of life!** I’ve lived long enough—and seen enough sadness to say, **I believe!** You will have to decide if it’s true—or if **your truth** is a better plan.

3. Now, here's the struggle I think we face. When you read what Proverbs, it's pretty blunt. ***In-your-face***—really. The Spirit of God, through these authors, is ***not*** saying, "My humble opinion is...take it or leave it." No, it's like they speak wisdom that sometimes grabs you by the shoulders, shakes you, and says, "**What were you thinking!?**" Listen to how this translation of Proverbs 1 sounds as recorded in ***The Message***.

Lady Wisdom goes out in the street and shouts. At the town center she makes her speech. In the middle of the traffic she takes her stand. At the busiest corner she calls out: "Simpletons! How long will you wallow in ignorance? Cynics! How long will you feed your cynicism? Idiots! How long will you refuse to learn? About face! I can revise your life. Look, I'm ready to pour out my spirit on you; I'm ready to tell you all I know. (Proverbs 1:20-24 MSG)

-Now, how many of you would describe this as tender, nurturing, sensitive language? How many of you would say it sounds more like boot camp language? And the question is—***why?*** Notice, figuratively, where wisdom is standing in this passage. It's in the ***center of town***. It's in the ***middle of traffic!***

-It's not very often that you stand in public, cup your hands and shout. The one time I remember doing that was at this giant campground, it was getting dark, and my son—who was about 3—was nowhere to be seen. I walked those roads yelling his name in front of 100's of people. It was life and death—and I didn't care what ***anyone*** thought!

-When someone you love is in extreme danger, do you stop and think, "If I yell, I might scare or embarrass them"? **Absolutely not! That's** not a time to worry about being polite or getting the "buddy of the year" award.

- a. ***That*** friends is ***specifically*** the issue in our culture! For some reason our world system is convinced that when it comes to lifestyle issues, moral choices and what we believe about life, God, and truth, we can just make it up as we go—and it will all be cool. That it's okay to just wish upon a star and follow your heart—which, I might remind you, came from Disney, not God.
-God, through his Spirit, says countercultural things like:

There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death. (Proverbs 14:12 NIV)

The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice. (Proverbs 12:15 NIV)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV)

- b. I want you to think about our world for a minute—with all of its knowledge and technology. The advances over the past 50 years have been nothing short of astounding! And yet...

*The most richest, most powerful nation on earth stands on the verge of not even being able to pay their own debts

*The media focuses on and rages over a young Mom who is accused of killing her child—yet the law says it's *fine* to do that if the child is still *inside* the Mom

*More than ever, we now see the infinite complexity of our universe—and yet people seem more prepared than ever to say, *It all just HAPPENED!*

*And every week in our world is a running commentary of people who sweat and claw their ways to the top--only to sabotage—or kill themselves—by doing something illegal or stupid...or tragic.

- c. What other adjectives than *foolish* and *stupid* would you use to describe the glaring inconsistencies of a world like ours? Really...what do you say to a culture that calls itself sexually liberated—yet overwhelmed by unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted disease, AIDS, rape, pedophilia and pornography; a culture that attempts to *solve* these problems by passing out free condoms to teens--with the absolutely *brilliant* advice to have "safe sex?"

-What do you say about a culture that pays the people who entertain us anywhere between 10 and 100 times what we pay those who *educate, heal* us and *lead* us? What do you say to a culture that cries the blues about violence and despair, and then spends billions of dollars to write, produce, market, export and *netflix* movies that glorify it? What do you say to a culture that has unlimited access to safe water—yet indulges itself in a billion bottles of bottled water—when 1 out of 6 people in our world drink contaminated water that is making them sick and killing their children?

- d. *That's* why wisdom stands on street corners—and in the middle of traffic shouting to us--like the line from the movie: **Planes, Trains and Automobiles**, "*You're going the wrong way!*"

-One of the problems is that wisdom isn't the only voice at these intersections. Besides all the voices in our world, I have something inside me called *needs and desires*. You have them too! Needs and desires come from a lot of different places; sometimes from things our parents drilled into our heads about money, talent or success. Sometimes they come gaping holes in our lives, like loneliness or a need for approval. Sometimes they come from our own brokenness and pain.

-And they *demand* our attention! They have a way of drowning out every other voice. "*Hey...I'm talkin' to you! LISTEN TO ME! Love me, feed me, cuddle me, hold me in your arms!*" The problem is that if you really need wisdom—and your *needs* are making your decisions for you--you're already on the wrong path. And *that* is why someone like Amy Winehouse would write a song that says, *I'm not going back to rehab...!* and die because that's what she really needed most.

e. For thousands of years, God has asked generation after generation, “Do you want to live with skilfully? Make a difference? Make wise decisions? Avoid pain and regret? Do you want **real life--ARMLOADS OF LIFE?** Then fear Me. Respect what I say. Let me lead your life—and I’ll **give** you LIFE!”

5. One of the things I occasionally hear people say is, “If God actually **speaks**—then why don’t I hear His voice? I occasionally talk to Him—but don’t hear anyone talking back to me!” That’s a **way** bigger issue than I can address in the few minutes I have left this morning—but let me give you at least part of the answer. God has already spoken to 95% of the issues in life we face—that’s what the Bible is about, really.

-Jesus even summarized it; “Love God with **all** your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength—and love your neighbour as yourself. That is, **treat them the way you would want to be treated!**”

-What you find in Proverbs is wisdom, captured in nuggets, that helps to fill in the gaps where we may have questions. It’s **very** down to earth. It tells us, for example, that gentle words turn away anger; that saying the right thing at the right time is like apples of gold in settings of silver; that if you shout an enthusiastic greeting early in the morning to a person who’s not really awake until noon—it will be taken as a curse! It says that a beautiful woman with no discretion is like a gold ring in a pig’s snout—that an honest response is like a kiss on the lips. It says, “Don’t be lazy! Don’t start arguments! Don’t be a nag! Keep your mouth shut—people will think you’re smart!”

a. Question; is what Proverbs says true because it works—or does it work because it’s true? Well, Proverb 8 unveils the mystery. These are not just clever sayings that brilliant people sat down one day and figured out. Verse 22 of that chapter says this in speaking of wisdom:

“The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be.” (Proverbs 8:22-23 NIV)

-And after describing everything from the oceans to the core of the earth, it says:

I [wisdom] was right there with him [the Creator], making sure everything fit. Day after day I was there, with my joyful applause, always enjoying his company, delighted with the world of things and creatures, happily celebrating the human family. (Proverbs 8:30-31 NIV)

-The **point** is that this wisdom is built right into the fabric of life on this planet. As basic as the air we breath and the water we drink. This is **inside information**. When we live with wisdom, we are cooperating with the way God **Himself** is—and the way He has made us and made everything.

-To ignore or reject this wisdom is the equivalent of trying to cross the ocean in a boat with holes in it; you will spend your time bailing it out—and when you get tired, you’ll go down. Let me put it this way: **It is in my best interests and in your best interests to know this truth—and align our lives with it.**

- b. This book doesn't give guarantees—but it **does** promise that the overall effect of building this wisdom into our lives will, over time, be profound.

*Proverbs 1:1-3 says,

These are the wise sayings of Solomon, David's son, Israel's king--written down so we'll know how to live well and right, to understand what life means and where it's going; a manual for living, for learning what's right and just and fair (Proverbs 1:1-3 MSG)

-Simply put, if you will listen carefully to what God is saying, you'll wind up with a good handle on what life is all about; you'll **train** yourself in the practice of knowing the right thing to do when you face a difficult situation; you'll know how to treat people in ways that are fair to them and fair to you.

*Proverbs 2 says that wisdom is more valuable than gold—because it will protect you from losing your way:

Good Sense will scout ahead for danger, insight will keep an eye out for you, they'll keep you from making wrong turns, or following the bad directions of those who are lost themselves and can't tell a trail from a tumbleweed (Proverbs 2:11-13 MSG)

-Anyone here who's been smart enough to **always** know when there's danger ahead? I'm not! These verses promise that wisdom has the power to protect you from danger you can't foresee—and from dangerous people who would love to get their hooks in your life.

*Let me mention one more passage. Again, I'm reading from *The Message*:

Dear friend, guard Clear Thinking and Common Sense with your life; don't for a minute lose sight of them. They'll keep your soul alive and well; they'll keep you fit and attractive. You'll travel safely, you'll neither tire nor trip. You'll take afternoon naps without a worry, you'll enjoy a good night's sleep. No need to panic over alarms or surprises, or predictions that doomsday's just around the corner, because GOD will be right there with you; he'll keep you safe and sound. (Proverbs 3:21-26 MSG)

6. By the way, has anyone noticed that I have grown a beard? See, I remember this episode from the **Andy Griffith Show** where Goober grew a beard. I mean, besides his brother, Gomer, he was the dumbest guy on the show. But when he grew a **beard**, people said he looked distinguished. Wise. I thought maybe a beard would help me with this series! Unfortunately, the beard didn't help him—and it doesn't help me.

-So. How do you become a wise person—with armloads of life? Is it a matter of memorizing Proverbs? Reading the book over and over again until we can quote it verbatim? Well, knowing this information **really well** would help. In fact, I would recommend that as we're studying Proverbs you read the entire book through at least

once. The Book of Proverbs is **jammed** with amazing wisdom—about work, relationships, sexuality, money, parenting, generosity, how you use your mouth, how to protect your reputation. But these **have** to be worked into your life. This wisdom is different than most of what our world emphasizes and loves:

*We live in a world that **loves** information. Problem is, knowing information may help you win a game show—but it doesn't help with life. Wisdom helps you know what to **do** with information.

*Education and knowledge are highly prized in a world like ours. Education and good marks can open doors for you—but **wisdom** is different. You can be really, **really** well-educated—and play the part of a fool.

*Talent? Wow—does our world, especially the culture we live in **love** talent! Musical talent, artistic talent, skill in playing sports. We will spend a **lot** of time and money to develop talent and watch talent. But wisdom is way different. How many of you have seen a **very** talented person destroy their lives in the past week or so?

*The ability to make money, speak convincingly and make strategic decisions—to impress people, get them to believe you and follow you are highly prized qualities in our world. But without true **wisdom**—it's all smoke and mirrors.

- a. **Memorizing** wisdom—**knowing** wise sayings is not enough. Wisdom has to be massaged into your life. It has to infiltrate the foundations of everything you build your life on. And there's one word that describes this process best.
Train.

-I've used this illustration before—but I'll use it again. How many of you think you could walk out the door of The Olive Branch today and run a marathon? How many of you could do it if you ate a great healthy meal—and tried really, really, **really** hard?

-How many of you think you could run a marathon if you had an expert trainer working with you—and you spent a year exercising, practicing and building up to it? What's the difference? It's **training**. Training helps you to be able to do what you **need** to do—**when** you need to do it!

-Training in wisdom is **more** than just knowing the wise thing to do; it's massaging it into your heart and living the truth of it--practicing it in the power of the Spirit day after day after day. See, making a wise decision at a critical, life-changing moment is **not** about having the right parable either memorized—or bookmarked so you can find it. It's about training yourself to **live** wisely—one day, one wise decision at a time.

- b. And you have to stay at it. Know what the greatest irony of Proverbs is? Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, the man who had **everything**, the writer of the bulk of this book didn't take his own advice. As he got older, he got cocky. Over-confident—and in his later years he got **way** off-track. Turns out, he ignored some of the very advice he had given.

Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track. (Proverbs 3:5-6 MSG)

-Wisdom **never** happens by accident. So, I want to ask: What will change about your life this year to make sure that you are properly trained to make life work in a screwed up world?