

Proverbs: Taking God at His Word

Big Idea: Wise people take God at his word.

Purpose: To encourage people to take God at his word.

Passage: Proverbs 30:1-6 **Verse:** Proverb 30:5

Opening

We have trouble keeping our word.

-Everyone in our family has a chore list. A couple of my weekly chores are vacuuming the house, cleaning the shower and tub and making dinner once a week. I have promised my wife that I will do these chores on a weekly basis. I have given her my word. Most weeks I do my chores. But some weeks, life gets in the way and I don't get around to it. I don't do what I promised to do. I don't keep my word. There are days when I promise I will play with our girls. Sometimes I don't get around to it. I don't keep my word. As much as I value keeping my word, sometimes I don't do so. But I am not alone in this. We all have trouble keeping our word.

-I bet if I asked you to tell me a story about a broken promise you would be choosing from a lengthy list. Studies have shown that a majority of people lie in a typical 10-minute conversation. In a *Reader's Digest* poll, 96% of people admitted to lying or committing other dishonest acts towards those close to them. Most of us are lied to at least 10 times a day. Some of us experience up to 200 lies a day. We have trouble keeping our word.

-This is true in every realm of life. It is definitely true of our Presidents. Woodrow Wilson promised to keep the U.S out of WWI until he declared war on Germany. Herbert Hoover promised massive economic growth but led the country into the Great Depression. FDR promised less government spending before leading the largest expansion of government in history. JFK promised to close the missile gap when he knew no missile gap existed. George H.W. Bush promised no new taxes before he instituted new taxes. Obama promised to close Guantanamo but never did. Trump has certainly promised things that it is unlikely he will deliver. This isn't about Democrats or Republicans. Presidents of either party typically do less than 50% of what they promised to do. Only 4% of voters think politicians will keep their promises. We have trouble keeping our word!

-This reality led comedian Stephen Colbert to coin the term *truthiness*. Truth no longer seems to exist. We have settled for truthiness. Truthiness was named the word of the year and is now in all major dictionaries. In the world of truthiness, in a world where everybody struggles to keep their promises, it is hard to take people at their word. We are continually writing checks with our word that we cannot cash with our actions. We have gotten cynical. We are waiting to be disappointed by everyone.

-But there is hope. God is not like us. What God says, God does. Period. Because of that, *we can take God at His word.*

Review

-We are in the final week of a series on Proverbs subtitled – *How Not to be a Fool*. Proverbs is part of the wisdom literature of Scripture. The wisdom literature is not written by one person, but by

generation after generation of sages. It is collective wisdom passed down to us. The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokmah*. It means skillful living. The sages are men and women who have learned to live skillfully. They have learned to live according to the way God has designed the world to work. And they are telling us how to do it. The book of Proverbs is like walking into a room filled with wise people. They are giving us collective advice on how to walk wisely; how not to be a fool. The sages don't tell us how to live 'the good life'. The sages tell us how to live *a life that is good*.

-Every day we come to a fork in the road. Will we go our own way, the way of the fool? That path leads to death. Or will we go God's way; the way of wisdom. That way leads to life. Which way will we go? Will we let God's way shape our way?

The Way Forward series preview

-Before we hear our Scripture, I want to whet your appetite for our new fall series that starts next Sunday. It will be called ***The WAY Forward: Following Jesus in a Chaotic World***. I am almost 50 years old. I have never experienced a more chaotic time. We are in the middle of the worst global pandemic in a century. We aren't sure when we are going to emerge. We are having important, long-overdue conversations about racial justice. But those conversations, along with many other important conversations, have been hijacked by hatred and violence. Hurricanes are pounding our coasts. Many people are out of work. And we are heading towards potentially the most divisive election in our lifetimes. And we cannot forget the murder hornets.

As followers of Jesus, how will we respond to this chaos? Our fall series is devoted to giving us tools and practices that will allow us to not only survive, but to thrive. We will explore topics like unplugging, simplicity, beauty, gentleness, empathy and peacemaking.

We will also have a conversation with celebrated author, thinker, and podcaster, **Skylar Jethani** about how followers of Jesus should approach politics. My hope and prayer is that this series will **equip our community to flourish even in the midst of chaos**. I hope you will join us and invite others who might be hurting and hopeless to join us as well. It has never been easier to invite someone to church.

-As we conclude our Proverbs series we are going to dive into a passage near the end of the book that reminds of the key to living a life of wisdom. Sheri Philips, take it away.

Public Reading – Proverbs 30:1-6

-The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh—an inspired utterance. This man's utterance to Ithiel: "I am weary, God, but I can prevail."^[a] ² Surely I am only a brute, not a man; I do not have human understanding. ³ I have not learned wisdom, nor have I attained to the knowledge of the Holy One. ⁴ Who has gone up to heaven and come down? Whose hands have gathered up the wind? Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is his name, and what is the name of his son? Surely you know! ⁵ "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him." ⁶ Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar. (Proverbs 30:1-6, NIV)

Color Commentary

Proverbs 30:1-3

-As I stated earlier, most of the wisdom literature is a collection from a group of sages passed down over generations. In this rare instance, we are told the sage is named *Agur* (A-gore). We can assume since Agur is named, he is considered a sage among sages, a wise man, one who lives skillfully.

However, Agur doesn't think he is wise. Agur is weary from his pursuit of wisdom. Apparently Agur has been pursuing wisdom apart from God. Perhaps Agur had the best and brightest human teachers, but these human teachers were not God-fearers. At the end of the day, Agur had lots of information in his head. He had straight A's and graduated with high honors, but he did not possess wisdom.

-Because of this, Agur refers to himself as a *brute* or a lowly animal. Animals have sub-human intelligence. Animals are driven by a need for food, water and safety. Animals don't live wisely; they survive. Agur has been taught a lot of things, but he has no wisdom. For this reason, he considers himself sub-human.

-The 17th century intellectual movement known as *the Enlightenment* has shaped our modern way of thinking and living more than any other. The key belief of the Enlightenment is that human reason alone can lead to truth, knowledge, understanding and wisdom. We have about 300 years of experience that proves that to be a woefully misguided belief. The way of wisdom cannot be discovered apart from God.

-In verse 3, Agur tells us that wisdom is learned through a relationship with God. There is no other way. Knowledge within is insufficient. Wisdom is discovered outside of ourselves. Agur mentions *understanding, wisdom and knowledge*. This is a *hyperlink* that takes any reader who is paying attention back to the prologue of Proverbs. *The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: ² for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight*, (Proverbs 1:1-2). We end where we began. Proverbs is meant to give us wisdom, knowledge and understanding. But do we discover that internally? No. The foundational verse of the book tells us, *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools^[e] despise wisdom and instruction*. (Proverbs 1:7) The pathway to wisdom is the fear of the LORD; taking God seriously, taking God at his word. As we read last week, *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.[a] 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord...* (Proverbs 3:5-7a)

-Agur is reminding us of the difference between a wise person and a fool. Fools thinks they are wise. The minute we think we know better than others and know better than God, we are in deep trouble. We are in danger of becoming fools. That is not Agur. He is a chief sage, and yet he acknowledges that he knows little and looks helplessly to God. By confessing his ignorance, he shows his wisdom. Agur is a wise person because a wise person doesn't think they are wise. A wise person fears the LORD. A wise person takes God seriously. A wise person takes God at His word.

Proverbs 30:4-6

-In verses 4-6 Agur seeks to demonstrate this truth. He asks five rhetorical questions. A rhetorical question is a question that answers itself. **Agur asks these four questions in verse 4:**

...Who has gone up to heaven and come down?

...Whose hands have gathered up the wind?

...Who has wrapped up the waters in a cloak?

...Who has established all the ends of the earth?

-The answer to each question is given at the end of verse 3 – **the Holy One**. These questions demonstrate **why we can take God at His word**. They also demonstrate that **Agur is deeply engaged with God's word**. Each of the questions is a **hyperlink** to numerous other **passages of Scripture that Agur knows like the back of his hand**. Agur expects his readers to know many of the references as well.

-I could literally spend the next few hours sharing the lists of Scriptures Agur is referencing with his questions. As much fun as that would be, I am doubtful that I would have many viewers left by the end. I will just give you two examples.

One is from the prophet **Amos**, and the other is from **Job**. Listen to see if you can hear Agur's questions in these Scriptures in Amos:

He who forms the mountains, who creates the wind, and who reveals his thoughts to mankind, who turns dawn to darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth - the Lord God Almighty is his name...he builds his lofty palace in the heavens and sets its foundation on the earth; he calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land - the Lord is his name. (Amos 4:13; 9:6)

-Then we have Job. Job's life gets turned upside-down by the Evil One. Job, after prodding from his friends, pushes back on God. The underlying assumption is that he might know more than God. Then the Lord speaks to Job out of the storm. He says:

"Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'?" (Job 38:1-11)

That is only the beginning. It keeps going. It is the epic verbal smackdown. Agur draws his questions from these passages and many more. These passages and prophets attest to who God is. **They proclaim that we can take God at His word.**

-Then Agur asks his fifth question: ...**what is his name? And what is the name of his son?** He follows that with – **surely you know**. Surely, we know because **he has told us already**. Surely, we know because **it is self-evident**. Only God, the Holy One of Israel, fits the descriptions given. Who is his son? **The son or daughter of the Holy One is the person who learns wisdom**. Much of Proverbs is a parent talking to a child on how to live skillfully. If we listen, if we live wisely, then that reflects our intimate relationship with God.

-Then Agur gives us a **direct quote from King David**. David says these same words in *2 Samuel 22* and *Psalms 18*. David wrote these words and song to celebrate God's protection and provision while

David was on the run. **Every word of the LORD is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.** (Proverbs 30:5, 2 Samuel 22:31, Psalm 18:30) The word **flawless** in Hebrew is a smelting term. It means **fire-tested**. The smelter put metal in the fire to burn away the impurities; to get pure metal. God's word is fire-tested. It is strong and sturdy like a refuge in a storm.

Big Idea (or first life lesson)

-Agur's prayer is placed near the end of Proverbs to remind us that **we can take God at His word**. Indeed, this is the heart of wisdom. Foolish people despise God's word. Fools are wise in their own eyes. How do we not become fools? We fear the LORD. Wise people fear the LORD. Wise people take God seriously. *Wise people take God at His word.*

-Luke presents young Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the ideal disciple. We can assume Mary knew God's word like the back of her hand. How does she respond when the angel Gabriel tells her she will be the mother of the Promised One? She says, "...*For no word from God will ever fail.*" (Luke 2:37) Mary knew God's word was firetested. Mary knew that what God says, He does. Mary knew that in a world where you can't take anybody at their word, she could take God at His word. Wise people take God at His word.

-What does this mean for us? How do we not become fools? I will give you three simple, and practical steps. If you do these 3 things, I can almost guarantee that you will not become a fool.

How Not To Become a Fool

We regularly engage with God's word.

-Wise people take God at His word. So, one foundational thing we need to do if we want to be wise is **to regularly engage with God's word**. I know that some of you may start to tune out when you hear this. '*Read the Bible, blah, blah, blah.*' You respond that way at your own peril.

-How can we possibly take God at His word when we don't know His word? And the sad reality is that most followers of Jesus do not know God's word. **Only one third of people who attend church engage with God's word regularly.** The effect of that is that we have an increasing number of Jesus-followers who are becoming fools.

-Jesus Himself referred to God's word as *food*. After 40 days of Jesus eating no physical food, the Evil One tried to tempt Him. Jesus responded with these words, *Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"* (Matthew 4:4) Jesus was quoting Moses, because Jesus knew God's word like the back of His hand. We are spiritual beings, so we need spiritual food. God's word is the food we were designed to consume. If we aren't regularly engaging with God's word, then we are becoming spiritually malnourished. That reminds me of a 17-year old British teen who was hospitalized with a swollen tongue and anemia. The cause? She admitted that for the last 15 years, all she had eaten was McDonald's chicken nuggets and fries. The doctors told her she was killing herself. We are what we eat.

-Psalm 1 was not originally called Psalm 1. It was written as the introduction to all the wisdom literature of Scripture. What do the first verses say? *Blessed is the one...whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.* (Psalm 1:1a-2) The foundation of wise living is to meditate on God's word day and night.

Hebrew scholars contend a better word than *meditate* is **murmur**. The wise person murmurs God's word day and night. It was virtually unheard of for the Hebrew people to read God's word silently. They almost always read it aloud or, more often, said it aloud from memory. The picture of a wise person is someone walking around murmuring God's word to themselves.

When God called Joshua to step in for Moses and lead His people into battle against the giants in the Promised Land, he said, *Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.* (Joshua 1:8)

-It's hard for me to think of a wise person I know who isn't regularly engaged with God's word. The two go hand in hand. Henry Cloud is one of the wisest people I know. Henry is a clinical psychologist. He is also a bestselling author and leadership coach. Henry has written 45 books that have sold 20 million copies worldwide, headlined by his books on boundaries. Henry has consulted 117 companies and countless leaders and CEOs.

I was listening to an interview with Henry last week. The host asked him for advice on how to stay spiritually healthy in such a crazy time. Henry quickly responded that his number one recommendation was *daily engagement with God's word*. Every day, Henry reads **a few Psalms, 3 chapters of the OT, a Proverb, and a chapter of the NT while journaling his reflections**. It takes him about 90 minutes. The guy has to be incredibly busy, but he makes time to engage with God's word. Why? It is the foundation of wisdom.

-Few of us have the discipline to spend 90 minutes a day in God's word. I certainly don't do that. But can you spend 5 minutes or 10 minutes or 15 minutes? How can you begin to engage regularly with God's word? It has never been easier. There are numerous free Bible apps that provide reading plans. Our friends at **The Bible Project** created an app called **Read Scripture** that includes videos. We have encouraged all of you to use the **Lectio 365** app. I use it every day. It takes about 10 minutes. You can read it or listen to it. Start small, but do something. If you are not regularly engaging with God's word, then you are in danger of becoming a fool.

-Our 12 year-old daughter, Eden, loves God's word. She does the *Lectio 365* reading every day and is also involved in an in-depth study of **John** through the **New Hope Student Ministries**. We regularly engage in deep discussions about God's word on our dog walks. I am so proud of her. I am also so grateful, because it means she will not become a fool. How do we not become fools? We regularly engage with God's word.

We trust God's word above every other word.

-Second, ***we trust God's word above every other word. It doesn't matter if we know God's word if it takes a back seat to the word of others. Whose word are you trusting?***

-In this day and age, we have lots of voices coming at us. We are listening to news anchors, podcasters, bloggers, authors, actors, athletes, politicians, your friends on social media and maybe you occasionally listen to your pastor. I am sure most of those voices have helpful things to say **but God's voice and God's word should take precedence**. All of those other voices will at some point lie and break promises. It's hard to take anyone at their word. **But we can take God at his word because His words are fire tested. Trusting CNN, Fox News, your favorite politician, or even your favorite pastor over God's word is how we become fools.**

-Let's remember the words of the Psalmist, especially in this election season:

Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God. (Psalm 146:3-5)

-How do we not become fools? **We engage regularly with God's word. We trust God's word above every other word.**

We DO God's word.

-Finally, *we do God's word*. I want to go back to the verse Hannah introduced last week in Matthew 11. Jesus was talking about how people could know He was who He said He was. Jesus said, *wisdom is proved right by her deeds*. (Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:35) In Luke's version of the same story, Jesus says, *wisdom is proved right by her children*. Jesus agrees with Agur. We show that we are God's children when we do what He says.

-One of the last things Moses said to Israel before he died was that they had the word of God so they could obey it. (Deuteronomy 30:14) What did young Mary say after proclaiming that no word of God ever fails? She said, *I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled*. (Luke 1:38) James, the brother of Jesus, wrote, *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says*. (James 1:22)

-Listen to the father pleading with his son in Proverbs 3:

My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity. Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.
(Proverbs 3:1-4)

We can almost picture the father walking with his boy and discussing God's word like Moses instructed God's people to do. The father is pleading with his boy – *don't just hear God's word, do it, son*. The father doesn't want 'the good life' for his boy. The father wants *the life that is good*.

-Back to our bodies: We can *understand* what it takes to eat well. We can *understand* what it takes to stay in good physical shape. **But it will make zero difference until we start eating the right way and exercising**. We can have all the knowledge in the world, but it won't make any difference until we **do** it. Too many followers of Jesus have knowledge without action. **Wisdom must be embodied**. Knowing God's word and trusting God's word without doing God's word is how we become fools.

-Wise people take God at His word. They don't just engage with God's word. They don't just trust God's word above every other word. **They do God's word**. Wisdom is not skillful knowing. Wisdom is skillful living.

Closing

Will we be a wise or a foolish builder?

-I love this picture.



The storm took out every house but this one. Why? The house was constructed to survive the storm. Jesus ended his most famous teaching with this challenge.

-Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew

7:24-27)

-We live in a world where it is hard to take anyone at their word. But there is hope. We can take God at His word because His word is *fire-tested*. What God says, He will do. Wise people take God at His word. Wise people don't just hear God's word, they **do** it. And in doing it, in living it out, they discover the life that is good.

God kept his Word in the death and resurrection of Jesus

-God promised at the beginning of our story that, despite our sin, He would send Someone to make all things right. God kept His word. Mary realized that the moment Gabriel gave her the news. As we come to the communion table, we celebrate a God who keeps His word. That gives us hope for today and hope for the days to come as we wait with expectation for Jesus.