

Listening to Wisdom

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Introduction.

In the modern-day United States, we place a huge emphasis on formal education. All the way through grade school, when I didn't want to do anything but hang out in my room, read science-fiction novels, and play computer games, my parents constantly pushed me to excel academically. Sadly, they weren't terribly successful about that, but they were right. All kinds of job opportunities open up to people who have college diplomas, even if their area of study doesn't have a thing to do with the job they're applying for. Today, Americans have to get a degree to get ahead.

However, this push for formal education sometimes leads us to forget what we might think of as informal education. It's entirely possible for somebody to graduate from school with a 4.0, yet be totally useless in real life because of the life skills they don't have. We can have flawless resumes, yet be deeply flawed as human beings, and the only way for us to address those flaws is by learning the things they don't teach us in school, but that we must know.

High on the list of these underrated but vital life skills is the savvy to listen to others when they're talking sense. This point is brought out in Proverbs 23:12. This is not the same thing as listening to lectures in school. I sat in classes and diligently took notes on everything from physics to insurance regulation law, and just as soon as I turned in the final, I promptly replaced that knowledge with important stuff like how to defeat the red dragon in Baldur's Gate II. Obviously, neither of those kinds of understanding are particularly useful. Instead, we need to learn to listen when other people are telling us relevant things about our lives, and learn as well to remember what they say and put it into practice indefinitely.

As with all other real-life skills, this is something we can pick up from the Bible. It tells us how to listen, to whom we should listen, and what the result of listening will be. Let's look at these things as we study listening to wisdom.

Listening.

The first point that Proverbs makes is, rather basically, that we need to **LISTEN, NOT TALK**. Among many, many other places, this appears in Proverbs 18:2. If we choose to talk rather than listen, that marks us out as fools. This calls us, then, to consider the mindset with which we enter a conversation. Is our focus on learning, or is our focus on running our mouths? I've known folks who react to differing opinions like their personal worth was on trial. They don't listen, they don't change, they just attack and defend, without the thought ever crossing their minds that they might learn something if they paid attention. That kind of behavior points to a serious pride problem. If we ever think that we've reached the point where we don't have anything to learn, all that says about us is that we have refused to learn. That's not the kind of attitude that will get us ahead in life or get us into heaven. Instead, we should approach every situation with humility, mentally acknowledging before the first word is spoken that we don't have it all figured out just yet, that those with whom we're talking may well have a different perspective that will enrich our own. That's wisdom.

However, listening indiscriminately can prove just as damaging as not listening at all. That's why we need to pay attention to the **SOURCES OF WISDOM** in our lives. Of these, the first we should listen to is God's word. Consider Proverbs 13:13. Although this verse may deal with judgment and the hereafter, its primary application is to the natural consequences of wickedness and righteousness. When we listen to what the word tells us and do what it says, we are most likely going to end up with a peaceful, happy life. On the other hand, when we reject God's will for us, we plunge into disaster. Whether we're reading the Bible directly or listening to a Bible teacher, we do well to listen to its wisdom.

It's also generally beneficial for us to listen to our parents. Solomon brings this up in Proverbs 15:5. Of course, unlike the word, parents are not divinely inspired. They can be wrong. However, they're a lot less likely to be wrong than their defiant teenage children. Life experience is a priceless asset, and no matter how old we are, our parents have more experience than we do. Just like the truth of Scripture is sometimes unpleasant, sometimes our parents will tell us things we don't want to hear, about our friends, about our romantic lives, about the decisions we're making. When the conversation gets unpleasant, that's when we most need to listen, because it's probably the truth we need to hear.

In similar fashion, we need to turn to wise friends for counsel. The Holy Spirit touches on the importance of this in Proverbs 13:20. First of all, notice that this is not blanket encouragement to listen to our friends. Any given friend is just as likely to be a fool as he is to be wise. What we need to do, then, is pay attention to our friends, study them over the course of the months or years in which we know them, and consider the outcome of the decisions they make. That will tell us a lot about the level of their wisdom generally, as well as the areas in which they are wise, and the areas in which they aren't so wise. I have friends whom I love to death, but let me tell you, brethren, if I had a choice between entrusting my household finances to them or deciding on the basis of a coin flip, I'd flip the coin every time.. Random chance will get it right every once in a while, but some folks have the knack for consistently blundering in every money

decision they make. In just the same way, I'm not going to go to the brother I know who has had four different wives cheat on him and ask him how to have a good marriage. We need to be wise in taking good advice from wise friends.

Finally, when we listen, we need to be wise about listening to a number of different people. This idea appears in Proverbs 15:22. This points to a danger that can arise when we listen only to ourselves or a few select like-minded friends. In a closed setting like that, it's very easy for us to fall prey to the dangers of groupthink. In a group like that, everybody buys into a shared vision of reality and makes decisions accordingly, but doesn't notice the times when their vision doesn't line up with the real world. As a result, it can be beneficial to talk things over with people we don't normally consult. Their perspective, which may be quite different from ours, can give us the wisdom we need to succeed.

Results of Listening.

Once we've learned to pay attention to others at the right times, we'll see many good **RESULTS OF LISTENING** in our lives. First, when we hear and accept wisdom, whether it's from the word or somewhere else in our lives, it adds value to them. This is what Solomon is getting at in Proverbs 16:16. Wisdom is a truly priceless asset, and the more we learn to make wise decisions, the better off we will be. Of course, this is not a guarantee of success. We can make the best decisions possible with the information available to us at the time and have those decisions blow up in our faces. However, over time, if we make good decisions, it will have a cumulative impact for good. Making good decisions is like having a good running back on your football team who averages five yards a carry instead of a bad running back who averages two yards a carry. Sure, the good running back will get stuffed occasionally, and the bad running back will break one occasionally, but over time, the good running back is going to generate more yards and points than the bad one. If we accumulate wisdom in our lives, it will have the same kind of overall beneficial effect.

Listening to wisdom is also important because it benefits us in the future. The Holy Spirit points this out in Proverbs 19:20. The point is that wisdom isn't something we can pick up in a single day. We can't read our way through the book of Proverbs once, talk to a few people who are wiser than we are, and expect that it's going to change our lives immediately. It won't. That kind of learning is just like me cramming for the statistics test back in the day. You hold onto it for a little while, but then you lose it just as quickly as you got it. Instead, our approach to gaining wisdom has to be a long-term approach. We have to show up here every time the doors are open. We have to cultivate and maintain friendships with the wise that last for years or decades. That way, the lessons of wisdom are hammered home repeatedly, and we reflexively make wise decisions instead of foolish ones. Wisdom leaves its deepest mark over time.

However, just as there are good results to listening, there are bad **RESULTS OF NOT LISTENING**. First, even if we have listened to wisdom in the past, once we stop listening, we stray from the path of wisdom. This is brought out in Proverbs 19:27. This is the flip side of the impact of repeated wisdom that we just finished looking at. Once we stop listening, we don't remain at the same level of wisdom. We start going downhill. It's like having a swimming pool in the summer. We don't fill the thing once on Memorial Day and expect it to have that much water through the entire summer. Instead, we have to constantly keep adding more water to replace the water that is lost. That's why it's such a disaster when Christians start coming to services less frequently or stop coming at all. They're forgetting spiritual wisdom all the time, and they're not getting topped off again three times a week. The effects might not be obvious at first, but over time, they sink lower and lower until they end up lost. The truth is, when we stop listening, we go astray.

Second, refusal to listen is both produced by and produces self-hatred. We learn this from Proverbs 15:32. There are two senses in which the first phrase is true. First, when we don't listen, it is inspired by foolishness that approaches active self-destructiveness. We've seen all the benefits that listening can bring. If we stopped a hundred people at the mall and asked them if it was good to listen when people said wise things, all of them would say yes. The problem is that when we're actually in that situation, we too often don't realize that what we're hearing is wise. At times like those, instead of benefiting from the wisdom we are hearing, we are hurting ourselves by rejecting it.

Also, when we don't listen, do the wrong thing, and get burned for it, that leads us to despise ourselves too. How many times have we kicked ourselves for saying something foolish in conversation, or paying too much money for a car, or failing to invest enough time in our marriages? Sometimes, the mistake is impossible to see in advance, but most of the time, it isn't. The question is whether we've taken in enough wisdom to spot the problem. When we fail to listen, then, we're actually dooming ourselves to a lifetime of embarrassment and regret. Let's rejoice in being wise instead.

Nor does our failure to listen affect only us. It injures those around us as well. Look at Proverbs 10:17. When we are foolish, we exert an influence for foolishness on everyone around us. This is perhaps most damaging in our relationships with our children. We've already seen that children are supposed to turn to parents for wise advice. What happens when we don't have any wisdom to give, when all we can do for them is guide them into making the same mistakes we did? I know Christians who have parents they can't trust, and it's a sad thing to see. As we have opportunity, then, let's listen to wisdom, not just for the effect it has on us, but for its effect on those we love.