

“A Father’s Greatest Gift”

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June 21st, 2026

Today is father’s day, a time when we remember and celebrate our fathers. So, it seemed fitting to hear a father’s instruction from the Book of Proverbs. In this passage we hear a father instructing his sons to pursue wisdom at all costs. The father states that it is the most valuable thing one can possess, for with wisdom, we have the ability to make good decisions throughout our life. The entire book of Proverbs is devoted to the idea that human beings possess free will. We are not born wise. We are born impressionable, and easily misled by folly’s temptations. So, if wisdom is to be gained, it will not be inherited genetically, it will have to be learned. And hopefully, those lessons will begin at home, with our parents.

Fatherhood has changed a lot since the days when this scripture was written. For a long time, there was a pretty clear division of labour in most families. Women stayed at home, tending to children and running the household, while men were responsible for dealing with the outside world. Both women and men might make money, often through the sale of crops or goods, but men were expected to be the ones who were more worldly, who understood politics and commerce better than their more home- centred wives. So, the Book of Proverbs abounds in advice from fathers like King Solomon about how the real world works, and how to avoid being caught up in the deceits and schemes of fools.

Fools show their annoyance at once,

but the prudent overlook an insult. (Proverbs 12:16)

A wise son heeds his father’s instruction,

but a mocker does not respond to rebukes. (Proverbs 13:1)

But the Book of Proverbs makes an assumption: that the world doesn’t change very much from year to year. That what a wise father or grandfather said a generation ago is still true today. And that was probably true back when this book was written. Most people were farmers or merchants, and the economy and its ways didn’t change much from generation to generation. So, the advice fathers handed down was probably still relevant year after year.

But that doesn't seem so obvious now. Most of our grandfathers grew up without cell phones, and possibly computers, depending on how old you are. Their life experience was gained before the digital age changed everything. So, we can understand why grandchildren may doubt that they have much wisdom to impart in this new age of social media and Tik Tok. And now there is artificial intelligence to deal with. No one really knows what it will do to jobs or education. How does a father or grandfather impart wisdom when no one knows what is going on?

The kids are way ahead of us on this. They are eager for advice, but their parents are no longer the only or the best source. A recent survey found that almost half of all people under 35 were consulting AI for personal advice. Among women under 35, AI was used for finding recipes and entertainment, but one of the most popular uses was for advice on their relationships. Among young men under 35, the top use was for health and wellness advice, as well as explaining current events.

There are now numerous companies offering AI chatbots who will act like a real person. Some act like friends, others like lovers. It is clear that children and teens are turning to AI chatbots for advice, questions that until a year or so ago would have been directed to parents or friends.

The problem is that AI chatbots do not love you or care for you. They are digital puppets created by companies that make money through attracting and keeping a user's attention. A chatbot wants a teen to stick around and keep coming back for more. To do this, artificial intelligence is programmed to be flattering, to agree with a user's perspective. For this reason, these chatbots are usually seen as friends who usually say yes and cheer on the teen.

But what AI won't do very often is say no, and that is a key part of parenting. Children are inherently impulsive and often will act before they think. This isn't their fault, their brains are still developing. The last part to mature is the frontal lobe where we make decisions. So, children need parents who can teach them what is allowed, what is wise, and what is a terrible idea. And that often means saying no. Artificial intelligence doesn't like to say no. And yet, the Silicon Valley has an interest in getting kids hooked on AI. It used to be bad friends parents needed to worry about, now it is the bad digital friend in a child's pocket.

We live in a society where we value positivity, taking risks and saying yes. The big Digital companies got where they are with the motto, "move fast and break things." This approach has made them into the richest companies on Earth. Just this week, Elon Musk became the world's first trillionaire, with the public sale of stocks in Space X, his rocket company. These digital tycoons have prospered by saying yes, and disregarding traditional restrictions on businesses. They have become rich, have earned the admiration of many young people.

But are they wise? In the Bible, wisdom is a quality that all people can attain, but most won't want it. Most people will prefer to act like Silicon barons, acting fast and breaking things. The proverbs have a lot to say about this kind of people.

First card:

Fools think their own way is right,

but the wise listen to advice.

Fools show their anger at once,

but the prudent ignore an insult. (Proverbs 12:15-6)

Second card:

The rich are wise in their own eyes;

one who is poor and discerning sees how deluded they are.

When the righteous triumph, there is great elation;

but when the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding. (28:11-12)

People who embrace folly don't listen to good advice, and berate anyone who gets in their way. Wise people, by contrast, welcome criticism because they may learn from it. Wise people, Proverbs says, are slow to speak, since they take time to consider matters. They recognize that they do not have all the answers simply because they possess intelligence. Indeed, being smart has nothing to do with being wise. Wisdom is a way of living that takes into account the needs of many, not just the needs of the one. Wisdom recognizes that humans are not actually in full control of our lives. God set up this system, so we need to learn God's ways to know how the Earth works. Anyone who simply acts to make money is eventually going to discover that there is a force of gravity that catches up with everyone.

Wiley Coyote

Fools can be rich and smart, according to Proverbs. But they act like Wiley Coyote when he runs off a cliff before gravity sets in. Everything seems ok until it isn't.

The Book of Proverbs is dedicated to teaching anyone who will listen how to be wise. In today's scripture, the father tells his son that the first step to getting wisdom starts in the heart. You have to want wisdom:

The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,

and whatever else you get, get insight.

Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;

she will honour you if you embrace her. (Proverbs 4:7-8)

This is the human quandry: we are not born with wisdom, we are born with desire. All of us desire things, from the baby's crying for food and love, to a young person's desire for affirmation from others. Desires come easily, but they can lead to conflict with other people who also are acting on their desires. Wisdom, proverbs teaches, gives us an inside pass to how life really works. God has provided guidance on how to dial down our desires so we can live a life with less conflict and more peace and joy. But God doesn't force us to choose wisdom. We have to get there ourselves. We have to want it before we can get it.

In our time, it is easy to confuse wisdom with information. The Internet makes information instantly available, from every century. But this information all looks the same - words on a screen. Wisdom is more than an idea, it is a way of living, one that considers the needs of the self and others, and works towards the common good. This is different than equating success with how much money one has in the bank, or how many hotels one owns. Wisdom sees no contradiction between a humble life and a good life, as long as it results in the flourishing of self and others, even if no one gets rich.

Better a little with righteousness

than much gain with injustice. (Proverbs 16:8)

How much better to get wisdom than gold,

to get insight rather than silver! (Proverbs 16:16)

So, in Proverbs, fathers instruct their children to be wise, which is worth more than gold or silver, or any amount of crypto currency. True wealth is measured in one's good living, making peace in ourselves and among others. Proverbs has a lot of advice about how to have a peaceful family life, and how to be fair with friends and neighbours. Proverbs promises that a wise person can endure any calamity, while selfish people struggle greatly and blame others for their misfortune. What the fools do not understand is that wisdom is a gift from God. It is the operating system of reality itself. There is a way to be happy in this life without being rich or famous. To attain wisdom, one must be ready to listen to the counsel of others, even when they disagree with you. We must even listen to people who say no, like our parents, when they have our best interests at heart.

Despite all the ways in which life has been revolutionized, wisdom has not lost its value. The ability to care for the self and others is just as important now as ever. It may mean giving some things up that are too distracting or cause anxiety. It may mean worrying less about our reputation and more about our own well being and the welfare of others. Ultimately, Proverbs argues, wisdom is knowing that God set this world up so we can all flourish, not just a few. And each of us has the power to attain wisdom. It is a way of living that will give us strength to endure hard times, and the ability to enjoy the pleasures of life that are all around us. Especially the ones that cost nothing. That gift, of wisdom, is something fathers can still give to their children, and may be needed now more than ever as we wander through this digital forest. Amen.