

02-01-27a Ecclesiastes

Let's continue our worship this morning by turning for our scripture reading to Proverbs chapter 2. Proverbs chapter 2. For the last few weeks we have been staying within the writings or at least the editings of Solomon because we find a confluence of some of his major themes in Ecclesiastes in the Proverbs. For this morning's scripture reading we're in Proverbs chapter 2. If I was going to, let's say I was a young lady in America back in the 1700s or early 1800s and I was going to plan out my cross-stitch sampler. You know, young ladies used to learn the art of sewing and then demonstrate it by creating a sampler.

You occasionally see these in museums or on people's walls or on that traveling auction program on PBS. But if I was going to choose a scripture verse I would probably choose the first portion of this chapter. There is nothing that encapsulates our opportunity as well as our responsibility as believers any better than this section of scripture.

Proverbs chapter 2. My son, if you receive my words and treasure my commands within you so that you incline your ear to wisdom and apply your heart to understanding. Yes, if you cry out for discernment and lift up your voice for understanding. If you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright. He is a shield to those who walk uprightly.

He guards the path of justice and preserves the way of his saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice, equity and every good path. When wisdom enters your heart and knowledge is pleasant to your soul discretion will preserve you, understanding will keep you to deliver you from the way of evil, from the man who speaks perverse things from those who leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perversity of the wicked whose ways are crooked and who are devious in their paths to deliver you from the immoral woman from the seductress who flatters with her words who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God for her house leads down to death and her paths to the dead none who go to her return nor do they regain the paths of life so you may walk in the way of goodness and keep to the paths of righteousness for the upright will dwell in the land and the blameless will remain in it but the wicked will be cut off from the earth and the unfaithful will be uprooted from it.

It just doesn't get any clearer than that in the word of God the choice that we face, the influence that we can have on one another we've seen Solomon talk about the 999 men out of a thousand who do not have wisdom and among those thousand there isn't a woman alone to be found who is able to latch onto and keep the way of wisdom the women are instead used as a picture of that which ensnares that which entraps, that which keeps us off the right path it doesn't mean that all

women are that way or that a single woman has to be that way the point is that there is a structure, there is a calling and there is a way to fulfill that calling that God has established for women it is always under the authority of someone it's normally under the authority of a husband or at an earlier age under the authority of the father it can also be under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ himself I think there are some women to whom God has given the privilege of functioning much as a pastor does and much as a husband does accountable directly to the Lord Jesus and that is reserved for only a few who are capable of functioning in that way but the picture that Solomon has given us in Ecclesiastes chapter 7 is clear it's a rare thing remember out of all of the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions who dwelt in the nation of Israel in Elijah's day there were only 7,000 that had not bowed the knee to Baal if the one in a thousand proportion holds up what does that tell us? large population, very small remnant Jesus told his listeners in his generation to strive to enter by the narrow gate because most people are on the broad road that goes through the wide gate that leads to destruction but narrow is the way and narrow is the gate that leads to life King James says narrow is the way and straight is the gate S-T-R-A-I-T we talk about being in dire straits we talk about the straits of Gibraltar what does it mean? It means a narrow place narrow is the way and straight is the gate that leads to life and few there be that find it well, it's our goal, I think, I can speak for all of us it's our goal to be among those few how is it accomplished? that's what we are told here in chapter 2 we have to receive God's word we have to treasure those commands within us how many times have we gone to John 14 and 15 where Jesus is giving his final words to his disciples on this earth and he says the one who loves me is the one who has these words and keeps them those are the ones who will be granted the privilege of the presence of the father and the presence of the son in a meaningful way in their soul I and my father will come to him and make our home with him Jesus says in Revelation 3.20 I stand at the door and knock if any man will hear my voice that picture of Jesus standing outside the door and knocking what does it mean to hear the voice of the Lord? if you receive my words and treasure my commands within you so that you incline your ear to wisdom that's what it means to open the door and let Christ in what does he say? if he hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and sup with him, this is the fellowship meal this is the intimacy that we can share with the Lord Jesus a lot of doors are being knocked on and not many people are opening and enjoying that meal we have seen recently in our study of Luke the picture of the banquet feast where there are those who are seated within with the Lord of the banquet and then others show up late and he rises and goes to the door and he looks out and he says I don't know you, I don't know where you're from never had that intimacy, never had that acknowledgement and so there's going to come a time when the situation is reversed and the Lord is on the inside and the table has already been set and there are those who themselves will in effect be knocking on the door and if we didn't open for the Lord if we didn't open that door and share a meal with him in this life he is not going to open that door and share a meal with us in the next life we sometimes think well maybe there was a different standard for Israel or for the Old Testament saints but you compare what Jesus said to his Jewish audience in Luke chapter 14 with what he says to the church in Revelation 3.20 and it looks to me like the standard is the

same it's a very similar picture so how can we understand the fear of the Lord? how can we find the knowledge of God? how can we open the door that the Lord Jesus Christ is knocking on? and I hasten to add that a lot of times when we come to this sort of subject we think it's an all or nothing thing we think well I have either opened the door and Christ is in and everything is great or I have not opened the door and Christ is outside and everything is bad any given individual, Christ is either inside the door or still outside knocking but in reality if we think about our lives there are different areas where we may have heeded and we may have opened you can think about an 8 cylinder engine you can say well my engine is either running or it's not that's one sort of standard but you may have a running engine that's only hitting on 3 or 4 cylinders or 5 or 6 cylinders and not hitting on all 8 and we can have areas of our life where we have been compliant where we have been receptive where we have been exercising faith and in that area we have heeded we've inclined our ear and applied our heart and then we can have other areas where we are recalcitrant where we are hard hearted and this I think explains I think especially for some of us in a real strong teaching tradition in the past we've tended to look and say well you're either hearing and responding to good teaching from the word of God or you're not and so if you're in a church where there's good teaching verse by verse, whatever then you see some other church over here where there seems to be a lot of other stuff going on they've got programs, they've got just topical sermons three points of fluff and a quick prayer lots of singing, lots of extracurricular things we think you know, nothing is happening in that church if they are not getting good solid food from the word of God every time their doors are open their church is worthless God is not at work, God is not there those two or three are gathered together but Christ is not in the midst and we tend to paint everything in terms of absolutes and that's not the case there are many functioning and growing believers in places where you would not suspect God is at work and Christ is present in many churches and in many groups and in the hearts of many believers that we might not suspect it's not just one single switch on the wall it's not just a one cylinder engine what you can say is God is limited in what He can do the growth is limited for believers who are not striving to hear the knock on the door in every area of their life in every part of the function of their church and if you think about this we find many wonderful believers who don't seem to make a priority out of learning the word of God and understanding it and grasping the finer points and the deeper truths they just kind of have 12 things that they know and they just kind of go through life on those 12 and they don't really seem to make any progress you cannot assume that God is not at work that there is no fruit being born but there is potential in a lot of areas and it's only being fulfilled in a few that's true of churches that's true of individuals so the other side of that coin is let's say that you are pursuing an understanding of God's word and you are regularly seeking to learn and grow in your understanding of the finer and deeper truths of God's word you cannot assume that because you are doing that all 8 of your cylinders are functioning we have areas where we are inclining our ear and applying our heart usually it's the easier areas the areas where we don't have a big weakness or where we don't have a big blind spot we know this just think about the different areas of your life there are some things I was talking to my brother on the phone yesterday and talking about the hiatus between my last employment and my current

employment and I was talking about how when you have an opportunity when a job leaves and you have no earthly idea where the next one is going to come from if you have any sort of sense of responsibility and any knowledge of your financial picture the opportunity is there to worry and to perhaps go off onto human effort and try to shake all the trees with your own arms and physically extract the job that you need from the rest of the world and by making flesh your arm go out there and secure for yourself at any cost and at any amount of expenditure of effort your job and I was talking to Matt and I said well I could have gotten off into worry but for me everybody has their areas of strength and areas of weakness I don't have a particular weakness that probably would not just be a worry wart some people are just cast in a more fatalistic mold or even as unbelievers so I had made some remark and then I had to correct myself because I said you know that's really not true I really never was seriously tempted in the area of worry that's just not one of the things where I tend to fall into the pit but there are other areas of my life where I struggle and fail it's like Theodore Roosevelt you know you err and come short again and again your face is marred by dust and sweat and blood and after lo these many years I am embarrassed by failures in the same old areas I've been failing in nearly all my life so for me there are certain cylinders that I have a hard time keeping firing and that job is just not one of them for me for other people it would just throw them for a real loop so you cannot assume that just because you're attending bible class regularly or because you have certain areas where you can look and say you know I really objectively speaking know that I'm on the narrow road here well that does not mean that we can say well ok fine and stop the analysis it wasn't an armored personnel carrier you know we have the APCs in the military where you get in and you ride from point A to point B so that you don't get hit with small arms fire as you go from one place to another God did not put us in an APC and take us from one place to another he put armor on us because we are susceptible to attack at any time and it doesn't matter how much of your armor you got on that this always applies to us you cannot judge others because they're in a goofy sort of church or they're doing things that we know better about in some areas nor can you say that because you're not in a goofy church or because you've got some things figured out that all eight of your at least we like to think we're not in a goofy church that all eight of your cylinders are firing we always have to be alert we did a study that I will probably revisit before long titled watch and pray went to all the places now that you have a computer you can go to a concordance and look up watch and there's hundreds of references you can go to pray and there's hundreds of references but watch and pray like the Lord enjoined the disciples to do with me watch and pray those passages are very meaningful well we've got to be alert do not think that because one part of your windshield is clear and you can see through it that your whole windshield is clear and you can see everything we always have blind spots that's why he says my son if you receive my words and treasure my commands within you accept it and receive and just value what you hear assign it some weight decide that it's important enough to think about again later some people will show up every time their churches doors are open they will be there every time their pastor teaches they'll be there for Sunday school when their Sunday school teacher teaches they'll listen to programs on the radio and having heard it's like in James what man goes and looks in the

mirror and what he looks like to treasure the commands means this is just like Psalm 1 and 2 to meditate in the law of the Lord day and night means you've got to do a lot more than just hear we recently reviewed in our Luke study all of the different failure points of our decision making we got to the beginning of Luke chapter 15 where the tax collectors and sinners gathered themselves to Christ to hear well the decision to gather is one point you may not even show but the decision to gather and to hear doesn't mean that you've completed the loop once you hear it do you value it? do you want to understand it? do you want to enhance your understanding? do you hear it and say boy that sounded great, that was inspiring walk away and two hours later somebody says well what was the lesson about this morning oh wow, I know I really enjoyed it made a lot of sense at the time but haven't really thought about it since it does you no good to start well in other words treasure my commands within you so that you incline your ear to wisdom and apply your heart to understanding having heard do we treasure it? do we consider it a value? when you hear something of value here's somebody talking about what has cholesterol or doesn't what has a good vitamin or doesn't what will stave off wrinkles and liver spots and premature gray and all that what tends to put weight on you and what won't they'll talk about it in conversation I heard just the other day that if you eat a grapefruit a day it just burns the fat off of you that'll stick in your mind why? because it impinges on something that's important to you if you're watching your weight anything you hear that is an aid to keeping weight off you value that you say you know what that's an important piece of information that's going to come up in my conversation I may even apply it as a supposedly great aid to keeping off weight incline your ear to wisdom and apply your heart to understanding yes if you now here's a step forward you cry out for discernment and lift up your voice for understanding do we having attended Bible class having heard having assigned value to something in our prayers to the Father do we say Lord please give me insight please help me understand how these things I'm learning relate let that be a light in my soul shining in a dark place Father please illuminate my life with your word illuminate my heart let it be that sword that lays bare the very core of my soul and critiques the thoughts and the intents of my heart I don't want it to just be water off a duck's back I don't want it to be a beautiful vase sitting on the shelf with an exceptional purpose I can quote it I can recite it I can remember that I heard it last week but I haven't really benefited from it in any material way are we growing? are we a more stable more fruitful believer this January of 2002 than we were in January of 2001 or January of 2000 after we survived the Y2K nuclear winter that everybody was worried about people spent a lot more time going out and buying generators and laying in canned goods for the supposed disasters that were going to befall at the turn of the millennium you know are we applying? are we lifting up our voice are we crying out to God and saying Lord make these things meaningful if you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures there are people who think everyday about their portfolio their investments they're checking the rise and fall of companies and are they up a point in a quarter are they down a half a point there are people who are constantly worried about their family or their children or their parents or their job there are people who constantly have their finger on the pulse of the industry that they're engaged in and the business that they're doing what do we seek like silver what is the most

important thing to us to live wisely before the Lord is it to be pleasing in his sight is that the uppermost in our mind all through the day are we seeking a wise life the way some people seek profit what did Solomon talk about wisdom being back in the earlier part of chapter 7 what is it that's found in the shadow wisdom is in the shadow like silver is in the shadow there are people who will in the mountains of Nevada looking for the big mother load up there spend their whole life doing that and there are people who figuratively do that every single day their job is uppermost I will travel I will change my schedule I will alter my family's situation and I'll move my vacation I'll change the time of the birthday party for my child I'll do whatever because my job is the most important thing I cannot lose my job I've got to close this sale and get the commission that's uppermost, that's the silver well, do we seek wisdom do we seek the understanding of God's word and God's plan God's heart the way people normally seek silver do we search for it like people search for hidden treasure all you have to do is watch the documentaries of people that bring up sunken ships that had hold full of valuable things valuable artifacts I saw where they excavated one of LaSalle's ships down in the Gulf of Mexico he thought he was at the mouth of the Mississippi he was way over there off of Galveston or some god forsaken place and everybody died the ship sank and it was a miserable thing but they found one of his ships virtually intact under just 12 to 15 feet of water and so they went to enormous expense and they built one of these and they went down there and every splinter every musket ball every tiny artifact that they found was of immense value and it's all in a museum and it's clean people search for that and spend millions of dollars retrieving it do we even make an effort to have that same attitude toward the wisdom of God if we do if we move through those stages of decision making of values by which we will live Solomon says in verse 5 then you will understand the fear of the Lord he doesn't say if you incline your ear and apply your heart you'll understand the fear of the Lord does he he doesn't say if you'll just receive the words and treasure the commands you'll understand the fear of the Lord it has to become the most important thing in your life to the extent or in the area of our life where it's not important boy we really want to know the word of the Lord we want to be sure we make a wise choice because we don't want to screw up and make ourselves miserable but there are other areas of life like our thought life or areas of relationship with people there are some people we are perfectly content to just hold a grudge and bring it up and gnaw on it like an old bone anytime we feel like being a little bit vindictive and spiteful we can't just take the good parts to ourselves and say look how good I am in this area every different area of our life every situation, every relationship everything that occupies clock cycles in the processor of our mind has to be given over this is what Paul was talking about when he said take every thought captive for Christ you can be attacking an army you can take a lot of prisoners but if you don't take them all then there is still resistance out there you've got to find the pockets of resistance on the Pacific Islands when the Marines were over there fighting on Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima and Okinawa and a lot of those islands the main battle would be over and they raised the flag on Suribachi but for several days after that they were going into the caves and the holes in the ground and rooting out those that had not yet been either killed or taken captive Paul says take every thought captive lose the value of the victory and take away you can lose men I don't even

remember the name of the movie there is some real famous war movie and the hero it's John Wayne or somebody right there at the end after the battle is over everything is won he has a little conversation they have a smoke on the beach and the guy says well you know we finally survived that and he is walking away and he steps on a mine or something and he goes oh man I don't remember which one it was is it the longest day? that was the longest movie probably why I can't remember how we got to that point but it seems so tragic that with the main victory won one of the major players in that is lost at the end but that's what can happen to our victorious life if you will or the life we live before God if we don't take every thought captive so when he says you can't store it like hidden treasures this is everywhere this is not 80% or 85% it only takes one sniper or one land mine that you haven't found and disarmed or taken captive to create a defeat and to leave you in a place where you haven't taken it then you will understand the fear of the Lord then you will find the knowledge of God the Lord gives wisdom and from his mouth comes knowledge and understanding but notice to whom is he going to give these things you don't just get saved and two days later you get an infusion of wisdom and knowledge and understanding it is the level to which we value these things that we receive them God doesn't say stand still and you will receive just don't move and you will find just don't depart and I'll open the door for you that's not the promise is it we have to ask how many doors are we knocking on how many requests are we sending to the Father for wisdom and understanding if you lift up your voice if you cry out and these are verbal expressions this isn't even silent prayer he doesn't say if you wish it in your mind or if you tell God in your heart he says if you cry out if you lift up your voice I've mentioned many times but I've learned it as a child and it always floats to the top of my consciousness in this context Psalm 55 17 what does David say evening and morning and at noon will I pray and cry aloud and he shall hear my voice why was David the man that he was why does he occupy the place in God's plan why is his name eternally attached to the Son of God David a man after God's own heart how did he get that way a minimum of three times a day he lifted up his voice and cried aloud to God they talk about the prayer of Jabez let's talk about the prayer of David evening and morning and at noon I pray and cry aloud where did Solomon get this says my son who's his father David who taught Solomon these truths David the man after God's own heart seek her as silver search for her as for hidden treasures cry out for discernment lift up your voice for understanding they ought to take every copy of the prayer of Jabez rip all the pages out one through seven and eight and following in that book that's the prayer to pray that's the heart to have he stores up sound wisdom for the upright he's a shield to those who walk uprightly remember Yashar the word we saw he says God made man straight it's usually translated upright well this is that word God made us straight unbent and it comes to mean upright something that is vertical but he has sought out many many ingenious explanations many other ways to make it through in life to get by, to get ahead people are always telling you the secret aren't they they're always telling you this is the key this is the key to whatever ambition you may have this is the key to a slimmer trimmer you this is the key to a better memory this is the key to happier children this is the key, even the news programs are trying to tell us it really annoys me that news 8 is going to give me a tip on how to have a happy home life take some time and read with your child if you're

a child of hell and you're living an evil life and your priorities are screwed up and you're a terrible example of a human being you shouldn't be spending time with your child you're just going to make them two-fold the child of hell that you are and there's people that their children are blessed from shuffles in from soccer practice to music lessons to cub scouts to one thing and another that's probably the best thing for them because their parents have nothing to give parents who try to make quality time and they have nothing to give them in that quality time are wasting their time and wasting their child's time if we want to understand righteousness and justice, equity and every good path if we want sound wisdom if we want God to be our shield there is a responsibility that we have and it is to walk uprightly not to fall victim to all of these clever plans and all of these ingenious explanations of how life can be lived for profit and for benefit God stores sound wisdom for the straight the upright He is a shield to those who walk straightly this is walking on that narrow straight road that leads to life He is not a shield to everyone He doesn't store up sound wisdom for everyone He guards the path of justice and preserves the way of His sanctified ones His holy ones and if you get in that category you will understand righteousness you will understand justice you will understand equity what's fair remember we came to this passage when we were studying divine guidance how do you, you know people say well I want God's will on how to live my life I want to know the right person to marry the right job, the right school the right place to live I want God's guidance on how to handle this situation or this challenge but if that's your silver and that's your hidden treasure is a happy life and a minimum of trouble in your circumstances guess what you have just disqualified yourself from ever finding divine guidance it's if you're seeking the center of God's plan and God's will regardless of what it entails that you're going to get sound wisdom and righteousness and justice and equity and you're going to understand every good path why? because the good paths lead to the fulfillment of God's plan not Sam's plan I often wake up and realize that I have been pursuing the plan of Sam instead of the plan of God I have things that interest me I have distractions I have things that substitute themselves I have a vision all of us do we all start establishing short-term goals and if we're not careful if we don't meditate in the law of the Lord day and night if we don't cry out evening and morning and at noon for discernment and understanding we will be Kelly's heroes that is still my favorite movie example of this principle remember that you've got Clint Eastwood you've got old Donald Sutherland you've got Don Rickles and all these different well-known people they're in the army in World War II they've got uniforms they've got equipment they've got radios they've got transportation they're supposed to be fighting for the cause they're supposed to be killing Germans and achieving objectives that have been set out ultimately by Eisenhower and what do they do? they find out there's a bunch of gold in the bank and they divert all of those resources and all of these advantages are sitting there and it's guarded by only one German tank and what do they ultimately do? when they get there and find out that they only have paint rounds Donald Sutherland is the tank driver and he's only got canisters of paint the only way they can get into the bank is to talk the German into cooperating with them so they wave a white flag and they make a truce and they get the German to use his tank with live rounds to blow open the bank and get out the gold and they compromise with the enemy they're in league with the people they're

supposed to be fighting and where are these people supposed to be somewhere there's a need someplace there may be troops that are fighting and dying somewhere else in the war because these guys are busy trying to fill their pockets and it's one of those movies that people like to watch because it's sort of a buddy movie and you've got these characters and they're all trying to do this and there's a lot of entertainment today and they start off a heist and I completely don't understand the intention of the filmmaker to get us to root for somebody who's basically a criminal they don't present the people who are being ripped off and all the people who are going to lose their life savings because this bank gets knocked over or whatever anyway, it's easy for us to get distracted and start pursuing our own goals and decide we're going to knock over the bank and we're going to get the gold instead of keeping the strategic picture in mind who does God store up sound wisdom for? who does he give knowledge and understanding to? who is he a shield for? he's a shield for those who walk uprightly he will preserve the way and guard the path of those who are on his path and not on their own and when you reach that point, verse 9 you will understand righteousness and justice, equity and every good path what's good for God is good for us we think we can pursue what's good for us at the expense of what may be good in God's plan when in fact it is as Jesus pointed out when we lose our life that's when we find it when we take up our cross and forsake all that's when we find the abundance that transcends this world and this time Matt and I were talking yesterday he was reminding me about Peter's view what kind of people ought we to be when we're knowing that the elements are going to melt with a fervent heat and the earth is going to disappear what kind of people ought we to be? all of these earthly goals the needs of the moment that seem so profound I look at my children and things that are so important to them things that seem like such monumental challenges oh my tooth hurts but I don't want to pull it out it's going to be painful or I must have this toy the world wants that way but we have grown beyond that haven't we? and we look back and we say if you could just put this in a larger perspective you're not even going to remember this day you will probably 10 or 15 years from now not remember this toy or this tooth or this problem or this stomach ache or whatever it is that's just completely destroying your day well God calls us to that same kind of perspective that's why hope is the motivation for the Christian life look ahead, think beyond the melting of the elements with fervent heat you will find every good path with wisdom enters your heart knowledge is pleasant to your soul discretion will preserve you and understanding will keep you these are promises of God aren't they? these are covenant promises in its initial delivery to the Old Testament saints if you're a saint if you're walking on that road these are iron clad divinely guaranteed promises aren't they? well I could spend the rest of the day on chapter 2 but I want to get back over to Ecclesiastes chapter 8 where we pick up our study here because we have and all I'm going to have time for before the break is just to point out one thing here take a look at Ecclesiastes chapter 8 verse 2 which if you want to put a chapter division in here this is where it goes we've already seen 8.1 goes with the end of chapter 7 people are seeking out all these weird explanations who is the wise? the last verse of 7 or the first verse of 8 the only thing I found God made man upright made him straight but he's busy seeking out all these schemes who is the wise man? who is the one in a thousand? who knows the interpretation of a matter? who knows

the explanation? it's the one who has the shining face he's got the wisdom that causes his face to shine he's got the wisdom that changes his countenance it goes all the way back to God talking to Cain Cain, if you do well will you not be accepted? why is your countenance fallen? wisdom will make man's face to shine so now we get to what ought to start chapter 8 and it says in your translation there I say keep the king's commandment for the sake of your oath to God well, these words are here but the way they're related in this English translation is not sound but what I want you to focus on is we do have the phrase oath or promise of God and we've just seen that in Proverbs chapter 2, haven't we? there are promises of God to those who have that shining face and that altered countenance because they have made God's wisdom their priority this is the key to understanding what's about to come it's all about the promise of God that's the key for believers what is God's promise to us? just think about that Proverbs chapter 2 if we will establish divine values if we will set biblical priorities it is a life-changing face-altering situation and God's power and the fulfillment of God's promises will come to us the question is not have we done that at all but to what extent have we done that to what extent what percentage of our life is in that category of devotion you can't just take one area and say, well you know I'm always at Bible class and I always listen we've got to be hitting on all eight cylinders well, let's pause here and take our break when we come back we're going to have to do a little bit of retranslating in chapter 8 but we're going to see a wonderful set of truths from the pen of Solomon let's pause here