

"Get Smart"
Proverbs 9:8-10; Matthew 10:26-28

INTRODUCTION

I don't know what you think but I think the best sitcoms were produced back in the 50's and 60's. They weren't very sophisticated but they were funny. I'm talking about sitcoms like *Leave It to Beaver*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, and yes, *Get Smart*.

Get Smart was one of my favorite shows. It was about a secret agent named Maxwell Smart. The title of the show, *Get Smart*, was both a double entendre and a pun. First, Maxwell Smart was dumb and needed to "get smart." Second, his enemies were always trying to "get Smart." They were always trying to outmaneuver or kill him.

I mention that old show because of its title. That title is God's call to us and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Get smart. Turn to the passages I read, Proverbs 9:8-10 and Matthew 10:26-28.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

Let's start with Proverbs 9:8-10. These three verses teach us how to get wisdom. Verse 8 counsels us to receive criticism with gratitude. Verse 9 counsels us to be open-minded. And finally, verse 10 counsels us to "fear the Lord" and that's what I'm going to focus on today.

All of us know by experience what fear is. It is nothing more than the anticipation of harm. To fear is to anticipate that something painful or bad might happen to us. Stop for a moment and think about some of the things that people and you and I fear: drunk drivers, pit bulls, inflation, police, cancer, tornadoes, parents, walking down Glenwood Avenue at night, rats, or maybe even German 201.

I read about some graffiti on the Clemson University campus. Someone wrote on a dormitory wall, *"Where will you spend eternity?"* Someone else then scrawled underneath it, *"The way things look now, in German 201."* Some of us can empathize can't we? It's possible to fear certain classes. We worry that our workload might be oppressive or that we might get a bad grade or, even worse, flunk the class.

That illustrates what fear is. It's the anticipation of harm.

Now, notice who it is that we should fear in verse 10. It's the Lord, the triune God of the universe. The Bible commands this over and over again. Fear God! Fear God! Fear God!

Many Christians don't really understand what it means to fear Him. I know that I didn't for most of my life. I have to admit it. I was uncomfortable with the idea of fearing Him. So I did what many preachers and Christians do. I soft-soaped the meaning of it. I believed and taught that it means to respect and revere Him, to hold Him in high regard. Respecting and revering doesn't sound as discomfoting or alienating as fearing does. So that's what I believed and taught.

But I was wrong. The command to fear God means just what it says. It means to fear Him. He requires us to be and do certain things. We anticipate that harm will come to us from Him if we don't be and do those things. That is what it means to fear Him.

WISDOM

Referring still to Proverbs 9:10, we see what the wise man says about that. It is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom is *one* of the dominant themes of the Bible and *the* dominant theme of Proverbs. Wisdom is smartness. To be wise means to be smart. When I say smart, I'm not talking about intelligence per se. We have been taught that wisdom is not the same thing as intelligence and that's true. A person can be highly intelligent but unwise. Or a person can be ordinarily intelligent, like most of us, but wise.

Wisdom or smartness isn't intelligence as much as it is good sense. It is discerning the fundamental realities and truths in our situations and then responding to or interacting with them in a beneficial way. Let me me say that again. Wisdom, smartness, is two things: (1) we discern the fundamental realities and truths in our situations; and (2) we respond to or interact with them in a beneficial way.

A professor of mine once told us a story to illustrate grading on the

curve. Two hikers were walking through the woods when a large bear suddenly confronted them. The first hiker immediately took off his hiking boots, pulled out a pair of running shoes, and began putting them on. The other hiker then cried out: *"What are you doing? You can't outrun that bear."* To which the first hiker replied, *"Who cares about the bear? All that I have to outrun is you."*

That first hiker did two things. First, he grasped the fundamental reality of his situation. The bear would only get one of them, the slowest. Second, he responded to it in a way that was beneficial to him. He put on running shoes so that he wouldn't be the slowest. That is wisdom or smartness.

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Now, notice what the wise man says about wisdom or smartness. The fear of God is the beginning of it. That is one of the most celebrated statements in the Bible. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

That statement implies something. It is wise or smart to fear some things. Think about it. Discerning the fundamental reality of some things, we anticipate that they will harm us. We then act so that they won't. It is smart, in other words, to fear some things – like scorpions.

I talked with a man who lives in Arizona. He told me that he never puts on a pair of shoes without examining them first. There's always a chance if you don't, he said, of putting your foot into a scorpion.

It's smart isn't it to fear scorpions. We discern that scorpions can harm us. If we live in Arizona, we then act so that they won't. We examine out shoes before putting them on.

Well, it's even smarter to fear God. The fear of God, in fact, is the beginning of smartness. The word "beginning" doesn't mean first as in a stage that we eventually leave behind for a second stage. It means first as in dominant or controlling. So, the dominant or controlling principle when it comes to smartness is to fear God. It is the very smartest thing that we can do.

Jesus Himself explains why in Matthew 10:28. He says, *“Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”* Let’s give this verse some thought.

Jesus talks about those who can kill the body. That might be the Nazis for instance. Suppose that you’re a Jewish person who lives in 1930’s Germany. You would fear the Nazis. You would anticipate that they could and would harm to you.

Jesus then talks about Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. For years, I thought that referred to Satan but it doesn’t. That’s because Satan doesn’t have the power to destroy our soul. It refers to God instead. Only God has the power to destroy our soul. Jesus’ point is that there isn’t anyone or anything else in the universe that can harm us as much as God can.

So, we should fear Him more than anyone or anything else in the universe. That really is the thrust of verse 28. What most people do fear the most is what can kill the body, like cancer or terrorists. But what they should fear the most is Him who can kill the soul. We should fear God more than anyone or anything else in the universe. We should anticipate that He can cause the greatest of all harms to us, the ruination of our soul. We should then act so that He won’t.

The Bible, in passages like Ecclesiastes 12:13, tells us how to do that. It’s by keeping His commandments. We avoid God harming us by keeping His commandments - by being and doing what He requires, which is one of the reasons we major in spiritual formation here at Bethel.

What I call “the cycle of smartness” then is this. We fear God. And because we fear Him, we be and do what He requires. That in turn avoids the greatest of all harms – the ruination of our soul. That cycle shows us that the fear of God truly is the beginning of smartness.

UNDERSTAND THAT GOD IS DANGEROUS

So, get smart and fear God. That is our call here in these passages.

Get smart and fear God. Getting smart is a two-step process.

The first step is to understand something – that God is dangerous.

Let me ask you a question. Of all of the theological truths that you know, which of them is the greatest?

There's an old child's song that tells us. All of you know it, "*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*" It can be argued that the three most important words in the Bible are in 1 John 4:8, "*God is love.*" The Bible teaches us that God has a compassion and love for you and me that is so great that it can't even be described.

That tells us several things, one of which is that He isn't out to get us. He isn't mean in other words. But He is dangerous. That is how Dallas Willard says it in his book Renovation of the Heart. Willard compares this to electricity. Electricity isn't mean. It isn't out to get us. But it is dangerous. It can cause us great harm. It's the very same way with God, he says. He isn't mean but He is dangerous. Great harm can come to us from not being and doing what He requires. Well, the very first step in getting smart is understanding this.

Let's go back to electricity again. I know a two-year old girl who put her mouth on an electrical outlet in her home. The electricity surged through her lips, almost burning them off. She had to have several surgeries to correct the damage that was done. You see what that little girl's problem was. She didn't understand that electricity is dangerous. If she did understand that, she would not have done what she did.

It's the very same way with God. We understand that God is love because the Bible says He is. We understand that He is good because the Bible says He is. But in the same way, we also need to understand that He is dangerous because the Bible says He is. Understanding that is the first step in getting smart.

REMEMBER THAT GOD IS DANGEROUS

The second step in getting smart is remembering that He is dangerous. When I say remember, I mean keep it in mind. We need to

keep it in mind that He is dangerous.

One of the problems that many Christians have is that they don't think about God enough in their everyday life. They do think about Him for a half-hour or so during their devotions but that's about it. They then rarely give Him a thought the rest of the day. Nothing ruins our soul as much as that does.

I've said before that the mind is the place of our widest and most basic freedom. We can place it on whatever we choose to. So, we choose to place it on God. We think about Him as much as we can through the day. We think about how loving and good and patient and kind – and dangerous – He is.

I once took a class called Trial Techniques. The professor was a seasoned prosecutor and trial attorney. He knew what he was talking about and one of the very first things that he taught us was this:

“Always remember something. The courtroom is the judge's and His word is law. He is a like a 600 pound Gorilla. So, fear Him.”

And that's what I did. I always kept what that professor said in mind when I was in a courtroom and encouraged my clients to do the same.

What I did with judges, I do with God. The universe is His and His word is law. He isn't mean but He is dangerous. First, I understand that and second, I remember it. I keep it in mind as I live this one life that He has given me. I constantly keep it in mind how loving and good and patient and kind - and dangerous - He is. I never forget to love and fear Him and neither should you.

CONCLUSION

Notice that I said “love and fear.” The **fear** of God isn't the **end** of wisdom, the **love** of God is. But it is the beginning of wisdom. I've talked about developing a detailed vision of God. Fear, informed by that kind of vision of Him, leads to love. So, get smart and fear God.