Proverbs 9:10 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

Dear Christians Made Wise for Salvation:

It is estimated that every 60 seconds another 2,000 pages of information are added to mankind’s storehouse of knowledge. The material produced in one day would take 5 years to read. More than 70% of all scientists who ever lived are alive today, and about 80% of all medicines used today were developed since WWII. An engineer who would have begun working in the 1950s could have his entire life’s work reproduced today in a few clicks of a computer mouse. We humans thirst for knowledge, and we are gaining it.

But while we are gaining in knowledge, would you say we are also becoming wiser? Does greater knowledge automatically lead to or equate to greater wisdom?

The Book of Proverbs has a lot to say about knowledge and wisdom. A proverb is, simply, a “wise saying.” Solomon, the author of many of the proverbs, was given by God great wisdom -- at least for part of his life. In this world where the search for knowledge and wisdom takes place at a feverish pace, let’s hear what God’s Word tells us about what to keep in mind about Mankind’s Quest for Wisdom. (1) It is futile apart from the Lord, and (2) It begins with the fear of the Lord.

Hear again Solomon’s wise saying: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” Much of the world, of course, would say that Solomon’s words are not wise, but probably the most foolish collection of words ever assembled into a sentence. If you talk about the Bible as something important and worth knowing, unfortunately, many people assume you are weak-minded, brainwashed, or some kind of off-the-wall fanatic.

That’s because, unlike much of the world, the Bible is more concerned with eternity than it is about the here and now. There is nothing wrong with gaining a good education to use while we’re here: geography, math, science, languages -- all very important for getting good jobs and living healthy, productive lives. St. Paul’s School and teachers do a wonderful job teaching many earthly subjects!

But we also keep earthly subjects in perspective. Worldly knowledge is constantly changing. Dr. Walter Steward of Princeton University wrote that he saw a group of his former students, now in graduate studies, coming out of a seminar. He asked them how it went. One replied, “Well, pretty well, except we just found out everything we learned about physics a few months ago isn’t true anymore!” How often haven’t we seen this “changeableness” in our lifetime? What we are so sure is true today turns out to be nonsense tomorrow. The wonder diet today that will supposedly make us live longer may turn out to be the worst thing for you. Theories of evolution are evolving faster than secular textbooks can keep up with. Science has gone from the Big Bang to the Big Bounce to the Big Bubble (all of it rubbish)! Even Albert Einstein was quoted as saying that “We humans really know very little and probably will never know very much.”

We also need to be careful with worldly knowledge because all of it, no matter how true, is only temporary. On the day of our death or on the Day of Judgment, no one, and especially God, is going to care whether or not you know the Pythagorean Theorem, the Periodic Table of Elements, or the difference between investing in stocks or bonds. That’s all great stuff here, but the one piece of knowledge that will count on that day and at that hour as we stand before God as sinners…will be Christ -- his perfect life lived for me; his sacrificial death suffered for me; his triumphant resurrection victoriously done for me! If a person doesn’t come to know and, by the power of the Spirit, believe in Christ Jesus while here on earth, then what has all that earthly knowledge gained? God’s Word says, “Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (Heb 9:27). If we think a “wasted mind is a terrible thing,” what about a wasted soul? What about a wasted eternity? How wise is Jesus when he says, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).
The wisdom of the world often says the Bible is just so much foolishness. Martin Luther once wrote this: “Where you do not find the Word, there God is not present -- nor wisdom, but mere folly. Wisdom is the Holy Scripture. It teaches you to know the Son of God made flesh for you.” Isn’t that exactly what Solomon is saying today? “The knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” This is what truly counts in life.

This is also why our forefathers and mothers at St. Paul’s, beginning 115 years ago, saw the great wisdom in Christian education: whether it is LES, SS, Conf. Class, ABS, VBS worship, or private devotions [copies of Meditations, etc.! The Bible is what God wants us to know so we can be with him forever -- and it’s not changing or temporary. No person can afford to be without that knowledge or the wisdom that flows from it. That’s why the Lord tells us, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). Parents, we can exasperate/frustrate our children in many ways (being mean, unfair, not setting limits), but the worst of all would be to not give them Jesus and his Word. Adults, the better we know the Word, the better we can share and model the Word for our children and grandchildren.

II

When Solomon wrote, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” what did he mean by “the fear of the Lord”? There are 2 ways to fear God. One is to be afraid of holy God because we know we’re sinners and he punishes sin. The teachings of God’s Law inspire that kind of fear. Our sinful nature should tremble at the thought! The other meaning of fear is to respect God because we know how much he loves and cares for us. The teaching of the Gospel inspires that kind of fear. As believers, our new creation rejoices at this beautiful message of our Savior God’s forgiving love in Christ.

It is this second meaning of the word “fear” that Solomon is using. When we believe that Jesus saved us our whole way of thinking changes. Our life under Jesus becomes a quest to respect and honor God by the way we live and speak and think. We wear spiritual glasses that allow us to keep our eyes fixed on the goal of heaven -- and that keep us from being distracted and misled by the fleeting things of this world all around us that can seem so important but really last but a moment.

- Christian wisdom leads us to think things through before we take action. It takes us from impetuousness to measuring things carefully before embarking on a course of action. Our measuring stick, of course, is God’s Word.
- Christian wisdom filters our words, stopping to ask the questions like, “Is what I am about to say true? Is it kind? Would Jesus approve of it and say it?” I once read: “It’s better to sleep on what you’re planning to say than to be kept awake by what you’ve already said and wish you hadn’t.” Christian wisdom understands that it is more important to listen and learn than constantly to offload my brain to others in speech.
- Christian wisdom doesn’t make excuses for or rationalize our sins. It confesses and repents of them. It doesn’t say, “You shouldn’t be this way, but I can.” Christian wisdom leads us humbly to see the huge plank in my own eye before finding the speck of sawdust in another’s.

In short, it could be said that wisdom is the Spirit-given ability to take the knowledge that God teaches us in the Bible and put it into practice in our daily lives. Only with faith in Jesus Christ can that happen -- and we all know that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

It all makes sense to our Christian hearts and minds, right? “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

Amen.