



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Honor Your Grandparents”

Wisdom Sermon Series Part I

Proverbs 1:1-7

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Proverbs 1:1-7.

¹The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

² For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,

³ for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;

⁴ to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—

⁵ let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,

⁶ to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.

⁷ The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.

What exactly makes a person wise? Is it that they have consumed and retained some body of information? Is it that they are innately smart or quick or witty? Perhaps it has something to do



with hitching your wagon to the right star or making good decisions. Maybe it's characterized by intellectual humility, patience, or even virtue. At some level, wisdom must require at least a hunger, a curiosity to learn more.

Bertrand Russell observed, "The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people so full of doubts." In a season marked by polarized opinions, social media echo chambers, and the relentless pursuit of certainty, we'd do well to remember that while certainty often *feels* good (it can offer clarity and a sense of control in a chaotic world), unwavering certainty is often a hallmark of ignorance or fanaticism. When someone clings tightly to their beliefs, they leave little room for alternative perspectives, critical thinking, or the nuance that defines complex issues. Certainty, in this sense, becomes a barrier to growth.ⁱ

In a culture that glorifies confidence, doubt is often dismissed as weakness. In reality, doubt is a sign of intellectual humility. Aseem Desai writes in *Psychology Today*, "It reflects an understanding that the world is complex, that answers are rarely simple, and that our knowledge is inherently limited."ⁱⁱ

The wisest people I know are not those who claim to have all the answers. Quite the opposite, they are the people who are willing to ask the most questions. They are curious, open-minded, and make space for learning.

Imagine a world in which opposing views were met with curiosity rather than defensiveness. Imagine political leaders who openly admit their own limits of understanding or prioritize questions over declarations.

I have heard it said that faith is not certainty, but the courage to live with uncertainty. The wise know there aren't always easy answers.

Many years ago, Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso wrote a children's book called *The Shema in the Mezuzah*.ⁱⁱⁱ It's a colorful tale which shares the origin story that explains why our Jewish neighbors hang their mezuzahs at an angle. The mezuzah is a small piece of parchment inscribed with the words from Deuteronomy 6 (called the *shema* for the first word in the passage – the Hebrew word *shema* means "hear" or "listen"), rolled up and placed inside a little metal or ceramic or even plastic box nailed to the doorpost of a Jewish home.

The wisdom of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 reads:

⁴ *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.* ⁵ *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.* ⁶ *Keep these words that I am commanding you today in*



your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The story goes that a town was divided on how exactly to hang their mezuzahs on their doorposts. Half the town thought that the mezuzah should be nailed in place horizontally – for the text says to recite this to your children when they lie down. The other half of the town argued that the mezuzah should be affixed vertically, straight up and down, for it says to recite it to your children when you rise.

It was quite a heated debate. And so the townspeople consult their rabbi. They want to settle this once and for all. “What are we to do?” The townspeople asked the rabbi. “Shall we put the mezuzah standing up or lying down?”

To the people who believed that the mezuzah should be standing up, the rabbi said, “You are right.”

To the people who believed that the mezuzah should be lying down, the rabbi said, “You are right.”

The townspeople were puzzled. “Rabbi, how can we all be right? We can’t have a mezuzah standing up and lying down at the same time.”

The rabbi smiled, “You are right again.”

“Very funny, Rabbi,” both sides agreed.

But the rabbi wasn’t laughing. “You haven’t read the instructions very carefully. The very first word on the mezuzah’s special paper is “Listen... Listen to one another.” He goes on, “You must put the mezuzah on the doorway so that it is standing up – a little – and lying down – a little.”

The people who wanted the mezuzah standing up listened to the people who wanted the mezuzah lying down and said, “Well, if we slant the mezuzah, it will almost be standing up.”

And the people who wanted the mezuzah lying down listened to the people who wanted it standing up and said, “Well, if we slant the mezuzah, it will almost be lying down.” So that’s what they did. The people stopped shouting. They stopped arguing. They stopped yelling. They listened.

The answer to their questions, to the town’s big problem, wasn’t black and white. There was compromise—but it was presented in a way that both sides could hear. Wisdom.



The first word in our passage from Deuteronomy, the first word written on each mezuzah is “listen.” The second part of that same verse is better translated, “The Lord is one.” “Listen, O Israel, the Lord your God is one.”

It’s hard to overstate just how important this word of wisdom from Deuteronomy is in the Jewish tradition. “Listen, Israel, our God is one.” These words are prayed in Jewish daily prayer. “Listen, O Israel, our God is one... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (vv4-5). They put these verses to song and teach it to their children at Shabbat school in sign language. One rabbi on a podcast I listen to said that the children in her congregation make pillow cases each year with these verses painted on them^{iv} – “recite this when you lie down and when you rise.”

I can imagine a father reciting this to a child, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” “Oh, dad.” It’s the kind of thing you want to pass on to your children and your grandchildren.

When I was in college, my grandfather used to sign off our phone calls or end our visits with the line, “Don’t forget where you come from.” He’d say it to me often. For him, “Don’t forget where you come from” ... “Remember where you’re from,” held an almost existential meaning. It meant more than the name of my hometown. It meant, “Remember how you’ve been raised.” “Remember the love we put in you.” “Remember the kind of person you are called to be.” It’s written on my heart, fixed to my forehead, nailed to my doorpost.

During my junior year of college, I called my grandparents the morning I was leaving for a semester abroad. My grandfather’s health was declining with emphysema, and in that phone call, I could sense he was trying to tell me something important. Papa told me that if he died while I was away, that I didn’t need to interrupt my studies or spend the money to fly back home. He told me that he loved me and that he was proud of me. And he told me, “Listen, don’t ever forget where you come from.”

God is calling us to listen, to hear these words passed down from our ancestors in the faith – to be passed down to our children and grandchildren. Listen, remember where you come from – the Lord our God, that the Lord is our God alone, the Lord is one. As a people of faith, this is who we are. This is the foundation of our identities as individuals and as community.

This is the foundation of true wisdom.



“Listen,” scripture says. To listen can also mean to respond in obedience. When a parent or grandparents stops you and says, “Listen,” they also mean “obey.”

There is a cacophony of voices vying for our attention. In a very real sense, you will follow whoever you’re listening to. We are shaped by the voices we hear. Google and Amazon know it. Facebook and Instagram have figured this out. They know how to advertise to us and reinforce the ways we are interacting with the world. But God’s word of wisdom, “listen,” is saying that if you’re only going to listen to one thing, listen to this truth—there is one God. And you are not that god, neither is your political party, or your ideology, or your country. There is one God, and you are called to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your might. Everything else should flow from there.

Baked into this instruction from Deuteronomy is the fear or knowledge that we are going to forget this important truth. Something is going to distract us, and so we are going to have to put mezuzahs or sticky notes all over our houses, on our foreheads, on our hands, on our hearts. We need reminding, over and over again. We need reminding that loving God is about doing kinds of things that remind you to love God.

The Old Testament book of Proverbs, the first passage we read this morning, is a book of instruction. It is attributed to King Solomon, David’s son. Despite Solomon’s many, many mistakes, he got a few things right: he asked God for understanding, discernment, and sound judgment. In asking for these things, he was—at least for a time—aware that he was *not* God. He recognized that he was small, weak, imperfect, and prone to error. Knowing where he stood in the hierarchy of things, he cultivated what he describes as “the fear of the Lord.” Not “fear” as in “terror,” but fear as in awe and radical amazement at who God is in relationship to humans. The beginning of wisdom is hunger, yearning, longing. The beginning of wisdom is the humble willingness to ask for what we need.

Part of our active decision to love God with all that we have and all that we are is the decision to surround ourselves with others that can help us. It is a community that helps us take seriously the testimony of our ancestors, our grandparents in the faith. We need one another to help us keep front and center God’s invisible divine force at work in this world. What the Bible tells us over and over again is that we are each other’s support system. We are responsible for each other—across generations and right now.

In Rabbi Sasso’s book, the rabbi reminds the towns people to listen and that God is one. Internalized, the towns people finally respond, “We listen. We are one.”



The wisdom of faith means living a life of radical differentiation from other ways of life—evident in the world around us all the time. There is the easy possibility, of course, of living in the world in a way that is most obvious to us that is given to us in all these other voices—voices calling us to look out for ourselves alone, voices calling us to view our neighbor as competitor or adversary. All of this is the way of life given to us, encouraged to us by the prevailing culture. But in God’s kingdom, we are trying to orient ourselves toward a radically different way of life in which we express love of God in expressing the wholeness of relationship in the human community and we refuse to exploit each other, we refuse to take advantage of each other, we refuse to structure society in ways that privilege ourselves at the expense of others. In order to live this way, we need each other to listen and seek wisdom in the voices of our faith grandparents. We need to hear the experience of younger generations and to come back to God’s Word and listen to this voice—the voice that matters most.

Wisdom isn’t about having all the answers. Wisdom is about having the courage to question the status quo. It is the willingness to question, reflect, and remain open to God’s Spirit. It is about listening and remembering where we come from—not this kingdom, but God’s.

ⁱ Aseem D. Desai “The Paradox of Certainty: Why doubt is a sign of wisdom” *Psychology Today*, Jan 26, 2025.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mindful-beats/202501/the-paradox-of-certainty>

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *The Shema in the Mezuzah: Listening to Each Other* (United Kingdom: Turner Publishing Company), 2013.

^{iv} Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. “Episode 505 Listen, O Israel! (Deuteronomy 5:1-21 & 6:4-9), BibleWorm podcast, Oct 1, 2023.

