WISDOM AND CHARACTER

Although the Bible speaks of God’s wisdom as a hidden treasure above the highest heavens (Job 28:21), it also commands us to get it at all cost. There is a healthy tension between the unreachability and the mandate to acquire wisdom. In fact, throughout Scripture we find many promises regarding this great virtue. Perhaps one of the greatest revelations about wisdom is that the God of wisdom is so willing to give it: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).

But what is wisdom and how does it differ from knowledge? How does it intersect with character? Why is it important in the work of education? In this week’s study, we will seek to answer these questions and provide clarity between these often seemingly abstract notions.
Write out Proverbs 4:5–15 from the translation of your choice. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
SEVEN QUALITIES OF WISDOM

Notice that our text for this week talks about wisdom and understanding. Also notice that it is not talking about knowledge. Later we will discuss the relationship between these important items. For now, let’s address seven insights that the passage shares about wisdom:

1. **We Get It.** Solomon’s counsel to his son is to get wisdom. Implied in the text is the idea that wisdom, unlike knowledge, is not learned but is received instead. In this case, it is received from the words of the father’s mouth. Thus, the counsel is not to find new knowledge; Solomon’s warning is to remember the wisdom that we already possess. According to the implications of the text, the moment we come in contact with the Word of God, we also receive a measure of the gift of wisdom. The first work of wisdom is not to forget the wisdom we already have.

2. **It Can Be Forsaken.** In addition to being forgettable, wisdom is something that can be forsaken or abandoned. Solomon’s advice is to avoid the temptation that arises in every human heart to forsake wisdom when it goes contrary to the desires of the carnal heart. Do not walk away from it or leave it behind, for in preserving wisdom, it preserves us.

3. **It Must Be Loved.** Loving wisdom is the means by which we do not forsake it. It is not enough to appreciate its presence when we need it. Like an important relationship that we value, wisdom must be loved or else it will be forsaken.

4. **Wisdom: The Principal.** For Solomon, wisdom is the first and the best thing. It is first in the sense that it is foundational—without it, nothing else really matters. It is the best in the sense that wisdom is all you need—with it, nothing else really matters.

5. **Wisdom: The Educator.** What does Solomon mean when he tells us to exalt wisdom? He gives us the reason why we must give it first place: because wisdom knows how to promote the person who possesses it. One of the meanings of “promote” in the original text is to raise up a child or to cause him or her to grow up.

6. **Wisdom Is Life.** “Man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut. 8:3). Jesus said, “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). The Word of God is wisdom and life. In other words, there is a difference between life and living—a foolish person can be living without life, while the wise, “though he may die, he shall live” (John 11:25).

7. **Wisdom Is Moral.** Solomon admonishes his son not to be unwise—not to “enter the path of the wicked” or “walk in the way of evil” (Prov. 4:14). The implication in the text is that wisdom is just and good. There is moral value to wisdom as opposed to a mere acquiring of information or knowledge.

Memorize your favorite verse in Proverbs 4:5–15. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.

Read more at www.inversebible.org/edu07-3
WISEDOM ABOVE KNOWLEDGE

In true education, there is a clear hierarchy of priorities. Contrary to common belief, the primary purpose of education is not the acquisition of scientific breakthroughs or literary achievements. From a biblical perspective, knowledge—although important—is the least valuable. True education values character above power and power above knowledge.

Societies today tend to overemphasize the value of knowledge. Our best academic systems and institutions today are designed to impart the latest and greatest information and research. Though this attribute has provided much good in them, it is also where they fail. Education must impart wisdom, which provides the right use of knowledge. The institutions of society succeed in disseminating knowledge, but the morality and wisdom associated with its usage is often absent.

There are several reasons why wisdom is more critical than knowledge in the education of students. First, God is all-knowing, and He is also very willing to impart wisdom and knowledge to those who sincerely seek to do His will. On His own, He has the power to make people smarter. He does not require the help of a teacher or textbook to accomplish this. He is not even limited by the ability (or lack thereof) of the student. Acts 2 is the perfect example of this: uneducated men spoke in languages they had never studied before, strictly on the basis of God’s desire to give them that ability.

There is another reason why wisdom is more important than knowledge in the work of education. The trend of education today often appeals to egocentrism. Students are taught to learn material for the purpose of gaining an edge over their peers. This strengthens the very weaknesses of character we are called to overcome by appeal to self. It prepares the student to compete with their classmates and to advance at the expense of others. From the beginning of the educational career, the student is taught to nurture selfishness, which is the root of all evil and the largest obstacle facing the world today.

What we have been taught as children in school, we continue to use as our mode of operation in the workforce. We seek to be better than our coworkers so that we can receive the promotion to a better position. When our businesses discuss profit margins, they generally do not have the well-being of the consumer in mind; they’re worried about making business profitable and successful.

The purpose of true education must be to develop a counterinfluence against selfish ambition, gluttony for power, and indifference to the needs of humanity. This happens when students develop characters with the ability to control ability and the power to control power. This is the real work of true education.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Proverbs 3:5–7  
Deuteronomy 8:1–6  
John 6:1–58

What other verses come to mind in connecting education and character?

Review your memorized verse from Proverbs 4:5–15.
Goodness in the world is not accomplished through intellectual prowess, streamlined efficiency, or great wealth. It is not the best who make the greatest impact in society; it is those who care the most. Love is the greatest motivation of all. In heaven and in earth alike, the person who loves Christ the most will be the one who will be determined and blessed by God in their fortitude to do the greatest good.

To the person who is discouraged and thinks they have nothing good to offer their community or no great gift to pour into God’s vineyard, God’s promise is an encouragement: a life of selfless consecration to God, of discipline, and of uncomplaining endurance will receive Christ’s greatest gift of grace. The challenges that our world faces is not a want of more brilliant minds, deeper pockets, or better resources; the desperate need of our societies is men and women who are truly unobstructed channels of God’s grace and goodness for those in need.

Wisdom takes the knowledge it possesses and asks itself the question, What is the greatest good that I can perform with the information that I’ve been entrusted with? Often, in order to do what is good, personal sacrifice will be required. It will be necessary to think of others better than ourselves. Wisdom does not seek personal riches; it seeks the salvation and wellbeing of others. Wisdom takes knowledge and power and exercises these advantages in ways that are morally aligned with the Word of God.

Jesus is wisdom. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). He is not just the Word of God; He is God the Word. Jesus is wisdom itself. Therefore “get wisdom!” (Prov. 4:5). For by receiving wisdom, we are receiving His very character in our lives, thus accomplishing the real work of true education.
“True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary acquirements; but above information it values power; above power, goodness; above intellectual acquirements, character. The world does not so much need men of great intellect as of noble character. It needs men in whom ability is controlled by steadfast principle.

“... Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now. Never was any previous generation called to meet issues so momentous; never before were young men and young women confronted by perils so great as confront them today.

“At such a time as this, what is the trend of the education given? To what motive is appeal most often made? To self-seeking. Much of the education given is a perversion of the name. In true education the selfish ambition, the greed for power, the disregard for the rights and needs of humanity, that are the curse of our world, find a counter-influence. God’s plan of life has a place for every human being. Each is to improve his talents to the utmost; and faithfulness in doing this, be the gifts few or many, entitles one to honor. In God’s plan there is no place for selfish rivalry. Those who measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves among themselves, are not wise. 2 Corinthians 10:12. Whatever we do is to be done ‘as of the ability which God giveth.’ 1 Peter 4:11. It is to be done ‘heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.’ Colossians 3:23, 24. Precious the service done and the education gained in carrying out these principles. But how widely different is much of the education now given! From the child’s earliest years it is an appeal to emulation and rivalry; it fosters selfishness, the root of all evil.

“Thus is created strife for supremacy; and there is encouraged the system of ‘cramming,’ which in so many cases destroys health and un-fits for usefulness. In many others, emulation leads to dishonesty; and by fostering ambition and discontent, it embitters the life and helps to fill the world with those restless, turbulent spirits that are a continual menace to society.”

“In every generation and in every land the true foundation and pattern for character building have been the same. The divine law, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart; ... and thy neighbor as thyself’ (Luke 10:27), the great principle made manifest in the character and life of our Saviour, is the only secure foundation and the only sure guide.

“‘The stability of thy times and the strength of thy happiness shall be wisdom and knowledge’ (Isaiah 33:6, Leeser’s translation)—that wisdom and knowledge which God’s word alone can impart.

“It is as true now as when the words were spoken to Israel of obedience to His commandments: ‘This is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations.’ Deuteronomy 4:6. Here is the only safeguard for individual integrity, for the purity of the home, the well-being of society, or the stability of the nation. Amidst all life’s perplexities and dangers and conflicting claims the one safe and sure rule is to do what God says. ‘The statutes of the Lord are right,’ and ‘he that doeth these things shall never be moved.’ Psalm 19:8; 15:5.”

(Edward, 225–229)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What other qualities of wisdom do you see from the main passage?

Delineate Ellen White’s hierarchy of the components for true education. How does this resonate with your experience?

How can knowledge-only education be dangerous?

Evaluate your educational experience thus far in light of this week’s study.

Contrast the motivation for service in the selfish and selfless sense. How can the former be avoided?

How is character development “the most important work ever entrusted to human beings”?

How can you apply this week’s principles of education to your educational experience?