

The Science of Virtue

WHY POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY MATTERS
TO THE CHURCH

Mark R. McMinn



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To Auden, Juniper, Eden, Mark, Wesley,
and Nash—my six grandchildren.

Stretch toward virtue as you face the joys, suffering,
blessings, and pain life will offer you.

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As will be evident in almost every chapter, I am grateful to the John Templeton Foundation for funding a three-year grant that allowed my colleagues, students, and me to study positive psychology and the church. Dr. Nicholas Gibson, the program officer at Templeton who directed this grant, was particularly helpful in reviewing the grant proposal and providing feedback along the way. My colleagues Dr. Rodger Bufford and Dr. MaryKate Morse were collaborators on the grant. Dr. Ward Davis at Wheaton College supervised one of the grant projects. Thanks also to George Fox University and Wheaton College doctoral students who worked on the projects funded by the grant: Andrew Cuthbert, Laura Geczy-Haskins, Paul McLaughlin, Jeff Moody, and Jens Uhder.

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Introduction

A New Conversation about Virtue

My students look at me funny when I mention 1980, as if we are studying ancient history. It doesn't seem that long ago to me, but most of them were ten years shy of being born. Mount St. Helens erupted that year, gifting my classmates and me with an inch of ash for our college graduation day in Portland, Oregon. Rubik's Cube captured the world's attention and more of my free time than I care to admit. And a concerned couple at my church approached my wife, Lisa, and me a few weeks before we packed our U-Haul for graduate school with a warning that my choice to pursue a doctoral degree in clinical psychology would likely cause us both to abandon our faith. Several weeks later, during my first day on the Vanderbilt University campus, another doctoral student insisted that I couldn't possibly be religious and be a good scientist. Psychology and Christianity were not getting along well in 1980.

While it might not be fair to say that the war between psychology and religion is completely over, I find it remarkable that, thirty-five years later, committed Christians author much of the scientific psychology literature I read. Not only can psychologists be Christians, and Christians be good social scientists, but some of the

most thrilling developments in the field have taken place because committed Christians decided to wage peace with psychology.

Much of the change is due to *positive psychology*. In 1998 the president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, noted that we psychologists had done a very good job describing and treating what goes wrong with people, but had largely overlooked what goes right with people. Almost overnight a vibrant contemporary science of virtue was born,¹ and since then many Christians have been involved in this new movement to study virtue scientifically. Many of the leading researchers on the topic of forgiveness are Christians, as are some of the world's leading experts on gratitude. Almost every scientist currently studying humility is Christian. New research programs are being developed to study grace, and guess who is leading the way? It's difficult to even imagine studying grace without knowing Jesus.

The John Templeton Foundation deserves much of the credit. Even in the face of persistent criticism from old-school scientists who still hold that religion has no place in empirical investigation, the Templeton Foundation has given generously to fund world-class research on religion and science. The foundation demands excellent science while affirming the importance of ultimate questions of meaning and purpose. Many of the Christians involved in positive psychology research, as well as researchers of other religious faiths, have received funding through this foundation.

This is an exhilarating time to be a Christian scholar, a social scientist, a counselor, and a follower of Jesus. Tensions remain between psychology and the church, but mostly they seem as distant as 1980 is to my students. Today we have a new conversation that opens the possibility of partnership and mutual collaboration.

Why Write This Book? Why Read It?

I have four reasons for writing *The Science of Virtue*, but I'm offering just two now and saving two for the end of the introduction.

First, positive psychology helps us to reclaim, or redeem, the language of virtue, which has been largely lost in contemporary times. One understanding of the word “redeem” is to buy back or repurchase something.

Conversations about virtue waned with modernity, as did our ability to comprehend virtue.² Today we value science, with its intense scrutiny of “what is,” more than virtue, which requires an awareness of who we are to become (teleology). Redeeming virtue requires us to envision a calling, to grasp that we are called to become more fully human, more abundant and Jesus-like. We need a Point B to help make meaning of our current Point A, and then we also need an idea of how to move from Point A to Point B.

Though science cannot fully reclaim the rich understanding of virtue that people had in centuries past, positive psychology is a step in the right direction. Positive psychology is redeeming virtue, bringing topics that have been considered since before the time of Christ—but mostly lost in recent decades—back into focus. As Aristotle taught both virtue ethics and empirical study of the world, so positive psychology brings virtue and science together to consider topics such as hope, resilience, compassion, gratitude, coping, forgiveness, authenticity, humility, creativity, wisdom, and more. I will consider only a few of these topics in a short book such as this, but in each chapter we’ll venture into the science of virtue to see how positive psychology is influencing our understanding of human character, mostly in helpful ways.

Mostly. This leads to my second reason for writing the book. Another meaning of the word “redeem” is to change for the better. The contemporary science of virtue will be most effective if the church gets informed and involved. Positive psychology needs the church. I will argue this point in every chapter of the book. In a moment I will summarize my argument for why positive psychology needs the church, but first let me set the context by considering virtue in relation to what Jesus described as the greatest commandments.

Virtue and the Greatest Commandments

Take a minute to think only of yourself. What might you want for your next meal, and how will you go about getting it? Are you enjoying your work? Do you make as much money as you want, and if not, how will you make more? To whom are you attracted, and if that person does not return your affection, how might you go about making that happen? How is your health, and what will make it better? Okay, now it's time to stop, but imagine for a moment that your whole life consisted of thinking only of yourself. This is the essence of vice: self occupying one's entire visual field.

It is tempting to suggest that vice is self-focused and that virtue, in contrast, is other-focused, but being entirely other-focused is not possible for embodied individuals. It seems we are hardwired for self-interest. Consider this sentence: *To be fully virtuous, we should completely empty ourselves of self and focus on the other.* Do you see the logical error? How can a self remove a self? The self exists and will be interested in its own existence. None of us has to work very hard to think about ourselves—that comes quite naturally for us. So the essence of virtue is not to remove a self, or eliminate all self-interest, but to find a balance point where interest of other coexists with interest of self. Further, virtue calls us to consider the growth of the self—both my self and other selves—toward some fully functioning state.

What might I want for my next meal, and how do my food choices affect those who grow my food in my own country and around the world? How do my food choices shape me? How do they affect the character formation of my close and distant neighbors? Am I enjoying my work, and does my work contribute to making the world a more wholesome and beautiful place? How do I balance my interest in money with a profound awareness of those with less access to financial resources? Does my relationship with money reflect a desire to become more and more the person Jesus created me to be? To whom am I attracted, to whom am I committed, and how do my attractions and commitments reflect

the sort of love that contributes to the welfare of others? How are my health, the health of those around me, and the health of the planet related? These more complex questions lead to the possibility of virtue, where self-interest is contained and balanced with interest in others and a godly yearning for moral growth. Christian psychologist Everett Worthington writes, “The essence of most virtues is that they self-limit the rights or privileges of the self on behalf of the welfare of others.”³

Consider the classic virtue of prudence, the ability to choose the right and avoid the wrong. How can we even know what is right without considering how our actions impact others? Prudence requires a balance between self-interest and awareness of the other. Another classic virtue, justice, is to give others what they are due. This requires a cognizance of the other, a keen ability to observe and understand the nature of the other. Fortitude is the strength to be just and prudent, sometimes calling us to put a higher cause above our own self-interest. Temperance calls us to moderate our self-interest, to enjoy the pleasures of this good life without becoming enslaved to them. Virtues limit self-interest, and they call us to become people who routinely do so.

Christian virtue introduces a third dimension—an awareness of and love for God. When the religious leaders of Jesus’s day tried to trap him by asking him what was the most important rule from the Old Testament law, Jesus gave an answer that has been resounding for over two millennia: “‘You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments” (Matt. 22:37–40). Here we see that following Jesus involves loving God, loving the other, and properly managing our instinctive desire to love ourselves. We may sing catchy praise choruses about worship being all about Jesus, but actually it’s not. Jesus clearly connected loving God with love of self and other, and so collective worship is about honoring a relational God who cares deeply about each

of us. Worship is a virtuous act involving God, self, the other who sits beside us, and the other who lives across the world.

Balancing an awareness of God and other with our natural desire to honor ourselves calls us to a more complex set of questions. What do I want for my next meal, and how do my food choices reflect both a love for local and global neighbors and a desire to understand and love what God loves? How does my work reveal God's image and contribute to God's redemptive presence in our broken world? How do my relationships image God while bringing joy, meaning, and hope both to the other and myself?

We can categorize vice, virtue, and Christian virtue if we wish. Many helpful taxonomies have been developed over the centuries, from the seven deadly sins that were actually eight until Pope Gregory the Great distilled the list a bit in the sixth century, to the four cardinal virtues that made their way into Christian thinking through Aristotle, to the three theological virtues identified by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. But all of these taxonomies ultimately reveal that vice elevates self to preeminence and traps us in gratifying present desires. In contrast, virtue calls us to a place of balance where we exercise control over wanton self-interest because we love God and neighbor. Virtue invites us to imagine a better self and a better world, and Christian virtue does this while being embedded in a profound love relationship with God.

Why Positive Psychology Needs the Church

With this understanding of virtue, now we can explore the essence of the argument I make throughout this book. Left to itself, psychology tends to veer toward self-interest. Many have written scathing critiques of psychology, some of which border on the ridiculous, but one of the most thoughtful and compelling critiques is offered by psychologist Paul Vitz in his text *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*,⁴ where he explores the ubiquity of selfism in contemporary society. Psychology can become a

worldview, much as a religion, according to Vitz, and can lead to an excessive focus on the self. Even positive psychology, which developed after Vitz's book was published, can veer in this direction.

Consider forgiveness, which has been an enormous boon to the positive psychology movement. Not too many decades ago forgiveness was relegated to religion and was almost never considered in the context of psychology. Now we have thousands of articles on the topic, including impressive scientific studies showing the power of forgiveness (more on this in chapter 2). But find someone on the street and ask why forgiveness is important, and you're likely to hear about the immediate personal benefits of forgiveness. Indeed, much of the science demonstrates the personal health benefits of forgiving an offender. Do you want to lower your blood pressure, to sleep better, to feel happier? Forgive someone who has hurt you. This is important research that should be celebrated, but notice how easily this can veer toward focus on the self and on a static view of self.

Now consider forgiveness from the vantage point of Christian virtue, as we will in detail in chapter 2. It's not just about me wanting to get on with my life and feel better. No, forgiveness is a spiritual act, a worshipful act, in recognition of God's gracious and forgiving character. God's character, revealed in Jesus, changes me. To whatever extent I am changed, I can then have a transforming effect on others around me, helping them glimpse what it looks like to move more toward the life Jesus lives. Thus conceived, forgiveness is a community act, designed to foster healing, hope, and growth.⁵ We forgivers need the church to remind us why it matters, to put our self-interest in the context of something deeper and richer than we naturally might consider.

Stanton Jones, former provost of Wheaton College, offers a useful and balanced critique of positive psychology.⁶ While Jones acknowledges various dimensions to be celebrated, he also raises serious concerns about how positive psychology understands the nature of existence (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), and practical philosophy. This is not just academic quibbling; it is the

necessary role of Christian scholars to consider how any new scientific advance squares with Christianity. As much as I value the past twenty years of positive psychology, the movement is still in its infancy. The church has been around a long time and serves as a custodian of truth. Positive psychology needs the church in order to identify its strengths and blind spots. I've given a preview of this by considering forgiveness and will make similar arguments about wisdom (chapter 1), gratitude (chapter 3), humility (chapter 4), hope (chapter 5), and grace (chapter 6).

Why the Church Needs Positive Psychology

I reserved my final two reasons for writing this book until the end of this introduction, knowing that one is controversial and the other quite challenging. Here's the controversial one: the church can benefit from positive psychology. One could argue that the church is relatively self-sustaining, has been over many centuries, and has little need for the latest psychological trend or current social-science research. Still, I write this book because I am convinced the church needs to consider positive psychology and what it offers to conversations about virtue that have been going on for centuries. I offer two illustrations of this point here and will suggest more in following chapters.

One reason the church needs positive psychology is that the time has come for Christianity and science to become better friends. Consider the plight of a teenager growing up in a church that avoids dialogue with science. On Sunday this teenager learns that religion is the path to truth, and perhaps even that science is not to be trusted. Monday through Friday, in the context of a public school, the teenager learns that science is the most credible way to know something, and perhaps that religion is backward and naïve. At some point in life this teenager will face a choice to remain in the church and distrust science or to trust science and leave the church. Increasingly, the church is losing this battle. We may hear something

like this and blame public school systems, but what are we doing to promote meaningful dialogue and peacemaking between science and faith? Social and natural scientists at any Christian college will affirm that science and faith are good conversation partners and need not be foes, but sometimes the church gives a different message. Embracing meaningful dialogue between science and faith will help build the church and keep us relevant in a time when science is garnering even more credit than it deserves. Positive psychology provides an ideal venue to foster conversation between science and faith because the subject matter—virtue—is something valued by both parties in the conversation. We may go about studying virtue differently, but we both care about it deeply and are looking for truth.

Another reason that the church needs positive psychology is to make the tenets of Christian thought practical. Consider forgiveness again. Most Christians agree that forgiveness is important. Jesus taught that we should forgive others in various ways, even right in the middle of the Lord's Prayer. All through the New Testament we see some mysterious relationship between God forgiving us and us forgiving others. Most of us have heard many sermons about the topics and feel both an obligation to forgive and peace when it happens. But how do we forgive? What are the practical steps I can take to forgive someone who has wounded me deeply? The practical strategies for accomplishing forgiveness tend not to show up in the Bible, though it is clear that we are called to figure it out. I have good news about this because positive psychologists have done tremendous work in figuring out the mechanism of forgiveness. Imagine a sermon that goes beyond the Christian mandate to forgive and demonstrates how it is actually done. Likely, that will be a sermon by a pastor who understands both Christian theology and positive psychology.

Christian Counselors and Positive Psychology

Finally, I offer the reason for writing the book that is most challenging, and likely most rewarding: positive psychology can help

Christian counselors and pastoral counselors do their work in new and refreshing ways. Why is this so challenging? Because the two related branches of psychology—clinical psychology on the one hand, and positive psychology on the other—haven't built many bridges for meaningful interaction. Clinical and counseling psychologists meet with their patients and clients and offer services based on traditional theories of intervention, whether they be psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, family focused, client centered, or some related strain. Meanwhile, positive psychologists tend to work in the academy. Though many positive psychologists are trained in clinical work, they tend to keep their research quite separate from their work with patients. With the exception of forgiveness (chapter 2), gratitude (chapter 3), and some preliminary work on humility, positive psychology stays in the ivory tower too often, and it seems important to ponder its implications for the work of Christian counselors.

As a clinical psychologist who has been immersed in the Christian counseling movement for many years through reading, counseling, researching, speaking, and writing, I think it responsible to speculate a bit at the end of each chapter about how positive psychology can inform Christian counselors. So I will.

In summary, I offer four reasons to read this book: because it is worth knowing something about positive psychology, because positive psychology needs the church, because the church needs positive psychology, and because positive psychology can help Christian counselors think creatively about their work. If this all seems somewhat vague now, it will become clearer as we move into chapters about particular virtues: wisdom, forgiveness, gratitude, humility, hope, and grace. And if grace doesn't seem like a virtue that belongs on this list, try to suspend judgment on that for now. I'll address why I include grace as a virtue later.

The married couple in our church that warned Lisa and me about the dangers of psychology back in 1980 were two of the most godly and honorable people I have ever known. They loved Jesus and lived out virtue in remarkable ways. As difficult as it

was going against their advice, I think Lisa and I have also found important ways to love God and neighbor in the process. Psychology has changed me, especially positive psychology, and some years later, when Lisa completed a PhD in sociology, that changed her as well, but in the process we have grown comfortable with the idea that social science can enhance our faith just as faith can sharpen our science. Join me on this integrative journey, and let's work together to redeem virtue.

1



Wisdom

The day before I started this chapter I played flag football with some of my doctoral students. Though I am thirty years their senior, I tried my best to keep up for three hours of great fun. Today my sore muscles scream any time I try to move. My wife, Lisa, would say they are reprimanding me for my foolishness. Typing on the keyboard is about the only motion that doesn't hurt. It seems both fitting and paradoxical to begin writing about wisdom the morning after punishing my body in the name of a good time. Hopefully I haven't just destroyed any credibility I have on the topic.

Football is a small example, but doesn't it seem we need vast amounts of wisdom to understand and participate well in contemporary life? Picture concentric circles, starting with individual choices and extending outward to our memberships and civic responsibilities. In each of these circles we yearn for wisdom. Individually, we continually confront questions about how to best use our time in an age when consumerism and entertainment demand our continual attention. We make choices about education, training for careers, choosing careers, changing careers, and retiring

from careers. How should we earn, spend, and give our money? If we have too much to do, and likely we do, then how should we balance sleep, leisure, work, and domestic chores? And why do we keep misplacing our phones and keys at the most inconvenient times? How are we going to lose a few pounds, and how much does it matter that we do? Is this just a third glass of wine, or is it a drinking problem? Am I reading a legitimate email or another scam? Should I even open the attachment, and if I do will it install a virus on my computer?

Moving outward on these concentric circles, many of us exist in family units that call for yet another level of wisdom. Honoring parents, loving a partner well, keeping children safe in a complex and violent world while raising them to be kind and compassionate, creating a balance of closeness without becoming overly enmeshed, knowing when to set rules and how many to set with adolescent children. Who purchases and prepares the food? How can we make ends meet in financially lean times?

Many live in small communities, with friends and neighbors who may delight or annoy us, or both. When do we set boundaries, and when are we just being selfish? Do we reach out to our friends and neighbors when we're in need, or do we manage things on our own? How do we respond when others reach out to us with their needs? Some of us are part of church communities where we have to decide how important ideological and doctrinal differences are in relation to unity in Christ. Because many churches are dwindling these days, we face a host of questions about how to stay relevant in a postmodern world and when efforts to be relevant cross over to moral compromise.

Stepping back to see the larger concentric circles, we see that we belong to civic groups, whether city, state, nation, or world. Making sense of our voting rights and responsibilities and knowing how to prioritize candidates' views on issues of personal morality, national security, economics, and social justice are no easy tasks. To whom do we offer our charitable giving when our resources are finite and the local and global needs seem infinite? Everywhere

we turn, every day we live, we are people longing for wisdom in a complex world.

Social scientists have been studying wisdom, which is good news to some, irrelevant to others, and perhaps bad news to the science skeptics. As one who has spent my career valuing contributions of science, I aim to foster a relationship between what science helps us discover and what faith has long told us about wisdom. By putting science and faith side by side and letting them influence each other, we can construct wisdom for daily living.

The Science of Wisdom

One of last night's flag football players, Paul McLaughlin, walked into my office three years ago, announcing that he wanted to do a dissertation on wisdom. "That's a great topic," I said, "but psychologists don't really study wisdom." Paul went to the library and proved me wrong. It turns out psychologists have been studying wisdom for at least three decades now. Much of the work has come out of the University of Chicago and the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. I've read quite a lot about wisdom over the past three years, Paul and I published a paper on the topic, and Paul completed his dissertation on wisdom.¹

Sometimes I look enviously at chemists and imagine that the constructs they study have clear definitions based on numbers of carbon molecules and the types of bonds they share. I'm probably wrong about the simplicity of chemistry, but still I can't imagine a more difficult construct to define than wisdom. If we asked a hundred people to define wisdom, we would likely get a vast array of perspectives, ranging from shrewd financial advice to spiritual practices to a decision-making model for whom to marry (and whom never to marry).

Paul Baltes, a world-renowned expert on developmental psychology and founder of the Berlin Wisdom Project, considered wisdom to be "expert-level knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics

of life.”² Note that wisdom involves knowledge, but is not the same as knowledge. You may know immense amounts of information about healthy living, but if you neglect the fundamental pragmatics of eating well, exercising, sleeping, and experiencing joy in the present moment, then your knowledge will not be of much benefit. Wisdom goes beyond knowledge by applying knowledge to the pragmatics of living well.

Yale psychologist Robert Sternberg makes a similar argument that knowledge must be applied in order for wisdom to show up, but reminds us that this is not just about self-interest: “Wisdom is involved when practical intelligence is applied to maximizing not just one’s own or someone else’s self-interest, but rather a balance of various self-interests (intrapersonal) with the interests of others (interpersonal) and of other aspects of the context in which one lives (extrapersonal), such as one’s city or country or environment or even God.”³

Knowledge itself isn’t enough. We probably all know relational experts who struggle in their own intimate relationships. Perhaps they are pastors or counselors or psychologists with a vast amount of knowledge on how we should relate to others, but they struggle with practical ways of applying their knowledge in maintaining close, lasting relationships. Wisdom requires both knowledge and pragmatic application of that knowledge, and it extends beyond our self and into the realm of caring about others.

I recognize that these definitions of wisdom may not fully satisfy Christians, philosophers, or those who are generally suspicious of scientists, but let’s stay here for a while before moving to a more nuanced Christian understanding of wisdom.

Because science involves measurable criteria, it is not enough to simply define wisdom as expert-level knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life. We need something more specific and measurable. Scholars at the Berlin Wisdom Project articulated and tested five criteria that fit within their definition: factual knowledge, procedural knowledge, life-span contextualism, values relativism, and managing uncertainty.⁴ The first two—factual and procedural

knowledge—are considered basic criteria in that they reflect the knowledge necessary for wisdom, but they are not sufficient in themselves. The remaining three criteria are about the pragmatic application of knowledge to a particular situation.

These five criteria can be illustrated with a silly story, though the silliness won't be clear until the story is done. Many years ago our pet cat, Frisky, ran away when we agreed to dog-sit for a few days. Frisky "belonged" to my daughter Sarah, though it seems reasonable to question whether a cat can actually belong to anyone. We assumed Frisky was just hanging out in the woods around our house and that he would return at the conclusion of our three-day dog-sitting stint, but he didn't. Ten days passed, and then one day after work Lisa told me that she saw Frisky lying dead on the side of the road on her way home from graduate school.

The first part of wisdom is *factual knowledge*. When we didn't know Frisky's whereabouts, we didn't have many options for moving forward in wisdom. But now, with Lisa's revelation, we had factual knowledge, and we needed to figure out how to be wise. Our daughter's beloved cat was dead, and she didn't know.

The next part of wisdom is *procedural knowledge*. When X happens, Y is the best thing to do. Procedure knowledge comes with time and experience. Because I was raised on a farm where we would have never considered having an indoor pet, I was quite uninformed about procedural knowledge when it comes to dead pets. Lisa, who was raised with one or more dogs in her home, knew much more in this regard. She helped me understand that the best thing to do when one's pet dies on the road is to bring it home and bury it. So on that rainy autumn evening, after our three daughters were in bed, Lisa and I went and found Frisky, put his body in a cardboard box, dug a hole under a big Douglas fir tree, and buried him. I'm sure some would say the best procedural knowledge would be to show Sarah Frisky's dead body and let her hold him once more before the burial, though that wouldn't have worked out well in this case because Frisky wasn't very presentable

or even clearly recognizable due to the work of maggots—a point that becomes relevant later on.

Sarah was in early elementary school at the time and was (and always has been) a sensitive soul who sees pain in others and experiences her own pain deeply. We knew that telling her about Frisky would affect her profoundly. We also knew that this would not be the last time she experienced loss and pain. Part of wisdom is *life-span contextualism*—recognizing that each of us is living out a story with a past, present, and future. We had no idea at the time that Sarah would someday confront the unwanted failure of a nine-year marriage, with two young children at home. All we knew was that Frisky’s death would be a huge loss and that more losses lay ahead. We had to tell her.

The fourth criterion for wisdom is *values relativism*. This is not a sloppy pluralism, but rather the notion that most tough decisions involve competing values. In this case, we would have loved to shield Sarah from pain, which is an honorable value for parents to hold. Parents often endure hardships for the sake of their children. At the same time, we value honesty and see the importance of open, candid conversation with our children. These values competed, but Lisa and I knew that it was best to let Sarah know what happened to Frisky and to allow Sarah the pain of her grief. We flanked either side of her bed as we told her the story, and then each of us held her hand or touched her shoulder as she sobbed and writhed in pain.

The final criterion is *managing uncertainty*. Wisdom requires us to stop short of answers sometimes and to be willing to confront the paradoxes, mysteries, and unknown dimensions of living. Sarah certainly faced her share of uncertainty in the days that followed, and it turns out that Lisa and I did too.

Several days after the burial, Lisa and I were playing cards with some friends in the living room when our youngest daughter, Megan Anna, bounded into the room and pronounced, “Mom, Dad, Frisky’s back!” We assured her that Frisky was dead and that he couldn’t come back, but at her repeated insistence we

SIDEBAR 1.1

Scientific Wisdom in Action

Here is a scenario that comes from wisdom science: a fourteen-year-old girl wants to get married. What would you think and say?

It is probably tempting to blurt out a loud “NO!” But hold on a minute. Let’s consider this based on the five wisdom criteria coming from the Berlin Wisdom Project.

Factual Knowledge

We’ll want to know something about the girl. Does she live in contemporary times? What is her cultural background? If she is a girl from Nazareth who lived a couple thousand years ago, we may have a different perspective than if she is a girl from Boston in the twenty-first century.

Procedural Knowledge

What sort of goals does this girl have in wanting to get married? How much time does she have to make the decision? Does she live in a time and place where marriage is more about function or more about romance, and if about romance, does she love the person she is considering marrying? Does she have wise mentors in her life that will help her make this decision, or is she in a position of deciding by herself?

Life-Span Contextualism

Is there a reason she is trying to escape her current living situation, such as an abusive home or living in poverty? Would marriage be likely to help her overcome difficult life circumstances, or would it simply add more difficulty?

Values Relativism

What are her priorities in marriage? How do her personal priorities mesh with the larger social good? What sort of universal values related to the good of self, others, and society should be considered?

Managing Uncertainty

To what extent is the girl prepared to deal with the uncertainty of her future? To what extent are you as an advice giver prepared to do the same? How can she prepare for an uncertain future even as she makes a decision about whether to marry?

went out to the back porch and, sure enough, there was Frisky, skinnier than usual, but definitely Frisky. Apparently we buried someone else's dead cat.

The happy conclusion is why I call this a silly story, but life consists of hundreds of these stories—some of them with happy endings and some without. Here, in the midst of life's stories, we strive to find expert-level knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life as we grow toward wisdom.

More remains to be discussed about the science of wisdom, but first it is worth considering what Christianity has to say about the topic. If we are to redeem wisdom, it will involve both appreciating the science of wisdom and considering how faith enriches our understanding of it.

Moving toward a Christian View of Wisdom

After Paul convinced me there is a science of wisdom, we started planning his dissertation, a task that was assisted by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. Some colleagues and I had just been granted funds to promote positive psychology in the church, including funding for five doctoral dissertations. Paul and I brainstormed about an ideal local church for his project, then set up a meeting with several church leaders at a nearby underground restaurant. Subterra Restaurant isn't a secret-society sort of eatery, but it is literally underground. It happens to be one of the best places for group conversation and good food in our little town of Newberg, Oregon.

After some initial conversation, Paul tossed out the definition of wisdom I have just been describing: "Wisdom is expert-level knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life." His words were met with silence that seemed difficult to interpret. Then the questions started coming. Should wisdom be so tightly linked to knowledge? Is experience being discounted here? Can wisdom be adequately defined in such nonrelational terms? What about

encounter with the living God? We were in for a lively conversation, and an important one.

Gregg Koskela, the lead pastor of Newberg Friends Church, offered another perspective on wisdom—one deeply embedded in a Christian worldview: “Wisdom comes from the history of regular individual and corporate practices that lead to making decisions in line with the character of Christ.” Thus understood, wisdom is relational, spiritual, and developed over years of practice. It’s reminiscent of that oft-repeated notion in Scripture that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

Note that the scientific definition that Paul and I offered is not mutually exclusive with Gregg’s faith-based description of wisdom. Gregg’s words speak to how wisdom is developed, whereas our scientific definition describes the outcome of wisdom. Science and faith can work together here, and both can enrich our understanding of wisdom.

Paul and I ventured forward with his wisdom project in the church that Gregg pastored. I’ll tell you about our results later, but first I should mention something we learned from MaryKate Morse, a professor at George Fox Seminary and a member of Paul’s dissertation committee. Morse’s PhD in organizational leadership involved writing her dissertation on wisdom, so it seemed a natural choice to have her on the committee. In the process of reviewing Paul’s dissertation proposal, she informed us of a distinction that theologians make between *conventional* and *critical* wisdom. Paul has a master’s degree in theology, so he was somewhat familiar with this. I love theology, but because I am not formally trained, I had never heard of this distinction between conventional and critical wisdom. Paul and I each read Morse’s very long (and very good) dissertation and learned a great deal in the process.

Conventional wisdom is best viewed as commonsense guidelines for living the good life. In many ways it is quite similar to the scientific views of wisdom discussed earlier in this chapter—expert knowledge in the fundamental pragmatics of life. If you

SIDEBAR 1.2

The Surprising Wisdom of Jesus

Jesus didn't offer wisdom from a throne, as King Solomon did in the Old Testament. Instead, the wisdom of Jesus reveals the unexpected, mysterious ways of God's relentless love (1 Cor. 2:7). Rather than coming as a triumphant ruler, Jesus—God incarnate—came as a baby born in a smelly barn.

This is the surprising Jesus who changed the world forever. People expected a politically powerful Messiah, and they got a carpenter and an itinerant minister who lived in the lowliest of conditions and ultimately humbled himself to the point of death by crucifixion (Phil. 2:5–11).

Throughout the New Testament we see the surprising wisdom of Jesus as he confronts prevailing assumptions. It's a costly wisdom, stirring up traditional assumptions and causing dissension among the religious leaders of the day. And when this controversial sort of wisdom led to its natural conclusion and the leaders of the day came to arrest Jesus in the garden, then Jesus healed his accuser's ear after Peter chopped it off.

Borrowing from Henri Nouwen's (2007) book title, here's to "the selfless way of Christ: downward mobility and the spiritual life."*

Healing on the Sabbath

"One Sabbath day as Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, he saw a woman who had been crippled by an evil spirit. She had been bent double for eighteen years and was unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Dear woman, you are healed of your sickness!' Then he touched her, and instantly she could stand straight. How she praised God!

"But the leader in charge of the synagogue . . ." (Luke 13:10–14)

read through the Old Testament proverbs, you are mostly reading conventional wisdom.

But we all know that conventional wisdom must sometimes be questioned and reconsidered. Jesus was a radical insofar as he questioned a number of the religious rules of his day. The devout religious leaders had their systems of wisdom in place, and Jesus challenged many of them, even to the point of being labeled a

Teaching the Paradoxes

“What blessings await you when people hate you and exclude you and mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man. When that happens, be happy! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, their ancestors treated the ancient prophets that same way.” (Luke 6:22–23)

Hanging Out with Sinners

“Later, Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. (There were many people of this kind among Jesus’ followers.) But when the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw him eating with tax collectors and other sinners, they asked his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with such scum?’

“When Jesus heard this, he told them, ‘Healthy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do.’” (Mark 2:15–17)

Verging on Sacrilege

“So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.” (Matt. 5:23–24)

I love being surprised by Jesus. His is a wisdom that turns things upside down in order to remind us how to love God and neighbor, and how deeply God loves us.

*Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life* (London: Orbis, 2007).

blasphemer and sentenced to death. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus repeated, “You have heard it said . . . but I say to you.” He rocked the boat. Based on Gospel accounts, it appears that Jesus did more healing on the Sabbath than any other day. I wonder why. Could one of his reasons have been that he wanted people to rethink the prevailing wisdom of the day—a calcified sort of wisdom that had led to rigid and oppressive rules? Maybe

Jesus deliberately mixes up people's understanding of virtuous living.

A second kind of wisdom—critical wisdom—is also found in the Bible, especially in Ecclesiastes, Job, and the life of Jesus. Critical wisdom is often countercultural, always discerning, and sometimes mysterious. Folks with critical wisdom think outside the box, but not just for the sake of being unconventional; they think differently because of a profound commitment to justice and goodness. It's difficult to capture this sort of wisdom with words, and it certainly can't be contained in simple proverbs about how to live the good life.

Consider the wisdom poem in Job 28, where Job ponders the deep mysteries of wisdom, so elusive and intangible.

“But do people know where to find wisdom?
 Where can they find understanding?
 It is hidden from the eyes of all humanity.
 Even the sharp-eyed birds in the sky cannot
 discover it.
 Destruction and Death say,
 ‘We’ve heard only rumors of where wisdom
 can be found.’

“God alone understands the way to wisdom;
 he knows where it can be found,
 for he looks throughout the whole earth
 and sees everything under the heavens.
 He decided how hard the winds should blow
 and how much rain should fall.
 He made the laws for the rain
 and laid out a path for the lightning.
 Then he saw wisdom and evaluated it.
 He set it in place and examined it thoroughly.
 And this is what he says to all humanity:
 ‘The fear of the Lord is true wisdom;
 to forsake evil is real understanding.’”

Job 28:20–28