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# Wisdom, Chapter 1 of The Science of Virtue: Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church

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# 1

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## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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\*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

Ponder the paradoxical wisdom in the book of Ecclesiastes, where the author begins with the shocking and rather dismal assertion that “everything is meaningless” (1:2), then follows with twelve chapters of ironies and uncertainties. Interestingly, the author concludes with the same conclusion as Job: “Fear God and obey his commands” (12:13).

At some risk of heresy, here are some faux Bible verses to illustrate the difference between conventional and critical wisdom. Knowing what we now know about the health effects of antioxidants and the taste of dark chocolate, one might imagine a proverb such as: “Eat dark chocolate, for it is good.” Realistically, we might want to add one clause on the end: “Eat dark chocolate, for it is good. But not too much.” One might even imagine a verse like this in the biblical proverbs, because it reads like common sense, helping us navigate the pragmatics of life. This is conventional wisdom.

But now consider what Jesus might say if he were discussing dark chocolate. I can imagine a statement such as this in the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard the proverb that says, ‘Eat dark chocolate,’ but I say to you it is better to eat no chocolate at all than to eat chocolate that contributes to human oppression.” In this Jesus would be affirming conventional wisdom—it’s still good to eat dark chocolate for health-related reasons and to celebrate the goodness of life—but at the same time Jesus would push against the cultural mindlessness of the day, being profoundly aware of and deeply troubled by the human atrocities committed in the name of supplying cheap chocolate to industrialized countries.<sup>5</sup>

The prophet Isaiah spoke of the incisive wisdom of Jesus hundreds of years before he showed up in swaddling clothes, and though today’s chocolate trade is not mentioned, it is certainly implicated.

And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—  
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and might,  
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

He will delight in obeying the LORD.  
 He will not judge by appearance  
 nor make a decision based on hearsay.  
 He will give justice to the poor  
 and make fair decisions for the exploited.  
 The earth will shake at the force of his word,  
 and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked.  
 He will wear righteousness like a belt  
 and truth like an undergarment.

Isa. 11:2–5

Jesus, the perfect image of God, is the master of critical wisdom. He didn't come to abolish conventional wisdom but to enliven it, to flesh out the greatest commandments of loving God and loving neighbor as self, to remind us of life's deep mystery, to call us back to the fear and awe of God when we so easily settle for a religion composed of cognitive beliefs and behavioral lists that make us feel holier than others.

If we are to become wise, we need to be willing to stand against social tides, but not for the sake of being nonconformists or to be noticed for being countercultural. This is about finding the moral courage to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Mic. 6:8) even when it means questioning the prevailing practices of the day, such as buying cheap chocolate.

### Wisdom's *Telos*

One example of critical wisdom can be found in considering the idea of *telos* in an age when the concept has been largely lost. *Telos*, a Greek word, refers to an end purpose or goal, the full picture of our moral and physical capacities, intentions, and capability. If we could imagine a fully whole human living a thriving, abundant life, then we would be picturing something like *telos*. We are inclined to equate full functioning with popular opinion, notoriety, or financial success, but this is not adequate to understand *telos*.

It's more about finding the natural and purposeful end of what it means to be fully human. An acorn grows into a majestic oak tree and finds its telos, and a human may grow into a fully functioning person, revealing what humans are for. Christians see Jesus as the perfect exemplar of telos.

Telos is so difficult to keep in focus amidst a consumerist society. In my early career I criticized older friends who seemed to think and talk excessively about the stock market. It seemed trite compared to my desire to change the world. But now, as my own retirement looms and I have abandoned hope of changing the world overly much, I find myself eyeing 401(k) balances and stock market growth, wondering what sort of financial security lies ahead. The humbling truth is that I am prone to do what people in our day do—look to money as my source of security in the future and accomplishment in life. Then I remember the words of James: “Look here, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.’ How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone” (James 4:13–14). What if financial growth receded into the background and I focused instead on telos growth for whatever time I have left? I wonder what it would be like to grow 6 percent each year toward the fully alive, abundant living that Jesus calls me to.

Virtue requires a vision of what is possible, replete with a deep understanding of our purposes for living, and then movement toward that telos. Maybe we should put this on our quarterly reports, rather than what we audaciously call “net worth.”

In a world that looks to money for net worth, we assume wisdom is found in business acumen, shrewdness, being competitive when needed, knowing how to get ahead. But wisdom in God's economy looks different. The book of James offers a glimpse of this contrast:

For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there

is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:15–18)

Here is a picture of a fully functioning person—one who loves peace, lives gently, embodies humility, is full of mercy, loves to do good, and refuses to play favorites. This telos helps us to understand a Christian view of wisdom.

### Scientific and Christian Wisdom, Side by Side

The purpose of this book, and of much of my career, is to propose a sort of partnership between science and the church. Science can inform us regarding wisdom, but it has its limits. Christianity plumbs the depth of wisdom, but we can still benefit from science to keep faith humble.

First, consider a limitation of science and why Christian faith can help. Science needs parsimony. We scientists take complicated constructs and scrub them down so they can be pristine and measurable. Sadly, in the process we sometimes change the very construct we set out to study in the first place. If we take a construct as complex as wisdom and brush off all the religious and spiritual “contaminants” so that we can measure it effectively with people who may or may not be religious, might we be left with something that is no longer recognizable as wisdom within a faith community? I fear we may have done this with forgiveness also, but I’ll save that for a later chapter. Science needs faith in order to remind us why these constructs we study have meaning and importance and to keep their rich nuance in perspective. Nowhere in the scientific literature do I find mention of conventional and critical wisdom, yet it seems so important for a full-bodied understanding of the construct.

But faith alone has its limits also. So much about wisdom is discovered in Scripture and through centuries of Christian thought, but some of it needs to be tested so that we're not merely accepting what we have been taught without critical appraisal. Just as the apostle Paul suggested that prophecies ought to be tested and sifted for the good (1 Thess. 5:21), so the teachings of the church will be better if they hold up under scrutiny. For example, if we ask ten churchgoing Christians about the relationship between age and wisdom, we will probably hear from nine or all ten of them that wisdom increases with age. This is not explicitly taught in the Bible, but has become part of our wisdom tradition—we assume it grows with life experience. It turns out that wisdom doesn't change as much as we think over the life span. Studies in Japan<sup>6</sup> and Germany<sup>7</sup> show wisdom staying almost constant after the age of thirty. In the United States, wisdom continues growing throughout adulthood, but it's not because we're wiser than folks in Japan or Germany. To the contrary, the average thirty-year-old in Japan is already as wise as the average fifty-five-year-old in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Could it be that wisdom comes faster in a culture that reveres those who are older? In the United States we tend to cherish youth over aging, and perhaps one cost of this is youthful folly.

The surprising finding that wisdom doesn't increase much with adult aging, at least among samples of Germans and Japanese, is coupled with a finding that it increases dramatically between the ages of thirteen and twenty-five. In psychology we often talk about critical developmental windows. These windows are particular times in life when monumental changes take place. Most children learn to walk in their second year of life. They also begin speaking words around the same time. A few years later they engage in monumental shifts in cognitive development—they start realizing that the events of life are not fully contained in and constrained by their personal perceptions. From the limited research available, it appears that ages thirteen to twenty-five represent a sort of critical window for the development of wisdom.

## Wisdom Goes to Church

In light of this critical window for wisdom development, my doctoral student Paul set out to study whether a church-based mentoring program would promote wisdom among young adults, ages eighteen to twenty-five. We started by developing a curriculum for eight small-group mentoring meetings. To be an effective partnership, this had to be a collaborative process, involving both Paul and me as social scientists, as well as the church leaders.

Remember Pastor Gregg's description of wisdom from our lunch meeting? *Wisdom comes from the history of regular individual and corporate practices that lead to making decisions in line with the character of Christ.* Gregg later developed this further by suggesting three steps toward wisdom.

1. Experiencing God through a variety of spiritual practices (Scripture, prayer, silence)
2. Considering one's own experience in the context of trusting relationships with others who share common core values (small-group conversation with leaders and peers)
3. Understanding, adapting, and appropriating the values and practices that have become a vital part of a particular Christian community (discerning what wisdom looks like in this situation)

Paul and I started with Gregg's understanding of wisdom, coupled it with the theological notion of critical wisdom discussed earlier, and developed the first draft of a wisdom-mentoring curriculum. We then sought the input of a young adult seminary graduate, who helped us refine and shape it. Then Gregg gave suggestions and developed the wisdom practices to be done between meetings. By the time the curriculum was finished, we all felt confident that something special would happen in these wisdom-mentoring groups.

Each of the sessions had a similar format. First, we started with a brief devotional thought from a particular passage of Scripture.

Next, we posed a challenging life situation, one that might be common for young adults. For example:

Your friend has been diagnosed with a serious form of cancer that will require difficult treatment with an unknown outcome. You want to remain hopeful and encouraging to your friend, but inwardly you are worried and sad. Your friend mentions that the cancer has been difficult for her faith. She wonders how a loving and powerful God could allow such a thing. You've been pondering this too, and aren't sure how to respond to your friend's questions about faith.

After some brief group discussion, the group entered into a time of meditation and reflection. They pondered other scriptures, sat in silence, respectfully listened to God and one another, and didn't rush to fix the problem. Then the participants discussed what they learned about wisdom as they considered this difficult life situation alongside scriptures and group discussion. The final question each week went something like this: "How does today's conversation help you in relation to other life situations you are facing?" They were then assigned several wisdom practices to complete before the next group meeting.

One of the most important parts was selecting wise mentors. Gregg handled this task—and did so masterfully. The women and men he selected as wisdom mentors were gentle, godly, peace-filled followers of Jesus. Paul and I met with them several times for training, planning, and debriefing, and each time I felt enriched in their presence.

So far this sounds just like ministry, but remember the purpose was to marry science and ministry, so we did what social scientists do: we found a comparison group, selected a series of measures to administer before and after the wisdom-mentoring program, and then interviewed participants several weeks after the conclusion of the groups to get their impressions.

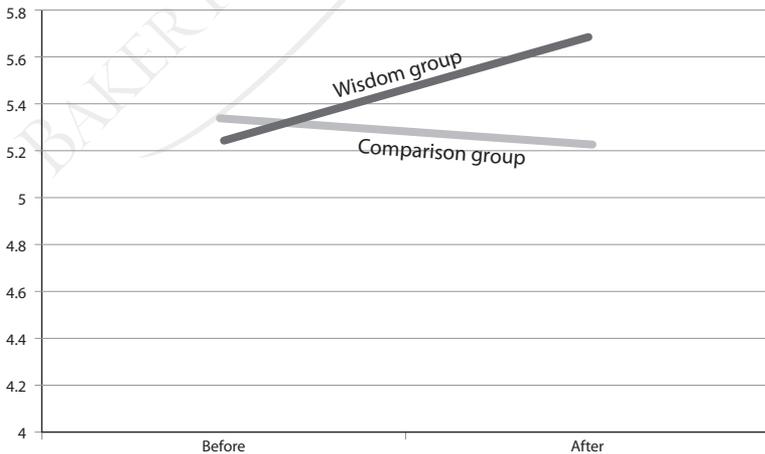
Our comparison group consisted of undergraduate students of approximately the same age living in the same community where

the wisdom mentoring occurred. This worked fairly well because most of the wisdom-group members were also university students. We gave a number of self-report scales at the beginning and end of the study and also asked the mentors for some reflection on each of the group members.

The mentoring program lasted for twelve weeks, with six meetings on an every-other-week basis. Ideally, we would have had longer for this mentoring—it's hard to envision much growth in wisdom occurring over six meetings. Still, we found some intriguing differences between the wisdom group and the comparison group.

We observed an overall increase in life satisfaction among the wisdom group, but not among the comparison group (see figure 1.1).<sup>9</sup> This may mean that wisdom mentoring increases life satisfaction, or it could be that any sort of small-group meeting over twelve weeks is likely to increase one's satisfaction with life. But still, there is something particular about the group that promoted

Figure 1.1  
**Life Satisfaction**

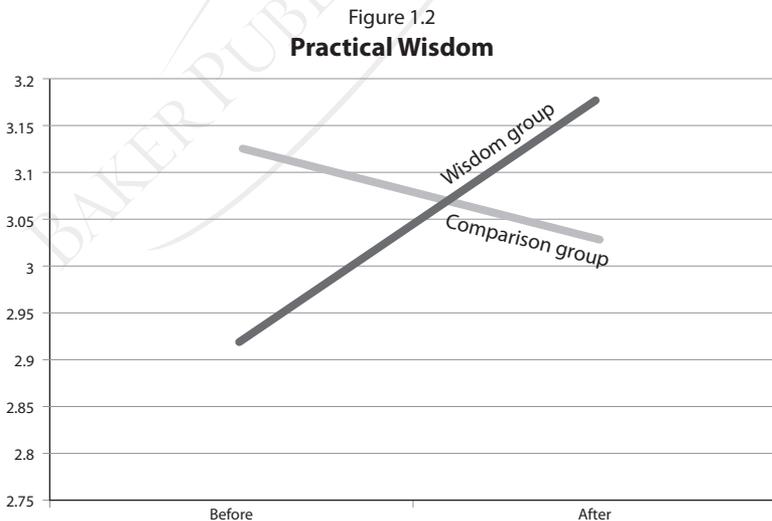


Satisfaction with life was measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale—5. The graph shows a significant interaction effect, with participants in the wisdom group increasing more than those in the comparison group. See Ed Diener et al., "The Satisfaction with Life Scale," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 49 (1985): 71–75.

wisdom. Note that scores for wisdom on the Practical Wisdom Subscale of the Wise Thinking and Acting Questionnaire increased for the wisdom-mentoring group over time, but not for the comparison group (figure 1.2).<sup>10</sup>

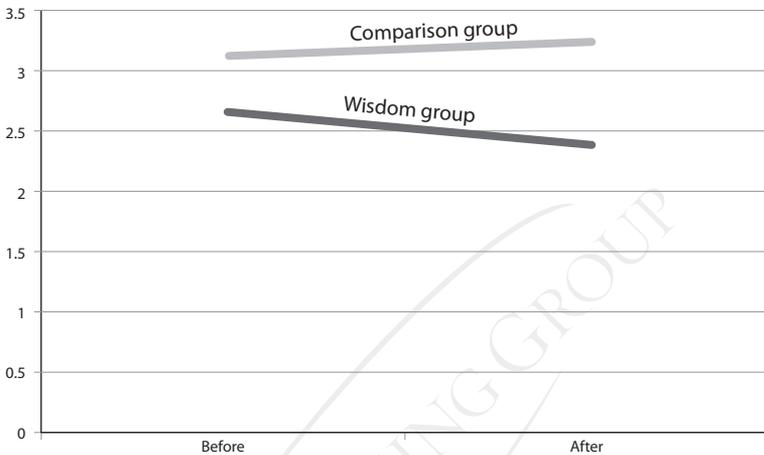
Those in the wisdom group reported more daily spiritual awareness than those in the comparison group, both before and after the wisdom mentoring occurred (figure 1.3).<sup>11</sup> Also, the wisdom group showed a statistical trend toward increasing more than the comparison group in daily spiritual experiences.

Perhaps the most important finding relates to a construct called “postformal thought.” This is the ability to think about complex issues in flexible ways. Rather than coming to simple, rule-bound conclusions, postformal thought requires nuance and understanding of situational complexity. The critical wisdom of Jesus, discussed earlier, is an excellent example of postformal thinking. Similarly, the example of a fourteen-year-old girl who wants to



Practical wisdom was measured with the Practical Wisdom Subscale of the Wise Thinking and Acting Questionnaire. The graph shows a significant interaction effect, with participants in the wisdom group increasing more than those in the comparison group. For details, see Katherine J. Bangen, Thomas W. Meeks, and Dilip V. Jeste, “Defining and Assessing Wisdom: A Review of the Literature,” *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 21 (2013): 1254–66.

Figure 1.3  
**Daily Spiritual Experiences**



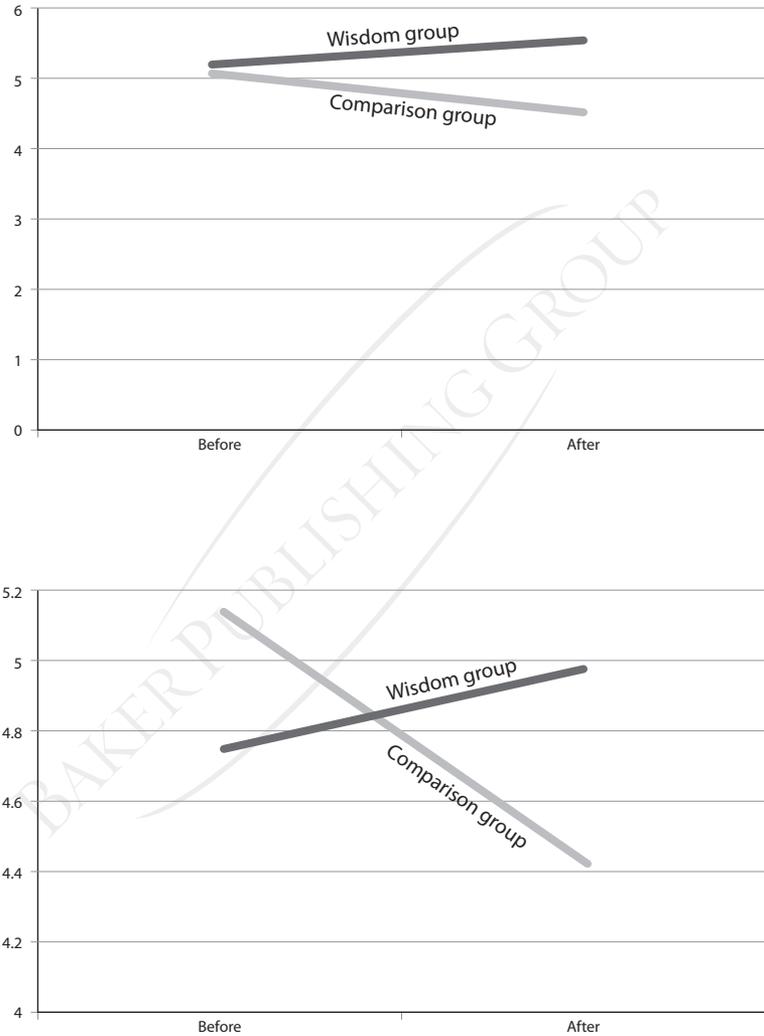
Daily spiritual experiences were measured with the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale. Lower scores reflect more awareness of spiritual experiences. The wisdom group reported more spiritual experiences than the comparison group both before and after the wisdom cohorts, and the wisdom group also showed a trend toward increasing more in spiritual experiences than those in the comparison group. See Lynn G. Underwood and Jeanne A. Teresi, "The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Development, Theoretical Description, Reliability, Exploratory Factor Analysis, and Preliminary Construct Validity Using Health-Related Data," *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 24 (2002): 22–33.

get married (see sidebar 1.1, on page 19) calls for complex postformal thinking rather than an immediate and reflexive "No!" Two of the three subscales on our postformal thought measure showed meaningful changes over the course of wisdom mentoring (see figure 1.4).<sup>12</sup> These young adults learned to think in more complex, nuanced ways.

We also interviewed participants several weeks after the conclusion of the wisdom mentoring. Many participants spoke of how they learned to confront the complexity of life situations as they grew in wisdom. They emphasized their opportunities to observe wisdom in their mentors and practice it in their groups. One young woman put it this way:

What I really like about our wisdom study is that we didn't just sit down and try to hash out, here's a definition of what wisdom is.

Figure 1.4  
**Postformal Thinking**



The top graph displays the ability to see underlying complexity in life situations. The bottom graph displays the ability to recognize that multiple "logics" may be applicable in a complex problem. Both were measured with the Complex Postformal Thought Questionnaire. The wisdom group reported increases as compared to declines in the comparison group. See Kelly B. Cartwright et al., "Reliability and Validity of the Complex Postformal Thought Questionnaire: Assessing Adults' Cognitive Development," *Journal of Adult Development* 16 (2009): 183–89.

It was more like . . . experiencing it. . . . Being a part of the group was experiencing it, because I think one thing I learned about wisdom is that it's something that's acquired through really studying God's Word and also hearing people. . . . So I think it's sort of that combination of what God's Word shows and also the Holy Spirit working and how he can work in other believers. So I think that was kind of what I came away with, was I just felt really encouraged by hearing . . . other people's perspectives and realizing that wisdom . . . doesn't have to be this overwhelming [thing]. . . . It was more like getting a chance to sit down and contemplate and have good conversations that I thought really helped me understand more.

As a social scientist, I was encouraged by this study in all sorts of ways, and it makes me want to study wisdom more in the years ahead. As a Christian, I was blessed by it deeply. Wisdom mentoring in the church works, and we can show at least some of its effects through scientific inquiry. This partnership between science and the church is exactly the sort of work that promotes meaningful dialogue about virtue in today's society.

### **Redeeming Wisdom**

As outlined in the introduction, the purpose of this book is to redeem virtue in four ways: by helping Christians understand positive psychology, by seeing how Christian thought can change positive psychology for the better, by encouraging the church to embrace the science of positive psychology, and by considering implications for Christian counseling. Let's consider each of these.

#### *Learning from Positive Psychology*

I am fascinated by the science of wisdom, and I hope this chapter may generate curiosity among others as well. One of the reasons I find it interesting as an educator is that the task of education has changed drastically over my career. We used to emphasize knowledge, and now we teach wisdom. Or at least we try to.

When I studied for my doctoral degree at Vanderbilt University in the 1980s, I spent hundreds of hours in the university library, reading and memorizing information so that I could pass my classes in psychology and biochemistry (I minored in biochemistry at the medical school while completing my doctoral work in the psychology department). Much of my time was spent inputting information into my cortex through rote memory, rehearsal, and studying for exams. A more current version of that same information is now accessible to students in ten seconds if they move their thumbs quickly enough on their iPhone keypads. Just for fun, I computed the amount of information in the Vanderbilt library when I studied there, and it turned out that all the information in an impressive university research library could now be fully contained on a hard drive that is available for \$99 on Amazon.com.

I recently began a chapel talk on wisdom at LeTourneau University by showing the students a picture of verticillium wilt—a problem that Lisa and I had in our tomato patch a few years ago. I challenged them to get out their phones and see how long it might take to discover whether verticillium wilt is caused by bacteria, fungus, insects, or lack of water. If I were researching a question like this back in the 1980s, it would require me to take a picture, run the roll of film to my local pharmacy for processing, pick up the pictures a few days later, then spend the day in the library looking through reference books on plant diseases. If I were fortunate enough to find the picture and diagnose the disease, I could then find additional books to figure out what sort of problem it is and how it is best treated. Granted, LeTourneau students are smart, and many are studying engineering, but within thirty-two seconds the students properly diagnosed verticillium wilt as a fungus, texted their answer to an online polling site, and watched their responses displayed on the chapel screen. The goal of education today is not inputting lots of information into a brain, as it was in my day, but properly discerning what information is good and valuable and what is not. Today we are bombarded with information, but some statements are more credible than others. How do we know the

difference? Education today is more about wisdom and less about knowledge. Yet wisdom is as old as human history. It's fascinating to sit at the intersection of the very old and the very new and see what we can learn.

I also find wisdom fascinating as a psychologist, perhaps because the science flatters me. In several studies coming out of Germany, wisdom seems to be quite high among psychologists. The researchers considered that this might be because psychologists run the studies and somehow introduce a bias into how wisdom is measured. But when they found a group of nonpsychologists, nominated by others as exemplars of wisdom, the psychologists still ended up doing as well as the wisdom exemplars.<sup>13</sup> I'm not sure what makes it so—perhaps sitting with people in the most complex life situations year after year—but for some reason people in my profession appear to be quite wise. That makes me curious. Why would such a thing be? And to what extent are we drawing on the wisdom of counselors and psychologists in our church communities?

### *What Can Christian Thought Offer the Study of Wisdom?*

In addition to finding the science of wisdom intriguing, I also find it frustrating. When positive psychologists started studying virtues a couple decades ago, they went to the religion and spirituality literature to identify the virtues and character strengths, and yet most social scientists have simply ignored what the major world religions have to teach us about those same virtues.

The scientific work on wisdom is helpful and fascinating, but the most revolutionary idea about wisdom that I have encountered is the theological distinction between conventional and critical wisdom. This distinction became the core of our church-based wisdom-mentoring program. More accurately, Jesus—history's greatest exemplar of critical wisdom—became the focal point for these groups. In Jesus we see one who shows incredible kindness and warmth to the disadvantaged even as he expresses outrage

at the injustices of calcified religion. In what may be the pivotal verse of the Bible, John describes Jesus as full of truth and grace (John 1:14). He is incredibly loving, forgiving, and merciful, and he stands firm against injustice, treachery, greed, and oppression. Being like Jesus, embodying critical wisdom, is our telos.

### *The Church Can Benefit from the Science of Wisdom*

Perhaps the most exciting part of Paul's dissertation is that it served the church well. Young adults learned from wisdom mentors, and they became more like Jesus in the process. The church also modeled the sort of rich dialogue with science that helps keep faith communities relevant in an age when science is revered, probably too much.

At the final meeting with our wisdom mentors one of the questions that blessed me most was one put to us by a cohort leader, who also happened to be the administrative pastor: Were they free, the leader asked, to continue using the curriculum now that the study was done? What a blessing to see this open partnership between science and the church, one that leads to scholarly articles and books at the same time as contributing to the health of young Christian adults. Everyone wins. Everyone strains toward growing in wisdom.

### *Wisdom in Christian Counseling*

Though we didn't consider the mentoring groups in Paul's study to be counseling, it occurs to me that counseling clients come for help because they are facing the same sort of quandaries in life that we posed to our mentoring groups. People come for help because they face difficult circumstances and want a companion to join them through the dark valley. They come seeking wisdom, embodied in the person of the counselor.

We dispense a good deal of conventional wisdom in counseling, and in Christian counseling this is shaped by Christian thought. In most counseling paradigms this is not done by the counselor

teaching or directly informing the client, but more by guided exploration as the client explores her or his feelings, beliefs, assumptions, behaviors, and priorities. Consider how the counselor is guiding the client toward conventional wisdom in the following hypothetical scenario.

CLIENT: I'm drowning in anxiety about all this. All she tells me is that she doesn't know if she loves me anymore, but I want to know what that means for our future. Is she leaving or is she staying? And every time I ask, she just turns and walks away, as if I've brought up some taboo topic.

COUNSELOR: And then when she walks away, your anxiety just goes wild.

CLIENT: That's exactly right. I mean, don't I have a right to know? Eighteen years ago my wife stood before God and two hundred people and promised me she would stay forever. What did that even mean to her?

COUNSELOR: [Pause.] And you're feeling all the weight of that, that sense that she promised something to God, to your friends and family, and to you, and now she may default on that promise.

CLIENT: [Long pause; tears of sadness.]

COUNSELOR: You talk about your anxiety, but I also hear a lot of emotion directed toward your wife. [Here the counselor is trying to help the client see his other emotions, besides anxiety for the future.]

CLIENT: What gives her the right to do this?

COUNSELOR: That's a big question, and an important one. When you ask that, "What gives her the right to do this?" what do you notice in yourself? [The counselor is turning the focus back to the client.]

CLIENT: It's terrible. I just get all tied up in knots. I can't think or do my job well or even sustain a meaningful conversation. It just overwhelms me. I feel this overwhelming urge to text her or call her and just force her to tell me what's going to happen. It's like she has all the control, and I have none.

COUNSELOR: I want to be sure I have this right. You have these feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the future, then you start thinking these thoughts about the injustice of it all—what gives her the right? Then the feelings get almost out of control until you find a way to contact her. So you reach out to her, hoping for some reassurance.

CLIENT: Right. But I don't get any reassurance. Just more rejection.

COUNSELOR: So this isn't working very well for you.

The conventional wisdom here is related to what counselors call the pursuer-distancer dynamic in troubled relationships. As one person feels increasingly insecure, the tendency is to pursue the other. But in this case the client's wife already feels smothered, so she chooses to distance herself further from her husband, the pursuer. On and on the cycle goes, and both partners feel increasingly distressed and troubled. Offering the client insight into this cycle can be helpful in adjusting the relationship dynamics, and if his spouse is motivated to participate in counseling, it can be especially beneficial to have both partners aware of the cycle.

There is also a place for critical wisdom in Christian counseling—helping the client think outside the box and try something entirely different. Notice how he avoids his own anxiety by pursuing his spouse more actively. Not only does this not work but it also ends up exacerbating the anxiety he was trying to avoid in the first place. Avoidance strategies in general tend to add to the problem people are trying to avoid. Critical wisdom calls us to a different

way of being, a new paradigm, even if the idea of such a thing seems outrageous at first.

COUNSELOR: So this isn't working very well for you.

CLIENT: No, it's really not.

COUNSELOR: Let me be audacious here. It's pretty clear how you want your wife to be—you want her to love you, to honor her commitments to you and to God, but let's go in a different direction for a moment. This is a defining moment in your life. Who do you want to be?

CLIENT: Huh? I don't know what you mean.

COUNSELOR: Just stand back and observe for a moment. There's a couple: the wife doesn't know what she wants, and the husband is terrified of losing her. How do you want him to act? Who do you want him to be?

CLIENT: [Pause.] Loving.

COUNSELOR: Say more.

CLIENT: I want him to stand by his wife, even if she refuses to do that for him. I want him to honor his promise to God even if she doesn't. I want him to find hope and maybe even forgiveness someday.

COUNSELOR: And as you say that, I see a calmer expression on your face, as if the anxiety monster steps back a bit when you focus on the person you want to be, the person you are becoming.

CLIENT: Yes, it does. I like how you put that, and it feels good to have the monster go away for a while.

If conventional wisdom helps the client see the pursuer-distancer dynamic in his marriage, critical wisdom helps him step outside to try something radically different. Pursuing his spouse is mostly a

way to avoid anxiety, but it ends up adding to anxiety. In contrast, imagining the virtuous person he wants to be, the person he is becoming, has a calming and centering effect on him.

Life is filled with so many complexities, ranging from the trivial, such as playing football too long at an advanced age, to the tragic, such as the dissolution of a marriage or struggling with a life-threatening illness. In all the complexities we yearn for the virtue of wisdom to find our way forward, to find God amidst the silence of uncertainty, and to press toward becoming the full, flourishing, person God calls us to be.

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