**“My son, if you will receive my words and treasure my commandments within you, make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding.” *—Proverbs 2:1–6* (NASB)**

Jonathan Edwards was just an eighteen-year-old in 1722. It was in the fall of that year that he began compiling the seventy “resolutions” that would serve as the guiding principles by which he would order his life. He began with a prefatory comment: “Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God’s help, I do humbly entreat him by his grace to enable me to keep these resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to his will for Christ’s sake.” He then listed his first resolution:

Resolved:  I will do whatever I think will be most to God’s glory; and my own good, profit and pleasure, for as long as I live. I will do all these things without any consideration of the time they take. Resolved: to do whatever I understand to be my duty and will provide the most good and benefit to mankind in general. Resolved to do this, whatever difficulties I encounter, and no matter how many I experience or how severe they may be.

He reached number thirty-five on December 18 of that year, and finished the last one on August 17, 1723. Number seventy reads, “Let there be something of benevolence, in all that I speak.” The seventy resolutions cover an array of issues, showing Edwards’s determination to bring every aspect of his life under the lordship of Christ. He recognized the centrality of God’s word in this process, stating in resolution twenty-eight, “Resolved: To study the Scriptures so steadily, and so constantly, and so frequently, that it becomes evident—even obvious—to myself that my knowledge of them has grown.”

Pervasive in Edwards’ list is the concept of **“resolve.”** The term occurs some seventy-eight times—testifying to the emphasis he placed on the mind and its exercise of the will. For Edwards, the unresolved life was not worth living. God has created us for and called us to a much higher plane of living than the mediocrity in which many are content to live. While Edwards certainly did not live up to his lofty ambitions perfectly, they served as the target at which he aimed his life. His enduring reputation as America’s greatest theologian testifies to how well he aimed.

Edwards’ resolve serves as a good illustration of how all Christians ought to structure their minds. Christian thinking can never be accidental or a matter of natural reflex. It can never be empty or neutral. It must be *conformed* to the right standard and *aimed* at the right target. To fulfill its purpose and please God (cf. Matt 22:37–38), the regenerate mind must be trained to operate with increasing correspondence to the divine operator’s manual. That standard, target, or manual is *God’s truth*. That truth must be sought as the most valuable commodity in life.

To seek truth requires **“intellectual virtues”**—habits of mind that foster the acquisition and comprehension of that truth. One writer describes these virtues as follows: “By intellectual virtues I mean qualities such as wisdom, understanding, foresight and love of truth. These are deeply anchored habits of mind that contribute to the success of our many intellectual endeavors and ultimately to our ability to lead excellent lives” (W. Jay Wood, *Becoming Intellectually Virtuous*, 7). Philosophers have observed that these “intellectual virtues” can be grouped according to four main categories: (1) ***acquisition virtues***—those habits of the mind necessary for seeking knowledge; (2) ***application virtues***—those habits necessary for connecting knowledge with practical life; (3) ***cultivation virtues***—those habits necessary for maintaining, refining, and defending knowledge; and (4) ***communication virtues****—*those habits necessary to communicate knowledge correctly to others. The focus of this study is on the first category—*acquisition virtues*. And rather than approaching it from the standpoint of philosophy, one can instead look to the divinely inspired book of Proverbs to see the intellectual virtues God has prescribed to the believer for his pursuit of knowledge. **Five such virtues deserve emphasis.**

**I. Fear**

The first and most essential intellectual virtue for the pursuit of knowledge is *fear*—specifically, the *fear of Yahweh*.

* **Prov 1:7** – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.”
* **Prov 9:10** – “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”
* **Prov 15:33** – “The fear of the Lord is the instruction for wisdom, and before honor *comes* humility.”

This virtue is known as *reverence—*the whole-hearted acknowledgment that Yahweh alone is the source and standard of all truth. Charles Bridges called this virtue **“that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law”** (*An Exposition of Proverbs*, 3–4). This virtue makes the acquisition of knowledge *theological* (it relates the pursuit directly to Yahweh); *exclusive* (it understands knowledge comes from Yahweh alone); and *relational* (it recognizes the success of acquisition to be dependent on a right relationship with Yahweh).

As with every virtue, **contrary to the virtue of *intellectual fear* stands a vice—namely, the vice of *intellectual contempt****.* This contempt is found in the state of mindthat operates in direct rebellion against Yahweh and His revelation, that attempts intellectual independence from Him and His word, or that places greater reverence in some other person than Yahweh Himself (i.e., the fear of man).

“In order to the attaining of all useful knowledge this is most necessary: that we fear God. We are not qualified to profit by the instructions that are given us unless our minds be possessed with a holy reverence of God, and every thought within us be brought into obedience to Him.” *—Matthew Henry*

How is this virtue developed? Cultivating *intellectual fear* requires . . .

* knowing who God is as He has revealed Himself to be;
* recognizing our own identity and status in relation to Him—seeing ourselves according to His light;
* acknowledging that all learning must be God-centered; and
* approaching all learning as an act of worship.

**II. Humility**

A second essential virtue for the pursuit of understanding is *humility—*specifically, a *self-abasement* expressed in the sincere admission that “I don’t know.” It is a recognition of personal and spiritual poverty, a willingness to agree with the sage that “I am stupid” (Prov 30:2). It casts suspicion on personal experience and intuition, it is discontent with what one has already attained, and it sees the source of true knowledge as residing outside of oneself. Furthermore, this virtue is not merely a one-time experience connected to the moment of conversion. It is fundamental to the entire, life-long process of intellectual maturation.

* **Prov 3:7** – “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil.”
* **Prov 11:2 –** “When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom.”
* **Prov 12:15 –** “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.”
* **Prov 14:12 –** “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”
* **Prov 26:12 –** “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”
* **Prov 28:26 –** “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but he who walks wisely will be delivered.”

“It is to be feared that many Christians spend all their lives in too unhumbled and conceited a frame of

mind ever to gain wisdom from God at all. Not for nothing does the Scripture say, ‘*with the lowly* is wisdom’

(Prov 11:2, KJV).” —J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 101

**The antithetical vice to the intellectual virtue of humility is *pride*.** Intellectual pride turns every endeavor of the mind into an instrument for harm and destruction. Such pride is not exclusive to the unbeliever; it commonly manifests itself even among the redeemed (cf. 1 Cor 8:1b – “knowledge puffs up”), including among those seemingly mature in the faith. Observing this reality, Jonathan Edwards wrote,

The first and worst cause of errors that abound in our day and age is spiritual pride. This is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of Christ. It is the chief inlet of smoke from the bottomless pit to darken the mind and mislead the judgment. Pride is the main handle by which he has hold of Christian persons and the chief source of all the mischief that he introduces to clog and hinder a work of God. Spiritual pride is the main spring or at least the main support of all other errors. Until this disease is cured, medicines are applied in vain to heal all other diseases. (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 1:398)

How can pride be mortified and intellectual humility nurtured? It requires . . .

* willingness to acknowledge errors and weaknesses—and therefore the need for change;
* awareness of the lurking danger of “the illusion of mastery” (“I already know that”);
* self-forgetfulness, where knowledge is not sought for making oneself great (1 Cor 8:1b);
* readiness to be a “perpetual pupil”—to reside at the feet of teachers.

**III. Desire**

A third essential virtue for the pursuit of knowledge is *desire*—namely, an *inquisitiveness* that embodies Solomon’s repeated command to “seek.” This desire is a holy ambition, a motivating drive, a compelling force.

* **Prov 2:3–5** – “for if you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God.”
* **Prov 4:7–9 –** “The beginning of wisdom *is:* acquire wisdom; and with all your acquiring, get understanding. Prize her, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. She will place on your head a garland of grace; she will present you with a crown of beauty.”
* **Prov 15:14 –** “The mind of the intelligent seeks knowledge, but the mouth of fools feeds on folly.”
* **Prov 16:16 –** “How much better it is to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is to be chosen above silver.”

**The antithetical vice to the intellectual virtue of desire is *apathy*.** Intellectual apathy manifests itself in a passive approach to the development of one’s thinking. It is content with letting the mind function freely according to old habits. It rarely challenges existing thoughts and quickly writes off any exhortation to renew the mind as “legalism.”

Granted, pursuing knowledge without desire is exceedingly difficult. To develop it requires . . .

* fostering discontent with one’s present state;
* resolve to set the will in motion—desire will follow;
* refusal to settle for substitutes (short-cuts, half-truths, ear-tickling); and
* effort to fan the flames of a passion for lifelong learning.

**IV. Teachability**

A fourth essential intellectual virtue is that of *teachability—*namely, a sincere *receptivity* to the instruction and correction of others. Owing to the difficulty of developing this virtue, the book of Proverbs has much to say.

* **Prov 1:5 –** “A wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel.”
* **Prov 9:9** – “Give *instruction* to a wise man and he will be still wiser, teach a righteous man and he will increase *his* learning.”
* **Prov 12:15 –** “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.”
* **Prov 15:31 –** “He whose ear listens to the life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.”
* **Prov 19:20 –** “Listen to counsel and accept discipline, that you may be wise the rest of your days.”
* **Prov 22:17-18 –** “Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your mind to my knowledge; for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, that they may be ready on your lips.”

**The antithetical vice to the intellectual virtue of teachability is *defiance*.** Defiance manifests itself in refusal—openly or subtly—to accept and apply correction given by others. It is one of the most formidable obstacles to the maturation of the Christian mind. To combat it, one must cultivate teachability, which requires . . .

* willingness to admit mistakes;
* courage and skill to craft good questions to ask of others;
* patience in waiting for opportunities and answers;
* eagerness to learn from the real people in your life, not just books or recordings or “men at the top”; and
* appreciation for those bold enough to confront you.

**V. Persistence**

The fifth essential intellectual virtue to be learned from the book of Proverbs is that of *persistence—*namely, a *resolve* *to press on* *and plod ahead*, rather than to quit or to live by impetuous starts and stops. It recognizes that the acquisition of real knowledge in this world will be difficult, but it is worth the effort and the price paid.

* **Prov 2:4–5** – “If you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God.”
* **Prov 8:17 –** “I love those who love me; and those who diligently seek me will find me.”
* **Prov 19:27 –** “Cease listening, my son, to discipline, and you will stray from the words of knowledge.”

**The antithetical vice to the intellectual virtue of persistence is *vacillation*.** It is the irresolution that marks the minds of those too faint-hearted to embrace the struggle and pay the price. They make plans and draw up impressive strategies, but when the going gets tough, they quit.

The problem of vacillation has nothing to do with IQ. Some of the smartest minds have utterly failed at life because of their lack of persistence. In fact, study after study shows that the greatest predictor of success is not intelligence, but persistence. To cultivate it requires . . .

* an expectation of obstacles and opposition to the renewing of the mind;
* a resolve to keep your seat in the chair, to finish reading the book, to finish the project you started;
* a focus on and contentment with small successes in learning;
* a refusal to be mastered by the flesh’s desire for ease.

**For Further Study**

Memorize Proverbs 1:7 and 2:4–5.

In your own words, describe an “intellectual virtue.” Be able to list the five intellectual virtues identified in Proverbs and provide a brief definition of each.

Out of the five virtues listed, which one is weakest in your life? Which one strongest? Why?

For each of the five virtues, make a resolution that will guide your development of that virtue. Be able to explain how that resolution will look in practice.

Spend time this week praying for your growth in each of these areas.

Read through Jonathan Edwards’s “Resolutions” (available online here: [Search WJE Online | The Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University](http://edwards.yale.edu/archive?path=aHR0cDovL2Vkd2FyZHMueWFsZS5lZHUvY2dpLWJpbi9uZXdwaGlsby9nZXRvYmplY3QucGw/Yy4xNTo3NDoxLndqZW8=)).

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** gracechurch.org/motw

**Next meeting:**April 20, 7pm, “Trained to Discern”