

# Sermon 31, The Beginning and Outcome of Wisdom, Proverbs 9:7-12

**Proposition:** To fear God, to know Him as holy, and to listen to His wisdom is the only path to life!

- I. Outcomes, vv. 7-9
  - A. Folly's Outcome: An Inability to Listen, vv. 7-8a
  - B. Wisdom's Outcome: A Listener who Keeps Getting Wiser, vv. 8b-9
- II. Beginnings, v. 10
  - A. Wisdom's Beginning: The Fear of the LORD, v. 10a
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## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, often in Hebrew prose structure conveys meaning. That is certainly the case in our text this morning. If you'll glance at the outline with me, you'll see that the center of our text describes wisdom's beginnings, and that that center element is sandwiched between two sections that describe the outcomes of wisdom and folly. What I hope to show you is that wisdom and folly alike are not merely isolated choices. They are full-blown lifestyles, and the longer you persist in them, the more they will mark your character. What I hope to show you this morning is that wisdom begins with fearing God and continues by listening, while folly begets — indeed, *is* — an inability to listen and results in punishment. The message, then, is this: Fear God and listen to Him, for if you don't, you will suffer the fate of the fool.

### I. Outcomes, vv. 7-9

Our text moves straight from Lady Wisdom's invitation to this three-verse snapshot of the character of the wise person and the fool. Whether you call this advice to the adviser (like Bruce Waltke in his commentary on this passage), or like Derek Kidner speak of it as a long-term picture of what becomes of the fool, the connection is clear. Wisdom produces one kind of person, and folly produces another.

#### A. Folly's Outcome: An Inability to Listen, vv. 7-8a

And the kind of person folly produces is one who cannot and will not listen. Reprove a scoffer and he will only scoff. You'll get shame; you'll look like the real fool in the situation. I saw yesterday the viral video some of you may have seen, in which President Trump won't answer a reporter's question and then tears into this reporter and calls him a terrible person. Brothers and

sisters, regardless of your politics, that's a classic example of the hazard of reproving a scoffer! Tell a fool he's wrong, and you're the one who comes out the laughingstock, because the fool will attack you. That's what this verse says. If you rebuke a fool, you'll get hurt! Now, we know that this is not a blanket permission to avoid confrontation with anyone and everyone. Rather, it is making a statement about the character of the fool. The fool, as we have seen over and over and over, is a man who doesn't listen. So when Solomon says "Do not reprove a scoffer," he doesn't mean that it's morally wrong to reprove such a man. He means that it is imprudent to reprove such a man. A scoffer will hate anyone who tells him he's wrong! If you value the scoffer's good opinion, don't rebuke him. It won't do any good.

Now, most of us interact with fools and scoffers at times, and the surface of the text presents wisdom for us as we do so. Be wise in how you rebuke. Make sure that the person you're rebuking is the type who can actually hear a rebuke.

But the deeper meaning is a warning to us against becoming this fool, this scoffer, this person who doesn't listen. If you are that person, you are in trouble — huge trouble. You'll bear the punishment, as the end of our passage this morning makes clear.

So I've asked you before and I'll ask you again: When someone confronts you, do you back down, or do you automatically and unwearingly insist that they're wrong? If the latter, then you are a fool. Period.

### **B. Wisdom's Outcome: A Listener who Keeps Getting Wiser, vv. 8b-9**

But a life of wisdom produces a character exactly opposite. A wise life produces a listener who keeps getting wiser, a man who knows that he doesn't have all wisdom and thus who grows in wisdom every time you teach him. A truly wise man loves the person who rebukes him because it is an opportunity for him to learn and grow in wisdom!

Now, can you honestly say that you love that person in your life who rebukes you? Maybe it's a friend. Maybe it's your mother-in-law. Maybe it's your spouse. Do you love this person more after every rebuke? The Biblical paradigm says, "Yes, absolutely. I love being told I'm wrong because it gives me the opportunity to repent and go right."

So which invitation will you accept? Which lifestyle will you live? The wise life or the foolish one? It seems to me that the choice is clear.

## **II. Beginnings, v. 10**

Well, the outcome of wisdom vs. folly can be summarized as listening vs. ignoring. But the beginning of wisdom (and hence, of folly) lies in the presence of an attitude (or its absence). Wisdom's first act is listening, but wisdom lies deeper than action. Wisdom lies in the heart, the source of action, and in the heart's attitude of fear of God.

### **A. Wisdom's Beginning: The Fear of the LORD, v. 10a**

To fear God is to recognize His dynamic energy and power and respond appropriately. When you're standing on the edge of I-90 and a semi-truck hurtles by at 80 mph, you fear it. Yet the energy of that rushing semi is incomparably tiny compared to the greatness and grandeur of God, who is pure act and pure energy. There is nothing passive, nothing potential, about God. He is

dynamic, rushing, moving, and a consuming fire. What is your heart attitude toward God? Remember, His character is most clearly displayed at the cross. Do you fear — yes, fear — the God who hung His own Son on a cross on a hill outside of town to die? He wasn't crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a garbage heap between two thieves. Golgotha wasn't a sanctified place of pilgrimage; it was the kind of place decent people would avoid. Calvary shows us God's attitude toward sin — your sin and mine. And that should teach us to fear God.

As for those who say that this fear of God is an OT thing, I would just ask them what the symbol of the Christian faith is. Is it a couch? An easy chair? A hot tub? An ice cream cone? Brothers and sisters, the symbol of our faith is a cross — an instrument of torture and death! Yes, the Son of God died on such an instrument, taking our punishment — but it was our punishment, the punishment we deserved, and He calls us to take up our crosses too. Nowhere will you find the Bible telling us to sit on our couch to follow Christ. Oh for some fear of God in your heart and mine! Oh for a recognition that a cross hurts and kills before it grants new life! Oh for the realization that in order to be resurrected we have to die, in order to be overcomers we must overcome something. People of God, wisdom begins with an attitude of fear and reverence directed toward God. The outcome of such an attitude is a listening heart. But the attitude is the foundation of all true religion. It is the delight of Jesus Himself, whose delight was in the fear of the LORD.

Notice, if you would, that the frame around chs. 1-9, discourses that praise wisdom and profile folly, is the fear of the LORD. The book's motto, in 1:7, tells us that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, while this chapter tells us that it is the beginning of wisdom. To know anything at all you must fear God. And to apply what you've learned, to live well, you must fear God. Everything that's addressed to the son, every profile in folly, every commendation of wisdom in these first nine chapters, takes place in the context of the fear of the LORD. Indeed, the book of Proverbs ends on the same note, for wisdom begins and ends with the fear of God.

The bottom line, then, is that if you're lacking this piece in your attitude toward God, you will never be wise. Unless you fear Him, you are a fool and will remain a fool

### **B. Wisdom's Content: The Knowledge of the Holy One, v. 10b**

Well, wisdom is not simply an attitude, a stance. It also involves and requires some content. To fear God rightly requires knowing Him truly. This is knowing about Him, of course — knowing His character and His works. But it is, more fundamentally, knowing Him personally. How is wisdom defined? As a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Internalized wisdom cannot be separated from personified wisdom. Unless you know the latter, you will never attain the former.

How do you know God? Read what He wrote you, in the Bible. Spend time with His associates, His people. Talk to Him in prayer. Listen to His voice in sermons. Brothers and sisters, the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. In other words, if you take the time to get to know God, then you will begin to understand better. You will gain the internalized wisdom that will protect you.

Sometimes I fear that I'm preaching the same sermon on Proverbs every Sunday. But this book is so artfully repetitive. It makes its point over and over, because wisdom really does consist of the basics! Don't overcomplicate it. Listen to your Father. Internalize His words in your heart. Fear Him. That is wisdom. And that, of course, is what Proverbs 1-9 exhorts us to do in every chapter. Wisdom is the result of a relationship in which we know God.

So yes, read theology books and listen to theology podcasts. Pray. Hear the word. Fellowship with the saints. Partake of the sacraments. But recognize that all of it is a means to the end of knowing God better.

### **III. Outcomes, vv. 11-12**

And what can you expect when you build on this foundation of the fear of God and the knowledge of God?

#### **A. Wisdom's Outcome: Long Life, vv. 11-12a**

You can expect this outcome: Personified wisdom will lengthen your life. She will providentially look out for you and give you not just long life, but eternal life. Wisdom leads to life! If you are wise, yes, the people around you benefit. See the first verse of ch. 10. But you yourself reap the biggest benefit of all — eternal life in the presence of God.

You weren't made to die. You were made to live. But you can only live when you live by wisdom.

#### **B. Folly's Outcome: You'll Bear the Punishment, v. 12b**

Folly's outcome, on the other hand, is gruesome. You'll bear the punishment for your folly. Because you failed to listen, because you despised God and didn't care to know Him, you personally will bear the punishment for that. Yes, your folly can and will hurt the people around you in this life. The sage is not intending to deny that, and many of the proverbs highlight it. But the point here is that your folly can and will damn you personally. If you're a fool, you're the one who will go to Hell because of a failure to listen.

Brothers and sisters, you are here in church this morning because you fear God. So I appeal to you as God-fearers to seek the knowledge of the Holy One. Come to recognize just how holy He is. Dedicate your life to being holy as He is holy. Don't be a scoffer who laughs at these things. Be the wise man who listens and hears. If you are, you'll live. God promises it. Amen.