

Wisdom and Folly: Proverbs

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This morning we're going to talk about wisdom and folly. The book of Proverbs is an appeal to seek wisdom. Seek to be a wise person, fearing God, loving God, walking in His ways. As opposed to being a fool. These are two fundamental categories. There is the path of godly *wisdom* which leads to life and happiness. And there is the path of *foolishness*, which is a road of destruction leading to misery and death.

The book of Proverbs is for everyone. It's a call to all of us to turn away from folly and pursue wisdom. We also see in the Proverbs a special appeal to young people. We hear, over and over again, the appeal of a father to his son. In light of that, I'd like to gear the sermon this morning specifically toward the young people here. If you're between the age of 5-17, raise your hand. This sermon is for you, and I hope you'll listen carefully.

My goal is to persuade you that it's worth it to seek for wisdom. My goal is to persuade you that living a foolish life will make you miserable. If you follow the crowd, if you crave the things that the world says are exciting, then you will be a very unhappy person in the long run. But if you look for wisdom and listen to wisdom and love wisdom, then you will have a great treasure, indeed.

Do you remember last week I talked about the fear of the Lord? One of the stories I told to try to explain that was from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. If you haven't read that book or seen the movie, you should. It's an awesome story, and it tells the story of the Gospel. Aslan, the great lion, the true King of Narnia, is like Jesus Christ. Last week I told the part of the story where the children are talking with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. And that's one of the cool things about Narnia, of course, that the animals talk. And Mr. and Mrs. Beaver are an amusing couple.

Mr. Beaver provides some comic relief, like when Mrs. Beaver is helping Fox, who had been hurt by the wolves. And as Mrs. Beaver is tending to his wounds, Fox is squirming around and complaining, and so Mrs. Beavers says to Fox, "Quit squirming. You're worse than Mr. Beaver on bath day." And Mr. Beaver says, "Worst day of the year."

Well, when the Beavers were first telling the children about Aslan, young Susan asked if Aslan is safe. "Is he—quite safe? I

shall feel rather nervous about meeting a Lion.” And Mr. Beaver said “Safe? . . . Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

That’s what it’s like to fear the Lord. If we belong to Him and are following Him, then we can draw near to Him with joy. We have confidence that His great power is for our good. But we still tremble when we hear Him roar.

There’s a strong connection between wisdom and fearing the Lord. In fact, the book of Proverbs says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (9:10). You must fear the Lord if you are to be wise.

Let me put it to you like this: The basic question is, who is at the center of your universe? Whose opinion do you care about the most? What relationship(s) are most significant to you? That will determine whether you pursue godly wisdom, or whether you follow the world’s foolishness. Is God at the center of your universe, or is somebody or something else?

I’ll remind you of one more part of the Narnia story. Do you remember Edmund’s mistake? Edmund entered Narnia, and he was fooled by the White Witch. Edmund fell for the White Witch’s schemes. She gave Edmund Turkish delight, a tasty dessert. But where did that get him? He ended up in the clutches of the Witch’s power, but by the time he realized she had lied to him, it was too late. He couldn’t escape. Fortunately, Aslan was able and willing to save him.

But Edmund’s actions are the perfect illustration of folly as opposed to wisdom. He was so selfish and prideful, that he just wanted more tasty treats for himself. And he was fooled by the White Witch that he might actually become a prince in her kingdom if he brought his brother and sisters to her. How foolish he was. And what misery it brought him.

My hope for you, boys and girls, young men and young women, is that you will be spared the misery of foolishness, and that you will experience in your lives the great joy of wisdom.

So let’s look at what Proverbs says about wisdom and folly. Here are my three points, which are basically the same point, just from different angles. And they all start with “L” to help you remember them. *Look* for wisdom. *Listen* to wisdom. *Love* wisdom. And with each of those I will say something about folly as well. We will be seeing the contrast between wisdom and folly.

Look for Wisdom (Turn from Folly)

I would encourage all of you young people to read Proverbs. And I would encourage parents to read the Proverbs with your kids. These are the very things young people need to learn as they're growing up, and these are the things grown folks need to learn throughout life. We all need this.

We all need to be looking for wisdom. This is the exhortation we heard very emphatically in chapter 4, which was read earlier.

“Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.” (Proverbs 4:5, ESV)

“The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.” (Proverbs 4:7, ESV)

Wisdom is what we should be looking for. And do you know what? By God's grace, you'll find it!

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” (James 1:5, ESV)

In Proverbs wisdom is described as a woman who is calling in the street.

“Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you.” (Proverbs 1:20–23, ESV)

God is not trying to keep wisdom from us. He has been very good to us and very gracious to us in revealing His wisdom. We have the Bible. You can read the Bible. You have parents and Sunday School teachers and others in this church who want to help you understand the Bible. So you don't have an excuse. You can't just say, “Oh, well, there's no way to know wisdom.” It's right here!! Look for it, and you will find it.

Picture yourself walking down a street. The street represents your life. And each decision you make is a fork in the road. There are decisions that seem pretty big, and other decisions that seem small. But each one is going to affect the pathway of your life. And again and again on this street there will be Wisdom

crying out to you to, pleading with you to make the right choice. On the other hand, Folly will also be crying out to you. Proverbs describes Folly as a woman as well, in contrast to Lady Wisdom.

“The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way,” (Proverbs 9:13–15, ESV)

So this is your life. This is my life. We are faced every day with decisions that will affect the course of our lives. And both wisdom and folly will be competing for our attention. The challenge is to see clearly. We must look for wisdom. And in our looking, we must make sure that we are clear-sighted. We have to make sure our vision is good.

I remember when I was a teenager my eyesight started getting a little blurry. It was hard for me to see everything that the teachers were writing on the board. At first it was just a matter of me getting a desk in the front of the room, and I was ok. Eventually I needed glasses, and those helped a whole lot, even though I didn't like wearing them. It was important for me to be able to see. It was important in the classroom, because otherwise I would be confused about what the teacher wanted me to learn. It was important if I was watching a football game, because otherwise I couldn't tell what was going on. When I turned 16 and started driving, it was very important for me to be able to see well, because otherwise I'd be a great danger to others and myself.

And spiritually, too, it is crucial to be able to see clearly. That's why we all need to be looking for wisdom. Wisdom is like putting on glasses. Folly distorts everything. Folly makes good things look boring and dull. And it makes the bad things look fun and exciting.

I brought this spoon with me today to try to make this point, and to make this memorable for you. Here's something you can try at home, if you haven't already. You can take a spoon (and I brought a very large one today, so you can see it—I don't eat my cereal with this spoon, it's too big for my mouth) and look into it and see kind of a funny reflection of yourself. I'm very easily amused, so I've had a lot of fun with this. If I look at the underside of this spoon, it makes me look like I have an enormous nose and no ears. If I look at the inside of it, then I appear to be upside-down. My head is down here, and my shoulders and arms are up here. Now, fortunately, I know better than to trust the way things appear in this spoon. I know that I do have ears on the side of my head. I know that my nose is not actually bigger than my head.

And I know that I'm standing with my feet on the floor, not on the ceiling.

The point is: if you're going to have a fruitful, enjoyable life, you have to be able to see clearly and accurately.

"The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble." (Proverbs 4:19, ESV)

That sounds like a miserable life, doesn't it! Stumbling through life, not even knowing what you're tripping over. But if you can't see, then your life is going to be a complete mess. Things won't make sense. Folly will cry out to you to lie, cheat, steal. Folly will cry out to you to do what all the other kids are doing, because it looks like fun. But then if you go down that path you'll end up falling flat on your face and not even knowing how you got there. We have to turn from folly and look for wisdom.

I don't know what folly is saying to you these days, in whatever season of life you find yourself. Some of you young people are in elementary school, others in middle school or high school. Maybe you have classmates who are saying to you, "Come on, here's a way we can cheat on this test so that we'll get an easy A. Nobody will know." Or maybe there's pressure to be mean to a certain kid in your class who doesn't fit in. Or maybe there's peer pressure to dress in a way that would be immodest or inappropriate. Maybe folly is crying out to you through the internet, to be doing things, writing things, posting things, looking at things that are going to be destructive. I don't know exactly what you might be facing, but you need to be looking for wisdom and turning from folly. And you'll need some help with this, from Scripture and from others, in order to be able to see things aright.

Listen to Wisdom (Tune out Folly)

"Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it." (Proverbs 8:33, ESV)

We need to look for wisdom, and as we've already learned this morning, wisdom can be found. God will reveal it to us. And now what I want to say is that we must listen to it. And this requires humility. Do you what humility is? A big part of humility is the willingness to listen. Humility is the opposite of pride. Pride doesn't like to listen. Pride says, "I'm doing fine on my own. I don't need any instruction. I don't need any help. I don't need any advice." But humility listens. Humility is teachable. Humility says, "I'm not doing fine on my own. I need instruction. I need help. I need advice."

Here's how Proverbs puts it:

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.” (Proverbs 3:5–7, ESV)

I remember as a young boy my dad explaining this passage to me. I was probably 6-7 at the time, and I still remember it so vividly. There was a thin mattress that was leaning up against the wall in my bedroom, and my dad said, “Ben, this is what it’s like to lean on your own understanding.” And then he leaned his weight on the side of that mattress, and he and the mattress crashed to the floor. It was like slapstick comedy, and I thought it was hilarious. I asked him to do it again and again. And the illustration has stuck in my mind ever since. If you lean on your own understanding, on your own wisdom, if you’re wise in your own eyes, there’s nothing there. There’s no foundation. It will all come crashing down.

This is such an important lesson to learn in life, and the earlier you learn it the better. I wish I would have starting really listening to wisdom at a very young age. As a young person, it’s very common to have the attitude that the young folks know more about life than the older folks. Our culture glamorizes youthfulness. And so the idea is very prevalent that the young know what life is all about. They know what is fun. They know what’s cool and hip and exciting. And the older people, the parents, are kind of clueless. They’re just stuck in boring mode. But that’s like looking in this spoon, where it appears that I’m upside down. It’s just not true that a 12 year old knows more about life than a 40 year old.

I remember having that arrogant mentality as a teenager, thinking that I knew better than my parents. I remember one time when, as an early teen, some friends of mine at school had invited me to go to a particular movie at the movie theater. And my friend’s mom was going to drive us over to the theater, and there was going to be a girl there who I kind of had a crush on. So I thought this was going to be awesome. The only problem was, my parents didn’t think I should be watching that particular movie (whatever it was, I don’t remember). But my parents had decided they didn’t want me to go. I was devastated. I actually remember being so upset, so disappointed and angry, that I was crying. How pitiful. Of course, I didn’t want anyone to see me crying. But there I was, a teenage boy standing alone in the living room, crying because I couldn’t go to the movie. I thought my parents were out of touch. I thought they were stuck in boring mode, no-fun mode.

I thought they were being mean to me. I thought they must want me to be miserable my whole life. But I wasn't seeing things the right way. I wasn't looking for wisdom. I wasn't listening to wisdom.

You know what, over the course of just a few years I began to see how wise my parents are. And I began to see that the rules and expectations they had for me were not their attempt to make my life miserable. NO. They wanted the best for me. They loved me and wanted to protect me from my own foolishness and wanted to teach me how to be a responsible, mature adult.

Mark Twain said something that I can totally identify with. He said, "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in 7 years." Mark Twain is making a joke when he says it that way. He knows that it wasn't really his father who changed so much over those few years. It was he, himself, who grew up to be able to recognize his father's wisdom.

My encouragement to all of you young people is to recognize NOW that the guidelines and expectations of your parents are good for you. Your parents do know what they're talking about, and you need to humble yourself to realize that they actually know more than you do, and they are wiser than you are. So listen to the wisdom you can glean from your parents.

And tune out folly. Eve listened to the Serpent. She should have tuned him out. She should have walked away from him. But she listened. And as she listened, the Serpent's seductive words began to play with her mind, and eventually led her to go directly against God's command.

Young people, there will be other people your age who try to do just that kind of thing. And if you listen too long, you'll start to get confused. What they're saying to you will start to make sense. And if you keep listening, you'll end up following the path of folly rather than wisdom. Tune that stuff out. Don't listen. When you know it's not right, just say, "That's not right," and then walk away. And if you're not quite sure what to think of it, then talk to your parents about it.

"Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him." (Proverbs 22:15, ESV)

I'll talk about the second half of that verse in the sermon on parenting. But the point here is that there's a connection between

folly and youth. Old people can certainly be foolish, too. Don't hear me wrong here. Just because a person is older does not mean they are necessarily wiser. But it is true that we are born into this world sinful and foolish. And it's true that folly is bound up in the heart of a child.

So the application point for kids and youth is this: if there are other young people who are trying to get you to do something that you know your parents wouldn't want you to do, you can almost guarantee that your parents' instruction is the way of wisdom and what your peers are telling you to do is the way of folly. So file that away as a piece of wisdom that will guide you well. If a 7 year old or a 13 year old tries to give you advice, take it with a grain of salt. Take it with a whole heap of salt. However much you may like that person, they probably still have a good bit of folly bound up in them. If that person is not looking for wisdom, listening to wisdom, then their advice will not be leading you toward wisdom, either.

Listen to the wisdom you read in Scripture. And listen to the wisdom you learn from your parents and from others who love Jesus and study the Bible. And tune out folly.

Love Wisdom (Hate Folly)

I've talked about looking for wisdom and listening to wisdom. I want to close by telling you to love wisdom. And as I'm telling you this, I'm praying that God will put within your heart a love for wisdom, which is to love God, Himself. My desire is for each and every one of you to hate folly, to be able to see through the fleeting pleasures offered by sinful folly. And instead to love God and look for His wisdom and listen to His good commands to us.

We could speak of this in terms of repentance and faith, which are like two sides of the same coin. You turn tails on sin, and head toward Jesus Christ in faith. Repentance is hating sin and turning away from folly, turning away from the pride of thinking you're wise enough on your own. Faith is humbling yourself before God and begging for mercy, looking to Jesus as your Savior from sin, and it will result in joyfully submitting yourself to Christ's lordship in your life. Faith is trusting that God's wisdom is far better than the world's wisdom, even when it may be difficult for us to see it that way at the moment. We have to trust that God sees far better than we can see.

In the hopes that you will see the beauty of wisdom, and that you will love wisdom, and that you will hate folly, I'm going

to read you a few proverbs that speak of the benefits of wisdom and the detriments of folly. We'll close this way.

“The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.” (Proverbs 3:35, ESV)

Don't you want honor instead of disgrace? Then seek for wisdom.

“Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.” (Proverbs 8:10–11, ESV)

Isn't that amazing! You may desire lots of things. Maybe you've already started your Christmas list. But wisdom is better than any of those things. Wisdom is more valuable. Wisdom will bring you more pleasure and joy than any other possession you could wish for.

“How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.” (Proverbs 16:16, ESV)

“Know that wisdom is such to your soul; if you find it, there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off.” (Proverbs 24:14, ESV)

You see, wisdom is valuable and it gives hope for the future. Wisdom will see you through this life. Wisdom will help you and protect you and enable you to endure in the tough times.

In stark contrast, listen to this gross description of the fool.

“Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.” (Proverbs 26:11, ESV)

What a nasty picture that is (and right before lunch, too). That's how despicable folly is. And that's, indeed, what happens. That's part of the foolishness of being a fool. You don't learn from your mistakes. You keep going back to the same old nasty things. What a miserable life to lead. Stumbling over who knows what, only to stumble over the same thing again and again.

Please, young people, I beg you not to go down that path. Cry out to Jesus to rescue you from that destructive road and to put you on the path of life.

Wisdom is calling to you. She is inviting you to a great feast.

“Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also

set her table. She has sent out her young women to call from the highest places in the town, "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who lacks sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight."" (Proverbs 9:1-6, ESV)

When we turn to the New Testament we hear Jesus Christ, who is Wisdom in the flesh, calling out to us in a similar way. He invites you to feast upon Him, to be filled with Him, to be satisfied in Him.

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." (John 6:35, ESV)

Don't starve in the wasteland of folly. Turn to Jesus, who is Himself our wisdom from God, and find true life in Him.