
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. Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.”

(Proverbs 1:20–33)

Introduction

The most significant day for me in living memory is 11 February 1980. At about 7:00 PM that Monday night, I attended a Bible study down the hall of my residence at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. I had been invited on several occasions, but had had no inclination to be with those very peculiar people. But that night was different.

Having spent a weekend full of sorrow for my sinful behaviour, and the destructive direction of my life, I was miserable. In fact, though I was just two days shy of my nineteenth birthday, life seemed hopeless. I remember thinking whether death would be a better option than what I was facing.

But God was working through that invitation to the Bible study. I had not been there but a few minutes before confessing my sins and finding comfort in my Saviour. Later, when I went back to my room, I began to set matters right, beginning with my roommate, Tim. I phoned my parents, my grandmother (who throughout my prodigal years would tell people that one day I would be “her preacher”). I also began to think about a young lady, whom I had known since I was three and she two. For some strange reason, I had a compulsion to see Jill Keen—later, Van Meter. And the rest is history.

I share this for two reasons. First, I want to thank my God for so great salvation. And second, this testimony illustrates the text before us.

For years, I was deaf to the voice of Woman Wisdom and was wide open to the alluring falsehoods of Lady Folly. But after that night, by God's grace, I was enabled to filter out the folly. My life has not been perfect, and I am not yet what I want to be, but thank God I am not what I was.

In this study, I want to briefly examine how to stay on the path of life – and stay off the path of destruction.

We recently studied Proverbs 1:8–19, which introduce what will become familiar refrain in Proverbs: “Hear, my son.” We noted that this portrays the ideal parent instructing their family in the way of life – that is, instructing them in the worldview of wisdom.

From v. 20 onward, the metaphor shifts slightly to wisdom itself speaking to the son. This is the first of many occurrences where wisdom is personified, and in the majority of cases it is personified as a woman. Later in the book, the woman of wisdom is contrasted with the lady of folly.

Whoever or whatever this is, it is a woman whom the father wants his children to get to know – *intimately* (Longman). These two characters – Father and Wisdom – are the main speakers and teachers in this book.

The introduction of the Woman Wisdom is in a setting that flows quite naturally from what has just been admonished by the father. The child, having been warned against the foolish substitute family (murderous and thieving gangs) will head off into the streets of the city. This, of course, is precisely where one would expect to encounter such gangs.

As the son finds himself in the hustle and bustle of the city streets, he will hear many different sounds and voices and allurements. It is here where he will also, if he listens carefully, hear the voice of wisdom. If the son heeds her voice, submitting to her, he will experience life as God intends. He will “dwell secure ... without dread of disaster” (v. 33). The opposite is implied. This is why, the first time that we hear the voice of the wise woman, “she begins with an angry denunciation of the foolish men for ignoring and rejecting her invitation to receive advice from her (vv. 22–25)” (Longman). A seventeenth-century playwright penned, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” I wonder if he was thinking of this passage.

The gist of this passage, as we see in more detail, is that the wise parent, the one who fears the Lord, will exhort the family to be prepared to *filter out the folly* as they enter the wider

world. Just as unfiltered water in our city will lead to disease, debilitation and even death, so unfiltered listening and living in a spiritually diseased world will lead to destruction.

This is the kind of education that those who fear the Lord will provide for their children. This is the most important of all educational curricula. This, in fact, is the ultimate homeschooling curricula. And every Christian home should be teaching it – regardless of where we send our children to school.

Train Your Ear

The writer, first, exhorts his readers to train the ear: “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?’” (vv. 20–22).

The world is a noisy place, and this is depicted in the opening verses of our passage. The text speaks of “the street,” “the markets,” “the city gates” and specifically identifies the “noisy streets.” Think of a busy, Middle-Eastern market: traders vocalising their products as they advertise, haggling, multitudes of people swarming and milling about. When we think of a street, we may think of the fairly wide streets of our suburban neighbourhoods. But the author is thinking, in his own context, of narrow, and therefore busy and noisy, streets. It is within this context that a voice is crying out – crying out to be *heard*. But only the well-trained ear will hear it: the ear of the person who is on the path of wisdom. This individual has been instructed with whom not to fraternise (vv. 8–19). But equally, he has been instructed with whom to fellowship.

As a young person encounters the busy city streets of this world, in the words of Carole King, “the stories that they tell; they can be heaven, they can be hell.” And this is determined by how well the ear is trained to ignore what it shouldn’t, and to hear what it should. The noises that a person hears can be intriguing, curious, and seductive. This is the point of this passage.

It is easy to focus on the obvious, dominating, overbearing noise of a busy street. It takes a lot of effort to hear a distinct voice. It takes a well-trained ear.

If we will walk wisely and securely, we need to *learn* to filter out the folly and to *listen* for the voice of truth. The city streets get our attention with the jazzy and seductive melodies of indulgence, self-pity, self-actualization, self-worship, and self-righteousness. The confounding music of false worship is not far behind.

The streets of the world also are abuzz with the clatter of materialism, self-justification, dishonesty, slander and malice. These sounds are so loud that it is sometimes hard to concentrate, hard to think. And, most importantly, it is hard to hear the voice of God. As Eve sorely learned, the sound of the serpent's slither is often easier to detect than the sound of Scripture.

All the above is why we need to learn to train our ears to listen to the voice of the wisdom of God, rather than the all too familiar noise of nonsense. The voice of wisdom invites the simple and naïve to a better way of living. Her voice even seems to be offering to foolish scoffers the opportunity to a better way. Only the wise will hear. And they must be trained accordingly.

Parents, train your children to hear your wise and authoritative voice above the alluring noise of the seductive streets. That is, fear the Lord and create this reverent ethos in your home. Parents sometimes say to their children, "Don't make me count to three!" Our goal should be to so instill reverence in our children that there is no need to count at all.

We train our ears to filter the folly as we increasingly learn to hear the voice of the Spirit as recorded in Scripture. No, we don't hear the audible voice of God. But as we read and study and learn Scripture, we do learn to hear the voice of the Shepherd (John 10:14–16). And when we do, it becomes very easy to discern the hollowing noise of the wolves.

We train our ears by a deliberate commitment. If you want to grow in wisdom, fellowship with those who will hold you accountable. But be careful: We need to mature so that we can hold others accountable. If you are always needing someone to keep you on the right path, then you are open game for the voice of folly. So, listen up! Grow up! And then, listen up some more.

Turn Your Heart

In v. 23, the writer urges: "If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you." This is both a promise and a prescription.

The promise is that, if we are committed to filtering the folly, we will be blessed with well-trained ears (see above). But there is an important prescription here as well: In order to experience this blessing, we must have hearts that are receptive to the reproving words of wisdom. If we are not willing to be shaped by God's word, we will never be prepared to filter the folly. This is the way of wisdom.

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.”

Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.

(Proverbs 9:1–9)

How do you respond to reproof? Do you *hear* those who rebuke you for your sin (see Matthew 18:15–20)? Paul rebuked Peter (Galatians 2:11–14), and Peter years later considered Paul a beloved brother (2 Peter 3:15). On Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles boldly preached the gospel, rebuking their hearers for their sin. The hearers “were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). In this context, it made an eternal difference!

Do you get bitter, or do you get better, when you are reproofed? Do you self-medicate by self-justifying, or do you humbly self-examine and then take the biblical medication? Do you respond with humble contrition and heartfelt correction, or do you respond with hateful contention and heartless condemnation? How you respond to the reproof of wisdom will determine the spiritual and relational outcomes of your life.

Clearly, the point of this verse is to promote the ability to hear the voice of God. How foolish therefore for us to reject godly reproof! Fundamentally, this is a matter of the heart. The heart, as they say, is the heart of the matter.

Consider the Outcomes

In the remainder of the chapter, the writer sets forth the outcomes:

Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.

(Proverbs 1:24–33)

This is a very sobering passage of Scripture—at least for those who are concerned about filtering the folly. We will not dig into the details of the passage, but the main point is clear: Those who do not train their ears to hear and heed wisdom will not turn their hearts to wisdom, and the result will be the terror and torment of folly. Destruction, not life, will be the outcome.

Kidner helpfully points out that the phrase in v. 26 (“I ... will laugh”) “is not an expression of personal heartlessness, but of the absurdity of choosing folly, the complete vindication of wisdom and the incontestable fitness of the disaster (see Ps 2:4).” In other words (to cite Longman), “the intention of this speech is to spur present action. She does not want them to wait till they are in the midst of their sufferings, but she wants them to turn to her right away to avoid the pain.”

If we choose to be fools—to be scornful of God—then it is our fault, not our fate: We are eating of the fruit of our way (vv. 30–31).

Consider: Wisdom informs us against presumptuous living. This is not merely good advice; it is a matter of life and death. Our choices have outcomes. There is a lot of truth in the adage that we are the sum total of our choices. So, if you want a godly outcome, begin early to listen to the voice of wisdom. Be devoted to learning God’s word. Be determined to do right by the power of the Spirit (v. 23). Be disciplined to run with the right “gang.”

Oh, listen to wisdom’s cry! She shouts in order to get our attention. Sometimes she shouts through heartache, sorrow and pain. As C. S. Lewis notes, “*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*”

Sometimes, wisdom shouts through a parent, a friend, or a preacher. Regardless, heed the warning. Consider the outcomes before it is too late.

Make Your Choice

The Lord Jesus Christ is the sum of all wisdom. Paul stated this clearly: “And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). And so, as we will see repeatedly in our studies, when we hear wisdom’s call, we are hearing the call of Jesus. So here.

Jim Newheiser helpfully observes:

The urgent pleas of Wisdom remind us of Jesus, who is full of love and compassion for sinners. He [too] pleaded with the lost (Matt 23:37; 11:28-30; compare Prov 1:20-21). Jesus pours out his Spirit upon those who seek him (John 7:37-39; compare Prov 1:23). He gives

his life to all who come to him (John 1:4; 3:15-16; compare Prov 3:18). Jesus also warned that the season of mercy will pass when he comes to judge those who reject him (Matt 23:37-39; 21:33-44; compare Prov 1:24-27). Those who trust him will be safe on the Day of Judgment (Heb 2:15; John 10:28; compare Prov 1:33).

In other words, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the wisdom that we need to hear. The wisdom of God was displayed by his sinless Son dying on the cross and suffering our God-deserved wrath. The wisdom of God was vindicated when Jesus Christ the King rose from the dead. The wisdom of God was enthroned when he ascended to intercede for all who will wisely bow the knee, kiss the Son, trusting in him alone for forgiveness of sins and for reconciliation to God.

The question facing us is, will we heed the voice of wisdom? Will we follow the voice of Jesus?

I appreciate Kidner's insight, which is very helpful at this point. He says of this passage, "The offer of wisdom is to the man in the street, and for the business of living, not to an elite for the pursuit of scholarship." In other words, the call of wisdom – the offer of life – is for everyone. But, each of us must make up our minds.

We must choose the path of folly or the path of faith. If we filter out the folly, then we will follow Christ to life. If we do not, then we will ultimately find ourselves experiencing irrevocable death and destruction.

So, we have heard the two voices. It is time to make a choice.

Christian, since we – the church – represent Jesus on earth, we are, in effect, the voice of wisdom. Let's raise our voice in the streets. Let us proclaim the gospel. Let us live in such a way that those in the streets will heed what they hear. Let us pray for a voice that is louder than the seductive lies of this world. Let us pray and live and speak in such a way that we will be used by God to help lost sinners to filter out soul-destroying folly.

AMEN