

Sunday, August 19, 2018 – Thirteenth Week after Pentecost
Wisdom and Foolishness

Proverbs 9: 7-10

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Comparison/Contrast Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This ancient proverb, from the book of Proverbs centers wisdom as an activity of God, but there are many other definitions of wisdom out there. What is wisdom? Well I think we can all agree, we'd all like to have it. Some have this almost mystical picture of what it is to be wise, like Gandalf from Lord of the Rings or Yoda from Star Wars – and yes, each are wise, colloquially, in their way, but neither center their wisdom in the fear of the Lord.

Wisdom is different than knowledge, and we often confuse them. Knowledge is about volume. It's about how much you know. Knowledge is the size of your library, the extent of your database, the volume of information. Wisdom is applying what you know to discern what's valuable, what's true, what's meaningful, what's important. Knowledge will help you out at Trivia Night or playing Jeopardy, and gaining knowledge is a valuable endeavor in and of itself, but it isn't the same as wisdom. James, in the New Testament, reminds us that even the demons shudder – they know who God is, they have more knowledge of the Bible, backward and forward better than any of us do – but that knowledge doesn't make them wise. So we're going to spend a little time this morning distinguishing between the wise and the foolish.

“Whoever corrects a scoffer (your translation may say mocker, or fool) 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.”

You've been there, haven't you? Down in the bowels of the internet – if you're ever in the mood to depress yourself and weep for humanity, just read the comment sections in the news, or on Twitter. There's a modern saying that goes along with this Biblical wisdom – “Don't feed the trolls.” You know, the ones that like to stir up the pot, set people off – if they don't get a reaction, they'll get bored. React though, correct the scoffer, and get ready for some wicked words back. The scoffer, the fool, doesn't want to be corrected and if you try to, they'll hate you for it.

Christian psychologist and business consultant, Dr. Henry Cloud uses this section of Proverbs to highlight some leadership and management principles. Let's say you have a remarkable employee – deeply loved, talented, highly personable, engaging speaker – they're your rockstar, your prima donna person – they know more than everyone else and they know it – but they have some issues. They won't receive feedback. They won't work with their team. They'll be doing great for long periods of time and then erupt with a volcano of drama. When you confront them about the problem, there are tons of reasons, excuses, deflection and blame to go around at everyone else but themselves. They may be the smartest person in the room but they have a tendency to be foolish.

I'm reminded of a section that often comes up when we confess our sins, out of 1 John 1 – “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Or said another way, there's no fear of the Lord. Friends, this is the thing with foolishness – no matter how high-flying, high performing, charming, knowledgeable, smart, engaging, beautiful or generally amazing you are, you have flaws. I have flaws. If the kneejerk reaction is to lash out when you're rebuked, to waffle and excuse and blame when you're corrected, then there's a healthy dose of the fear of the Lord that we need, to begin to become wise.

And friends, that's where confession is good for the soul. It keeps us humble. It helps us remember not only where we shine but also where we fall. It's the beginning of wisdom to see and recognize reality. Foolishness is asking reality to adjust itself to you. Wisdom, on the other hand, is adjusting yourself to reality.

“Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”

But if we confess our sin, God is faithful and just to forgive our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. This is wisdom – adjusting yourself to the way things really are. There is repentance and sorrow over sin, the fear of the Lord that begins us on a lifelong journey if wisdom.

Let's say you have a ho-hum, ordinary employee – not especially remarkable, but adequate. There are areas for improvement. You provide feedback, and they are receptive.

Perhaps, they even proactively seek it. They know what they know and what they don't know, so they seek to know and understand more, and are humble to ask for help or depend on a team for what they don't know. They'll slowly but steadily improve, stable and dependable for long periods of time, rarely if ever bringing any drama to the table. When you confront them about an issue there's acknowledgement, responsibility and a genuine desire to improve and do better. They're not highflying like that other one... but who do you trust? Who would you rather have on your team? Who can you work with?

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom – confession has two parts. Yes, there's humility to adjust yourself to reality and contrition, that is true sorrow over your sin, but there's something else as well – faith. Faith, trust, that God is what He says He is – faithful and just or fair to forgive. This fear of the Lord is not some mere fear of a tongue lashing or a punishment – but it's also trusting that God is who He says He is. It's faith in Jesus, perfectly wise in every way who came to die for the sins of fools who won't chafe at rebuke, won't take responsibility, cast blame around the room at everyone but themselves. At times, that describes all of us, doesn't it?

Trust this. See this. Let God instruct and bring the beginning of wisdom, time and time again as we confess our sin to receive forgiveness. Yes, this: Jesus comes with forgiveness as you're trying to adjust reality to yourself, and He adjusts you back to reality. We deserve sin death and hell but we get forgiveness, life and salvation. We want to scoff and mock and erupt with drama, He reproves, corrects and trains us up steadfast love. He does not mistake your knowledge for wisdom – He aligns your knowledge for understanding to help you become more wise. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom! God bless you in Jesus' name, Amen.