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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## The Truth & Character of God - Part 2

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ JULY 23, 2023

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### Introduction

Last week's meditation laid the foundation for a two-part series based on the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. At the end of last week, I left you on a "cliffhanger." Today's meditation serves as part two and the conclusion of the series. I am aware that in this sanctuary and worshiping online are some of the smartest people I know. However, I am also aware that even the best minds tend to "leak." Therefore, please allow me to provide a brief reminder of last week's main themes.

Proverbs chapter 1 showed us that all wisdom comes (not from experience or even reflecting on experience but) from God. God created life and everything else, and if we desire wisdom to live well in the world God designed we must operate according to our Manufacturer's intended purpose. The Manufacturer's Instruction Manual where we discern wisdom is the Bible. We further defined wisdom as including knowledge, but as being more than mere knowledge. Since last week I have heard from many of you about your own favorite modern-day proverbs, and one of our members shared this proverb with me to help illustrate the difference between wisdom and knowledge.

**Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit.**

[This is true based on the botanical definition although I believe that by the culinary definition, it is classified as a vegetable.]

**Wisdom is knowing that tomatoes don't belong in fruit salad.**

So, wisdom includes knowledge but adds to knowledge insight and deep understanding. Wisdom also includes a moral center that enables us to act rightly, justly and fairly. To sum up these ideas we used this working definition for wisdom taken from Mark Labberton's book *Called*, "biblical wisdom is the truth and character of God lived in context."

I closed last week's message intentionally with the words of Jesus from the best sermon ever given, the *Sermon on the Mount*, where Jesus proclaimed,

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup>The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. <sup>26</sup>But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup>The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

Matthew 7:24-27, NIV

Jesus reminds us that to be wise means we must hear the Word of God, live it out, and reflect the truth and character of God in our lives. However, Tim Keller observed,

...no Bible verse will tell you exactly whom to marry, which job to take, whether to move or stay put. Yet a wrong decision can be disastrous. And there are no explicit moral laws against character flaws such as abrasiveness, impulsiveness, emotional fragility, and disorganization, yet they can also damage the course of your life.

In other words, while the scriptures are the very wisdom of God and are like an instruction manual, they are not step-by-step

instructions for every circumstance we may encounter. How then are we to make wise decisions congruent with the truth and character of God in the context of our daily lives? This is what we will seek to discern today from our reading of God's Word.

Our Scripture passage comes from Proverbs 9:1-18. In the preceding chapter, Solomon introduced Lady Wisdom—an allegorical, personification of *wisdom*—who called out in the streets for the simple to listen and find life. Wisdom is described as being the first of God's works of creation and the ordering principle through which all things came into being. The final two verses set up the contrasting figures of wisdom and folly in our text for this morning. "For those who find wisdom find life and receive favor from the LORD. But those who fail to find me harm themselves; all who hate me love death" (Proverbs 8:35-36).

With this refresher and introduction to Proverbs, hear now the Word of the Lord from Proverbs 9:1-18.

**W**isdom has built her house;  
she has set up its seven pillars.  
<sup>2</sup> She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;  
she has also set her table.  
<sup>3</sup> She has sent out her servants, and she calls  
from the highest point of the city,  
<sup>4</sup> "Let all who are simple come to my house!"  
To those who have no sense she says,  
<sup>5</sup> "Come, eat my food  
and drink the wine I have mixed.  
<sup>6</sup> Leave your simple ways and you will live;  
walk in the way of insight."  
<sup>7</sup> Whoever corrects a mocker invites insults;  
whoever rebukes the wicked incurs abuse.  
<sup>8</sup> Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you;  
rebuke the wise and they will love you.  
<sup>9</sup> Instruct the wise and they will be wiser still;  
teach the righteous and they will add to their learning.

- <sup>10</sup> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
- <sup>11</sup> For through wisdom your days will be many,  
and years will be added to your life.
- <sup>12</sup> If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you;  
if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer.
- <sup>13</sup> Folly is an unruly woman;  
she is simple and knows nothing.
- <sup>14</sup> She sits at the door of her house,  
on a seat at the highest point of the city,
- <sup>15</sup> calling out to those who pass by,  
who go straight on their way,
- <sup>16</sup> “Let all who are simple come to my house!”  
To those who have no sense she says,
- <sup>17</sup> “Stolen water is sweet;  
food eaten in secret is delicious!”
- <sup>18</sup> But little do they know that the dead are there,  
that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.

### Interpretation

The personification of “Lady Wisdom” from Proverbs 8 continues in Proverbs 9. And in Proverbs 9 we meet another personified character whom we might call “Dame Folly.” Both Lady Wisdom and Dame Folly are depicted as being perched at high places in the city and calling out in the streets. Both are building their respective houses and soliciting the simple to become their guests. Both even use the same beckoning phrase, “Let all who are simple come to my house.” However, the author is drawing a distinction. Lady Wisdom calls out to find life abundantly in her, while Dame Folly—like a siren from Homer’s *The Odyssey*—seeks to lure and entice the simple into her home to their demise.

Frankly, this dynamic is what makes it so difficult to live the truth and character of God in context. It can be difficult to differentiate the message of wisdom from the message of folly because at least at the surface level the messages sound similar. Both call out, “Let the simple come to my house.” Isn’t it just like the enemy to

masquerade as wisdom and light but to have nefarious intentions all along? Jesus observed this dynamic. Remember when Jesus was tempted by the devil? The devil quoted scripture to test Him. Yet Jesus was able to refute the devil by using the scriptures properly. You see, like wisdom, Jesus said He came that humanity might have life and have it abundantly, but our enemy came to steal, kill, and destroy (cf. John 10:10). Elsewhere, He said the enemy cannot deal in truth because lies are his native tongue. The devil is the “father of lies” (cf. John 8:44). The enemy’s modus operandi is offering half-truths that give some semblance of godliness or wisdom but in the end lead to destruction. As Proverbs 14:12 states, “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.”

The temptation of Jesus reveals that scripture is the very wisdom of God but the right and wise application of it is essential. Let us consider the issue of human rights. The modern concept of human rights has its origins in Judeo-Christian ethics. Once again Tim Keller writes that American philosopher and Professor Emeritus at Yale University, Nicholas Wolterstorff,

... summarizing much recent historical scholarship, argues that [the modern concept of] individual human rights developed... based on theological themes in the Bible.... and that there is no plausible or better alternative grounding for human rights than the original, religious basis.

Christianity rightly teaches that human beings are made in the image of God. As image bearers we have the responsibility to honor the image of God in the humanity of others. This assumption of human rights is built into the very fabric of our society. We see it explicitly reflected in one of our founding documents, the *Declaration of Independence*, which reads, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The “American Experiment” was established on the biblical

principle that human rights are God-given and that no one can take them away from us. The wise application of the biblical principle of human rights in context has become a challenge in the modern cultural moment. Wisdom and folly are both crying out together about human rights but what wisdom and folly mean by human rights is often very different with opposing implications. Both wisdom and folly appeal to the value of human rights and here is how the argument goes, “If you don't agree with this, then you don't support the rights of (fill in the blank).” However, the wise Christian understands that proper application of the biblical principle is everything. How do we ensure we are listening to Lady Wisdom and not Dame Folly both of whom appeal,—“Let all who are simple come to my house,” when one leads to life and the other to death?

A few weeks ago Lauren, Bella, and I went to *Home Goods*. Bella asked me, “Dad, what would we do if we found money on the floor at the store?” I replied to her, “We would take the money to the front of the store and tell the store manager that we found it.” She further inquired, “And they would make an announcement over the speakers or something?” We said, “Maybe, but the point is that it would not belong to us, and we would look for the rightful owner of the money.” And Bella asked another deeper question, “What if the store manager took the money and kept it?” Great question. We replied, “We can't control what someone else does; all we can do is do the right thing to the best of our ability. That money doesn't belong to us so we would do whatever we could to return it.”

What we were doing at this moment was passing along our values in a very intentional way. I am convinced God intended “family” for this very reason. I could not think of a specific place in scripture that offers guidance for this exact issue, but perhaps one of you would share it with me. However, we sought to look through the lens of scripture and apply it as best we could to Bella's question. I thought about Bella's question from my perspective. If I had lost money in the store I would have felt helpless, frustrated, and sick. If someone else had found it and returned it, what a relief it would be! Perhaps the biblical principle to apply in this context is as Jesus said

in Luke 6:31, “Do to others as you would have them do to you”—the *Golden Rule*. The point, as Keller said, is that there may not be a specific example or a specific command in scripture to provide direct guidance for everything we experience in life. Our goal is not to look to the scriptures as a book of step-by-step instructions for every daily experience. Rather our goal should be to understand scripture as a lens through which our world is brought into focus.

### **A Biblical Worldview**

The goal of immersing ourselves in God’s Word is to establish a biblical worldview. As we learn to see the world through scripture our worldview is constructed upon the principles or pillars of wisdom found in scripture. Proverbs 8 and 9 offer a wonderful poem teaching that God has built wisdom into the very fabric of creation. In chapter 9 wisdom is building a home that reflects God’s created design. I am convinced that God intended for our homes to be established as a reflection of God’s wise design. Our goal ought to be that our homes and everything over which we have influence are established on the sure foundation of a biblical worldview—a lens through which we can bring the fuzzy issues of today into sharper focus.

Proverbs 9:1 suggests that Wisdom has built her house and set it upon seven pillars. Over the years many biblical students have sought to determine the nature of the seven pillars. Some have suggested they are the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, the seven cardinal virtues, or even the seven churches of Revelation. Generally, Proverbs 8 and 9 seem to speak about the order of creation. In this great poem, wisdom has repeated patterns of six plus one, reflecting the order in which God created everything. God created everything in six days and rested on the seventh. Therefore, seven seems not to be representative of the seven principles of wisdom but rather God’s intention that our lives be oriented around God’s model of wisdom and completion. Today I want to suggest three biblical pillars upon which we can establish our homes in wisdom: the pillars of faith, hope and love.

## The Pillar of Faith

First is the Pillar of Faith. When our homes are established in faith God's Spirit dwells in our midst. Through faith we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us and abide with us. By the Spirit we have access to the very wisdom of God. By the Spirit, the scriptures are illuminated and we are able to understand them and to apply them. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit."

Perhaps we can summarize this verse with the simple proverb, "Spiritual things are discerned spiritually." The scriptures are the only foundation for faith and life and the Bible is a spiritual book. When through faith we receive the Spirit, we are enabled to interpret and apply the scriptures rightly, justly, and fairly to our lives. Spiritual things are discerned spiritually; therefore, Paul rightly observes that at times our actions may be interpreted as foolishness to the outside world in whom the Spirit of God does not reside.

Solomon, the author of Proverbs was King David's son and probably learned a great deal of wisdom from his father. Saul was king before David was king of Israel. After David defeated the giant Philistine warrior, Goliath, the Israelites praised David and Saul became jealous. Over time that jealousy bent Saul's heart and he became unhinged and deranged and began to seek David's life. Saul's son, Jonathan, who had a deep friendship with David, warned David of Saul's intentions so David fled for his life. Saul chased after him with 3,000 of his young men leaving a path of death and destruction in his wake. David and his allies were hiding deep inside a cave with their backs up against the wall when Saul entered the cave alone and was unaware that David was there. David's men encouraged him, "This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish'" (1 Samuel 24:4). The man who led the charge to seek David's life was helpless and David could have done as he wished. Instead of listening to his advisors David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul's



robe. Later, because Saul had been the Lord's anointed, David was ashamed of this action. He left the cave and made himself vulnerable as he called out to Saul, "This day you have seen with your own eyes how the LORD delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the LORD's anointed'" (1 Samuel 24:10). And he showed Saul the piece of his robe as proof.

Were it not for the Spirit, David's men probably would have considered David a fool. Saul was the one who was seeking David's life and causing so many problems. He was probably the subject of countless psalms about how enemies surrounded David on all sides. David could have ended it right then and there and who would blame him? But David spared his life; stepped out of hiding in faith; and confronted Saul. Underlying David's actions were a deep trust in the leadership of God and a desire to honor God's leaders—even a tyrant like Saul—because David honored God. David stood on the Pillar of Faith and trusted God to guide and protect him and God honored his faith. What may at first blush have seemed foolish was actually wise because his faith was anchored in God.

The Pillar of Faith is the first pillar upon which wisdom is established in our lives. When we trust in God, we allow the Spirit to enable us to rightly interpret and apply the scriptures to guide us in our lives—even when others may consider our wisdom folly! It is by trusting in the Lord with all our hearts that the Lord makes our paths straight. We hold unswervingly to God's Word.

### **The Pillar of Hope**

The second pillar of the foundation is hope. Proverbs 23:18 reads, "There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off." Our God is a God of hope. If wisdom is built upon the character of God we are wise to live as a people of hope. We have a crisis of hope today. Many view the future with skepticism or even dread. I was talking with a pastor friend who was reflecting on a conversation with a young woman who had shared how much anxiety, dread, and despair she had for the future. She felt as though the

world had so many crises her generation was responsible for solving: racial tensions, political division, a climate crisis, world conflicts, et cetera; that she had a crisis of hope.

While I am in no way suggesting that we have no responsibility over the stewardship of our world or the part to play in the larger problems of the world, we should not feel as though we are to be the savior of the world. Our world has a Savior! If we put that responsibility on ourselves it would be crushing. **Our hope is in Jesus**—period! To live wisely in this world is to allow our hope to be rightly placed.

I believe we should be able to differentiate between wisdom and folly by the outcome of our decisions. Wisdom calls out to us, “Come to my house” —where there is life and hope. Folly calls out, “Come to my house” —but like a siren, she seeks our demise. We will be able to differentiate between wisdom and folly by whether we are led to hope and a future or to despair and our demise. There is growing skepticism and pessimism today. Is that an indication of our embrace of folly? As Christians, we are wise to never give up hope. Our future and hope are secure in the Lord. Romans 15:13 states, “May the God [whose character is] hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

**When we live the truth and character of God in context our lives will overflow with Hope.**

### **The Pillar of Love**

Finally wisdom, or the truth and character of God, is established on the Pillar of Love.

1 John tells us that God’s central character trait is love. God is love and those who abide in love abide in God. It was out of love that God sent Jesus into the world to save the world. For us to live the truth and character of God in context we must embody that love. In Christian theology “the rule of love” has sometimes been used to describe the result of our discipleship. If we are living according to the truth and character of God we will grow to love God more and

more and we will grow to love our neighbors deeply. The wise Christian will establish life on the Pillar of Love.

Still, it may be helpful to note that at times both wisdom and folly call out that we should love. However, they are oriented differently. Wisdom says love and seeks the well-being and hope for all. Let your love reflect God's created order and wisdom. Frankly, I believe folly often says today, "You are not loving if you cannot accept my perspective on this or that. If you do not accept this—you do not accept me." Or worse, "If you do not accept my perspective on this—you hate me!" To love is not to say there are no standards in the world. Rather, to love someone is to seek their best which is to hope that their lives align with God's design. I believe that sometimes Folly's call to love is merely a ploy in the tool of the manipulative to silence dissenting voices. Wisdom calls out in the streets to lovingly lead others to live abundantly. At times, respectfully disagreeing with another is the most loving way to live.

God has built and established this world in wisdom. Wisdom is found in our central document, the Bible. While the scriptures do not speak directly to every situation we will face, our goal is to develop a biblical worldview established on the pillars of faith, hope, and love. **With these pillars, we will live the truth and character of God in context.■**



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9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | [fpcbonita.org](http://fpcbonita.org)