

Proverbs 8:10–13 (The Message)

Prefer my life-disciplines over chasing after money,
and God-knowledge over a lucrative career.
For Wisdom is better than all the trappings of wealth;
nothing you could wish for holds a candle to her.
“I am Lady Wisdom, and I live next to Sanity;
Knowledge and Discretion live just down the street.
The Fear-of-GOD means hating Evil,
whose ways I hate with a passion—
pride and arrogance and crooked talk.

Proverbs 17:17 (NIV)

¹⁷ A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for a time of adversity.

Proverbs 18:24 (NIV)

²⁴ One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 (NIV)

⁹ Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:
¹⁰ If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.
But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.

Luke 14:7–11 (NRSV)

⁷ When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸ “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Self-sufficient? Is that to be our way?

I was brought up to be self-sufficient, to lift myself up the bootstraps, to depend on no one. I’m sure I’m not alone in this, for Americans have always strived to be a self-sufficient people. Merriam-Webster’s has two definitions for “self-sufficient.” The first is “able to maintain oneself or itself without outside aid: capable of providing for one’s own needs.” Sounds about right. But the second definition is the one that should get our attention: “having an extreme confidence in one’s own ability or worth.” Therein lies the trap.

Seeking to provide for one’s own needs is one thing. But there are two fundamental problems: no one is truly self-sufficient, we all depend in one degree or another upon others. We are bound up in complex webs of societal and personal pressures and relationships. But more importantly, the belief that one can be truly self-sufficient is squarely on the path to pride, arrogance, and hubris. And we all know the great truth of Proverbs 16:18, “Pride goes before destruction; a haughty spirit before a fall.” The truths of Proverbs are as relevant now as they were more than two millennia ago.

The book of Proverbs does not open with the good, practical advice that we associate with Proverbs. Instead, the first third of the book is an extended presentation of the value of wisdom and the danger of folly. In an extended metaphor, a young man is wooed by two women, Wisdom and Folly. Surprisingly, both women in the metaphor live in the highest point in the city (Proverbs 9:3 and 9:14), a place reserved in all ancient near-eastern cities as the place of god(s).¹ What are *both* Wisdom and Folly doing there?

The Israelites had always been tempted to worship other gods, Baal being the chief god in the Canaanite pantheon. It is the priests of Baal that Elijah takes on at the great competition recounted in 1 Kings 18. Thus, the choice offered between Wisdom and Folly in the book of Proverbs is a choice between the LORD God and Baal. Who will the Israelites follow? Who, or what, will *we* follow? Who is *our* god? Will our god be money or time or career or family or flag or the “divine within” or spirituality? Or will our god be the one true God, revealed fully in Jesus?

This choice is the most important choice any of us ever make in our lives. Scripture always casts the choice in stark terms – the way of the wise or the way of the foolish, the narrow path or the broad, for God or against God. We can’t have it both ways.

Jesus – Wisdom Teacher

Ben Witherington writes, “In the Jewish tradition, ultimately Wisdom was *the* teacher of God’s people. . . . Matthew assigns this role of Wisdom as *the* teacher to Jesus himself. . . . In his resurrection Jesus becomes *the* Teacher who continues teaching and guiding his people how to live.”

This does not mean that Jesus was merely a dispenser of sage advice. Rather, Jesus used the Wisdom forms like proverbs and parables to convey the message that the Kingdom of God was arriving in himself.

We tend to think of wisdom as an abstraction. But for the Jews, Wisdom was the expression of the living God. Wisdom was one of several cherished symbols for God and God’s work in the world. The book of Proverbs personifies Wisdom as a woman who exercises a commanding presence over the city, as God does – for God is Wisdom. The Gospel writers depict Jesus as Wisdom in person, wisdom you could talk to and touch. And, further, if Wisdom connotes God and God’s work and Jesus is Wisdom in person, then . . . Jesus is God. Jesus as Wisdom is another means by which the first Christians came to embrace Jesus as divine.

There is no room for compromise. The Laodiceans thought they could be lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, and Jesus spit them out of his mouth (Revelation 3:14-22).

It is this choice that God lays out before us in the first part of Proverbs, for unless we embrace God as the foundation of our life from which all things follow, there isn’t much point in reading the book of Proverbs. Without God, Proverbs becomes nothing more than yet another self-help book – and who needs another one of those.

By beginning Proverbs with the choice between Wisdom and Folly, God reshapes the specific advice that follows. If we choose Folly, the way of the world, then all the specific advice in the proverbs becomes nothing more than helpful tips that might get you further in life, depending on your goals.

But if we choose Wisdom, the way of God, then all the proverbs become infused with God-awareness and God-purpose. Proverbs 16:18 becomes not just a warning about pridefulness, but a call to seek humility, to see that we can never be truly self-sufficient. The proverbs above are then not simply about the value of friends, but a call to surround ourselves

¹From Dillard and Longman’s, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Zondervan, 1994. Only one person could build on the highest point in a city and that was the city’s god. Thus, God’s temple in Jerusalem was built on the highest point within the city walls.

with those who are also seeking after Lady Wisdom, rather than the fools who will lead us away from God and toward ruin.

From arrogance to humility

Not surprisingly, Jesus taught wisdom, i.e., God's way. Today's passage from Luke relates part of what happens when Jesus is invited to dinner at the home of a Pharisee. After getting into another dust-up over a healing, Jesus then pointed out the way they all sat down to dinner. People would rush to get the more esteemed seating. Jesus told

How to Go Wrong with the Book of Proverbs

Dillard and Longman remind us that there are a few ways we could go wrong when we come to the book of Proverbs.

First, we can make the proverbs out to be absolutes, divine promises that always bear out. However, the proverbs themselves reflect truths that will bear out over time. You and I know that the good guys do not always win in this life. But our time frames are not limited to this life. God is a mighty fortress even for those who die at the hands of evil.

Second, we need to read the proverbs in the context of all Scripture. Read alone, the proverbs would lead us to believe that success is God's blessing and suffering is his curse. But the book of Job reminds us that things are not that simple. Yes, sin always carries with it terrible consequences that may not be immediately evident. But at the same time, suffering does not necessarily imply sin. Stuff happens and much of it we don't understand. Job certainly didn't.

Third, as highlighted in this study, always read the pithy aphorisms that make up much of the book in the context of the first eight chapters. Will we choose Wisdom or folly? Everything starts there.

them it was much better to get invited to a better seat than it is to get demoted to a lesser seat. Sound advice. But is that all it is? No . . . not for Jesus. In v. 10 he tells them not to take merely a lower seat, but to take the lowest . . . for those who lift themselves will be humbled and the humble will be lifted up. We can safely bet Jesus was not invited back.

Turning to our own world, we know that genuine humility is not highly valued. The typical Jew of Jesus' day was probably a farmer or herder, or perhaps a simple merchant or tradesman or homemaker. Their ambitions might have been to add a few sheep to their flock or sell a few more tunics in the market. We live in a far different world. Many of our life ambitions are played out in organizations. The large for-profit and not-for-profit organizations for which so many of us work simply did not exist in the first century. We live in the Age of the Organization – and it is little more than 150 years old.

Most of us do not work in isolation or even amongst just a few trusted friends. Rather, whether we are working with others to build cars or instruct third-graders or care for the ill, many of us have to manage countless relationships every day. We have ample opportunities to “push our way to the front” or “sweet-talk our way to the top” rather than to “put ourselves aside and help others get ahead” (Philippians 2:1-4).² Indeed, such words hardly even seem to make sense in the context of the many modern workplaces.

Believe me, I know that humility is not exactly a treasured commodity in many workplaces. But still, looking back over my career in business, I can remember several managers

who always seemed to put others ahead of themselves and yet were able to achieve their career ambitions. These were all confident people who valued trust in a relationship above all else. They seemed to almost intuitively understand that trust enables people to take risks and to learn well. They understood that trust takes a long time to develop, but can be destroyed almost instantly. They were always willing to help others get ahead; indeed, they took great satisfaction (joy!?) in helping others discover talents that they never knew they had.

² Three of Eugene Peterson's paraphrases from Philippians 2 in *The Message*.

I don't know whether these men and women were Christians, but they were certainly walking the path of wisdom. Are we? We are followers of Jesus, seeking to do as our Master did, seeking Wisdom.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

If someone asked you to contrast Wisdom and Folly what would you say to them? How is a discussion of Wisdom and Folly going to be different for a Christian or Jew than it would be for someone who denies God?

In his commentary on Proverbs in the *New Interpreters Bible* (in our library), Raymond Van Leeuwen draws our attention to the complex relationship between Lady Wisdom (the way of God) and Dame Folly (the way of the world). [You might read Proverbs 9]. Wisdom's house "designates a world in order, full of life. Folly's house is a world in disorder, descending into Sheol, the realm of death." But both occupy this world. Wisdom may have built this house, but Folly dwells here too. Folly seeks to tear down the life-giving house that Wisdom built. Seen this way, Folly is evil, creating nothing, only destroying. And here is the key for our day-to-day experiences. Folly masquerades as good (Isaiah 5:20). When we are tempted away from God, it is by something that God created good, but has been distorted and twisted by Folly/evil/sin. As Van Leeuwen writes, "Folly has not built her house, she has stolen it."

How can such distortion by Folly be put right? Who can put it right? How can we possibly hope to see through the distortion to the underlying goodness and beauty?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More on Wisdom and Folly

Monday, Proverbs 1 A father gives advice and Lady Wisdom calls for the people to turn from their own way.

Tuesday, Proverbs 3 Wisdom bestows well-being.

Wednesday, Proverbs 4 Be sure to get Wisdom – at any cost!

Thursday, Proverbs 6 Warnings against adultery and folly

Friday, Proverbs 8 Wisdom calls out to us.

Saturday, Proverbs 9 The invitations of Wisdom and Folly

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class (no class on April 16)

We are studying the gospel of John.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class (no class on April 17)

We are studying the book of Samuel.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Jewish History*, a six-week series with faculty from UTD's Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies.