

“WISDOM AND FOLLY”

Proverbs 9:1-18

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth. Then took the other. I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood and I—I took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

The words are from Robert Frost’s poem The Road Not Taken, written in 1916. In the decades since, literary scholars and poetry lovers have debated the meaning of that poem. Was Frost saying that “the road less traveled” was the right road or the wrong road, the right choice or wrong choice? Regardless, Frost’s poem is clearly about making choices. When two roads diverge in a yellow wood, only one road can be taken. A choice must be made.

Life is like that poem; or more precisely, that poem is like life. Life is filled with diverging roads and ongoing choices. Some choices are relatively minor: “Should I eat cornflakes or oatmeal? Should I take the freeway or the back way?” Other choices are more serious: “Should I accept the new job or stay with the old one? Should I sell the house or wait for the market to improve?”

Even more important than these are the diverging roads—moral, ethical, and spiritual choices—that we face on a daily basis: “Should I yield to temptation or resist it? Should I tell a convenient lie or speak the painful truth? Should I teach my children to love money or to love God? Should I break my marriage vows or remain faithful ‘until death us do part?’ Should I obey the words of men or obey the words of God? Should I trust in myself for eternal salvation or trust alone in Jesus Christ?”

Two roads are always diverging in our lives. We know this from experience. And like Robert Frost, we can’t always see beyond the bend in the undergrowth—that is, the eventual outcome of our choices. So, how do we choose the right road? And does it really matter if we choose the wrong road? Solomon answered these questions in Proverbs 9. The analogy he used was not that of two diverging roads, but of two different women with competing invitations; one named Wisdom, the other named Folly.

If I asked you to define wisdom, what would you say: experience, age, intelligence, education? If I asked you to name one truly wise person, who would you name: Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking? The word wisdom is used two-

hundred and thirty-four times in Scripture. Virtually every Bible word for wisdom—from the Hebrew CHAKMAH to the Greek SOPHIA—has the sense of prudence and discernment; that is, possessing the knowledge required to determine right from wrong.

Solomon was a wise man at many levels. His IQ may have been as astronomical as his wealth. He was an expert in the fields of literature, music, politics, science, history, astronomy, biology, and even botany. According to 1 Kings 5:29, **“God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the seashore.”** Yet, when Solomon became king of Israel, this is what he asked of God: **“Give Your servant a discerning heart to govern Your people and to distinguish between right and wrong,”** 1 Kings 3:9.

Solomon understood that true wisdom had nothing to do with mental prowess or intelligence or academic degrees or educational institutions. True wisdom came from knowing, believing, and reverencing God. True wisdom lay in the truth of God’s word. **“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,”** he wrote in Proverbs 9:10, **“and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”**

Over and over the Bible insists that true wisdom comes from God; that true wisdom is revealed in God’s word; and that the truly wise person believes in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and conforms his will to God’s will. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:15-17, **“From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

Not only does Scripture insist that true wisdom is from God; it also teaches that human wisdom is foolishness to God. Listen to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 3:18-19, **“Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a ‘fool’ so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.”**

This is not to say that human wisdom has no value. Learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. Become an expert in various fields. Do the New York Times crosswords puzzles. Blurt out the answers on TV’s Jeopardy or Wheel of Fortune. Yet, never forget that human wisdom has human limitations and human weaknesses.

Mathematics cannot tell you how to be saved or how to live a God-pleasing life. Geometry cannot lead you to Jesus Christ, of whom Paul wrote in Colossians 2:8, in Christ **“are hidden all the riches of wisdom and knowledge.”** And never forget that in many instances human wisdom is diametrically opposed to God’s wisdom—insisting that getting

is better than giving; that human works are better than God's grace; that earthly possessions are better than treasures in heaven; that infidelity is better than marital commitment. Such so-called worldly wisdom is utter foolishness in God's sight. And choosing folly over wisdom, Man's Way over God's Way, always has dire consequences. What then may we learn about wisdom and folly from today's text?

First, wisdom and folly are always side-by-side choices. Look at the text. Where is Wisdom located? **"The highest point of the city,"** verse 3; that is, a place of prominence. But where is Folly also located? In the same place, **"the highest point of the city,"** verse 14. Next, how does Wisdom open her invitation? **"Let all who are simple come in here,"** verse 4. But how does Folly also open her invitation? With the same words, **"Let all who are simple come in here,"** verse 16. Next, whom does the Wisdom address? **"The simple,"** verse 4. But whom does Folly also address? The very same people, **"the simple,"** verse 16. In Proverbs the word "simple" does not mean simple-minded but lacking spiritual knowledge and moral direction.

So, why would Solomon picture Wisdom and Folly as having the same opening invitation, the same location, and the same audience? In part to teach us that Wisdom and Folly are always present, are always side-by-side, whenever we face moral, ethical, or spiritual choices.

However, a second reason for the close proximity of Wisdom and Folly is to illustrate that the **"simple"** and **"those who lack judgment"** on their own cannot tell the difference between Wisdom and Folly. Without Scripture and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, Wisdom and Folly may appear the same—same location, same invitation, same audience.

Surely, all of us have heard people say, "Well, in my opinion, all religions are the same: Islam, Christian Science, Scientology, Mormonism, Seventh Day Adventism, Judaism, Christianity. They may be different roads, but they all lead to the same God and the same salvation. The Bible and the Koran are on the same shelf in the Public Library. Both are books. Both are religious. Both talk about God. Both have the same Dewey Decimal System Category Number. So, what's the difference? And even if there is a difference, God doesn't care. God, if there is a God, is like a loving, doting Grandfather, who doesn't care what the kids do or believe so long as they drop by for a visit on Sunday morning."

Is this true? Far from it. Jesus said, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me,"** John 14:6. He did not say that he was one way among many acceptable ways to the Father. Likewise, Paul wrote to Timothy, **"From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for**

salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” 2 Timothy 3:15. He did not say ‘from infancy you have known Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* or *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien.’

To the “simple” and “unsuspecting,” Wisdom and Folly may *appear* to be similar. Choosing one over the other may *appear* to have no consequences. However, as Solomon teaches us in Proverbs 9, Wisdom and Folly, God’s Way and Man’s Way, are vastly different; so different that God Himself declares in Isaiah 55:9, **“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”**

Second, Wisdom builds up. Folly builds nothing. Proverbs 9:1 states, **“Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars.”** But no mention is made in the entire chapter of Folly building anything; not one thing, not one stone, not one pillar, not lifting one little finger. According to Solomon, Folly merely **“sits at the door of her house,”** Proverbs 9:14.

Moreover, that which Wisdom builds is portrayed as strong and permanent. Notice the descriptions: Wisdom builds. Wisdom hews out. Wisdom sets up seven supporting pillars. The Hebrew word translated as **“has hewn out,”** CHATZAV, was used especially of cutting out stone. In other words, Wisdom’s house is a house of stone. And this stone house has seven stone pillars—seven being a number of completeness in Scripture. The symbolism Solomon used of Wisdom is very clear. The house Wisdom builds is always strong, always well-established, and always lasting. In the house of Wisdom, nothing is missing from life or for making godly choices.

By contrast, except for the mention of a door, Folly’s house is not described at all. And this very non-descriptiveness creates the image of a run-down rental property, with a crumbling foundation; with weeds, litter, and crushed beer cans in the yard; and inside, cheap furnishings, stained carpet, cigarette burns on the Lazy Boy recliner, constantly running toilet. In other words, Folly’s house is a dwelling of no substance, no strength, no permanence, and no genuine beauty.

A house is only as strong as its building materials. Wouldn’t you agree? The same is true of a household. We can either construct our households, our families, our lives, using the cheap, fragile building materials of human wisdom or using the rock-solid truths of Scripture. This is exactly what Jesus taught in His Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders, saying: **“Everyone who hears these words of Mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. 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. 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 the sand. 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.

Which house would you prefer to live in: the one built on the rock or the one built on sand; the house Wisdom built or the house Folly rented? Parents, how would you prefer to build and build up your children’s lives, hopes, and confidence; by using the flimsy building materials of worldly Folly—“wealth equals happiness; and “getting is better than giving;” and “whoever dies with the most toys wins?” Or, would you prefer to use the rock-solid, infallible truths of Scripture, of which Jesus said in Mark 13:31, **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away”**?

Realize what a difference we can make in the lives of our friends and families, our marriages and ministries, our happiness and confidence, when we build them all upon the foundation of God’s word. Each of us here today has the opportunity to make that difference simply by sharing the invitation of Wisdom: **“Let all who are simple come in here?”** Where? To church? Yes; but more precisely, to the living, abiding word of God.

Thank God for godly parents, who pass down more to successive generations than family heirlooms and photo albums and life insurance benefits. Thank God for godly parents who teach their children wisdom from God; who teach their children right from wrong; who teach their children the truths of Scripture, and to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Thank God for godly parents who not only teach Christ but live Christ, so that by word and example, children will know how much their parents love Christ.

Third and last, Wisdom acts, while Folly waits. Notice what Solomon says of Wisdom: **“She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table. She has sent out her maids, and she calls from the highest point of the city,”** Proverbs 9:2-3. But as for Folly? **“She sits at the door of her house,”** Proverbs 9:14. Remember that Wisdom in Proverbs represents the word of God. And the word of God is all about the acts of God. From cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation, from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to the tree on which Jesus Christ, the Son of God, suffered and died, the Bible proclaims how God acted in divine wisdom to redeem the world through Christ. God acted to save us, because we could not act to save ourselves.

And this, perhaps, is one of the most fundamental differences between Wisdom and Folly, between Christianity and every other religion. Christianity alone declares that God has redeemed the world through Jesus Christ. Every other religion declares that salvation comes from human works and human righteousness. Here are two diverging roads moving in vastly different directions, and with vastly different destinations. Wisdom says, “Jesus saves.” Folly says, “Save yourself.”

And Folly “sits,” said Solomon. Folly waits. Folly procrastinates. And it is sheer folly for anyone to put daily life ahead of eternal life, or self ahead of salvation, even with the best of intentions: “But I had so much to do. I had so many errands to run.” Can you imagine offering such excuses to Jesus on Judgment Day? Are we really saying that in our busy schedules we have no time for God, no time for His word, no time for our salvation? Would Solomon call that Wisdom or Folly?

In the end, the greatest difference between Wisdom and Folly is this: God’s Wisdom gives life. **“Leave your simple ways and you will live,”** says Wisdom in verse 6; and in verse 11, **“For through me your days will be many, and years will be added to your life.”** And as for Folly? Read verse 16: **“But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave.”**

Choose Wisdom. To add a slight revision to Robert Frost’s poem:

‘I shall be telling this with joy
somewhere ages and age hence:
two roads diverged in my busy life
and I—I took the road God called me by;
and that has made all the difference.’