

Walking Wisely in a World of Fools

The Quest for Hidden Treasure – Part III

Proverbs 1:7

Introduction

In the preface of a commentary I have on the book of Proverbs, Robert Alden has these words:

Since 1955 sheer factual knowledge has doubled every five years. Our generation possesses more data about the universe and human personality than all previous generations put together. Think of it this way: high school graduates today have been exposed to more information about the world than Plato, Aristotle, and the [Apostle Paul] combined. In terms of facts alone, neither Aristotle nor the Apostle Paul could pass a college entrance exam today.ⁱ

What I find especially ironic is that much of this quote is now terribly out of date. Alden wrote this in 1983, and he is now way behind on his facts.

According to a recent report by the Education Secretary of the United States, technical knowledge alone is now actually doubling, not every five years, but every two years. This means that students who are starting a four year technical degree, will find that half of what they learn in their first year of study will be outdated by their third year of study. In fact, by the year 2010, it is predicted that technical knowledge will double every seventy-two hours.

Imagine – in the 1950s, technical knowledge with machines, computers, and gizmos doubled every five years. It has been doubling now every two years. Soon it will be doubling every three and a half days.

This report went on to say that some of the top ten jobs in America did not even exist in the year 2000. This means we are preparing students to hold

jobs that have not been created, using technologies that have not been invented, in order to solve problems we do not even know will exist.

How do we get ready for this?

Listen to even more staggering facts from the Department of Education:

- the number of text messages sent and received every day exceed the population of the world;
- by reading the *New York Times* newspaper for one week, we will have been exposed to more information than the average person came across in a lifetime in the 1800s.

How do we prepare for a future when we have no idea what it looks like? How do we manage the changes all around us?

How do we get ready to handle forms of temptation and kinds of pressure that were inconceivable twenty-five years ago? The internet was something we could not have conceived of twenty-five years ago – until Al Gore invented it.

When my twin sons were born twenty-two years ago, if I had been asked how I would talk to them about the problem and temptation of pornography that they would begin facing in life, I would have been thinking about how to shield them from magazines.

The truth is that with all our knowledge, the world is not a better place. It is, in fact, in the same mess it has always been in. The only thing that has changed is the speed of change and the equipment. All the information and technology advancements have not transformed our world into a better place.

Alumni from noted universities have mastered information about a narrow slice of life, but cannot make it out of the first grade when it comes to living successfully with others.ⁱⁱ

One author said that society today is populated with a bumper crop of brilliant failures. He went on to say that we probably do not have more fools than other nations, but in America, fools are better organized.ⁱⁱⁱ

The truth is that knowledge is not enough. Even if it doubled every twenty-four hours, the world would still be full of educated disasters.

Why? While some things change, some things never change. In other words, the conditions of the human experience may change rapidly, but the condition of the human heart does not.

Yes, there are now 3,000 new books published every single day in our world. This further proves the words of Paul to Timothy that the world of unbelievers is,

always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. (II Timothy 3:7)

This is the reason someone can graduate at the top of their class and fail at the basic institutions of life.

There must be more than knowledge.

Facts do not provide the foundation for life. This is what Proverbs is all about.

Turn in your collection of Proverbs to chapter 1, verse 7. This is the key verse; the theme statement; the theological premise of the entire collection.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

Knowledge and wisdom and instruction are synonyms in this context to merely state the premise of Proverbs. They all allow a person to make the right decision for the right reason at the right time and apply it in the right spirit in order to attain the right effect, because they place the highest priority on their relationship with God.

Since fools are people who neither believe who God is nor desire a relationship with Him, they ultimately and effectively despise knowledge, wisdom and instruction, as the latter part of verse 7 says. This means a fool is someone who is unable to make the right decision for the right reason at the right time and apply it in the right spirit in order to attain the right effect.

By the way, in the Bible, a fool is not someone with a low IQ. It has nothing to do with their SAT score.

The word “fool” is used about twenty-six times in the Old Testament and all but seven of them are found in the book of Proverbs.

The Fool

The fool is described in living color throughout the book of Proverbs. Let me give six characteristics that I have uncovered.

1. The fool is arrogantly unaccountable.

Solomon writes,

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel. (Proverbs 12:15)

2. The fool is unruly.

As Solomon describes,

A fool's anger is known at once, but a prudent man conceals dishonor. (Proverbs 12:16)

In other words, the prudent man holds back his dishonorable feelings.

3. The fool is not only unaccountable and unruly, but unteachable.

A fool rejects his father's discipline [or training], but he who regards reproof is sensible. (Proverbs 15:5)

Solomon writes, in Proverbs 26:11,

Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.

In other words, he just will not learn. In fact, the fool cannot imagine himself as mistaken. But the root of his problem is not mental, it is spiritual.

4. The fool is also uncontainable.

Proverbs 20:3 says,

Keeping away from strife [literally, ceasing from strife] is an honor for a man, but any fool will quarrel.

Most men will consider it honorable to stop an argument, but the fool loves to argue almost for argument sake.

The fool is described in Proverbs as unaccountable and unruly and unteachable and uncontainable. Let us look at another description.

5. The fool is incorrigible.

In other words, there is an irredeemable, incurable side to his foolishness since he denies the

existence of God, who alone can rescue him. The fool persists in loving his arrogant self-view and sinful lifestyle.

Solomon says,

Though you pound a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his foolishness will not depart from him. (Proverbs 27:22)

Sometimes we shake our heads over the foolishness of people. I pulled a few Associated Press reports as illustrations of foolishness that we probably could not pound out of these people.

- This one is from Texas:

Forty-five year old Amy Brasher was arrested in San Antonio after a mechanic reported to the police that eighteen packages of marijuana were packed in the engine compartment of the car which she had brought to the mechanic for an oil change. According to police, Brasher later said that she did not realize that the mechanic would have to raise the hood to change the oil.

- Here is one from Michigan:

A man walked into Burger King in Ypsilanti, Michigan, at 7:50 a.m., flashed a gun and demanded cash. The clerk turned him down because he said he could not open the cash register without a food order. So the man ordered onion rings, but the clerk said they were not available for breakfast. The frustrated man just turned and walked away.

- This one is from Kentucky:

Two men in a Kentucky town tried to pull the front off a cash machine by running a chain from the machine to the bumper of their pickup truck. Instead of pulling the front panel off the machine, they pulled the bumper off their truck. Scared, they left the scene and drove home with the chain still attached to the machine – with their bumper still attached to the chain – with their license plate still on the bumper.

The Message paraphrases Proverbs 27:22 to read,

You cannot pound foolishness out of a fool.

Why? Because at the heart of the issue is an unredeemed person. He has chosen his foolishness.

Let me give one more characteristic of a fool that is obvious.

6. The fool is unholy.

David wrote,

The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” . . . (Psalm 14:1a)

And as one man said, “Where there is no God, anything is permissible.”

This is the reason, as Solomon wrote in Proverbs 14:9a,

Fools mock at sin . . .

Literally, fools mock guilt.

They are committed to unholy living. Fools mock those with moral absolutes. They say that guilt over sin is simply the residue of the Victorian era – too much religion – and shrug it off.

This is the reason they can be brilliant engineers and doctors and mechanics and school teachers, but utterly devoid of common sense and utterly incapable of selfless relationships and utterly wayward in moral attitudes and actions.

By biblical definition, a fool is someone whose mind is closed to God, whose conscience is seared to sin, and whose heart is fully devoted to self.

The Wise Person

The wise person, on the other hand, is the one who fears the Lord. Solomon put it this way, in Proverbs 1:7,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge . . .

The Hebrew word translated “beginning” – “the fear of the Lord is the beginning” – is used fifty times elsewhere and can be easily understood as something that is foundational or best. The Hebrew root is an offshoot of the word for “head,” which suggests that which is first or primary.

One Old Testament scholar wrote, “It is not merely a starting point, it is a foundation to build upon.”^{iv}

In other words, Solomon is saying, “The best of knowledge; the foundation of all true knowledge is a relationship of awe and respect and intimacy and worship with the faithful and true God.”

In Proverbs 9:10, Solomon said this again, only a little differently, as he wrote,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

In other words, the ability to make the right decision at the right time in the right spirit for the right reason to achieve the right effect is a relationship with the Creator God.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of” – the foundation for – “knowledge”.

Meaning of “the fear of the Lord”

Now, we had better understand what “the fear of the Lord” means, because it is the beginning of knowledge.

This phrase is a compound expression. We cannot figure it out by separating the two ideas and studying the words “fear” and then “Yahweh” or “Lord” separately.

This would be like separating “butterfly” and studying all you could about “butter” and then studying the “fly”. You would end up with an animal that melts in the sun.^v

Many attempt to do just that with this expression. They study the word fear and then transpose that back into their relationship with God.

Certainly the concept of “fearing God” is a biblical concept. Everyone we read about that has an audience with God usually faints with fear.

- Isaiah cried upon seeing a vision of God, *“Woe is me, for I am ruined.” (Isaiah 6:5)*
- The Apostle John saw the glory of God and, *“fell at His feet like a dead man.” (Revelation 1:17)*
- *“It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:31)*
- Even Daniel, after seeing the angelic visitor, which may well have been a Christophany, began to tremble uncontrollably and had no strength. (*Daniel 10*)

So is Solomon saying that the wise person walks around with a sense of dread and terror; having fainting spells now and then as he encounters the living God?

Is this how we walk wisely in a world of fools?

I believe the best way to interpret this phrase is to let the Bible interpret it for us. In fact, this is true with any text. The synthesis of scripture, or to use another phrase, the analogy of scripture is part of a correct approach to understanding scripture.

This phrase, used by Solomon, is wonderfully explained and expanded when all we do is get out our concordance and track it throughout scripture.

Characteristics of those who fear the Lord

Let us look at three living characteristics of someone who fears the Lord:

1. First, there is joyful delight in the word of God.

David wrote,

... How blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in His commandments. (Psalm 112:1)

In Psalm 119:103 David writes,

How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

You might say, “Okay, the one who fears the Lord obviously loves His word.”

However, the fear of the Lord is more than just reading and loving the word of God.

2. Secondly, there is a passionate desire to apply the word of God.

David wrote in Psalm 128:1,

Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.

Solomon spelled it out even more clearly in Proverbs 14:2,

He who walks in his uprightness fears the Lord, but he who is devious in his ways despises Him.

A wise person delights in the word of God and applies the truth of God to his life. Let us look at one more characteristic.

3. Thirdly, there is a placing of confidence in the promises of God.

David wrote in Psalm 147:11,

The Lord favors those who fear Him, those who wait for His lovingkindness.

These are the characteristics of those who fear the Lord.

How to develop the fear of the Lord

Let me quickly ask and answer another question, “How do we develop the fear of the Lord in order to walk wisely in a world of fools?”

1. First, constant exposure to the word of God will develop the fear of Him.

This is obvious, right? If the fear of the Lord is evidenced by the study and application of the word of God, then the way to develop greater fear of the Lord is to study His word even more.

I found it interesting that more than seven million people each year go online to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary. One of the top ten words looked

up, is the word “integrity”. One college professor commented on this interesting search by saying, “Perhaps integrity is becoming so scarce, its definition is now unfamiliar.”^{vi}

We have the idea that a wise person is a person who has all the answers about important things regarding relationships, integrity, communication, honesty, purity, etc., etc. The truth is that a wise person in the Bible is one who actually knows where to take his questions.

Listen to David words in Psalm 119:38,

Establish [confirm] Your word to Your servant, as that which produces reverence [fear of] You.

The fear of the Lord is a relationship – with the written word and the Living word.

2. Secondly, prayer will further develop the fear of the Lord.

Listen to this prayer of David, paraphrased in the Message,

God, teach me lessons for living so I can stay the course. Give me insight so I can do what you tell me – my whole life one long, obedient response. Guide me down the road of your commandments; I love traveling this freeway! Give me a bent for your words of wisdom, and not for piling up loot. Divert my eyes from toys and trinkets, invigorate me on the pilgrim way. Affirm your promises to me – promises made to all who fear you. . . . See how hungry I am for your counsel; preserve my life through your righteous ways! (Psalm 119:33ff)

What a prayer! It is a prayer that will help us swim in this ocean of change and information.

God’s word and prayer develop our wise walk. Let us look at one more.

3. Thirdly, the fear of God is also developed through wise counsel.

This wise counsel may come through parents, peers, friends – all of whom are described throughout the book of Proverbs, as we will uncover together. For indeed,

. . . in the multitude of counselors there is safety. (Proverbs 11:14)

Remember, a wise person, according to the scripture, admits he does not have all the answers.

I came across this fascinating account of Chuck Yeager, the famous test pilot in the late 1900s. He

was flying an F-86 Sabre over a lake in the Sierras when he decided to buzz a friend’s house near the edge of the lake – just rattle his windows for fun. During a slow roll, he suddenly felt his aileron lock. This is the hinged part of the edge of the wing that we see out a plane window that either flips up or down. Yeager said, “It was a hairy moment, flying about 150 feet off the ground upside down.”

A lesser experienced pilot might have panicked with fatal results, but Yeager let off the G’s, pushed up the nose, and indeed, the aileron unlocked. Climbing to 15,000 feet, where it was safer, Yeager tried the maneuver again. Every time that he rolled, the problem reoccurred. He knew that three or four pilots had died under similar circumstances, but to date, investigators were puzzled as to the source of the Sabre’s fatal flaw.

Yeager landed and went to his superior with a report, and the inspectors went to work. They found that a bolt on the aileron cylinder had been installed upside down. It seemed right side up, but this particular bolt had to be inserted with the head down rather than at the top. The culprit was found in a North American plant. An older man on the assembly line had ignored the instructions about how to insert the bolt because, “You don’t screw in a bolt upside down, you put it in from the top down.” He knew better! Yeager says that no one ever told the man how many pilots he had killed.^{vii}

What a foolish man.

A wise person is one who says, “Lord, give me the directions – I don’t know better than You.”

Conclusion

I will never navigate my way through this maze of information – and change. How do we walk with wisdom in a world of fools?

The foundation; the primary thing is not having all the answers, but having a living, vital, open, honest committed relationship with our Redeemer.

So, even when technology changes so fast and the world around us seems unsettled, we do not have to know what is coming:

- we cling with reverence and respect to the Rock;
- we apply with passion His revelation;
- we rejoice in the promises and assurance of His redemption.

This is the way we walk wisely in a world of fools.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/9/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Robert L. Alden, Proverbs: A Commentary on an Ancient Book of Timeless Advice (Baker, 1983), p. 7.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 7.

^{iv} Peter A. Steveson, A Commentary on Proverbs (BJU Press, 2001), p. 9.

^v Bruce K. Waltke, The Book of Proverbs (Eerdmans, 2004), p. 100.

^{vi} <http://www.cnn.com>, Dec. 10, 2005.

^{vii} Matt Friedeman, The Accountability Connection (Victor Books, 1992), <http://preachingtoday.com>.