

The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge



10p

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 23rd January 2005
by Mark Ashton

Proverbs chapter 9

Wisdom and Folly

Introduction: The Foolishness of God is Wiser than Man's Wisdom

Wisdom and folly are two great themes of the book of Proverbs. But it redefines those two concepts for us. In fact it turns them upside down. Edward de Bono has this story in one of his books: a small Australian schoolboy called Johnny used to get teased at school because when someone once offered him the choice of a two dollar coin (a comparatively small coin in Australia) and a one dollar coin (a considerably larger one), he chose the larger one dollar coin. The other boys all laughed at the way he didn't yet know that the smaller coin was worth twice as much as the larger one. So they would regularly tease him; and repeat the experiment and laugh at his stupidity because he always chose the larger and less valuable coin. Eventually a teacher had pity on Johnny and took him on one side and explained to him that the smaller coin was actually worth twice as much as the larger coin. "Yes," said Johnny, "I do know that. But how many times would they have offered me the coins if I had chosen the two dollar coin the first time?"

You see, there is often in life another way of looking at things, an alternative wisdom. We call that 'lateral thinking', and it can quickly degenerate into deviousness and deceit. I rather like this Dilbert cartoon that depicts an employer interviewing a prospective employee: "I ask all prospective employees this question to test their reasoning," he says. "You have one fox and two chickens that you need to get across a river. You can only take one at a time in the rowboat. The fox will eat the chickens if left alone."

You are probably familiar with that riddle and its solution. But this prospective employee had a different answer! "I'd buy livestock insurance, then barbeque the chickens and blame the fox." And the employer says, "Can you start today?"

Now, while the book of Proverbs communicates with you and me in that same sort of way—a lateral sort of a way (it's a bit like reading a riddle or a cartoon or a joke)—nevertheless the wisdom that the book of Proverbs speaks of is not a sort of supercharged version of human wisdom: it's not telling us how to be wise in a human way—a little sharper, a little more profound than normal human wisdom. No, it actually stands our ideas of human wisdom on their head (as we began to see last week).

A person can be very, very clever in human terms and highly educated. They can have more degrees than the thermometer (as one man put it) and be thoroughly successful in the world's eye, and yet still be what the Bible calls 'a fool'. In fact, I fear that many of our world's big names and celebrities (the people that you and I look up to and idolise) many of those would fall into exactly that Biblical category: the category of The Fool.

And on Education Sunday, in a city like Cambridge which worships the intellect and puts such great store on academic achievement, we need to listen carefully to what the book of Proverbs has to say to us. If we worship the god of education, we will need to be prepared to have our thinking recalibrated as to who the truly wise people are. So let's come humbly to Proverbs chapter 9, where we hear the voice of wisdom and the voice of folly.

1. The Voice of Wisdom and the Voice of Folly

(Proverbs 9:1-6, 13-18)

It starts with the Voice of Wisdom and her invitation to us: *Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars. 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. "Let all who are simple come in here!" she says to those who lack judgment. "Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding"* (9:1-6). You will have noticed, as the chapter was read to us, that the chapter ended with the Voice of Folly: *The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city, calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way. "Let all who are simple come in here!" she says to those who lack judgment. "Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!" But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave* (9:13-18). We saw last week how what our culture sees as one of the great high points of the human expression of freedom, sexual intercourse outside of marriage, is described by Proverbs as death: *But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave*. That's an example of what I mean by the reversal of wisdom: what we think looks wise, the book of Proverbs says, "No, it's the opposite."

In fact, chapter 9 forms the summary and conclusion of the first 8 chapters of the book which have hinged around the idea that we have a choice to exercise between following Wisdom or following Folly. Just glance back to chapter 1 (where we were last week), because verse 7 of chapter 1 is something of a motto for the whole book. We saw last week that the first six verses are telling us what the book of Proverbs consists of, and then it says: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline* (1:7). That's the motto of the whole book, and it sets a choice for us between two ways of living: *Choose my instruction instead of silver*. Wisdom says in chapter 8. And look at how chapter 8 ends: (Wisdom again is speaking) *Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favour from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death*. (8:32-36).

That appeal has been sounded constantly throughout these nine chapters. Notice that it isn't an appeal to start a quest ("Go and seek Wisdom"). It's an appeal to listen to a voice that is already addressing us. Revelation comes to us. By God's grace every human being is addressed by the voice of Wisdom. But alas!—there is another voice also ringing in our ears: *The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city, calling out to those who pass by . . .* (9:13-15a). Are you aware of that—that you and I are being addressed by these two voices in our lives, every day—the voice of Wisdom and the voice of Folly? I don't know if you've ever been in a situation where you suddenly realise somebody was calling to you. Last August Fiona and I found ourselves on the steps of the Opera House in Sydney, thinking we were a long way from any member of the congregation of St. Andrew the Great. I suddenly realised a little voice was shouting out behind us: 'Fiona, Mark, Fiona, Mark!' It was Andy and Josie Latimer (some of you might know them.) They happened to be in Sydney for just four hours when we encountered them on the steps of the Opera House. You may have had a similar experience.

But actually there are two voices calling your name all the time: the voice of Wisdom and the voice of Folly, according to the book of Proverbs. And when we start to hear and to differentiate those two voices ringing in our ears it will change the way we live our lives. Life can never be the same again, because we realise that Wisdom and Folly are at stake in the life-choices we make every day. Will we act wisely, or foolishly? That is particularly true at significant life changes: when we go to college for the first time—will we act foolishly or will we act wisely? If you came up to college here this last year have you followed the voice of Folly since then, or the voice of Wisdom? The first job: will I be wise, will I be foolish as a worker? Seeking someone to marry: will I marry wisely or foolishly? Will I make a wise parent or a foolish one?

Remember that no life change is ever spiritually neutral. It either takes you closer to God or further from Him. And I want to ask you, if I may, which way did your last life change take you? Are you nearer God now than you were, or are you further from Him? Which voice have you been heeding? Maybe you have changed country recently: Are you walking a little closer to God since you've been here in the U.K.? Which voice have we been heeding? That's the way the book of Proverbs would describe it to us: has Folly wooed us, or Wisdom?

Between the voice of Wisdom (in verses 1-6 of chapter 9) and the voice of Folly (in verses 13-18) there comes a discussion of the human response to Wisdom's voice (in verses 7-12).

2. The Refusal to be Corrected

(Proverbs 9:7-12)

Firstly notice:

(a) The value of criticism

(vv. 7-9)

Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult: whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning (vv. 7-9). In the book of Proverbs, the foolish person who goes Folly's way is called various names, but he is never called the dunce, the person of low I.Q. This foolishness is essentially to do with intellectual attitude, not intellectual ability. So this person here in verse 7—the mocker (or scoffer)—has a lot to teach us. It may be a man or woman of very high intelligence, look at verse 7: ***Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult: whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse.*** Now notice this about Folly: it is not an active pursuit of stupidity. People don't set their minds on being stupid: *I'm going to be as foolish and silly as I can be in life.* Nor is folly a positive contradiction to wisdom, by putting some other system of thought in wisdom's place. No it is the refusal to be corrected. Remember chapter 1 verse 7: ***The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge*** [wisdom], ***but fools despise wisdom and discipline.***

In chapter 1, verses 23-26, again Wisdom is speaking: ***If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me when I called and no-one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster.*** It is the refusal to allow God's word to rebuke, reprove and correct me. Can I take criticism? Much is said today about how destructive criticism is, and about how much psychological damage it can do. But the Bible says more about how damaging it is to reject criticism and to ignore reproof. God's wisdom will rebuke me, and woe betide me if I try to evade that rebuke! I need to hear it and to accept it, I need to acknowledge it. Human life is not about being blame-free. It is about knowing what to do with blame. In the eyes of God you and I are guilty, and until we can accept that and acknowledge it, we can't take it to God and confess it to Him—and receive from Him His grace which deals with human guilt.

And there is no other escape from guilt. The world has tried many, many ways to deal with the guilt that we have in our hearts: we're told all sorts of stories about how it can be dealt with. The Bible tells us that first we acknowledge it: *Yes, I am guilty. I have fallen short. I am not the person I ought to be. I have sinned.* And from there we can come to experience the forgiveness and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Christian believers are sometimes accused of having closed minds; but the person with the truly closed mind is the person who refuses to be told about his or her own sin and how to be rid of it. Can we accept judgment? If we can't, we will not come to know God. If we can, then our sin can be dealt with and we can enter into true life—which is actually a state of constant change. There will always be reproof, correction and training in righteousness for the believer this side of heaven.

But it is never a grim, depressing guilt-ridden process: it's a gracious process of growth in the life of the Christian believer. Every time my sin is pointed out to me, I take it back to the foot of the cross and claim God's forgiveness and the power to live in a new way. Wisdom will always be instructing us: ***Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning*** (9:9). There is the value of criticism, as I have called this point.

(b) The value of fear

(vv. 10-12)

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For through me your days will be many, and years will be added to your life. If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer (vv. 10-12). Like criticism, fear too has a bad press. It is thought to be de-motivating and depressing for the human spirit. But a recurrent theme of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament is just this: the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. See chapter 1, verse 7 again, or chapter 9, verse 10.

And what keeps us humans from wisdom is not the idea (the notion) of God, but our unwillingness to take a certain attitude to God: to fear God. As a non-Christian I was not resistant to belief in God (I thought God remained probably the best explanation for the ultimate origin of the world in which I found myself); but I was resistant to fearing God. I liked the idea of God as a sort of equal, to whom I could relate as to another person. He was O.K. as an idea, as the origin of everything, as a sort of super-scientist who had masterminded the creative process, or as a chum, but not as someone to be feared. That was my problem with belief. Fear was a bad thing, to be done away with. But not according to Proverbs.

No, according to the book of Proverbs, we cannot be wise without taking a certain attitude to God and that means letting Him be God—and that means fear on our part. If I do not fear God I can never know God, because the true God

is fearsome in His holiness and His majesty and awe.

Chapter 1 said of mockers and fools that they did not choose to fear the Lord . . . they would not accept . . . advice, and (they) spurned . . . rebuke. In fact, they are programmed not to hear Wisdom's voice. It is like a human speaking to a dog. Do you remember this Gary Larson cartoon which portrays a man shouting at his dog under the caption: 'What we say to dogs' – "Okay Ginger! I've had it! You stay out of the garbage! Understand Ginger? Stay out of the garbage, or else!" But the next picture is entitled: 'What they hear' – and the man is just saying, "Blah, blah, Ginger, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah Ginger blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!"

Now is that because dogs can't hear what the human voice is saying? But what if dogs just don't choose to hear—particularly when you are telling them to keep out of the rubbish bins? Are you and I like that? Whatever God may be saying to us—do we screen out everything we're not prepared to hear? Is it just blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah—because I won't listen to it? What do I do? I turn round and say that God is a silent God: He isn't speaking to me. There is no voice I can hear, because I have decided I will sieve out everything except what is acceptable to me. And I am surprised that God then falls silent. It's like Ginger: I cannot hear, or I will not hear, what He is saying to me.

I think there is a bit of that in all of us. And it is the response of Folly—to hear only what I want to hear; only what the culture will let me hear and not to hear the voice of God's wisdom.

We must allow God's judgment, God's verdict, God's living voice to come home to us, in order that we may experience God—His mercy, His grace, His love, His forgiveness. If you're like Ginger, don't be surprised if you find Bible reading boring and you don't ever get round to it; and you find sermons tedious to listen to . . . and you wonder what it is that other people see in this Christian life and you don't. If we won't hear His rebuke, we cannot experience His love.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)