

January 28, 2018
Life-Long Thinking

Assorted Proverbs on Life-Long Learning and Teachability

In just the past week we learned scientists have now cloned the first primates (macaque monkeys), 2014-2017 were the four hottest years on record, the world is more divided on trade (free trade vs. isolationism) than ever, nuclear war looms, pilotless planes are coming, and more and more women have been abused by men in power. An education from the 1970's and '80's is not enough for me to cope with these new realities. In society and in the church, we need mature, wise, godly thinkers wrestling with these challenges.

Paul writes to Christians in Corinth, *"Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger"* (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). More recently, historian Mark Noll wrote a provocative book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*: *"The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind."* *"The church,"* says theologian J.I. Packer, *"is 1000 miles wide and ½ inch deep."*

My plea this morning is simple: we need to think well. We can't just accept what we read on a blog, see in a YouTube video, read in a book, or even hear from a preacher. Paul pleads that, *"we become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ"* (Ephesians 4:13-15).

The Bible values learning, reflection, and good thinking. In Scripture, learning is a life-long process. Maturing is a process of learning how to think and live day-in and day-out with God on the journey of life. So, as life unfolds, as we face new and different circumstances, our health changes, the world changes, technology changes, our life stage changes, ethical challenges change, we wrestle with how God's Word, Presence, and wisdom speak to our circumstances. God and His word never change, but those of us who take God and His Word seriously know we often cannot find a specific chapter and verse that speak to our situations. God's Word gives us general principles that we then wrestle with applying.

In the Bible, a wise person is someone who humbles themselves before God, remains open, teachable, and eager to grow in knowledge and wisdom for the new moment. Learning from God, we are fully alive people who help His Kingdom come and will be done.

Proverbs: The Simple/The Fool ...

- *"The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps"* (Proverbs 14:15).

- *"Enthusiasm without knowledge is no good; haste makes mistakes"* (19:2).

In Proverbs, the wise person is always learning. In contrast, the "simple" person goes with what they feel, when they feel like it, without thought for other people, the consequences of their actions, or God. The "simple" way is to let your emotions, peer pressure, popular culture, and media shape your life. The latest book, most popular personality, most viewed blogger is right. We don't think. We let others "think" and we jump on the bandwagon.

Being "simple" cuts across educational lines. Well-educated people (with all the degrees, credentials, and years of Sunday School) can still be simple, unless we are humble and keep thinking. *"I may 'know' something, but what is more important is that I have 'learned' something ... Learning involves reflection, decision making, perception, discernment, finding connections in information, in ways that lead to renewed integration into life and experience"* (Linda Cannell).

In the Bible, a "fool" is someone who says in his heart *"there is no God."* (Psalm 14:1). If I am this person, I am sure **I** know it all. If only **I** were the CEO my company would be perfect. If only **I** were the Prime Minister the country would be perfect. I know it all. I come across confident and strong, if a bit self-righteous and arrogant. When things go great I can look down my nose. But when things go badly? It's someone else's fault or it's fake news, because I'm right, right? I **am** right – that's who I am, by definition.

Well-educated, well-degreed people can also be "fools." We can assume that since we have taken the classes we know it all. But we've stopped learning. Learning begins when I face new challenges and I know I don't know it all. Instead of putting my head in the sand and saying, *"I'm a genius. You're wrong. It's your fault,"* I'm humble. I wrestle with hard questions: *"How does Scripture speak to these issues? What wise person can I speak with? What principles does God say on this? How does this shape my thinking today?"*

Proverbs: The Wise Person

- *"A fool spurns a parent's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence"* (15:5).
- *"Intelligent people are always ready to learn. Their ears are thirsty for knowledge."* (18:15)

A prudent, wise person is **teachable**. A wise person recognizes when their emotions are leading them, not good thinking. A wise person does not think they know it all. They are open and eager to learn. A fool, on the other hand, thinks they have all the answers.

A teachable spirit comes from a humble heart: I recognize that I need God's wisdom from His Word. I need good, godly advice, and knowledge of those wiser than me. In humility, I don't settle for simplistic answers; I wrestle through difficult questions. Humility – me recognizing I need always to be thinking and learning – is a hallmark of a wise person.

Wise people see the signs of the times and changing life circumstances (aging?) and think ahead. They take on new challenges, learning new skills, take risks (like helping with children or youth, meeting refugees, or inviting students over for lunch). They do it, not just to learn "stuff," but to learn more about how God is at work in the world, in their lives, in the lives of others, so God's Kingdom does come and His will is done.

a. Wise people seek out good advice.

- *"Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life. You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail."* (19:20-21)

I can muddle through on my own. I can make my own mistakes. Or I can learn from others who have made the mistakes and accumulated experience and wisdom. Which is wiser? The simple person might say, *"It's too much work to get advice; it's easier to go with my gut."* The foolish person might say, *"Older people are all wrong anyway – I know that – so I'm going to go with what I know is best."* The wisdom of Scripture says:

In what areas of your life do you need advice?

b. Wise people are humble and accept correction

- *"To learn, you must love discipline; it is stupid to hate correction."* (12:1)
- *"Correct the wise, and they will love you. Instruct the wise, and they will be even wiser. Teach the righteous, and they will learn even more."* (9:8-9)
- *"If you ignore criticism, you will end in poverty and disgrace; if you accept correction, you will be honored."*(13:18)

I don't like to be told I am wrong. Advice and wise counsel can be threatening. But I really appreciate wise mentors and friends who gently, but firmly, offer me guidance. It takes strength of character and a strong self-image to accept correction. I need to be humble to hear how the Lord is speaking to me through Scripture and His people.

There is a footnote to this. Be VERY careful if you see yourself as "The Corrector." If I think my mission is correcting other people, there is an eerie echo of self-righteousness and arrogance, isn't there. Who does that remind you of? The fool ... Correction only comes out of a deep relationship of love and trust:

- *"Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy."*(27:6)
- *"The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense."*(27:9)
- *"As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend."*(27:17)

I'll be blunt: if you haven't built a good friendship, you haven't earned the right to correct.

c. Wise people think before they act

- *"The wicked bluff their way through: the virtuous think before they act"* (21:29).
- *The LORD says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control."* (Psalm 32:8-9)

Somehow in our culture – and in the church – we have got the ideas that we can make right decisions just based on

- ***Feelings or emotions*** (the "simple" do this in proverbs all the time). Sometimes we "spiritualize" this saying, *"I feel led by the Spirit ..."* This is a tricky one. Yes, the Spirit can lead us in creative, innovative, and exciting ways. But we need the depth of relationship with God, and the godly counsel of mature Christian friends, to help discern when the leading is a genuine leading of the Spirit or when it is my own personal agenda or feelings. The Spirit leads out of prayerful commitment to His will in His Word and His people. And when the Spirit leads, mature, godly people follow.
- Our ***knowledge, skills, or "common sense."*** We have the perfect technique/plan. God is irrelevant ("fools" do this). Again, this is not straightforward. God has given us brains. He gives us knowledge. He expects us to use them wisely. But, in humility, we still must allow God to speak and lead in and through this process ...

Through the Spirit, God and Scripture shape our hearts and minds so we think, act, and react in God-shaped, Spirit-filled, Jesus-like ways. Our lifelong challenge is to immerse ourselves in God's Word and with wise, godly people so we can find God's wisdom in the shifting circumstances of life and emerging challenges. Our lives change. Our world changes. God and His Word may not give us a specific chapter/verse for every situation. But the more we get to know God, His character, His mission, His values, and His Way, we do discover His wisdom for the moment.

A wise person, a teachable person a mature person humbles themselves before God, remaining open and eager to grow in knowledge and wisdom. The more we ask questions, ready, reflect, pray, share, and study, the more God's Spirit shapes us so we live wisely, AND the more His Kingdom comes and His will is done in and through us.

Will we allow God's Spirit to help us think? Will we listen to what His Spirit is teaching us? Will we act on what we have learned? This is Paul's prayer for us: *"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe"* (Ephesians 1:17-19).