

PROVERBS



One of my favourite pastimes from my youth was to get the Saturday comics. Inside was one page where there were word puzzles and a featured picture called “The Magic Eye.” To simply look at the picture, you would only see a jumbled mess of confusion. But once you trained your eyes to look beyond the picture, what you could discover was that there was a picture hidden in plain sight. It’s not that you need a magic eye to see; what is needed is a different perspective.

The further we go in Proverbs, the more discernment is needed to see what is going on. And as we get further into the book, the assessment grows more and more negative: fools become more foolish; leaders look less and less positive; and this will culminate in chapter 30 and a sense of hopelessness.

It’s important for us to understand this movement – from the hopeful future for a youth, to a son launched out in the world, and now we encounter a young man who is interacting with the politicians of his day (17:7). After learning about the ways of the Lord in chapters 15 & 16, we now have an introduction to what will follow about the foolish son. In 17:25 and 19:13 we hear about the foolish son, and these seem to be markers that are to adjust our eyes to see the dangers of the folly of fools. So how do we discern the dangers of folly? Two things will help us so that we can see the wisdom of Christ.

First, Avoid the Corruption and Contentiousness of Folly (17:7-24)

This young man is no longer just out in the world; now we get a sense that he is interacting with politicians. In 17:7 he is being warned to watch out for foolish speech because this is disastrous for leaders. And the reason for this is that foolish speech often indicates that there are other and more serious problems that lie below the surface. This section will use the word ‘fool’ repeatedly, and what we are being trained in is how to discern people, especially leaders. And if there is a need in our day for discernment, we need help to discern good leaders.

The first problem that foolish speech reveals is that corruption is not far behind. Twice in this section we hear about bribery (vv. 8, 23) and in the middle we hear about the injustice of these leaders (v. 15). Foolish, careless speech reveals the heart, which is what v. 16 means when it says that a fool has no sense – literally he has no heart.

Instead of seeing the humanity of each person, we have someone who may actually be more like the Grinch who stole Christmas. In this story by Dr. Seuss, we hear of this creature who lives out of town and hates Christmas and all of the celebrations that the people of Whoville have to celebrate. Seuss writes:

“The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!
Now, please don’t ask why. No one quite knows the reason.
It could be his head wasn’t screwed on just right.

It could be, perhaps his shoes were too tight.
But I think that the most likely reason of all
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.”

And so the Grinch goes and robs all the homes of the trees and presents and lights to stop the Christmas spirit. And what is his problem? His heart.

Poor, careless speech will result in injustice that stems from having no heart (v. 16). One of the themes that Proverbs wants to teach is justice for the poor. Proverbs always speaks from the position of power and wealth. It speaks about condemning evil and upholding good, because fools justify the wicked and condemn the righteous. This is legal language of the courts. A society cannot flourish when its justice is perverted.

Recently I received an email from someone who is working in Central America providing optical support for the poor. I asked how they got involved in this Christian ministry and they shared how there is no college of optometrists. People pay exorbitant amounts for corrective lenses that often do not work. For just a few dollars and with the ethics of Christ to love neighbour, they are helping the poor to be able to see clearly. Story after story they shared was full of how corruption oppresses the poor and creates a society of haves and have-nots.

The second problem that foolish speech reveals is a contentious or divisive spirit. The person who is careless in their words doesn't care if problems are created. "You should have a thick skin," they might say. "I don't care if it hurts them!" they say. At that point, you have the heart revealed. Deep down, they want their way. Verse 19 tells us that the person who has a rebellious heart loves strife.

Simply put, a contentious person doesn't have friends, alienates others, causes division, and ends up alone. And verse 14 says that the folly of contentiousness is like cracking a dam – the flood of disaster will come, so avoid this kind of scenario!

The root of these problems lies in what a fool thinks about himself and about God. The word for "fool" in v. 7 is the same word that is used in Psalm 14:1 – the fool says in his heart, "There is no God." In other words, the problem of the fool is that they think that justice is determined by them. They are overconfident, arrogant, and their mouths reveal that their ethics are corrupted.

But in these verses, we also have the opposite of a fool. Little whispers come to us about a different kind of person. And we need help to see what a God-fearing person looks like. In contrast to the fool who acts with injustice is the person who receives correction. Verse 10 says that they take correction deeply. It impacts them. They listen. A fool doesn't. The second thing about a God-fearing person is that they are a friend who loves at all times, especially when times are hard (v. 17). A contentious and divisive person doesn't have friendships because they alienate themselves from others. But a God-fearing person will love and stick with you through thick and thin. And that is because the God-fearing person has a heart that is seeking after joy

(v. 22). They know that God has made us for him, and so they desire to spread joy because joy is healing to the heart.

So how do you avoid corruption and contentiousness? Be a God-fearing person who receives correction, sticks with others, and aims to bring joy to others around you.

Second, Watch People's Words (17:25-19:12)

This section begins in v. 25 with the phrase "A foolish son." How do you identify someone who lives in folly? Again, this section looks at the words that come from our mouths. In chapter 17:27-28, we see that words show the heart and reflect if one is understanding.

In 18:2, 4, 6, 7, and 8 we get some clues about how folly is revealed in words. The person who doesn't listen to advice but expresses their opinion (v. 2) walks into a fight (v. 6). Instead of having words that are a fountain of life (v. 4), their words bring destruction and cause them to be beaten up (v. 6). This is because a heart that is proud, arrogant, and conceited doesn't want to let people in (v. 11); instead, they will be speaking and not listening (v. 13). They love to rush to judgments before hearing all the facts (v. 17).

The reason that words matter is that words can either be deathly or life-giving (v. 21). God has made us in his image, and we know that words matter. God spoke all things into being by words. And he has given us his Word so that we would know life and death. As human beings, words can bring great satisfaction (v. 20) and good words can bear good fruit (v. 21).

But what are we to do when we feel the blow of harsh words? Where do we go when we feel beaten down by the words of others? Verse 10 tells us: the name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous runs in and is safe. It is fearing the Lord that we learn to listen and acquire knowledge (v. 15). We run to the Lord. We listen to his Word. We have him remind us who we are. We pour out our hearts to God, knowing that there is safety there. He will hear our pleas and cries. He brings us in and keeps us safe. Because the Lord is a strong and sure fortress.

And because he is our strong fortress, both sections tell us that there is a day of reckoning coming. Justice belongs to the Lord. He will deal with evil, and calamity will come to the one who perverts justice (17:11, 13). Destruction will happen (18:12). And we know this to be true because we don't depend on our wisdom, but we...

See the Wisdom of Christ

In the life of Christ, all four gospel accounts retell the final days of Jesus' life. And in one of the most tragic instances, one of Jesus' closest friends chooses injustice and a bribe rather than integrity and honour. For 30 pieces of silver, Judas would choose to betray Jesus (Matt. 26:14-16). He would take a bribe and then betray his friend with a kiss (Matt. 26:47-56). His words would betray him. He would love injustice rather than righteousness. And this would lead an

innocent man to trial where justice would be perverted. The courts would run at night in secret. He would be sentenced quickly and handed over to death.

Yet in the greatest act of injustice, God made evil bow the knee and serve his greater purpose. His very own Son would go to the cross as the Righteous King and take the blow of sin and death as men would heap words of scorn on him, mocking him (Lk. 22:63; Matt. 27:29). He would be crowned with thorns and given a royal purple robe as the soldiers would mock him, only to have the coronation reversed with them spitting on him, stripping him of his robe, and crucifying him. Here is injustice.

Yet in this act of injustice, the “King of the Jews” would take his throne on the cross, wear the crown of thorns that Adam had been told would torment him all his days, and take the sting of the curse so that the judgment we deserved as unrighteous might be taken from us. He chose to justify the ungodly not in an act of injustice, but by taking the punishment we deserved so that we might be considered fools for his sake. But the apostle Paul would say in 1 Corinthians 1 that the foolishness of the cross and the folly of God are smarter and stronger than all of human wisdom combined.

And so we have been given the eye to see what lies behind the picture. We’ve been given a new perspective. We can see the wisdom of Christ crucified, and it causes us to work in this world for a better day.

For Jesus is a friend of sinners (Matt. 11:19; Lk 7:34), he sticks closer to us than a brother in our day of adversity, for he went to the cross for the joy set before him (Heb. 12:2). And as we go to the cross with him, he makes us to be a friend who sticks closer than a brother to others, speaking what the Father commands, and working for a better day. Why can we do this? Because our worth and value is found in Christ alone, our Rock, Redeemer, Fortress, and Refuge.