

Wisdom and Discernment

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[0 : 00] Proverbs chapter 9. Proverbs chapter 9.

Leave your simple ways and live and walk in the way of insight. Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.

Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you. Reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser.

Teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life.

If you are wise, you are wise for yourself. If you scoff, you alone will bear it. The woman of folly is loud.

[1 : 30] She is seductive and knows nothing. She sits at the door of her house. She takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by, who are going straight on their way.

Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. And to him who lacks sense, she says, stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.

But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol. Well, in Proverbs chapter 9.

So I think we don't have to argue the case that everybody would recognize there are competing worldviews, competing ideas of what defines the good life, and competing ideas of what it is to live the good life.

In terms of Proverbs, they're competing ideas of wisdom and foolishness. Now, they cannot all be right because they say such different things.

[2 : 40] You might say, well, none of them could be right, and that's true, that's a possibility. Some could be right and others wrong, and that's a possibility, but they can't all be right. And the big question about that then is, how do I know that my worldview or my view of life and the good life is correct?

How do I know the worldview that's shaping my life is wise? And how do I know that it's actually delivering the good life I crave? Is it possible to think that my worldview is delivering the good life and actually be deceived?

Well, Scripture tells us, yes. It's possible to think you're in wisdom, and yet you're in foolishness. Australians, and I may not sound like one, but I count myself as one, I haven't lived much more of my life here than in Ireland.

But Australians think of themselves as very open-minded. So if you're talking to Australians, they'll say, look, I'm easily persuaded by evidence and truth.

And if you talk about history, they'll say, yes, and I'm persuaded by evidence and truth in contrast to past generations where it was so obvious they were so full of prejudice, racial prejudice, religious prejudice, social prejudice, and so on and so forth.

[4 : 02] But in reality, every person has prejudice. That is, prejudice is buried background beliefs about wisdom and the good life. And these things are often things we're blind to.

Sometimes we'll hear it expressed as, well, that's just the way things are in life. Probably that's a background belief, a buried background belief that just accepts without questioning.

And what that means is, I think, oftentimes people just copy the lifestyle that's familiar, copy the lifestyle that's been handed down to them.

Copy the lifestyle that we see others around them living. And from that, they say, well, if that's what the majority are doing, then that must be the good life. That must be wisdom. And then from there, most people would agree that the closed, the person who is closed-minded, who backs their own

form of wisdom without ever examining it, is actually foolish.

Or stupid. And what we've done, you see, as Australians, is we've got ourselves into a real dilemma. Because our society is committed to the absolute freedom of the individual.

[5 : 31] That means an individual is free to believe what they want, how they want, and should be free from even being examined or corrected on that view. But this is an expression of closed-mindedness.

And it's in conflict with discovering the life of wisdom we crave. Because if we're going to have a worldview, it means, and we've got to be able to examine it. And in fact, I would argue we need an external authority.

Because we can't actually trust our own examination ultimately. We need an external authority which is both true and actually works when it comes to delivering the good life.

Now, that takes us into Proverbs because Proverbs presents God's pathway of wisdom. And it presents it as the only one that delivers the good life we crave.

In fact, the Bible at other points and quite repeatedly through the scriptures, the Bible says what Peter says in chapter 1, verse 18. He says that everything else is an empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers.

[6 : 47] It's that idea of just taking what you've received, what's popular, what's familiar, and trying to make the best of it. Even though most of us would say, hey, it doesn't actually work. Wisdom is about choices, choices, choices.

That's the reality that these, that first section of Proverbs, chapters 1 to 9 has been building towards. Wisdom and foolishness are competing alternatives.

And making right choices requires discernment. And heaps of it. Wisdom is wholesome. It's desirable. It's valuable. It's satisfying. And generally, wisdom is a course of action which is reasonably obvious. But we see it all around us all the time that wisdom doesn't happen automatically.

It's not something we're naturally inclined to. It's always as a choice, and I think a tough choice, to follow wisdom and turn away from foolishness.

[8 : 07] Chapter 7, 8, and 9 emphasize this with challenging pictures or metaphors. Chapter 7 was a sexual metaphor.

and the thing that plays out there is the choice between true intimacy and false intimacy in the context of a picture of seduction.

Chapter 8 was a treasure hunting metaphor that Dave took us through last week. The choice is between real treasure and counterfeit treasure that looks shiny, that dazzles and turns your head but just doesn't deliver.

The choice is always between finding life in relationship with God, expressing God's character and every action of life and chasing an alternative life, a life of autonomy, a life of rejection of God's pathway.

And as Dave said last week, foolishness always presents as an equal alternative. That's the sneakiness, the deceitfulness of it. It always presents as an equal alternative to God's wisdom but it actually seduces and dazzles and appears popular while actually destroying people.

[9 : 41] So once again I say to make right choices, every person needs discernment in spade loads. And chapter 9 I'm suggesting this morning is a case study in wisdom and discernment.

So critical, as I'm saying, is in this process of finding and nurturing wisdom is discernment. Now, what is discernment?

Discernment's the ability to sort through apparently equal options and dig into it in a way that you can identify and avoid lies or false reality and embrace truth or true reality.

Bit of a tautology there but for emphasis. Now, I would actually venture to say and it's a bit sad to say that I think discernment appears practically to be in really short supply in our world.

And I think it's actually even the case among Christians that discernment is in short supply. One of the past greats, the theological greats said that they figured that discernment was probably the last characteristic that Christians would develop.

[10 : 59] Well, come with me then into chapter 9. And what we have here is another metaphor. It's a metaphor, a party metaphor where the choice here in chapter 9 is between a life-giving and a life-destroying party.

Now, it could be a feast, it could be a party, it could be an event. I'm just using those terms interchangeably. But party's probably something we resonate with more. So, there's two competing identical party invitations.

One from this woman called Dem Folly, we'll call her Dem Folly. If you look at verse 16, look at the words. Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. There's the invitation.

And verse 4, identical invitation. Whoever is simple, let him turn in here. Now, these two invitations turn up in your mailbox. And at that point, they look identical.

Which party will you go to? Each is issued to the simple. Now, hear this next sentence very, very carefully.

[12:10] The simple is a description not of mental capacity, but of mental attitude to life. It's about an approach to life of the average person.

The simple person is the average person. That's the point in this metaphor. It's the average person who, in a sense, is a bit aimless and drifting in life, yet always looking for the next exciting thing. unthinking, at points, easily believing what others say and do, yet quite defensive and headstrong when challenged.

It's a strange mix, but I think that does describe the average person we rub shoulders with. The invitations are identical, but the shape of the two parties is radically different.

They're different in basic appeal. If you look at verses 13 and 14, I'm dealing with Dame Folly first and then come back to Lady Wisdom.

[13:15] So Dame Folly, her appeal is loud and seductive and shameless. That's the word in English there, knows nothing, is probably better translated shameless. She's right out there.

She's in your face. She sits at the door of her house. She takes a seat in the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by her, going straight on their way. She's loud. It sounds a bit familiar.

Loud, proud, and shameless. And she knows jolly well that the majority of people will just be passing right past her front door. She doesn't have to work too hard.

She just needs to get their attention as they go past and suck them in. And she assumes a crowd at her party. Verse 3, In contrast, Lady Wisdom knows the average person will not be naturally inclined to accept her invitation.

So she's busy pursuing individuals, pleading with them to come to her event. The two parties are radically different in AIM.

[14:19] Dame Folly, as we just read those verses, her biggest intent is just to fill her house. Get them all in. She cares nothing for the people she seduces into her party.

So she makes it easy for people to be there. And notice, there's no obvious cost of entry. She invites them into that place if you look at verse 15 and 17.

She invites them into an environment that's familiar, that's comfortable. Where you can hang out with all the people you've always wanted to be around. The cool people, the celebrities, the high profile sports people, the sexy people, and so on and so forth.

Verse 17, water is often a picture for sexual expression in the Proverbs and the Old Testament. So it's almost as if this Dame Folly is saying, hey listen guys, I just want to fill my house.

Tell you what, leave your brains at the door. Leave your morals at the door. Come inside and I promise you you can indulge in all the fantasies of your heart, all the desires, the secret desires of your heart you long wanted to express.

[15:25] Because in my place if it feels good and everybody else is doing it then you can be sure it's right. You can be sure I've got the good life.

But we're told here that in truth her party is toxic. And it's a picture of Todd Sweeney's place where the bodies are being piled up in the cellar while more people are pouring through the front door.

And what do we discover? We discover there is a huge cost of entry to pay.

But in her party it's landed on you at the last minute. What's the huge cost of entry? Death.

Destruction. And by the time you realize there's a huge cost of entry it's too late.

It's pay up time. The good life they thought they had found was actually a lifeless life. Now in sharp contrast Lady Wisdom is deeply concerned for those she invites.

[16:41] Her party again remember and this is all metaphor that's all picture language verses 1 and 2 her party comes from a really solid house. We might use exchange that for the word worldview.

She comes from a really solid well thought out well constructed place. She's prepared meticulously and she's offering a lavish feast of meats and wine.

The sort of stuff that would really satisfy the body and satisfy the soul in the metaphor. But her party has a very obvious upfront cost to be paid which she makes no bones about.

Look at verse 6. She says yeah come to my party by all means I really would love to have you here but verse 6 leave your simple ways and live and walk in the way of insight.

She's saying look if you want to come to my party that would be terrific. I want you there but the cost of entry is that you must be prepared to examine your life. You must be prepared to leave behind wrong thinking of the past.

[17:53] You must be prepared to be pushed into unfamiliar uncomfortable places. My party won't be a cocahoot affair. My party will be serious. It will be challenging, but it will deliver something the other party will never be able to deliver.

It will deliver life. You need to be willing to think deeply about the big questions of life. You need to leave behind your previous sense of self in as much as you discover that to be foolish.

You need to be prepared to embrace a new world view a new lifestyle in short true wisdom. I don't know I'm not a big party person but in terms of the metaphor you can see one party is eminently appealing isn't it?

And the other you just think and that's exactly the point of the passage. The party that Lady Wisdom throws doesn't present like an exciting fun party.

few I suspect are interested in thinking about the invitation let alone committing to be at the party. Few are prepared to challenge popular belief of the crowd.

[19:15] That's what it is to be the average Australian. Go with the flow. And in brackets still say I'm evidence based. but those who do take up the invitation to Lady Wisdom's party discover that not only is it a brilliant party but it's actually an investment in the good life which lasts for eternity.

So yeah there's an upfront cost but boy the cost is nothing compared to what the party itself delivers. so choices choices choices and how we make them choices and why we make them which party to buy into at first glance the choice would appear totally obvious wouldn't it when you set it out the way I've set it out you would choose life over death every time because remember that is the quest of life for every single person we want we're actually in our heart of hearts every person whether Christian or non-Christian every person is on that quest to find what is the good life and so if life's on offer then wouldn't we take life over death every time yes of course we would that's the obvious choice but here's the deceptiveness of foolishness in reality so many persist in pursuing the popular lifestyle of if it feels good and everyone else is doing it then it's got to be right it's got to be good it's got to be the best there is even when the evidence suggests it's foolish and when their own experience tells them that this life I pursued has actually failed to deliver the good life that it promised me it would deliver it's failed to deliver the security the intimacy the satisfaction which I crave in my heart of hearts and which it promises why well come to the last section so the two party invitations form a bracket around the chapter and then verses 70-12 dig into this question of why why is something so obvious it's not automatic verse 70-12 gives us a very simple principle and then I'll dig into it a little bit verse 70-12 says really essentially this why do people pursue foolishness and destruction when the choice for life is obvious answer very simple it's a question of whether a person is teachable it's a question of whether they have discernment or not Proverbs has five or six different words to describe different aspects of foolishness that are used over all the chapters each remember I say again each describing mental attitude not mental capacity so there's nothing wrong with people's ability to think when they're called the simple or in verse 7 when they're called a scoffer the simple person is now described as the scoffer the same person but here the word has an emphasis on being fixed in their thinking being closed minded now I've said before the average Australian presents as open minded what I would argue is actually closed minded and unteachable they claim to be evidence shaped yet generally go with the flow of what is popular you speak to them and they're absolutely confident that they know what life is about and they'll back themselves in what life is about yet at the same time you're thinking hang on a minute you're not showing me any evidence you've actually thought deeply about this and when you challenge the average Australian man you find how seriously they dislike challenge or correction recognition of their world view they'll back themselves and their own form of wisdom every time so totally committed to their own autonomy their own form of wisdom as they chase the good life that in the end they interpret every circumstance as supporting what they already believe

and when things go wrong their response is to back themselves and blame others why is my life falling apart well because they did this and he did that and she did that and society has let me down never oh my goodness maybe I've got the wrong world view in stark contrast verse 9 the wise person knows their heart or knows something of their heart the wise person is suspicious of their attitudes they recognize their potential for foolishness a few weeks ago

Bo spoke about that as the paradox of the gospel paradox of proverbs that the person who's starting to nurture wisdom actually begins by acknowledging foolishness and seeking external wisdom external guidance external rule in life because we've made a mess of our own lives and we can't even sort of trust our own motivations our own analysis to work out what's right and what's wrong sometimes we need an external source as a reference point in verse 10 that process of wisdom and it is a process verse 10 leads to the Lord as a source of real wisdom and ultimately the source of the good life but notice again you see we've said this over many weeks now verse 10 the fear of the Lord the fear of the Lord is much more than acknowledgement of his existence it's much more than just a sort of general respect for God as being part of our universe fearing the Lord is actually craving knowledge of him that only comes through relationship with him and exposure to his character and purpose which in turn then overflows practically into all of life and verse 11 then sort of gives some illustration of that wisdom or understanding of success or understanding of happiness and security of life is shaped ultimately by a person's view of God by understanding God's character and by relationship with him that overflows as I take on and form the mind of the Lord in the Lord Jesus Christ then I start to understand wisdom I start to express wisdom I start to live wisely in God's world and so in summary and if you haven't heard anything else or haven't connected try and listen to this connection here it's on the outline that's on the back of your bulletin in summary then the principle of teachability or discernment is a process we start with choices and those choices hundreds thousands of them will be choices either towards wisdom or towards foolishness over a period of time our choices actually shape and form our character so our character then will either be increasingly discerning and growing in wisdom or increasingly drifting into foolishness greater foolishness choices choices character and ultimately all of that will determine destiny life or death my friends hear this wisdom is not simply a one off choice that we make as

[28 : 41] Christians or we make as people and sometimes I think that's what we think wisdom is wisdom now we get wisdom in a one off choice as we come to Jesus no question about that but nurturing wisdom and becoming wise is a lifetime progression people people do not discover life or stumble into destruction through one isolated decision it's not one strike and you're out but it's a process of choices wisdom is a process of choice reflecting attitude to God and reflecting conclusions about the source and shape of the good life and ultimately and that's what the point of verse 12 is I spent a long time trying to work out verse 12 I think this is what it is ultimately that process is for each person and each person alone to own if you're wise you're wise for yourself if you scoff you alone will bear it we so readily blame other people even for our own choices we blame other people for the consequences of our choices

I think wisdom says that how we can only look at ourselves for our choices and the consequences and the destiny that comes from it when you look at your own character and when I look at my character I am me I have to take responsibility for my character because it's the product of all those choices over many years I might like to blame other people but I have to take ownership for it whether wise or foolish it's yours to own no point trying to scam out of it it's still yours to own you can blame whoever you like but it's still yours to own and that's why there's an urgent call in this passage to nurture discernment as the pathway to wisdom and the climax here takes us back to the very opening verses of

Proverbs chapter 1 verses 1 to 6 wisdom is more than intellectual knowledge you can have a massive intellectual knowledge and still be a fool wisdom is applied knowledge first of all accumulating the right knowledge true knowledge but ultimately wisdom is applying that knowledge and knowing how to apply that knowledge in every situation of life that's discernment and it's a paradox as I mentioned a few minutes ago it begins by recognizing that our natural expression of wisdom is actually foolishness and counterfeit and leads to a cheap imitation of the good life we crave wisdom begins as we recognize our closed minded autonomy and we recognize that that has kept us from considering properly God's alternative as an alternative and God's word says we get wisdom when we come to God through Jesus who is the embodiment of wisdom 1 Corinthians and

we grow in wisdom as God's spirit shapes new character in us expressed in a willingness to self-examine and a new struggle to make every choice of life a reflection of God's character that's what it is to grow in wisdom and here's the appeal of scripture it's in Proverbs and it's right through the scripture Psalm I'm going to just use two I could have used dozens Psalm 34 verse 8 says this and it's a lovely picture in the context of a feast it says this test and see that the Lord is good taste and see that the Lord is good that's an invitation to a feast a satisfying soul satisfying feast now how will you respond will you be like the brattish closed minded child who looks at the vegetable on the plate and says no I'm not going to eat it I know it's not going to be nice I've never done that but I heard other people have children who've done that I don't think I knew what vegetables was until

I was a teenager but anyway unless there was something to throw at your brothers so there's your choice you see will you be like that closed minded child and that's what it is they look at the thing and they make a decision about it before they even try it or different picture will you heed the urging of Romans chapter 12 1 to 3 you can look it up in your own time essentially there it says don't be conformed to what the majority are doing on the basis that it feels right and the majority are doing it rather it says be daring be willing to be transformed by the renewal of desires and attitudes and thinking which in turn it says will actually lead you to prove that God's wisdom actually works both factually and experientially and in the end my friends that's what

[34 : 46] I hear all around me in Australia our post modern post most modern society don't tell me if something's factually correct I want to know if it works if I can get the experience of the good life that I'm craving Romans says you've got to be prepared to be transformed to walk away from old patterns of thinking to walk into new patterns of thinking new attitudes new desires a new world view and if you do that Romans says you will find the proof it will be self authenticating my friends discernment is not seen in quick fix decisions and I think as Christians we're still totally hooked up on that we just and I include myself we just want life to be simple we don't want to be having to make decisions every day make a decision

Monday morning at nine o'clock and let that cover the whole week is what we'd like at least that's what I would like oftentimes but it's foolishness discernment is not seen in quick thick decision but it's seen in the way of long training and discipline not simply informing your mind with God's words so that you know what is right lots of Christians do that they can say oh yes this is what the Bible says about this this and this and this not just disciplining your will impractical commitment to doing what you know to be right yep I'm going to do this and not this because that's what the Bible tells me today but training the heart to new delight in the Lord himself so that you follow his pathway to life because he he in this person is supremely attractive and beautiful I want to be like my father I want to be like the Lord Jesus Christ oh and guess what overflows out of that and if you're a person and I'm finishing this if you're a person who has not yet made a choice for wisdom and there will be some here this morning whether you're in your teenage years or younger or whether the other end of the spectrum and older there'll be some here this morning who's not yet made a choice for wisdom I say to you take the first step now before you leave this building today admit that your commitment to autonomy has led you down a dead end road I suspect that the fact you're here today says that something about your life hasn't quite delivered and you're looking perhaps for something else well recognize your autonomy and recognize how it has taken you down a dead end road admit that your problem thus far in life is not so much a lack of knowledge or desire but an empty heart that is settled for fast food instead of the satisfying feast offered by Jesus if you want to pray something really really worthwhile for yourself and I include everybody and I include myself let's pray for discernment let's pray that we might know what is the right thing to do and that we do it because we delight in the

Lord let's pray Lord help us to see the deceptiveness of foolishness in our world help us to see how easily we can be fooled by ourselves Lord your word tells us that our hearts are deceptively wicked and we think we're in charge of them Lord but often times they're in charge of us help us Lord to look for autonomy that keeps us from your pathway of wisdom and help us Lord to be willing to step away from that which we've been committed to perhaps Lord for 20 30 40 50 years help us to step away from that into new life in the Lord Jesus Christ in his name we pray Amen