

Wisdom's Imposter

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[0 : 00] All right, let me begin by asking you whether you are good at spotting fakes. So let's just do a quick test, a few questions to see.

So first, as you tune in each Sunday, can you tell whether the flowers that are in the back are real or not? Perhaps the fact that it's the same few arrangements every week during lockdown might give that away.

They're actually, if you're still wondering, it's artificial flowers. How about the shoes on this picture? Can you tell, left or right, which is the real Nike shoe?

All right, and the answer is, next slide, yep, it's the one on the right. And the giveaway is that those little words on the back down at the heel, I think it says Nike running or something.

Okay, how about this one? Which of these is the real diamond? I think this is not easy, is it?

Apparently, it's the one on the right.

[1 : 06] So the next slide, yep. The one on the left is a manufactured diamond. It's a cubic zirconia and sells for a fraction of the price of the real one. Okay, here's the final one.

Can you identify the fake Kim Jong-un? All right, I think you all know this one. The one on the right, yeah, he's an imposter.

He did a walkabout in Singapore just before the real Kim met Donald Trump. Now, as for the one on the left, he's meant to be the real Kim. But who knows really?

Because it's been told that Kim uses a lot of body doubles. So it may be fake, it may be real. Well, sometimes telling what's real from the fakes is hard, isn't it?

So, imitations can be deceiving. And tonight, as we consider wisdom in Proverbs, we're going to find out that that's the same for wisdom as well.

[2 : 06] Proverbs teaches us that there is true wisdom and then there is fake wisdom. Now, we spent the last few weeks flying through the first nine chapters of Proverbs.

And to be honest, we haven't really done it justice. But what I want to point out briefly now is to say that the first nine chapters are actually quite well structured.

In week one, we looked at the prologue, which is the first seven verses. But thereafter, in the next six and a half chapters, these are framed as instructions from a father to his son concerning wisdom and then warning against folly.

Now, mothers aren't excluded because the father includes her as a partner right at the very start in verse eight of chapter one, which says, Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

What I think it shows is that the normal way of wisdom is that it's imparted in the context of a household from a parent to a child. Of course, it's not limited to a household.

[3 : 10] But it says that wisdom isn't passed down in the abstract where you can pick up a book and just read through it and you gain wisdom. You can do that. But often wisdom is better handed down through trusted relationships.

And particularly where the one who is wiser, a parent, an older Christian or a teacher, has some authority over the one being taught. Now, the other aspects of these initial chapters are that chapters one to four are primarily focused on the positives, on the benefits of gaining wisdom, of the importance of pursuing wisdom at all costs.

Then we get to chapter five and seven. There are still some warnings in chapter one to four, but the warnings are mainly reserved in chapters five to seven, which if you read through first of all, appear to be heavily focused on the folly of sexual adultery.

So, for instance, in chapter five, verse one, we read this. My son, pay attention to my wisdom. Turn your ears to my words of insight that you may maintain discretion and your lips may preserve

knowledge.

For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey and her speech is smoother than oil. And as you keep going, that's the common theme throughout these chapters, which leads you at first to conclude that this is all about the dangers of sexual immorality, which it is.

[4 : 39] So, for you young men and women listening, and perhaps even for the old men and women too, older men and women, sexual immorality is foolishness.

Don't engage in any sexual relations outside marriage. That's the warning. If you do, there's only trouble and grief that comes from it, not to mention God's wrath.

But more than that, though, when you get to chapters eight and nine, we discover that these verses aren't just about the folly of adultery. They also use adultery or the adulterous woman as a metaphor for folly.

It works the other way around as well. You see, since chapter one, we've already seen that wisdom has been personified or portrayed as a virtuous woman. She calls out for people to follow her.

So, take verse 20 and 22 of chapter one. Out in the open, wisdom calls aloud. She raises her voice in the public square. On top of the wall, she cries out.

[5 : 43] At the city gate, she makes a speech. How long will you who are simple love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?

And this, again, is a consistent picture we get even in chapters eight and nine. So that when we finally get to chapter nine, we realize that the adulterous woman in Proverbs, in the earlier chapters, just like the virtuous woman, is a metaphor.

Except she personifies, not wisdom, but folly. And throughout these chapters, she's an image of folly. People who succumb to folly are like men who fall for adulterous women.

So, what we've got here in chapter nine, then, is a side-by-side comparison of lady wisdom with adulterous folly. Folly, as we shall see, is portrayed as wisdom's imposter, a fake, a deceptive imitation.

But before we get to folly, let's look first at lady wisdom and her invitation, point one. So, look at verse one of chapter nine, which reads, Wisdom has built her house.

[6 : 55] She has set up its seven pillars. She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine. She has also set her table. She has sent out her servants, and she calls from the highest point of the city.

Let all who are simple come to my house. To those who have no sense, she says, Come, eat my food, and drink the wine I've mixed. Leave your simple ways, and you will live.

Walk in the way of insight. Now, just in the chapter before, we've seen that lady wisdom has impeccable pedigree. So, in verse 20, for example, it says this of her, The Lord brought me wisdom forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old.

I was formed long ago, formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be.

And then in verse 27, she goes on, I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so that the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.

Her pedigree now is being reinforced in this picture of the house that she's built. It's set up with, or in some other version, it's hewn out with seven pillars.

[8 : 19] Seven being the complete number for the Jewish people. But this is what you might call an establishment. Like one of these Turek mentions that you see here. I counted there were four or five pillars, not quite seven.

Couldn't find any with seven. But anyway, it's a picture of a well-built mansion, isn't it? This place has stood the test of time. It's built a good reputation.

And in it, her servants are hard at work, preparing a feast of meat and wine, and setting the table for a banquet. This invitation that she gives out is not just for the rich and the powerful, but for all.

That's why she's at the highest point of the city, calling out, Let the simple come to my house. Now this is not an invitation to gluttony or excess, but actually to consume fully and enjoy the benefits of wisdom.

Come, eat, grow in wisdom is the call. But then when we get to verse 6, we're given a clear picture of how this happens.

[9 : 28] It requires the simple to leave their simple ways. Give up your maccas, is what she's saying. Have nutritious, quality food.

Fine food. Walk in the way of insight instead. In other words, it actually costs to eat at wisdom's house.

Not in money terms, not in paying for it, but in changing and repenting, in turning away from simple ways, embracing the discipline of wisdom.

And so while the benefits are huge, great rewards, the way isn't easy. And I think we all know how hard change is, isn't it?

Getting rid of bad habits, admitting we're wrong, being humble enough to accept discipline. And particularly when those old temptations rear its ugly head again, we have to be determined, don't we, to say no to it, time and time again.

[10:38] You say, I know a friend, for instance, who has a problem with alcohol. And you know, when times are good, life's good, he's able to keep that at bay. But whenever there's pressure in life, there's stress or relationship issues, whatever, then immediately he's tempted to turn to the bottle again as a coping mechanism.

It's hard, isn't it? It's hard to stay the way of wisdom and discipline. Ladies' wisdom's invitation seems great. But given her demands, and it's not easy, it's not always accepted.

And that's why in verse 7 and onwards, we are given two responses to her call. Which brings me to my second point, wisdom's demands and two responses.

So verse 7, whoever corrects a mocker invites insults. Whoever rebukes the wicked incurs abuse. Do not rebuke mockers, or they will hate you.

Rebuke the wise, and they will love you. Instruct the wise, and they will be wiser still. Teach the righteous, and they will add to their learning. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

[11:53] For through wisdom, your days will be many, and your 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.

Now obviously, even though wisdom here is personified again in Proverbs, what actually happens in reality is that often wisdom is passed down, as I said earlier, through trusted relationships of authority.

Wisdom's servants are those who are already wise, aren't they? Trying to hand it on to others. And so in these verses, perhaps wisdom is continuing to speak to these servants, and telling them to be prepared for mockers and the wicked to reject her invitation.

Now of course, the idea here is that everyone should be given a chance. But then, they are to expect that some will return it with insults and abuse instead. And so when that happens, wisdom's servants are asked to move on.

Don't rebuke them. It's not worth the trouble. I mean, even Jesus, for example, said not to cast poles at swines, didn't he? We heard that phrase sometimes, haters gonna hate.

[13:03] Well, mockers are gonna mock. And we can expect such responses, is what Proverbs is saying, because not everyone will embrace the humility and discipline that comes with receiving wisdom.

And in fact, their mocking and insults are a cover-up, aren't they? To their unwillingness to admit that they're wrong. They know they're wrong. They just don't want to admit it.

Conversely, Proverbs says, those who are wise value correction. Rebuke the wise and they will love you, it says. Now I think that sounds pretty optimistic, actually. I mean, I don't see many people readily hugging and kissing those who point out their faults.

But I think when the wise do calm down and reflect some more, they would at least be thankful for that rebuke. Now why is that? Because they recognize that the rebuke is true.

They clean what's true from it, even if not all aspects of that rebuke is. Because their aim is to want to grow from that correction. Their desire is to grow in wisdom.

[14:08] And that desire is so strong that they're willing to humble themselves, to repent as a response. And ultimately, of course, this humility and this repentance expresses itself in the fear of the Lord, as it says in verse 10.

And a knowledge, and this I think is not just an intellectual knowledge, but a relational knowledge of the Holy One. We've seen this refrain before, haven't we, in chapter 1 and verse 7 as well, that having a right relationship with God is the key to wisdom.

And here even, it's being tied to holiness. holiness. The one we are to have a relationship with is the Holy One. Living wisely in the way of insight involves holy living.

Because the one who reveals his wisdom to us, he is holy too. And so the question is, how will each of us respond to wisdom's call?

Is it mockery and insults because our pride has been exposed? You know, we can laugh now, but then suffer later? Or will we submit and embrace correction now, even though it hurts, but then be rewarded in the long run?

[15:28] In verse 11, we get the promise, don't we, of wisdom, and that is, your days will be many and years added to your life. Now, again, with a lot of, many of these proverbs, this is not an absolute guarantee.

Sometimes the wise can die young. But all things being equal, the general principle is that wisdom adds to your days rather than detract from it. Because when you live wisely, you live according to God's will, don't you?

You're aligned with the way God has designed this world and He's created you. You're not, if I could put it, rubbing against the grain of God's plan for this world.

And so when you live like that, it brings peace and assurance in your life. When you look out at the world, it makes sense to you. Even if life isn't easy, you can understand what's going on.

And so that's a great comfort, isn't it? That's a great encouragement. That wisdom actually is encouraging and comforting. And all which, I guess, promotes length of life. But if we choose not to heed wisdom's call, then don't think that there is just a neutral path.

[16:37] No, what happens when we reject wisdom is that we fall unwittingly into folly's arms. And then that brings us to verse 13 and 18, our final section.

Now here, I would like you to notice as I read it again how folly is actually mimicking wisdom. The writer intentionally portrays folly as wisdom's imposter.

So he writes, folly is an unruly woman. She is simple and knows nothing. 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 to my house. To those who have no sense, she says, stolen water is sweet, food eaten in secret is delicious. But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.

Did you pick it up? Just like wisdom, folly is calling out at the city's highest point and she uses the very same words, don't she? Let all who are simple come to my house.

[17:47] To those who have no sense, same words again, she invites them to come to her house to do the same thing, eat and drink, just like wisdom. Except, and here's the third point, adulterous folly is full of deception.

She promises blessing and reward just like wisdom, but look a little closer and it's all lies. It's all a trick, a mirage. First of all, notice some of these differences.

Notice her house isn't described, is it? It's rather like a pop-up restaurant which she erects at the top of the city. It's so convenient, isn't it, for the simple, just to come in.

No effort required, no need to get off the path even. It reminds me of those street vendors in Rome and Milan, you know, when they sell their fake Gucci's and Rolexes.

They're not a proper establishment, aren't they? Theirs is like a pop-up store, a huge canvas on the sidewalk, all the fake goods laid over it. Now, why is that?

[18:46] Because if the cops come, they cannot wrap it up in a hurry, can they? And then make a run for it. Well, likewise, that's a bit like Folly's house, isn't it?

It's a far cry from Wisdom's mansion. She sits outside, I think that's a sign of her being lazy, you know, probably leaning back on one, two back legs, and inviting people in.

You know, no need to go too far, she says. Just step right in. Just one step and you're in already.

And then notice what she serves. Stolen water and food eaten in secret.

It all suggests something dodgy is going on inside. And then finally, notice what she omits. There's no instruction, is there, to leave their simple ways.

No, just come in and eat. There's no cost to you. You can keep living your simple and sinful ways. In fact, she might even suggest a few more for you. As long as you're enjoying yourself, indulging your heart's desire, it doesn't matter how you do it.

[19:54] So she may be offering the same rewards as wisdom, but it's actually a false promise. Because when those who are deceived enter, what they find are the dead inside.

These are others that have gone before, gotten trapped, and then they die in there. You see, it's all really deceptive because folly never admits to her true and real nature, does she?

I mean, that's the same with life. No one falls into folly by choice. No one says, oh, I know it's foolish, but I'm going to do it anyway. Instead, it's always something like, oh, it just seemed like such a good idea at the time.

I thought it was all legit. I thought I was doing the right thing. In fact, they often think that what they're doing is wise.

They think that this will enable them to get an edge over others, a shortcut perhaps towards their goals and desires. It always seems so right, doesn't it? So wise until we realize it's folly.

[21 : 04] And so how can we tell when it's really folly? Well, when it never makes demands on you to reckon with your own pride, with your own selfishness, when it never challenges you to repent of your wrongdoing, where you never have to confront God and His truth.

And that brings me to Jesus because when Jesus appeared, His message was exactly the opposite, wasn't it? So on the slide there, His very first words as a preacher in Mark chapter 1 was, repent for the kingdom of God is near.

In fact, Jesus upped the ante didn't He? Because He didn't just challenge the simple of His day with that message, He challenged those who were considered wise as well. To the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, He said, if you think you're really wise, then you would recognize me as Lord and repent.

Of course, the answer, the question was, did they? Well, they didn't, did they? Because who do we find as the mockers at the foot of Jesus' cross? They were the wise chief priests and the teachers of the law.

They were hurling insults at Him, weren't they? They thought the whole idea of the cross and the idea of their Messiah hanging from it was utter foolishness rather than, as Paul says in the New Testament reading that we had, that Jesus was the wisdom of God.

[22 : 35] And so what we see in the Bible is this progression that when we go from Proverbs to the New Testament, wisdom initially personified as a virtuous lady in Proverbs.

She was there with God, as He was creating the world. What happens is that when we get to the New Testament, wisdom isn't simply a virtue personified as a person, but rather, wisdom is found fully embodied in a real person, in Jesus, the Son of God.

He's the very fullness of God's wisdom. He was there creating with the Father in the beginning, and when He came to earth, He called, and He's still calling, everyone to leave their simple ways, to follow Him.

He's asking them to feed and eat on Him and His blood for their salvation, not literally, but spiritually. That is, to believe that His sacrifice on the cross is what brings salvation to us.

You see, in the cross, God turns wisdom and folly on its head. just as Proverbs 9 predicts, there will be mockers who look at the cross and see only folly.

[23 : 52] And yes, the cross and its message of salvation does look foolish in the eyes of the world. But Paul says, it is only to those who are perishing that it is folly.

people enter folly's house thinking they're wise and wisdom is foolish. But really, it's the other way around. In verse 19 of that passage in 1 Corinthians, God uses the foolishness of the cross to destroy the wisdom of the so-called wise.

He uses it to expose the folly of human pride. But for those of us who embrace the folly of the cross and believe, God is pleased to save us.

Verse 21 and verse 24 because for those who believe, Christ is the wisdom of God. God's foolishness, Paul says, is wiser than human wisdom.

Now friends, I know some of you listening in today, you've been trying to work out whether to embrace Christ or not. I've spoken to some of you. I know you struggle with many intellectual questions.

[25 : 03] And I have to say it's not wrong to ask them. It's not wrong to even try and find answers to them. But here's the thing, you need to realize that the good news of Jesus will always look foolish in the eyes of the world, by the world's standards.

Why? Because it requires you to humble yourself and to embrace weakness, your weakness. Like wisdom in Proverbs 9, wisdom in Christ, it is not sophisticated ways of reasoning in order to embrace Christ.

It requires humility on your part. No, what is truly wise is found in the person of Jesus and in the message of the cross.

And then Proverbs says that if you embrace that wisdom in Christ, you find life also. Now for those of us who have, let me add further encouragement to ask you to keep following him.

That is, listen carefully to the wisdom in his teachings. Live in the manner in which he calls you to, and just as he did. And that, when you do that, means you are eating and drinking in the very house of Lady Wisdom.

[26 : 26] And when you do that, you not only add physical years to your life, you add eternity to your spiritual life as well. So may you be encouraged as you go through this season of Proverbs over the next few weeks, as you read through Proverbs, to grow in wisdom from it.

But more than that, may it help you point to Jesus, who is the wisdom of God, and to look to him, his teaching, but also in the manner that he lived, so that we might be more like him, and therefore be wise like him as well.

Let's pray. Father, humble us so that we are not fooled by the deception of folly. Help us to recognize the wisdom that is found in the message of the cross.

Help us to see wisdom in the lowly and humble way of Jesus. Teach us to accept correction salvation so that we may grow in wisdom. In Jesus' wise and powerful name we pray.

Amen.