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Proverbs 4:10-19

Second Message

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THE WAY OF THE FOOL

Man continues to accomplish incredible feats. We can send a near flawless probe to Mars. We can clone sheep. Through the Internet, I can transmit or receive a message anywhere in the world. A twenty-one year-old can win the most prestigious golf tournament in the world—by twelve shots!

But, the speed of life is frightening sometimes. And it seems to be accelerating. Even if you want to slow down to sixty-five on the freeway, everyone else is going seventy-five, so it's almost impossible. We have no margins in our lives, so when life throws us a curve, we are immediately overwhelmed.

And the complexity of life is numbing. I looked at a business card the other day that showed me about nine different ways I could leave this man a message. Cell phone, work phone, voice mail, home phone, pager, fax, car phone, e-mail, and snail mail to his home address. Probably I'd never actually talk with him, but I could exchange information with his machines. What he should have put on there is, "just drop by sometime for a chat!" What happened to that one?

But at some point you have to ask, does checking and maintaining all these electronic things really simplify my life?

James Thurber once wrote, "Man is flying too fast for a world that is round. Soon he will catch up with himself in a great rear-end collision, and man will never know what hit him from behind was man."

Basically, we don't know how to apply wisdom to what we know.

Knowledge and information seem to be on the superhighway and wisdom is putting along on a country road somewhere. Our ability to do outstrips our ability to be.

Does God really have anything to say about our predicament? In our opening study in the book of Proverbs we saw that God makes Wisdom accessible and practical through placing him first in our lives.

But is the cost too high? Are the benefits to following wisdom real? Does it really pay to remain faithful to God when it seems easier to just "go with the flow"?

Someone once said, "Each man has a choice in life: he may approach it as a creator or critic, a lover or a hater, a giver or a taker." And Proverbs would add, "a wise man or a fool." In chapter 1 we are told "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." But the second half of that verse is an equally important part of wisdom: "Fools despise wisdom and instruction." Thus enters another player in the drama of Proverbs, the fool.

Foolishness is not being a prankster, as we might think of it today. As we said last week, it is basically an approach to life that is self-oriented. The fool is "wise in his own eyes" (Prov 12:15).

There are many descriptions of fools in Proverbs. There is the naive simpleton who is uncommitted and gullible to anything. Then there are several other types who seem progressively resistant to truth

based on their chosen outlook, not their brain power. Only the scoff-er is impervious to truth, and is unteachable. But in all of them, the root of his trouble is spiritual.

So, the father's training of his son is to introduce him to the prevailing godless attitudes of the world around him and at the same time instill a love for God. In 4:1-9, first we saw that he must seek wisdom at any cost. Now, in verses 10-19, the father tells him to stay on the path of wisdom. But there will be foolish opposition. He wants him to understand what motivates the wicked person. It's not enough to just tenaciously follow the wisdom of the Lord, we must understand the motivations and outcomes of unwise choices.

Today we will learn that there are fundamentally two paths that our choices take us down, the wise and the foolish, and we will be shown clear benefits for seeking the wise path and rejecting the way of the fool.

Proverbs 4:10-19:

**Hear, my son, and accept my sayings,
And the years of your life will be many.
I have directed you in the way of wisdom;
I have led you in upright paths.
When you walk, your steps will not be impeded;
And if you run, you will not stumble.
Take hold of instruction; do not let it go.
Guard her, for she is your life.
Do not enter the path of the wicked,
And do not proceed in the way of evil men.
Avoid it, do not pass by it;
Turn away from it and pass on.
For they cannot sleep unless they do evil;
And they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble.**

**For they eat the bread of wickedness,
And drink the wine of violence.
But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.
The way of the wicked is like darkness;
They do not know over what they stumble. (Prov 4:10-19 NASB)**

Notice the many references there are for images of "movement." Words suggesting movement on a journey are everywhere: see, walk, steps, run, stumble (three times), enter, path, way, proceed, pass by, turn away, pass on. All of it surrounds the idea of being on a road or journey.

In fact, the passage breaks out based on two "ways." Verses 10-13 speak about the way of wisdom (v. 11a); verses 14-17 give insight into the "way of the wicked" (v. 14a). Then the passage concludes, in 18-19, with a summary image of light and darkness to describe again, the paths of the righteous and the wicked.

We all understand this image of being on a journey. We use this phraseology all the time today. We say “we’re on the road of life.” The Bible describes our process of growing in relationship with God as a “walk.” The Lord God “walked” with Adam and Eve in the garden. God sent fire at night and a cloud by day in the wilderness to “show you the way which you should go” (Deut 1:33). Psalm 1 speaks of the way of a righteous man contrasted with the way of the wicked. And then Jesus landed this image in himself, saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

But we all know there are many false and harmful ways. And, as Proverbs says, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”

So what are some benefits of the wise path, of staying on the path of wisdom?

The first thing the father tells his son is, being teachable and humble is healing and life-giving: “that the years of your life will be many.” Verse 10:

**Hear, my son, and accept my sayings,
And the years of your life will be many. (4:10)**

As is his custom, the father beseeches his son to listen to and accept the wisdom passed down from his father and forefathers, the law, and what the One God, Yahweh, has revealed. The fifth commandment, to honor your father and mother, is linked with a promise that it would “go well with you and your days may be prolonged.” In Proverbs 4:22, the father’s words are life-giving and healing if taken into the heart. James (5:14-16) even suggests that sometimes sickness is related to sin or caused by sin and that prayer and confession in the company of other believers brings forgiveness and healing.

Secondly, the father tells his son that the path of wisdom will add stability to his life. Verses 11-12:

**I have directed you in the way of wisdom;
I have led you in upright paths.
When you walk, your steps will not be impeded;
And if you run, you will not stumble. (4:11-12)**

The word here that says “upright paths” can be literally “straight tracks.” It is used for a well-worn groove or rut that’s carved through repeated movements by an ox cart on a path. The rut actually keeps the cart on a straight path. And it’s harder to drift off the road because you know the way and have worn a path with many others before you. Do you know you can actually be in a good rut, not just a bad one? You can even pick up your speed and run with confidence, knowing the right way, and you will not stumble.

This is what it’s like applying God’s truth to your life—making a pattern out of it. It is harder to deviate; and you receive the reward of stability.

Are you tentative because you are unsure of the wisdom of following a certain decision or relationship in your life? Is your life unstable, and when you pick up speed, it really gets scary, because you don’t know where you will end up?

Finally, the father says, be diligent to hang on to what you’ve learned about wisdom. Verse 13:

**Take hold of instruction; do not let it go.
Guard her, for she is your life. (4:13)**

The father now drives it home by using three ways of saying we must not be complacent in our walk with God. Seize (wisdom), don’t relax, guard her.

We can’t ever afford to stop learning and growing. We can’t rest. Athletes have to keep their muscles toned or they will go backward and atrophy. Will Rogers said, “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there!”

The reason is because “she is your life.” Wisdom, which we know is Christ himself, gives us a quality and stability of life we can’t afford to ignore.

But it is also true that we can’t afford to engage in the other path, in verse 14, the way of wickedness.

So the second part of the motivation to stay on the path of wisdom is to understand what motivates the wicked and what his outcome is.

In chapter 1, the father took his son into the streets to observe the mob, the gang, the peer group that offers excitement, a shared purse, and acceptance. (Sounds a lot like parts of the business world too, not just the temptations of the young!) In chapters 5 and 7, the father takes his son into the world of sexual temptation and shows him the result of the person without sense who has created an unbridled appetite and in the end loses everything valuable to him.

There are many arenas of foolishness that we need to expose. It could be the seductiveness of materialism or workaholicism. What seduces you and draws you into its world where wisdom is no longer the operable principle in your life?

The father doesn’t ignore or shelter his son from the existence of evil, rather he shows him the teeth of ungodliness and unmasks its allure by explaining where it ends up.

The father gives him two insights about it:

First, you will not be strong enough to resist its charms by being regularly immersed in it. Verses 14-15:

**Do not enter the path of the wicked,
And do not proceed in the way of evil men.
Avoid it, do not pass by it;
Turn away from it and pass on. (4:14-15)**

This is why the father repeats himself and intensifies his words. Listen to his language: “Do not enter their path, don’t proceed, avoid it, don’t pass nearby, turn aside, and pass beyond it.”

We must be careful. This isn’t talking about separating ourselves from the world so we don’t get contaminated and live little cloistered Christian lives in Christian communities going from fox hole to fox hole. No, we are being encouraged to apply wisdom to the world we live in, but recognize the power of seduction of certain thinking and self-oriented behavior. Don’t think you can enter into that world day after day and not be affected by it.

So the first insight is really pretty obvious: if you struggle with walking with Christ and seeking wisdom in a certain area of your life, don’t keep placing yourself in the midst of a situation you can’t handle. Remove the fuel. Stay clear. Disengage. Tell someone about it so they can help you as well.

The second insight is deeper. It unmasks what motivates the ungodly. The normal activities of life no longer satisfy them, and they develop an appetite for exploitation. Verses 16-17:

**For they cannot sleep unless they do evil;
And they are robbed of sleep unless they make someone stumble.
For they eat the bread of wickedness,
And drink the wine of violence. (4:16-17)**

You meet people down this path who become driven not just to enjoy the common elements of honest labor (rest, food and drink). That's not enough to satisfy their lusts. They live on the edge and promote their own success at the expense of others in the process. In fact, ironically, they are robbed of sleep until they rob life from someone else. They've traded normal bodily appetites, which should refresh and regenerate the body, to become tools for scheming to get what they want. What begins as adventure can end up in an addiction or being hurtful in ways never intended.

The story was in the news recently of several teenagers who started out one evening of adventure taking a road sign. At the end of the night, they had taken nineteen road signs. Later that night another car of teenagers went through the intersection with a missing sign and were broadsided. That sign was a stop sign. All the young people in the second car died. The kids were given fifteen years and a lifetime of dealing with the results of their actions. There was a high cost to continuing down a path of foolishness. What can begin as setting foot in an unwise path, can lead farther than ever imagined.

Again, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it is the way of death." Ultimately, an appetite is created for self, rather than an appetite for God. We have to ask ourselves, do we really want to end up there?

And if that's not enough motivation for clinging to God's path, the father gives us a beautiful analogy, light and darkness. Verses 18-19:

**But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,
That shines brighter and brighter until the full day.
The way of the wicked is like darkness;
They do not know over what they stumble. (4:18-19)**

The righteous (or followers of God's way) walk in ever-increasing light. It is like dawn breaking into mid-day: it is ever-increasing until full. This is what our relationship with Christ is like. Walking in the light with Jesus is not a static thing, but dynamic, gradually shedding light in shadows and dark places of life.

I like to hike in the hills to spend time alone with Christ. Spending time in God's Word, reflecting on it, and talking with God in prayer, sheds light on muddled areas of my life as I walk. Jesus regularly spent nights in a cave alone to restore his outlook on life from the Father regarding the pressures surrounding him. And the Father would restore him. We have a dynamic relationship with God.

The wicked stumble around in the dark. The word here is actually a deep darkness. Here is a great image of people not looking to Christ but themselves to make it through life. It's like getting up in the middle of the night with a power outage, trying to find a candle, stumbling about. They don't have a clue. Do you want to trip and not even understand what you're tripping over? That's dark.

So, are you moving in the light or stumbling in the dark?

You have a choice. The father is imploring us to choose the way of wisdom and experience, blessing and light, not darkness and defeat. Make no mistake, a choice needs to be made, or a choice will be made for you. This is real.

Joshua exhorted Israel in his farewell words to them, as they lived in a land filled with enemies, "choose for yourselves today who you will serve, the gods of the land around you or the Lord, but for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." The scripture on the cover of the bulletin is the Lord appealing his people through Jeremiah to walk in the ancient paths, the good way, and find rest. But the people rejected God and continued their idolatrous ways (Jer 6:16).

What are the gods of our land that woo us to serve them, to leave the Lord of Wisdom, and trust in ourselves as the only way to get ahead?

Has the Way, the Truth and the Life only become one of many ways for you?

Have you let go of his hand and found your own way and now are somewhere you never thought you'd be?

Or are you on the path at all? Perhaps you haven't ever stepped onto the path of walking with Christ. He invites you to leave the realm of darkness and be transferred into the kingdom of light. He said, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life."

The great news is that wisdom is always available to us. Christ is wooing us to draw near and receive our hearts' desire, a relationship with him. He will lead you on straight paths that will delight you and not put you in danger of losing all that is important to you.

The choice is before us.

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