

Explore the Bible: Living Wisely

June 30, 2020

- *The Explore the Bible Lesson for July 19 focuses on Proverbs 14:8-15.*

One of my favorite details about the Bible is its rich literary variety. As Christians, we recognize the Scriptures as being uniquely inspired by God. At the same time, there can be no question God chose to communicate using diverse literary forms. Ruth is a narrative. The Psalms are ancient Hebrew poetry. Texts like Romans and 1 Peter are letters. And so on.

The literary variety of the Bible requires us to approach different texts in different ways. A key part of this process is recognizing different literary devices found in different biblical texts. However, some literary devices are found across a variety of biblical genres. One of these is the chiasmus.

A chiasmus is an arrangement of words in what's called an "A-B-B-A" structure. But rather than explain this—which may be cumbersome and boring—I want to *show* you what a chiasmus looks like. Our text for today is a perfect example. Proverbs 14:8-15 consists of eight verses, each of which is paired with another. Verses 8 and 15 go together, as do 9 and 14, 10 and 13, and 11 and 12.

Prudence and Foolishness (vv. 8, 15)

These two verses serve to contrast the "prudent" and the "foolish." As discussed previously, wisdom has a moral dimension, as does foolishness. To be a fool is not simply to be dumb; it is to be immoral.

The "prudent" in this passage are those who think carefully about their ways. They don't dive headlong into decisions, but rather take the time to

consider and reflect. By contrast, fools are easily deceived (verse 8) and “believe anything” (verse 15).

In an era of “fake news,” Christians must exercise thoughtful discernment in what media we consume and how we process said media. Numerous half-truths and outright lies are floating around at the moment, and Christians should not be known as people easily tricked into believing such things.

Before sharing something controversial on social media, take some time to think and reflect. Ask: “Can I confirm these facts to be true by looking at other sources? Are there people with whom I normally disagree who also recognize these facts to be true? Have I done careful research and consulted other people to hear their opinions?”

Recompense and Reward (vv. 9, 14)

The next contrast concerns making recompense or reparation for one’s wrongdoing. Fools laugh at the idea of making restitution for their wrongdoings (verse 9), but they will one day “be fully repaid for their ways” (verse 14). By contrast, the righteous—who do make amends when they harm others—experience God’s favor and will be rewarded.

This pair of verses may serve simultaneously as comfort and warning. On one hand, it is comforting to know that injustice and evil will not go unpunished. Those who seem to have gotten away with atrocities in the past will not get away with it forever.

However, this truth ought also to convict our hearts as Christians. We will one day also give an account for our own actions. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Heartache and Joy (vv. 10, 13)

This pair of verses is unique in that it does not contrast the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked. Rather, these verses make an astute observation about human emotion. No one really can know for certain what someone else is feeling (verse 10), and even apparent joy can be a mask for sadness and pain (verse 13).

These verses hit home for me in a way the others do not. I have numerous loved ones who have struggled with depression, and a few have even attempted or completed suicide. Scripture here bears witness to a painful truth. Even what looks like joy to us may in fact be a cover for immense pain and sadness.

These verses should challenge the church to do more to understand mental health and to care for those struggling with depression, suicidal thoughts, etc. This is an area in which the church has often failed, and we must do better.

Life and Death (vv. 11, 12)

This pair of verses sits at the center of the chiasmus. The way of righteousness leads to life, but the path of wickedness leads only to destruction. However, there also is a twist: “There is a way that *appears* to be right, but in the end it leads to death” (verse 12, emphasis mine).

Many of us would like to think that matters of right and wrong are clear. This is right; that is wrong. The “good guys” look like this; the “bad guys” look like that. And so on. If this were true, it would make our lives much easier. Sadly, this often is not the case. The “right thing to do” often is difficult to discern, and what appears righteous may in fact prove to be evil.

Consider white American Christians who supported and defended slavery in

the early centuries of U.S. history. They firmly believed they had the Bible (and nature) on their side. We all know how that turned out.

What then shall we do? As Christians, we must walk with humility and prayerfulness, holding our convictions with an open hand and being willing to change our minds. If we ask God for wisdom, he surely will give it to us.

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