

Learning from the Failure of Fools

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon. New year, new space, new microphone. Josh Olson said this would be distracting, so I thought I would draw attention to it to just get it out of the way.

! That's great. It's good to be here. After six months on the platform, I feel like Josh is finally starting to look up to me, which is pretty much physically impossible.

Well, I thought as we began this series in Proverbs, what better way to start than with a fable? So did you hear this story? There was once a young sapling. He grew up in the shade of many mighty oaks.

He grew up next to a fence, on the other side of which stood a few younger oak trees. And these young oaks would often call to the sapling and urge him to come on over to the other side of the fence to drink in the sunlight there.

Come on over, they would say. We get the first light of the day. And the oaks which towered over him warned him not to go through the fence or he would get stuck. But each morning, the sapling looked across the fence and he saw these young oaks, their leaves shining in the first bright rays of the day.

[1 : 20] And the more the sapling saw them, the more he looked, the closer he grew to the fence. And these younger oaks kept pressing him to come over. And the more he listened, the closer he came until one day he woke up with the sun on his leaves.

This bright early light that he had been looking for, he had. He grew quickly toward the morning light on the other side of the fence, putting out many leaves to soak in this new patch of early sun.

And the young oaks around him praised him for his fast growth and he ate his fill each morning. But one day, the sapling woke to the sun shining, not on his leaves, but on his trunk, which had grown stiff as he grew taller.

He'd grown too strong to bend back through the fence and the patch of morning light no longer reached his leaves. Day after day, he felt the hunger grow and he watched the younger oaks around him lose their leaves as the sun did not shine on them.

While the old oaks stood still high above them, catching every last ray of sun in the afternoon brightness. The sapling could only look up, knowing that he should have listened while there was still time.

[2 : 35] It's a cute story. Maybe. We could take any number of morals from it, but one in particular I think will be helpful to us this evening.

I have morning in my manuscript. We're getting used to these things. The moral of the story of the sapling is to follow the path of flourishing before you reap the reward of fools.

Follow the path of flourishing or reap the reward of fools. This morning, we're starting this series in Proverbs, and for the next seven weeks while we meet in the evening, we're going to sit down to feast on the Bible's banquet of wisdom.

Proverbs 1 sets the table for us for this feast with three addresses. In verses 1 to 7, we're given this address. It talks about the stuff of wisdom.

In 8 to 19, we'll look at the path of wisdom, and the chapter closes with the warning of wisdom in 20 through 33. The story of the sapling gets at the message of Proverbs 1, because what Proverbs 1 is getting at and what I hope to set before us today is the encouragement of Proverbs to choose wisdom's riches or reap a fool's reward.

[3 : 54] I've been playing with titles for sermons, and I've titled this sermon, Learning from the Failure of Fools. I've aimed at this because the stuff, the path, the warning of wisdom all work together to tune our ears to this call, to choose wisdom's riches or reap a fool's reward.

Would you pray with me one more time before we look at our text? God of creation, we praise you for your work of creation.

We praise you for the glory that's displayed in it. We praise you for the wisdom with which you laid the foundation of this world. To in our hearts, we pray to hear you this afternoon and to live wisely as we leave this place.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Well, the first of our three addresses between verses 1 through 7 is all about the stuff of Proverbs.

What is it? What's it for? What kind of stuff exactly are we going to find in this book that we call Proverbs? The answer to this question, if you've done any study in this book, is notoriously tricky.

[5 : 05] Even our text, Proverbs itself, in verses 1 through 7, it gives us seven different answers. What's in the book? Verse 2, it's wisdom, it's instruction, it's words of insight.

In this book, we'll find Proverbs, sayings, the words of the wise, and riddles. That's what verse 6 tells us. Because it's so hard to pin down what exactly this genre is, scholars have given a name to this kind of literature.

This stuff that can be found all over the ancient world, not just in our Bible, but in Egypt and other ancient texts. It's called wisdom literature. I start here because it's important to know what we're reading.

After all, you would want to know if the headlines you were reading came from the Babylon Bee or the New York Times. Our response to what we read changes based on what it is.

Different genres do different things. Stories are not law. Poems are not instructions. The news informs, the law regulates, poems move us to experience something that the author would like us to experience.

[6 : 09] This wisdom literature also has a purpose. So what is Proverbs trying to do? What is the stuff of Proverbs about? As Dave read, you might have heard it as he started this book.

We had this thing come up over and over again, these purpose statements. These opening verses, a number of times we read that Proverbs is written so that we might know wisdom, written to know wisdom, to understand, to receive instruction.

Proverbs, this wisdom literature, is written to form the reader. It's not here for entertainment. It is here to form us. But who is the reader?

Who is Proverbs for? Again, our first address, this stuff of Proverbs, tells us. In the first place, Proverbs is for the simple.

Proverbs is for the youth. This is a character who will appear throughout the book of Proverbs. The simple is not quite the same as the fool. It sounds a little bit like an insult to call somebody simple. But what Proverbs mean when it talks about the simple is just the one who is in the process of being formed.

[7 : 20] Like clay that is still able to be molded and shaped like the sapling from the story while he was still young. One who is still young enough to bend through the fence or maybe bend his way back out again.

So verse 4 tells us that one of the purposes of the book is to give prudence to the simple. Knowledge and discretion to the youth. So who here is under 20?

This book is for you. But not only for the young and the moldable. Also for those older and experienced. Verse 5 says, Let the wise hear and increase in learning.

The one who understands obtain guidance. Who hears over 60? This book is for you. It's also for everyone in between. And we should say at the outset that this book, 31 chapters, is far more than we can handle in just seven short weeks.

But what we can do is sort of sample the menu of this banquet. We're going to drop into a few key places. Pick up a few of the more insightful themes. Proverbs has three main sections.

[8 : 28] The first nine chapters are large discourses like we read this morning. Speeches like the one we have today. We can read and preach those like we have from Deuteronomy or from the letters of Paul.

Chapters 30 and 31 are the same. But from chapters 10 to 29, we have our just collections of sayings. These are the proverbs, the riddles that we read about in this first address.

So in the next few weeks, we'll try our best to capture as broad a vision as we can from this book. Next week, Daniel will take Proverbs chapter 2. In the last two weeks, Dave and I will take chapters 30 and 31.

And in between will be three weeks where we sort of wrestle with this middle section. Taking whole handfuls of sayings, trying to distill, fit pieces together like a puzzle. To tease out what Proverbs has to say about laziness and work.

About speech. About money and possessions. What does this banquet of wisdom have to teach us today? All of this might still leave us wondering, okay, what is all the stuff of Proverbs really?

[9 : 35] What is it? What does learning for the wise look like? What does giving prudence to the young do? How does it happen? Well, the answer to both of these hangs on verse 7.

This is where this sort of prologue to Proverbs culminates. This is what it says. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. And fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs aim to form wise people. Wisdom is the knowledge of how to act in God's world according to God's character in whatever place God has us.

Verse 7 summarizes this with the phrase, the fear of the Lord. Which basically means the awareness that we live our lives before the face of God.

And knowing this is the first step in wisdom. Through this lens we are well situated to learn from the failure of fools. The stuff of Proverbs is the fear of the Lord.

[10 : 33] The second address, as we come to verse 8, it sort of moves us from considering the stuff of wisdom. This book of Proverbs more generally.

What it is, what's it for. It brings into focus the path. The path of wisdom. What it looks like to walk wisely. I think this second address in some ways helps fill in the sketch of the fear of the Lord.

Because we've all heard that phrase hundreds if not thousands of times. But it's a hard thing to wrap our heads around. What does it mean to know how to act in God's world? Well, this second address from a father and a mother to their son begins to sort of color the lines in for us.

To fill out this picture. Verse 8 begins, Hear, my son, your father's instruction. And forsake not your mother's teaching. The first word of this, hear, or shema in Hebrew.

And the last word, teaching, or Torah, should make us think of Deuteronomy. It's a bit hard for us in English, but these stand out really strongly. The passage from which Jesus calls out the greatest commandment, Deuteronomy 6.4, it's called the shema.

[11:44] And this other word, Torah, is the word Dr. Block urged us as we walked through Deuteronomy to translate instruction. And here's a clear place where Torah means instruction. It's teaching. It's the mother's teaching for her son.

And Proverbs, in many ways, is like Deuteronomy. When we walked through Deuteronomy, one of the clearest things we saw was life comes from obedience. And disobedience leads to death.

In Proverbs, the same thing is true. As we stand at the start of this path, or as we stand at the start of Proverbs, two paths sort of stand before us. We have the path of wisdom on one hand and the path of fools on the other.

Wisdom leads to flourishing for us, for our families, our societies. But foolishness, wickedness, even in Proverbs, simple laziness leads, on the other hand, to floundering and destruction in life.

For us, for our families, and for society. So hear, my son, your father's instruction, your mother's Torah.

[12:51] If sinners entice you, do not consent. We see here that right at the outset, the path of wisdom leads away from sin and from sin's attraction. This example is a bit of a, it's a bit extreme, to say the least.

The great Dr. Papendorf did a great job reading for us when he read this. When sinners say, come with us, lie in wait for blood with us. We shall find all precious goods.

Throw in your lot among us. Let's go sit in the bushes and wait until someone comes by. We'll rise up, kill them, and take all of their things. I remember back in middle school when I was invited to one of these parties.

It's a bit of an extreme example, but it is this way on purpose. Because this is how all sin is, isn't it? It's ridiculous.

When we paint sin in its clearest colors, choosing to follow the path of death always sounds foolish. Who's going to follow a sign that says, take a left, it'll kill you?

[13:56] Not many. Yet this is where the path of wisdom begins. It begins in learning to listen. The path of wisdom starts with learning to see the end from the beginning.

And so this exhortation from the parents to their child. If sinners entice you, do not consent. Look at their way of life. Students, you might not hear this same invitation from your friends, but I guarantee you will hear something like it.

This is an extreme example, but notice what's here. First is the promise of community. Come with us. Throw in your lot among us. I got into my first bad group of friends this way.

They were already my friends when they started going off the path and the draw of community, people who understood me, people to talk to who weren't my parents or my siblings. It's going to be a real pull off the path of wisdom.

So students, learn to see the end from the beginning. I think it's important also to recognize that this can be a good desire.

[15:06] Community is one thing that Proverbs will repeatedly point out is a good thing. There are goods designed by God to be attractive. Proverbs will promise many goods for those who follow the path of wisdom.

Things like friendship, prosperity, health. All of these are part of wisdom's riches. But friendship along the wrong path is just a distortion of the real good that community can be, the real good that God promises as the reward for those who follow wisdom.

And so the path of wisdom starts here, in learning to see the end from the beginning, because what starts out as an appeal to what is truly good, like friendship, can become distorted.

The parents say, my son, do not walk in the way with them, for their feet run to evil. I think we know, and students, I think I knew when my friends started to go off the wrong way, we can recognize when others do not fear the Lord.

Even if it's hard to define fearing the Lord, I think we know it when we see it, and we know it when we don't see it. So the path of wisdom recognizes when others do not fear the Lord.

[16:27] But even more than that, wisdom can see what happens to those who reject God. This is verse 17, where he says, In vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird, but these men lie in wait for their own blood.

They set a trap for their own lives. You can imagine, if you're trying to capture a bird, let's say you're very hungry and you want dinner or something, Aldi is closed.

You're not going to set a trap in front of a bird who's right there. You're not going to catch the bird. But these guys, they are setting a trap for themselves. This is a common theme in the Old Testament, especially throughout the Psalms and Proverbs.

Wicked men are destroyed by their own wicked acts. Sin sets its own trap. The desires of sin, they wrap us up in a net that tangles us until we are consumed by it ourselves, killed by our own desire.

These fools are blind to the real reward of their way, which is destruction. They think it's quick gain, some fun with friends. They keep all the stuff that they find, but in the end, their road is death.

[17:38] Like the sapling, those of us who abandon the path of flourishing will reap the rewards of fools. Now, if the son or the daughter in Proverbs needs to be on guard against such obvious evil, how much more do we need to be on guard against the much more subtle ways that Satan tempts us today?

Maybe it's not just our friends, but what about the things we consume? This is for us as parents and adults, as well as students. The books we read, the movies we watch, the music we listen to, they all present a narrative of what's normal, a picture of what the good life is, and the path of wisdom teaches us to see the end from the beginning.

Christians should be able to see the outcomes of stepping into the narratives that our culture has created. We should be able to say no to influences that will turn our hearts from God. And this starts with learning to see the end from the beginning.

For Christians who are just absentmindedly consuming everything, we will be unaware of the influences on us. Of course, Christians should also have the capacity to enjoy the stories others write without being influenced by them, right?

Just as we should be able to have relationships with those outside the church without being formed by those outside the church. But once again, immunity to the narratives of our world starts with being able to discern the end of an action, right?

[19:12] To carry the thoughts of our neighbors to their logical conclusions, to be able to assess the intentions and the outcomes of the neighbors and the narratives that surround us.

Sometimes we might be with our neighbor on the intentions with which we want to, I don't know, pursue some endeavor, but disagree on the outcome.

We both want to love our neighbor. We have a different idea of how to get there. Other times we might agree on the outcome, but not the intention. We're doing the same thing, but for two very different reasons. Proverbs wants to shape us into the kind of people who can grapple with these things well.

To know how to make the right decision for the right, reasons. So the stuff of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, the awareness that life is lived in the face of God.

It's learning to live in God's world according to God's character, wherever God has placed you. The path of wisdom invites us to walk in this way. It begins by learning to listen to the end from the beginning.

[20 : 18] And as we shift to look at wisdom's warning, I want us to notice that the path of wisdom is exactly this. It is a path. Proverbs, this wisdom literature, this banquet, is not simply giving us rules to follow.

These are not only warnings for us. Proverbs wants to train us to walk a certain way. Sometimes the path can be difficult to follow.

Proverbs starts out very basic. The ethics of Proverbs, the right and wrong, are black and white. And as Proverbs moves along, things get more complicated. It's training us to walk a path.

Sort of like the road in Pilgrim's Progress, the path of wisdom takes us through the difficulties of life. It's not a path that removes every obstacle for us, but a path that shapes us into the kind of people who can make the journey.

And this is where the warning of wisdom comes in. Because a new voice calls out in verse 20. Wisdom cries out aloud in the streets. In the market, she raises her voice. At the head of the noisy street, she cries out.

[21 : 24] Notice that wisdom's warning comes as one voice among many. I once spent two months in Turkey, and we took the chance one afternoon to go to the Grand Bazaar, which was cool.

It's probably not as cool as it was a thousand years ago, but it was still fun. It was just a huge market with a thousand stalls, hundreds of colors, and vendors everywhere calling out to customers who are walking between the aisles, sometimes literally trying to pull you into their store to get you to look at what they have.

This is where wisdom raises her voice. In the marketplace. At the noisy street. This is where she's crying out. She promises life and security.

Later in Proverbs, she puts it this way. Wisdom is better than jewels. All that you desire cannot be compared with her. Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord.

She calls out to the simple, to the scoffer, and to the fool. She calls out to anyone who will listen. Listen, wisdom is ready to pour out her spirit, to make her words known to them.

[22 : 30] Wisdom offers her riches to any who will have them. But she is just one voice among many. And we are far too easily distracted. So the warning of wisdom begins in verse 24.

Because I have called you and you refuse to listen, because you ignored my counsel, I also will laugh at your calamity. I will mock when terror strikes you.

The warning is not that wisdom is petty. She doesn't mock fools because they are in danger. She doesn't rejoice in people going the wrong way.

But her laugh comes because in the day of terror, they will look for wisdom and find nothing. It struck me while Mr. Papendor was reading it, that even if they look diligently in that day, their lack of diligence in searching for wisdom their entire life will come up to meet them.

Wisdom in the days of peace. It's just how things work. If there's nothing in the tank, your car is not going to run. And so the warning of wisdom is this.

[23 : 41] We are the sum of our choices. Every decision adds up. When faced with the choice between diligence and sloth, the path we choose shapes us.

Every time. Our choices become habits. Our habits become character. And it seems in the warning of wisdom, our character becomes our destiny.

I know this firsthand. Just going right back to middle school and high school today. I wasn't the most diligent person growing up. I had a good work ethic.

Some natural ability in sports and things. It made it easy for me to just sort of slack off. And in the last 10 years, especially since starting college and a whole bunch of other things, I had to fight hard the habits I formed as a teenager.

And the whole time wishing I had listened to my parents growing up. So for you who are teenagers now or going to be teenagers, make the hard choices now.

[24 : 43] Take the right path now because it's so much harder to undo the habits you make than it is to make them rightly. Choose wisdom. Read this book.

You could read it tonight. It takes an hour and a half. Or you could read a chapter a day. 31 chapters a day makes it a great monthly goal. There's a year where I read a proverb a day.

It was a great year of my life. It was actually the point where I began to change from a person with a little bit less diligence to slightly more. So this warning of wisdom calls out to us.

Choose wisdom's riches before you reap a fool's reward. Think of the sapling. While young and impressionable, he slipped through the fence. He enjoyed the immediate reward of the early light of the day, but he failed to look ahead along the path of wisdom.

He failed to look up, seeing the mature oaks enjoying the sun every day. So he enjoyed the rewards of the easy path until he literally grew into his choices. At that point, it was too late.

[25 : 49] Choose wisdom's riches before you reap a fool's reward. This is the warning of wisdom. We all grow into our choices. We are the sum of our decisions.

In ceramics, also something I did in high school, clay goes through a couple of stages. The clay that a potter can work with is sort of like Play-Doh.

So you can form it. You can shape it. It will move under your hand, but as it sits, it begins to dry. And it moves from moldable clay to what they call leather hard.

It's still damp, but it can't be shaped very easily with your hands. It takes a sharp tool to cut away pieces. And so instead of being molded, this hardened clay is cut and trimmed with knives.

Any excess clay is excised. It's cut out. Eventually, the clay dries out completely, and it cannot be molded. It can't be cut with these tools.

[26 : 56] You can sand it down a little bit, but at this point is when the potter, whoever's working with the clay, puts it into the kiln, and it gets fired. These kilns get super hot, and when clay reaches a high enough temperature, it actually undergoes a chemical change.

It's not a physical change. Like water to ice. But it becomes no longer clay. It becomes glass. It's ceramic. And there's no changing the piece at this point.

You can't soak it in water and get it back to where you can shape it again. At this point, it is done. Which you can see on some of the pieces that I did in high school. I figured I'd have time to fix them later, but once it was glass, it was done.

As children, as young men and women, we are like clay. We're still soft enough to be formed, but over years, our choices and our habits, they dry us out. If you get your head on you at some point, maybe you can start cutting yourself back into shape, getting a little bit more disciplined or something, like I did.

But eventually, decisions, stress, troubles, and suffering, these things put us into the kiln of life, and these things take us and they sort of cement our habits into character.

[28 : 12] These are the things that, barring the work of God or some very hard unlearning, they stay with us for a long time. We all become hardened at some point, unable to bend without breaking.

At some point, we all become more like fired glass than moldable clay. And this is wisdom's warning, that a day will come when we need the fear of the Lord and we need wisdom's instruction.

But if we have not chosen well, that day will leave us without what we need. Wisdom doesn't withhold herself from the fool out of spite, but because they hated knowledge, in verse 29, therefore they shall have the fruit of their way.

And her warning ends like this, the simple are killed by their turning away. And the complacency of fools destroys them. But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread of disaster.

In this noisy place in the grand bazaar of life, wisdom calls out to us and she offers security and life without dread of disaster. So her warning stands before us today.

[29 : 32] Choose wisdom's riches before you reap a fool's reward. Learn from the failure of fools. Now as we begin to close, maybe the question has sprung in your mind.

The reward of fools and sinners is their own death. But in Christ, we have had the consequences of our actions paid for.

Right? I may have earned a fool's reward. I might be that fired pot unable to change, but in Christ I am a new creation. Right? This is true.

This is exactly what Paul says. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come. And this, I hope, is one of the amazing things that will stand out as we feast on Proverbs.

Because where we have all earned a fool's reward, while we all eventually turn from this moldable clay into fired glass, God does what is impossible.

[30 : 36] This is the new birth, the regeneration, the salvation that Michelle read out for us from Ephesians. Salvation by faith in Christ. He makes what has been fired, hard glass, and he turns it into what can be shaped again.

He takes us who are fools and sluggards, the proud and the violent in our heart, and he, the loving potter, has made us new and is shaping us into the image of Christ.

So how much greater an opportunity do we have then to follow the path of wisdom? We who have been given the Holy Spirit to inspire and empower us to choose wisdom's riches, but how much greater also then should wisdom's warning come to us?

We who have heard the message of Christ, who is the power and wisdom of God. Because remember, the warning of wisdom to choose the path of wisdom is built on the stuff of wisdom, on the fear of the Lord, living life before the face of God, in the world of God, after the character and the perfection of God.

So yes, wisdom's warning should be even greater to us who claim to know God more. Because to whom more is given, more is expected. that's what Paul says, or what Paul means when he says over and over again, things like, put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life, and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

[32 : 07] So, we cannot shirk the call of wisdom simply claiming to be in Christ. the most horrible thing to hear in our time of need before God will be the mocking laugh of wisdom and the realization that our own foolish complacency has destroyed us.

Instead, as we walk through Proverbs for these next seven weeks, as we feast on the banquet before us, let's learn from the failure of fools. Let's not think that we can take the warnings of Proverbs and set them aside because of what Christ has done.

Let's learn from the failure of fools because, in our case, before we reap a fool's reward. Let's pray.

Our God in heaven, we give you great thanks for what you have revealed to us. What you have revealed to us in your word.

We thank you for the warnings that you give us. We thank you also, Lord, that you have given us so many good things to desire and that you feed the hungry with food.

[33 : 22] And so we ask that we would hunger for you, that we would be those who call out for wisdom, who hear her as she cries to us. Hold us fast, we pray in Christ's name.

Amen.