

The Ways of Wisdom and Folly

Proverbs 9

Proverbs 9:1-12 - *“Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn out her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her meat; she has mixed her wine; she has also furnished her table. She has sent out her maidens, and she cries out from the highest places of the city, “Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!” As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake foolishness and live, and go in the way of understanding.” He who corrects a scoffer gets shame for himself, and he who rebukes a wicked man only harms himself. Do not correct a scoffer, lest he hate you. Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser. Teach a just 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 understanding. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years of life will be added to you. If you are wise, you are wise for yourself, and if you scoff, you will bear it alone.”

Background Notes

Back in Proverbs 1, we gave a simple outline of the Book of Proverbs:

- Precepts of Wisdom (chapters 1-9)
- Proverbs of Wisdom (chapters 10-21).

So chapter 9 is last chapter of the first division of Proverbs. This chapter is a great summary of the first eight chapters of the book, in which we've seen the benefits of wisdom contrasted to the pitfalls of folly.

In chapter 9 Wisdom and Folly are pictured as two women who have prepared banquets in their homes, and they're inviting simple and naïve young men to come in and partake of the benefits. But what a difference in the meals - and what a difference in the results! These two women have been referred to as Lady Wisdom and Madam Folly.

Doctrinal Points

1. Lady Wisdom invites the naïve to a sumptuous feast of long-term satisfaction.

In verse 1 we see that Lady Wisdom has built a house with seven pillars. Do these seven pillars represent some specific seven pillars, like the seven days of Creation in which our Lord built the heavens and the earth? Or do they represent the seven aspects of the “wisdom from above” in James 3? *“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure and peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruit, without partiality and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17).* Are those seven

aspects of wisdom the seven pillars in Proverbs 9:1? Or are the seven pillars just the idea of a large, well-constructed house for a great feast? In Scripture seven is the “ideal” number, but I don’t think we can be dogmatic about meaning of the number.

But we can say that Lady Wisdom has prepared a sumptuous banquet in her large house, and everyone is invited to come and partake of the benefits of wisdom. And the invitation is not just for the elite or only for intellectuals! No, it is for everyone! And it’s especially the naïve, who could reap the benefits of wisdom if they would turn from their foolish ways.

You can’t miss the invitation. Lady Wisdom sends out her many maidens to call out the invitation from the heights around the city. This open invitation to Lady Wisdom’s banquet sounds very similar to the banquets in the parables of the Kingdom that our Lord gave in Matthew 22 and Luke 14.

Matthew 22:1-5 - “Jesus spoke to them again by parables and said: “The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.”’ But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business.”

Luke 14:16-23 - “Then He [Jesus] said to him, “A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, ‘Come, for all things are now ready.’ But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.’ Still another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor, and the maimed, and the lame, and the blind.’ And the servant said, ‘Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.’ Then the master said to the servant, ‘Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.”

Most people refused the invitations in these two parables. Unfortunately, this is also true about Lady Wisdom’s invitation to participate in the long-term benefits of wisdom. Many people go through life following their own foolish ways. Refusing to respond to Lady Wisdom’s invitation is rejecting the message of salvation. Look at verses 5-6 once again: *“Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake foolishness and live, and go in the way of understanding.”*

This is the same as the gospel invitation in Isaiah 55:1-2 - *“Come, everyone who thirsts! Come to the waters! And you who have no money, come buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance.”*

Why would anyone refuse such a good deal? The benefits of responding to Wisdom's invitation are not just for this life, but also for eternity. Lady Wisdom invites the naïve to a sumptuous feast of long-term satisfaction.

2. Madam Folly invites the naïve to a sinful meal of instant gratification.

Proverbs 9:13-18 - *"A foolish woman is clamorous. She is simple, and knows nothing. For she sits at the door of her house, on a seat by the highest places of the city, to call to those who pass by, who go straight on their way: "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here." And as for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, "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 hell."*

Madam Folly is obviously a prostitute. It doesn't take much insight to see the sinful sexual allusions in her invitation: *"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here." And as for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, "Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant" (v16-17).*

Notice how Madam Folly uses the same tactics as Lady Wisdom to get out her invitation. *"She cries out from the highest places of the city, 'Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!' As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, 'Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine I have mixed. Forsake foolishness and live, and go in the way of understanding" (v3-4). And in verses 14-16, "She [Madam Folly] sits at the door of her house, on a seat by the highest places of the city, to call to those who pass by, who go straight on their way."*

Who does Madam Folly target? *"Those who pass by, who go straight on their way."* Is her target those who are looking for exciting ways to sin? No! She calls out to those who are trying to do what is right – who are trying to go straight! So it's like having two clear invitations coming at you at the same time. Wisdom is the right choice. It promises long-term satisfaction that leads to life. Folly promises instant gratification, but it is the sinful choice, and leads to death.

Which one will you choose? This must be a **decision** and **commitment** of your **will**, because instant gratification is much more appealing to our sinful natures.

Hebrews 11:25 says that Moses *"chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin."* There is instant gratification and pleasure in sin - but the pleasure is fleeting. ***It doesn't last!*** Madam Folly invites the naïve to a sinful meal of instant gratification.

Practical Application

Can you pass God's test of wisdom?

What is God's test of wisdom? Is it some kind of IQ test? Of course not! God's test of wisdom is found in verses 7-12:
"He who corrects a scoffer gets shame for himself, and he who rebukes a wicked man only harms himself. Do not correct a scoffer, lest he hate you. Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser. Teach a just 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 understanding. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years of life will be added to you. If you are wise, you are wise for yourself, and if you scoff, you will bear it alone."

Did you see God's test of wisdom in these verses? How well do you handle reproof and correction? You will fail God's test if you:

- can't stand to be corrected
- always insist you are right
- refuse to listen to instruction
- refuse to apologize
- despise the people who are trying to help you.

If those attitudes characterize your life, you are a scoffer and a fool - and you have failed God's test of wisdom. You will reap what you have sown (v12).

On the other hand, you will pass God's test of wisdom if you:

- handle reproof and instruction well
- appreciate those who are trying to correct you
- learn and grow from discipline
- honor the Lord with your words and behavior.

If those attitudes characterize your life, you have passed God's test of wisdom.

It's not a matter of intelligence - it's a matter of **character**! And your character – wise or foolish - is **your own individual responsibility**! Can you pass God's test of wisdom?