

Chapter 9: Fearing the Lord vs. Scheming

Ecclesiastes 7:15–29

The Preacher mentioned the value of wisdom briefly in the first part of this chapter (Eccl. 7:11–12). Even there, though, the Preacher noted the limitations of wisdom, given the crookedness in the world by the work of God (Eccl. 7:14). In the second half of this chapter, the Preacher gives wisdom closer consideration. Here again, we find the Preacher testing the world, trying to find some path to escape the vanity of life under the sun. What makes this passage unique to what we have seen so far, is that the Preacher will acknowledge some real value for wisdom (v. 19), and he will insist that he personally has sought to be wise (v. 25). Nevertheless, the Preacher still notes that true wisdom is “far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?” (v. 24). Still, the Preacher offers us a better solution here than might at first meet the eye by teaching that *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (cf. v. 18).

Wisdom is Not in Pretense (Eccl. 7:15–18)

First, the Preacher turns to consider the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the fools. As the Preacher has noted earlier, “all go to the one place” (Eccl. 6:6)—that is, all must die, the righteous and the wicked alike. Nevertheless, the righteous and the wicked do not have the same experience during the course of their lifetimes: “There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing” (v. 15). It is possible that the Preacher is here articulating one more counterintuitive part of life, if we read this to describe the short life of a righteous man as opposed to a man who lengthens his days *by* his evildoing.¹ On the other hand, v. 17 gives a specific warning about the shortened lifetimes of the wicked and fools: “Why should you die before your time?” On this basis, Douglas Miller is probably correct when he writes instead that, “at issue is not a *prolonging* of life, but a *living long in ... wickedness*, with all its bad results. Qohelet recognizes that wickedness leads to extended sufferings; increasing wickedness actually leads to an early termination of life (*die before your time*), and so he counsels against it.”²

Warning to the “Righteous” and the “Wise” (v. 16)

Such a warning, however, might lead the “righteous” to trust too much in their own righteousness and wisdom. As Duane Garrett explains, “Like Job’s three friends, such people are convinced that the question of how a human is to relate to God and the world is easily answered: If you obey all the rules, you will be safe.”³ So, the Preacher gives a different warning to the

¹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 69.

² Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 132.

³ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 323.

“righteous”: “Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?” (v. 16). Some have twisted these words, taking them to justify laxity in their lives by arguing that even the Preacher tells us not to take our faith *too* seriously. Charles Bridges perceptively identifies the motivations behind such a mindset as having less to do with a genuine desire to apply this word from God, and more to do with latching on to a justification for worldliness: “The insincere professor finds an excuse for loving the world in his heart, and meeting it half way in his practice. He may have a plea for avoiding all the offence of the cross. He may revolt from the most spiritual doctrines and exercises of the Gospel.”⁴ The Preacher, however, is not exhorting us “to do a little sinning.”⁵

It is better, then, to translate the sense of “overly righteous” and “too wise” along the lines of pretense. Michael Eaton explains: “The translation *too* or *overmuch* goes somewhat beyond the Hebrew, which means ‘greatly’ and does not express the judgment implicit in ‘too great’ or ‘overmuch’. This view is confirmed in the next line where the Hebrew for *Do not make yourself overwise* (RSV) contains a Hebrew hithpael which may mean ‘to play the wise man’ (cf. Num. 16:13 ‘play the part of a prince’; and 2 Sam. 13:5 ‘pretend to be ill’). Play-acting righteousness delights in the reputation of wisdom (cf. Matt. 23:7).”⁶ The point seems less whether the person is aware that they are acting only on a pretense of righteousness or wisdom; presumably, some may have been sincere in their efforts. The issue, then, is about those who seek to present themselves as righteous and wise, but who are far from truly *possessing* righteousness and wisdom.

Thus, the Preacher is condemning the approach to religion where someone starkly modifies his outer presentation to make himself seem religious, but without ever affecting the heart. For this hypocrite, the heart is neither necessary nor significant: “Rather, he is concerned with a philosophy of life that seeks the benefits of long life, prosperity, and personal happiness through the strict observation of religious and wisdom principles.”⁷ The Preacher’s warning is anticipating Jesus’ parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector, where the former appeared more religious, but it was the latter who went home justified (Luke 18:9–14). As Walter Kaiser writes, “The danger is that mortals might delude themselves and others through a multiplicity of pseudo-religious acts of sanctimoniousness or ostentatious showmanship in the act of worship: in some, a spirit of hypercriticism against minor deviations from one’s own cultural norms, which are equated with God’s righteousness, and in others, a disgusting conceit and supercilious, holier-than-thou attitude veneered over the whole mess.”⁸

Warning to the “Wicked” (v. 17)

Of course, if the Preacher is warning against a simplistic view of life where there is no salvation apart from true, from-the-heart faith toward God, then it isn’t enough to set aside merely external formalism. That is, those who give themselves over to wickedness can do no better than the “greatly righteous”: “Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before the time?” (v. 17).

⁴ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 162.

⁵ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 323.

⁶ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 130.

⁷ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 323.

⁸ Kaiser, *Coping with Change: Ecclesiastes*, 138.

Here, the Preacher is dealing with the one who is wise in his own eyes, believing that he has found the secret to happiness and satisfaction by living according to his own rules, doing as he pleases, and rejecting any boundaries God has established that would stand in his way. Those who take this path may feel as though they are finding shortcuts to success in life; however, as the psalmist warns, “the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1:6). Neither strict, formalistic (but merely *external*) religious practices, nor wanton disregard for God’s law will provide security and peace in this world.

Commending the Fear of God (v. 18)

Instead, the Preacher insists that the only sensible course of action is true, genuine, fear of God: “It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them” (v. 18). The Preacher wants to hear his warning to the righteous (“take hold of *this*”) and his warning to the wicked (“from *that* withhold not your hand”), but not to find some kind of “middle way” where we balance a life of righteousness *and* wisdom.⁹ On the contrary, the Preacher is saying that the fear of God sets aside any hope that some particular course of actions will guarantee success in this life. That is, we cannot “manipulate” God into getting what we want, either by formalistically obeying his external laws, or by taking our lives into our own hands to seek our goals apart from his laws.¹⁰ The one who fears God trusts whatever God sends, whether for good or for ill (cf. Eccl. 7:14). But, where the “greatly righteous” and the “greatly wicked” will both fall short of their ultimate desire for satisfaction, the one who fears God shall “come out from both of them” (v. 18).

Wisdom is Not in Pragmatism (Eccl. 7:19–24)

False wisdom, or wisdom on a pretense, has no benefit (v. 16). True wisdom, on the contrary has much benefit: “Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city” (v. 19). Wisdom gives strength since, as the Preacher noted back in Ecclesiastes 7:12, “the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.” The Preacher is clear: an ideal life will involve the pursuit of true wisdom.

Even so, the Preacher knows that this is easier said than done. So, he notes in v. 20, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” Although righteousness and wisdom are distinct, the Preacher treated them together earlier in v. 16, demonstrating that they are related. Conversely, a few verses later, he will speak about the “wickedness of folly” (v. 25). Righteousness is connected to wisdom, and wickedness is connected to folly. So, if there is not a single righteous man on the earth, then there is also not a single wise man on the earth. Of course, this statement in v. 20 serves as confirmation that sin permeates every last person on the planet. Although Paul does not cite this text in his argument that all have fallen short of the glory of God because of sin (Rom. 3:9–18), this text would fit in very well with that set of verses. Again, the pursuit of the ideal is easier said than done.

The Preacher offers a practical example of wisdom in action in v. 21–22, when he warns against “laying to heart” (ESV: “take to heart”; same language as Ecclesiastes 7:2) what other people say. This

⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 70–73.

¹⁰ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 132–33.

is especially important when we receive information that someone close to us has cursed us—whether by eavesdropping directly, or by information reported to us from someone else. The Preacher warns us to assess such situations with practical wisdom by acknowledging that “Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others” (v. 22).

Nevertheless, the wisdom the Preacher is speaking about is not a list of practical maxims and mottos. Tremper Longman observes, “Qohelet is not just interested in the *what* of existence; he desires to know the *why*.”¹¹ So, as valuable as proverbs may be (indeed, see the Book of Proverbs), the Preacher has something more weighty, deep, and ponderous in mind when he speaks about wisdom: “All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, ‘I will be wise,’ but it was far from me. That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?” (v. 23–24). This theme that we are incapable of discovering wisdom on our own reappears throughout Scripture, from Job 28, when all of creation confesses ignorance about where wisdom may be found, to the New Testament, when Paul reminds us that eyes have not seen, nor ears heard, nor hearts imagined the wisdom of God that has ultimate been revealed to us in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 2:6–16). Derek Kidner writes, “The honest admission of failure to find wisdom—of watching it in fact recede with every step one takes, discovering that none of our soundings ever gets to the bottom of things—this is, if not the beginning of wisdom, a good path to that beginning.”¹² True (not pretended) wisdom is incredibly valuable; yet, it is not easily attained.

Wisdom is Not in People (Eccl. 7:25–29)

In view of the difficulty of finding wisdom (v. 24), the Preacher sets his heart to discover the truth as best he can. Note the number of ways the Preacher describes his pursuit after wisdom: “I turned my heart to *know* and to *search out* and to *seek* wisdom and the scheme of things, and to *know* the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness” (v. 25). Wisdom is precious, and the folly of wickedness is to be avoided at all costs, so the Preacher sets his face with full determination toward ascertaining these matters. Along the way, he identifies one of the primary lures away from discovering wisdom: sexual immorality from the adulterous woman (v. 26). The language here echoes what we find in the beginning of Proverbs, where Lady Wisdom is contrasted directly by Dame Folly, an adulterous woman who calls out to men, drawing them aside from the pursuit of wisdom into her house of adultery—and, ultimately, her house of death (cf. Prov. 7:27).¹³

Now, the Preacher’s language in this section concerns some by sounding misogynistic (hatred or a demeaning attitude toward women). Against this, we must remember that the original audience for Ecclesiastes would have been *men* (cf. Eccl. 11:9).¹⁴ If this had been written to women, the Preacher would doubtless warn them against the lures of silver-tongued men, just as he here warns men against seductive women. The Preacher’s point is not that men would be virtuous if it were not for women; indeed, Adam is portrayed negatively when he tries to blame his wife for his sin against God’s commandment (Gen. 3:12). The Preacher’s point, rather, is to emphasize that sexual

¹¹ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 201.

¹² Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 71.

¹³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 76.

¹⁴ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 324.

immorality uniquely draws people away from the pursuit of wisdom. Along these lines, pastors commonly remind one another that seemingly sudden apostasy—especially from young people who have grown up in the church—is almost never a purely intellectual shift. Rather, drifting away from believing the gospel is a spiritual issue, suggesting that the individual is wrestling with a combination of shame and an inflamed desire to do what God has forbidden—more often than not, a combination that emerges from sexual immorality, and that is driving someone toward more sexual immorality. Christian women must take the same warning to heart, even if they must convert the warning about the seductive woman into a warning to steer clear from a seductive man.

So, then, the Preacher returns to his task, which he now describes with mathematical language: “while *adding* one thing to another to find the *scheme* [or, ‘sum’] of things” (v. 27).¹⁵ Even though he pursued wisdom thoroughly, exhaustively, *mathematically*, he ultimately acknowledges that he could never find the fullness of that elusive, deep, ponderous wisdom that is impossible to find in this world (v. 28a). Instead, he says, “One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found” (v. 28b). What does this mean? Benjamin Shaw helpfully notes that this also isn’t a misogynistic, anti-woman statement. Rather, the Preacher’s meaning is much simpler: “He has searched, adding one thing to another, to find out the sum of wisdom. But there is something that he is yet seeking, that he has not yet found out. One man among a thousand he has found, but a woman among all of these he has not found. I don’t think Solomon here is indulging in what our generation calls ‘sexism.’ I think his statement is more simple than that. What he has found is that one man among a thousand he has been able to understand, but he does not understand women at all.”¹⁶ Wisdom, then, cannot be found in a pretense of righteousness, in practical wisdom, or in *people*.

Indeed, the Preacher says that people are all too caught up in their own “schemes” for living to find that true wisdom: “See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (v. 29). Earlier, in v. 27, the word “scheme” meant “sum,” and it contributed to the mathematical imagery of the Preacher’s attempt to “add up” the “sum” of wisdom. Here, the same word appears, and it still has a mathematical idea; however, the Preacher is now talking about the different “sums” (or, perhaps, “conclusions”) about life at which people have arrived. Everyone has their own “accounting” of how to live life, and they are all actively trying to find success through their “schemes.”¹⁷ This, indeed, has been humankind’s problem from the beginning, when our first parents attempted to make themselves wise—like God, but apart from God’s commandment—by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.¹⁸ God made them upright, but we have gone astray to pursue all our various themes.

It is in this light, then, that we must return to the point the Preacher made earlier: “the one who fears God shall come out from both of them” (v. 18). While “fools despise wisdom and instruction,” seeking to chase their own schemes in life, “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). As Warren Wiersbe would often say, faith is “living without scheming.” Indeed, faith is living instead by the fear of the LORD, trusting him to lead us into knowledge, without leaning on

¹⁵ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 132.

¹⁶ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

¹⁷ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 138.

¹⁸ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

our own understanding” (Prov. 3:5). The Preacher does not find this kind of wisdom in this world, but instead, he is led into the wisdom of entrusting himself to his God.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Why does the Preacher warn against prolonging one’s life in evildoing, when wickedness can cause someone to die before his time (v. 15, 17)? What then does the Preacher mean when he warns against being “overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise” (v. 16)? What, then, is the Preacher commending when he encourages us to fear God (v. 18)? What is the fear of the Lord in the Bible? Why does the Bible urge us toward the fear of the Lord?
- 2) What practical value does wisdom offer (v. 19)? If, though, there is not a single righteous man on earth, how many are there who are truly wise to receive the benefits of wisdom (v. 20)? On what basis does the Preacher counsel us not to lay to heart the cruel words of others (v. 21–22)? Why do you think that it is this bit of practical wisdom that the Preacher includes at this point in his book? How does this piece of wisdom in particular give protection and power?
- 3) If the Preacher is attempting to offer us wisdom, why does he insist that wisdom “was far from me” (v. 23)? In what sense is wisdom “far off, and deep, very deep” (v. 24a)? Who indeed can find wisdom (v. 24b)? When the Preacher talks about wisdom in this sense, do you think he is still talking about the kind of practical advice he has just given when he warns us not to be too offended when someone speaks ill of us? What sort of wisdom is the Preacher talking about then?
- 4) If the Preacher thinks that wisdom cannot be found, why then does he set his heart to find it anyway (v. 25)? Why does the Preacher warn about the adulterous woman on his quest to find wisdom (v. 26)? By this statement, along with stating that he has not found a single woman he understands (v. 28), is the Preacher making a blanket condemnation of women, or should we understand the Preacher’s words in a different light? What are the “many schemes” that people have sought out?