

Thursday Morning Bible Study: Proverbs

Life In God's World For Dummies

3. The Discipline of the Lord (2)

Those who will not receive instruction will find that they need *rebuke* and *correction*. Even the wise person, or the person on the way of wisdom, may find that reproof is needed—Prov. 3:11-12—because “people do the darndest things!” The LORD is so determined to make us wise, to make us mature and godly in his world, to be blessed and a blessing, that he will do whatever is needed. He is not an indulgent father, but a strong, loving, committed father who wants not just our good but also the best for us. The most foolish thing to do with this reproof is to hate, resist, and refuse it—5:12-14—that leads a person away into dishonour. The reproof of the LORD always has a sting to it, and it is generally delivered through a human agent—and this leads to the danger of the one reproofed finding reason to ignore or dismiss the reproof.

And sometimes when reproof, correction and admonition is ignored, *punishment* is needed. There are times when it seems that “fate” or “nature” itself seems set against the scoffer who has refused Lady Wisdom’s call—and when it does she laughs, she has no sentimental pity. Calamity (here it seems to be an event outside the control and action of the person) may be needed, and Lady Wisdom has strength to see it through. Prov. 1:20-33 is a strong warning, especially vv. 26ff. At times the foolishness of refusing discipline brings about its own punishment. So, the foolish who seek to gain at the expense of others find it rebounds on their own heads—Prov. 1:17-19, 31. At other times correction, rebuke and punishment comes through others, or by God’s own hand.

The scoffer and the fool must in many ways be left to their own devices, and suffer the consequences of their folly. There is little room in the Proverbs for “harm minimisation” for them. If there is any harm minimisation, it is for the naïve, the simple. But it is harm minimisation that takes place in the context of strong exhortation to find the better way of wisdom and to avoid all the ways of folly and wickedness.

The constant call of the father in the Proverbs is “My son, be attentive to my words, to my wisdom...” Proverbs 2:1-22 tells us that through attentiveness to wisdom we will be renewed and protected. But it does require attentiveness. 2:1-4 has “if” in front of each exhortation—and is followed by a “then” in vv 5 and 9. Some people may think this is a kind of legalism, a *quid pro quo*—“If you do this, then I’ll do that...” It is not that. It is describing the *way to* wisdom, not the *price for* wisdom. It is no more legalistic than being told that to get to Melbourne you have to drive down certain roads! If you head up through Port Augusta and take off towards Coober Pedy, you’re not going to get there very soon, and that is not legalistic; it’s just the way it is!

This passage calls us to pay attention, to *hear* and *learn* the way. As C. S. Lewis said, “God cannot bless us, unless he has us. When we try to keep within us an area that is our own, we try to keep an area of death. Therefore, in love, God claims all. There is no bargaining with Him.” So, we must receive wisdom, treasure it up, make our ears and hearts attentive to it, and incline our hearts to understand. We are to keep looking for it, crying out for it. There is to be a life-long and whole-hearted ache for it.

This call of the father in Proverbs is the call of God to us in Jesus Christ. “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:11-14.)

In the so-called “wisdom” of our age, promulgated by people like Oprah and Joel Osteen runs some thought like this: “You’ve got to stop spending time with those people who are holding you back, the kind of people who are always stuck in a rut, They are going to drag you down with them.” There is a modicum of wisdom there (some Proverbs say something a little similar, e.g. “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm”—Prov. 13:20) but it is not an absolute law, and the wisdom of grace is deeper, richer. God our Father loved us enough for his only Son to get dragged down by us to Golgotha, to get stuck with us (by us) on the cross. This deeper wisdom of grace is a saving wisdom, that liberates us from our suicidal and self-destructive folly, liberating us into a whole new world in which we are renewed and protected through wisdom.

Through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are brought to the Father as adopted, beloved sons and daughters. And we are being conformed to Christ, shaped up to bear his likeness more and more. This is through difficulty as well as through joy. “It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons [and daughters.] For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons... [H]e disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Heb. 12:7-11)”