

January 13, 2013. Proverbs – The Path of Wisdom. The Ultimate Question of Wisdom and Folly. Randy Lovelace

This morning we continue in this second sermon in a series on the Proverbs. Proverbs - The Path of Wisdom. Let me ask if you have your Bibles to turn with me to Proverbs, the ninth chapter. If you don't have your Bibles the passage will be provided for you on the screens in front of you. This is a continuation of a series we began last week as we're looking at the nature of wisdom, the teaching of the Proverbs that God has instructed us to show us the way we ought to live. Proverbs themselves are in one level very simple yet terse statements about the way the world actually is. It also is calling us to do -in the way things ought to be, the way we ought to live. But in some ways they are often seen as disjointed or disconnected proverbs just laid over against one another. But as we looked at last week wisdom, at its most basic definition, is the art of living. It is not the accumulation of greater and greater intellectual knowledge. It is not the gaining, or the living out of greater and greater good, moral ethic code. It involves both of those things, but it is so much more. It calls us--wisdom does--to take that which we have learned from our experiences and to fit our life in a well ordered way. To learn what it means to live, to apply that which we say that we know. And to be honest about our need for wisdom in the way to live.

But Proverbs as well, as we looked at last week, can be divided up in a number of different ways, but oftentimes the most accepted, broad outline for the book itself is chapters one through nine, the message of a father to his son in his formative years, teaching him that there are two ways to live. There is a way of wisdom and there's a way of folly. And in those nine chapters he's unpacking the nature of wisdom personified in a woman of wisdom and to avoid another thing which is folly, also personified as a woman of folly. And he's driving him, his son, and those who read it to the ultimate question of wisdom and folly. Then from chapter ten through chapter thirty-one it's going to go through the most practical elements of everyday life: speech, work, relationships, and the like, and to learn what does it mean to live wisely in all of these areas. Both always coming up this one theme: which way are you going to go.

And so this morning we begin then by looking at chapter nine, verses one through six, and thirteen through eighteen to look at the ultimate question of wisdom and folly, and the question is this: Will you dine with me? Now let's look at what that means. Proverbs chapter nine, verses one through six, first. "Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars. She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table. She has sent out her maids, and she calls from the highest point of the city. 'Let all who are simple come in here!' she says to those who lack judgment. 'Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding.'" Then we are greeted with the woman, Folly, verses thirteen to eighteen of the same chapter. "The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city, calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way. 'Let all who are simple come in here!' she says to those who lack judgment. 'Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!' But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave." This is the word of God. Thanks be to God.

Please pray with me. Father, by your Holy Spirit open our ears, our minds, and our hearts that we might see wondrous things in your word. That we might learn what it means to live wisely. And to hear the invitation to dine with wisdom. Help us Lord, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name, amen.

You remember from last week, if you were here, I was trying to show you that the original audience was intended to be a young male in his formative years. But while that is the immediate context of perhaps some of the most beautiful poetry in all of Scripture, it is also meant to set the table for anyone who would come across these words, that is an invitation to learn what it means to live wisely. And so in the process of developing for his son this argument, in laying out for him wisdom and folly, he leads to describe these two women: Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly. And so this morning we're going to look at who is wisdom and folly, what is their message, and what are the consequences, and then what does that mean for us.

So, who is wisdom and folly? What is interesting is we need to recognize, if we're honest, that the writer of Proverbs is himself wise. This father is laying out for his son, by talking about these two very alluring women, woman wisdom and woman folly, and to be able to understand who they are and their potential appeal to this young man and to us, we need to be able to look at what kind of women they are and who do they represent and where do they live. We find out a lot about who they are and who they represent and where they live. So let's do that together. Who are these women? Let's look first at woman wisdom. We hear early in chapter nine what he's been building on from chapter eight. She's built a house. She's prepared a vast meal of delightful meat, sumptuous wine, and she has set a table. She then has many attendants through whom she goes out, and she calls from a high place in the city where everyone can see. So it's clear that she wants to be seen. She has something that she wants others to hear. And she's setting out for them something which would be rather tasteful. But building up to this setting of this table, we learn something about woman wisdom in chapter eight. It would have been far too much to put on the screens and so forth, but let me just give you—if you have your Bibles, turn over one chapter to chapter eight. Just do a quick synopsis of woman wisdom. In verses one through two it says, “Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gates leading into the city, at the entrances, she cries aloud...” So she is a woman who takes her stand on her principal, and she wants it to be announced to everyone who will hear it. She's not afraid to be in the midst of the commerce. She's not shy, she's not demure. She has a message that she wants everyone to hear. But this chapter eight tells us about this woman, verses six through seven. “Listen, for I have worthy things to say; I open my lips to speak what is right. My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness. All the words of my mouth are just; none of them is crooked or perverse.” So we learn of this woman that she is a woman who guards the truth, who guards her lips from uttering things that are perverse or wicked. She is a woman who is full of justice and righteousness, and she wants her speech to reflect justice and righteousness itself. But she goes on, and that which she describes, that she holds and that what she wants to give—she is a very giving person--in verse nine and forward she says, “To the discerning all of them are right; they are faultless to those who have knowledge...” So she's inviting them to understand that if you listen to what I say, if you follow my precepts, knowledge and wisdom will come to you. But then she says this: “Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.” And so she is not afraid of exalting what likely would be, in the eyes of these men who are traveling in and out of the city gates doing commerce, and saying that which is lofty to you, what I give to you is more powerful, more beautiful, more rich than what it is that you seek. But it goes beyond that, it describes her as a woman who loves the company of prudence and discretion and knowledge. So you see that having knowledge doesn't make you wise, but being wise means that you're learning to apply your knowledge. And so she has knowledge in her hands. She wants to give it. Then it's something else. Look at the company she keeps. She says, “... to hate evil. I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech.” Meaning she avoids these things, she's not surrounded by those who are full of perversity or wickedness. Rather, those who come to her are those who are rulers. She says the kings and rulers,

those who “make the laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth.” And then this: “I love those who love me, and those who seek me, find me....My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver.” And then with all of that she then says in these opening verses of chapter nine, I have a house and I want you to come to to dine with me, I have set this table. That tells us what kind of woman she is. But note this. Where does she live? It tells us, wisdom has built her house, chapter nine verse one, and she has hewn out—fashioned--seven pillars. I have prepared meat there, wine. But notice that it’s at the highest point of the city. The original audience was the Israelites, for the Israelites when they hear from the lips of Proverbs that wisdom finds her home at the highest point of the city and a house that has seven pillars... Put together with what we just heard in chapter eight, which tells us that she, wisdom, has been with God before the foundation of the earth, before anything had been created wisdom with there with God. Put together with that the Israelites would've understood loud and clear that wisdom dwells where God dwells, in other words, she’s pointing to the temple where God's presence is on Mount Zion. So here is wisdom, who dwells with God, who has been with God, offering this invitation to come to God's house and be filled with that which will satisfy, which is richer than all of man's wealth. Come and eat, for with me you will find joy, with me you will find wisdom. So that’s woman wisdom.

What about woman folly? We hear it, thirteen and following. Woman Folly is understood this way. “The woman folly is loud.” The word there translated as loud I the NIV could also be translated as the word ‘brash,’ in other words, she sticks her nose in where it doesn't belong. She makes everything her business. It goes further. “She is undisciplined and without knowledge” meaning she is ignorant of being ignorant. She doesn't know what she doesn't know, but she speaks forth anyway. Then it also notes that she, too, sits at the door of her house at the highest point of the city. But notice something which is quite distinct from woman wisdom who says, I'm preparing a meal for you, and notice also woman wisdom says, I love all those who love me. Notice what is absent from woman folly. “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!” Do you notice a difference? The food she provides is not from her. It was not prepared by her, it was not thought out by her. It is stolen. She is a thief. And what's interesting, while woman wisdom says if you come to me, I will give you that which you desire and it lasts, whereas woman wisdom [folly] doesn't say that at all. She appeals to the basest of human desires. Meaning, I will offer you the sugar high. She is the energy drink—she is the five hour energy drink of the Old Testament. In other words she's appealing only to your immediate desire and nothing beyond it. Are you sleepy at three in the afternoon? Do you find yourself groggy at your desk? Drink of me and you will be a phenom. Yeah, for an hour. It reminds me every time I read it of the words of U2 written like this: Sweet the sin but bitter the taste in my mouth. Sin and stolen things are sweet and appeal to our basest desire, but what happens to those who eat it. Does she love them? She never says she loves those who love her. Rather, we’re told what happens to those who drink of her drink and who eat of her food. Little do those who know, who take her invitation, that they will be dining with the dead, and when they eat they, too, will end up as the previous guests of her house---in the grave.

Now where does she live? Note this: while woman wisdom is also at the highest point of the city, dwelling with God, woman folly, too, has found her highest place in the city. She, too, is trying to be in the middle of commerce. She, too, is trying to be—well, make herself known and to what she provides. Now many commentators have looked at this invitation, have looked at her house. No one has exactly been able to determine who she exactly is. But many commentators are agreed, and I think it makes a lot of sense, that this was written to the Israelite people. That she is likely representing idolatry and false religion at the highest place of the city. And what was that which continually caused the Israelites to stumble in following God, that when God gave them the land, even the land of the Canaanites, instead of following him in faithfulness they fell into the temptation, into the five-hour sweet drink of false gods,

principally the gods of Canaan. One of those was Baal, on which there was a temple built and there were to be sacrifices offered. That even though they knew that God was the Father of food, the Father of rain they wanted to cover their bases, and so they went up to the highest place to the temple of Baal and there offer sacrifices in hopes...and in case God didn't come through, she'll promise prosperity. She will promise rain. But what did God say over and over again to the Israelites through the prophets like Jeremiah. I am the Father of you my people and I give you rain, I gave you manna in the desert. But to judge you I will cut off rain, there will be drought. In other words, the gods of Canaan were always thieves, always trying to call that which God can provide their own, thereby leading the people of Israel astray.

So here's this father unpacking this woman wisdom and this woman folly using them both in the personification of a woman representing God in his bounty and the false gods and idols of the land where God had placed his people, and essentially saying these two women are here to get your attention. Follow one, and it will lead to life. Follow the other and it will lead to death.

So these are the two women, but what is their message? Their message, first, is indirect if we're listening. We see it in their audience. Do you notice that in chapter nine, both with woman wisdom and woman folly, both of them are going after the same audience. Both are seeking an influential place in the middle of commerce where everyone can see them. But notice both of them describe their potential audience and it is this: Let all who are simple come in here--those who lack judgment. That's woman wisdom. Listen to woman folly "calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way." She says, "Let all who are simple come in here! she says to those who lack judgment." Their message is seen in their audience. They're saying, everybody who can hear the message in this invitation needs to recognize that we are at bottom simpletons who lack judgment. This is a biblical theme. It's not saying we don't have knowledge. It's not saying we can't think or reason. It's saying something about the heart of man which we hear through the words of the prophet Jeremiah who says the heart is deceitful above all things, who can understand it. And he says only God searches the heart. What is Jeremiah saying? At our base we all lack judgment and wisdom. The question is, do you doubt yourself enough to humble yourself to recognize--to not live in ignorance but to recognize that you need wisdom. But know this, both of their messages go to everyone. But here is their message, formed by way of a question---and back to the title of the sermon---the ultimate question. Will you dine with me? Both invitations are enveloped in an invitation to a dinner. That is because in ancient near Eastern culture, not just Israelite culture, but all of ancient near Eastern culture understood that the invitation to dinner meant that when you sat down to the table with someone, that you shared your life with them, meaning you were in relationship. The other day, meeting with a man at Panera bread, there were no seats or chairs available. And this woman said to us there were two seats available at her small table. She said, you want to sit here? We said, are you sure? She said yes. Great, we'll sit here, and we went about our conversation, and she went about her work. That's foreign concept to the ancient near Eastern culture. We didn't share any life. She no more believed in what we believed as far as we knew than we did her. The point is that to say yes to either one of these is to make a decision about life, to make a decision about your heart. And the one to whom you seek wisdom, with whom will you dine and know the consequences of that decision. One leads to life and one leads to death.

The life as the consequence of following woman wisdom. We hear in Proverbs 8:14 and following: "Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have understanding and power. By me kings reign and rulers make laws." And then she says this in verse nineteen: "My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver." And then at the end of chapter eight we hear these wonderful, beautiful words. "Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be

wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death.” I want you to hear the promise of life, but I also want you to hear the harshness of wisdom’s promise. Receive me and you will enter into life with the Lord. Because I have been with the Lord before the foundations of the earth. I was with God and by me he has created all things. With me there is life. But reject me...and the implication is, so will the Lord. Reject me and your life will go to the grave. But do you notice that the consequences of following folly never tells us the whole story. We have to learn from another person’s lips that the guests in her house die. That they are not satisfied. All we hear from woman folly is “Come and eat. Isn’t it great? It will be enough.” And if you think that’s not powerful, if you think that that’s not at the base, and that doesn’t attract the base of who we are as human beings then let me remind you of a famous writer, Saint Augustine, who, looking back over his life and writing as he does about his life in the *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, (which I recommend to everybody), the one thing that he looks back on his life and he looks back on it with shame because of what it stood for, it was this: the day he decided to steal a pear from his neighbor’s tree. Now to many of us, that’s...a pear! But he said, you know what, I didn’t want the pear, I didn’t even eat it. I wanted the delight of doing something which I knew was forbidden. But then I heard the singing of a child at the house, singing of wisdom of the Lord. And he looks back on his life and he sees that base desire which no one put in him, which he thought up on his own. Wouldn’t it be fun to drink stolen pears, stolen wine, stolen food? Yes! But then once he did, it did not satisfy because he rejected the Lord, and he found what he was left with was an appetite that was not satiated. Woman folly never tells us the consequences of following her is that she simply says, come with me, we’re gonna have a great time. But know this: woman wisdom, whether you follow it or not, whether you’re willing to acknowledge yourself as one needs wisdom, she says to you, and is honest enough to say to you, follow me and there is life. Follow folly and there is death.

But what in the world are we to do with this, how do we apply it. I would like to share a story, since it’s Super Bowl season, about a quarterback named Tom Brady, a quarterback for the New England Patriots. A few years ago he gave an interview; you can likely find it online. It’s very profound. And I want you to hear something which is incredibly human, very honest, and think I want to use that as a springboard. Steve Croft, a Sixty Minutes correspondent, was interviewing Tom and he said this. He said this whole experience, this whole upward trajectory—what have you learned about yourself? What kind of effect does it have on you? Brady responded, well I put incredible amounts of pressure on me when you feel like you’re ultimately responsible for everyone and everything even though you have no control over it and you still blame yourself if things don’t go right. He acknowledges reality, acknowledges he’s not in control of it, but he still puts the pressure on himself. He says, I mean there’s a lot of pressure. A lot of time I get very frustrated and introverted. There are times I’m not the person I want to be. Then he looked at Steve Croft and he says, why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there’s something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, hey, man, this is what it is. I reached my goal, my dream, my life, me! And I think, God, it’s gotta be more than this. I mean, it can’t be what it’s all cracked up to be. I mean I’ve done it. I’m 27, and what else is there for me. And Croft responds by asking him what is the answer? And Brady responded, I wish I knew. I mean I think that’s a part of me trying to go out and experience other things. What he has just said is an invitation. What he’s willing to admit is at bottom, all that which we often strive for does not satisfy. It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. And yet we often ask, what is there left for me? Know this, and I would say this to Tom as I say it to anyone else, if you want to know, the answer is with wisdom. As we learned last week, wisdom is God saying to the world, fear the Lord for that is the beginning of knowledge. You see, just as we’ve had wisdom saying that he was with the Lord before the foundation of the world, by me things were bordered out and created, is it any surprise that in chapter one of the gospel of John that we hear the

description of Jesus? In the beginning was the word, meaning logos, meaning wisdom, in the beginning was the word, was wisdom and I was with God, and I was God. By me all things were made. It is Jesus who says to us in that very same gospel, I am the way, I am the truth, and I am the life. This is Jesus as a prophet, as a priest, as a king, as a wise man, as wisdom personified, as the expression of God saying, do you want to know the way of wisdom? Begin with me. I am the way. Come unto to me, all who are weary and I will give you rest. Take on my yoke for my burden is light. Super Bowl rings, women at your left and at your right hand, cultural influence, cultural power in the end does not satisfy. Come unto me, for I am the way. He also says that he is the truth. It is Paul who describes Jesus as this truth in his letter to the Colossians, when he says my purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine sounding arguments. When Jesus says, I am the way, come to me for I am the way of wisdom. I am a person. I am the truth. In me are are hidden all the riches of knowledge and wisdom. And he also says, I am the life. Pastor Tim Keller once said God didn't send an airtight argument. Maybe he sent an airtight person. That when wisdom says, all who follow me will find life, we hear the very same words from Jesus himself. No other teacher. No other teacher of wisdom. No other prophet has said these words. I don't just show you a way of wisdom, I don't just show you a way of truth, I don't just show you the way of life. Jesus said, I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life. I am the Lord. So the invitation is to you. With whom are you dining and with whom will you continue to dine. There is a way that leads to life and life to the full with Jesus Christ, and there's a way that leads to death, which is folly. Choose you today who you will follow.

Let's pray.that we would see the wondrous things of your knowledge and wisdom in Jesus Christ this morning. By your Holy Spirit, O Lord, present him to us and to our lives, and give us the ability to lay down our folly, to acknowledge our need for wisdom, and to come to Christ to be renewed in him and define life. For he is the ultimate answer to the ultimate question, with whom we will dine. For in Christ is life. Help us, O Lord, and give us wisdom, in Jesus' name, Amen.