

October 18, 2009
Have You 'Learned' Anything Lately?
Assorted Proverbs on Teachability

- Who was the most influential teacher in your life?
- What made that person so important?
- What did that person teach you?
- Where would you be without that person?

We are who we are today - in large part - because of the influence of other people in our lives. Some of those influences have been good ... some not so good. Some of those influential people have been formal educators (teachers, mentors, professors, coaches), some have been family (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, even siblings), some have been friends, colleagues, and co-workers. We may have even learned some things in church - from volunteer helpers, Sunday School teachers, youth pastors and leaders, even pastors.

Right now ...

- Who *is* - right now - the most influential teacher in your life?
- What is that person teaching you?

Can you name some one, some people, some small group ...? Are you still learning?

One of the challenges of our western educational system - including our old-time Sunday School system - is that it suggests that when you have "done your time" you're done learning. You've made it. You graduate from high school. You graduate from university. You make it through Sunday School. You even make it through youth group. Now you're done learning, right?

Proverbs takes a much more holistic view of life and learning. Learning is a life-long process - the wise are never "there" - they are always learning more and more. You never graduate from the school of God's wisdom - there is always more to learn. Education is more a process of learning how to learn from the journey, than arriving at a destination. As life unfolds around you - as you face new and different circumstances - as the world changes, technology changes, your health changes, your life stage changes ... Proverbs tells us we learn more and more ...

A wise person, in the Bible, is someone who humbles himself before the Lord, and remains open, teachable, and eager to grow in knowledge and wisdom ...

The Simple/The Fool ...

In Proverbs, the opposite of the wise person, who is always learning, is the simple person. This person goes with what they feel, when they feel like it, however they feel like it - without thought for other people, for the consequences of their actions, or the Lord: "*The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps*" (Proverbs 14:15). The "simple"

way to live is to let your emotions, peer pressure, popular culture, the media shape your life. The latest, hottest fad, coolest fashion, book or idea is right ... We don't think, we jump on bandwagons ... *"Enthusiasm without knowledge is no good; haste makes mistakes"* (19:2). A simple person simply does not think - they go with what friends and culture tell them.

Similar to the "simple" person is the "fool." In biblical terms a foolish person is not a joker - he is someone who says in his heart *"there is no God."* (Psalm 14:1). If I am this person I am sure I know it all. If I were the CEO my company would be perfect. If I were the Prime Minister the country would be perfect. I may come across confident and strong - and self-righteous and arrogant. When things go great I may look down his nose at everyone else ... but when things go badly ... what happens, then? It must be other people's faults, because I'm right, right? I can't accept that I might be wrong, because I *am* right - that's who I am, by definition.

Well-educated people - people who have got all the degrees and credentials - who've been all the way through Sunday School - can still be simple. Unless they are willing to keep thinking. *"I may 'know' something, but what is more important is that I have 'learned' something ... Learning involves reflection, decision making, perception, discernment, finding connections in information, in ways that lead to renewed integration into life and experience"* (Linda Cannell).

Well-educated, well-degreed people can also be fools. They can assume that since they have the credentials they know it all. They have stopped learning. Learning begins when I am jarred from my comfort zone - when I face new challenges and - instead of putting my head in the sand and saying, "I'm right, I'm right, it's all your fault" - I look to learn. I ask myself, *"How does Scripture enable me to identify, accept, and be committed to appropriate values so that I become more and more like Christ in how I live my life?"*

What's the Alternative?

"A fool spurns a parent's discipline, but whoever heeds correction shows prudence." (15:5) One of the qualities of a prudent or wise person is *teachability*. A wise person does not think she knows it all. She is open to learning. A fool, on the other hand, thinks she has all the answers ...

A teachable spirit comes from a humble heart: I recognize that I can always benefit from good - godly - advice, and the knowledge of those who know more than I do. In humility, I always choose to look for new insight and knowledge. Humility - me recognizing that I am not as smart as I think I am - is one of the keys to being a wise person.

- *"People who despise advice are asking for trouble; those who respect a command will succeed."* (13:13)
- *"Intelligent people are always ready to learn. Their ears are open for knowledge."* (18:15)

In fact, wise people don't wait for opportunities to learn - they are always proactively seeking to learn. These are the people who see challenges and take them - like learning new skills (learning a musical instrument, painting or a language), helping with children or youth, inviting college or

university students over for lunch. These people actively move out of their comfort zone to try something new. They take risks. They do it, not to learn more stuff, but to learn more about God, about how He is at work in the world, in their lives, and in the lives of other people ...

Some of the qualities of a wise person include:

a. Get good advice.

I can muddle through on my own. I can make my own mistakes - and learn from them. Or I can learn from others who have already made the mistakes ... who have accumulated years of experience and wisdom. Which is wiser? The simple person might say, *"It's too much work to get advice; it's easier to go with my gut."* The foolish person might say, *"Older people are all wrong anyway - we know that - so I'm going to go with what I know is best."*

The wisdom of Scripture says:

- *"Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life. You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail."* (19:20-21)
- *"The instruction of the wise is like a life-giving fountain; those who accept it avoid the snares of death."* (13:14)

In what areas of your life do you need advice?

b. Accept correction

This is a tough one! I don't like to be told I am wrong - ever. But I really appreciate those wise mentors and friends who gently - but firmly - offer me guidance. It takes strength of character and a strong self-image to accept correction. I can find correction very threatening. But I need to be humble to hear how the Lord is speaking to me:

- *"To learn, you must love discipline; it is stupid to hate correction."* (12:1)
- *"Correct the wise, and they will love you. Instruct the wise, and they will be even wiser. Teach the righteous, and they will learn even more."* (9:8-9)
- *"If you ignore criticism, you will end in poverty and disgrace; if you accept correction, you will be honored."* (13:18)

There is a footnote to this, of course. Be careful if you see yourself as "The Corrector." If I think my mission is always correcting other people's mistakes, there is an eerie echo of self-righteousness and arrogance, isn't there. Who does that remind you of? The fool ...? Correction only comes out of a deep relationship of love and trust: in September we read these proverbs:

- *"Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy."* (27:6)
- *"The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense."* (27:9)
- *"As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend."* (27:17)

If you have not built a relationship, you have not earned the right to be "The Corrector."

c. Think before you act

- *"The wicked bluff their way through, but the virtuous think before they act."* (21:29)
- *The LORD says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control."* (Psalm 32:8-9)

Somehow in our culture - and in the church - we have got the ideas that we can make right decisions based on

- Feelings or emotions (the "simple" do this in proverbs all the time). Sometimes we "spiritualize" this saying, *"I feel led by the Spirit ..."* This is a tricky one. Yes, the Spirit can lead us in creative, innovative, and exciting ways. But we need the depth of relationship with God - and the godly counsel of mature Christian friends - to help us discern when the leading is really my own personal agenda that I have "spiritualized," as opposed to a genuine leading of the Spirit. The Spirit leads out of prayerful commitment to His will. And when the Spirit leads, mature, godly people know.
- Our accumulated knowledge or "common sense"; we can come up with just the right plan or scheme ("fools" do this regularly). Again, this is not always easy. God gave us brains. He gives us knowledge. He expects us to use it wisely. But am I allowing God to speak in and through this process ...

Proverbs challenges us to seek God's wisdom. Remember Joseph (we looked at him in August)? He was in prison and needed wisdom to interpret dreams for Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker? Then he needed wisdom to interpret Pharaoh's dream (Pharaoh's magicians couldn't do it)? He could have gone with his gut. He could have gone to the prison library and brushed up on Freud and Jung. Those are good starting points.

Then what Joseph did was pray and ask God to use his life experience and knowledge, to speak through his feelings and ideas, to give him the truth. Joseph's knowledge and smarts, brought under the lordship of the Holy Spirit, gave him the wisdom to interpret the dreams. Jude Adam writes, *"Where do we look for our wisdom? Bookstores heave with self-help titles - penned by the magicians of our time. But all we really need to do is stop, quieten ourselves and come before our God, who is the ultimate giver of dreams."*

Right now ...

- Who *is* - right now - the most influential teacher in your life?
- What is that person teaching you?
- Are you a teachable person?

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