



Where Is the Balance?

The wise person realizes God offers wisdom to the imperfect.

ECCLESIASTES 7:11-22

We live on a fine line. If we think too lowly of ourselves, we see ourselves as being so broken we are not salvageable. If we think too highly of ourselves, we see no need for God or His forgiveness. We need to find balance to being broken by sin and yet still created in the image of God. Fortunately, God has not left us on our own to navigate our time “under the sun.” The wise person realizes God offers wisdom to the imperfect which gives us balance in this life and hope for the future.

Why is acknowledging our sinfulness important for having a proper understanding of ourselves and our limits in this life?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ECCLESIASTES 7:1–8:17

In Ecclesiastes 6:12, the Teacher asked: “For who knows what is good for anyone in life, in the few days of his futile life that he spends like a shadow?” He set out to answer this question in 7:1–8:17. He began in chapter 7 using proverbs. The person who is wise is able to evaluate what the better things in life are. For example, Solomon observed that the death of a person with a good reputation is far more valuable than the expensive perfumes used in burial preparations, and the death of one who lived for God is better than fleeting moments of merriment.

When faced with mortality, one may take stock in how life should be lived, whereas amusements serve as temporary diversions at best. The person who is wise will contemplate how to live in light of his or her mortality. Hence, the birth of a child is wonderful, but a life lived for God is even better (7:1-4).

The wisdom that comes from God is the key to living a balanced life. It is wise to recognize one’s utter helplessness and look to God. Having the wisdom of God provides strength and a way of escape from sin. It is recognizing that only God can make one upright (7:11-29). God’s wisdom enables people to conduct themselves properly before governmental authority, realizing while one may be powerless before a king, every king is powerless before God (8:1-8). Additionally, it is God’s wisdom that gives people patience to wait on God’s judgment of the wicked and vindication of those who fear Him (8:9-13). In contrast, trusting in one’s own wisdom leads to futility, because the Lord has deliberately made life incomprehensible apart from Him (8:16-17).

As you read Ecclesiastes 7:11-22, consider the contrast presented. How does God’s wisdom produce the balance called for by Solomon?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

ACCEPT IT (ECCL. 7:11-14)

¹¹ Wisdom is as good as an inheritance and an advantage to those who see the sun, ¹² because wisdom is protection as silver is protection; but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of its owner. ¹³ Consider the work of God, for who can straighten out what he has made crooked? ¹⁴ In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity, consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that no one can discover anything that will come after him.

VERSES 11-12

Verses 11-12 consist of an observation followed by an explanation. The first clause of verse 12 explains the first clause of verse 11, and the second clause of verse 12 expounds upon the second clause of verse 11. The main purpose of both verses is to espouse the high value and desirability of wisdom. The first part of verse 11 states that gaining **wisdom is as good as an inheritance**. They are similar in that both wisdom and an inheritance are passed on from one generation to another. Additionally, both have value. That which one inherits may have sentimental value or monetary value. In either case, an inheritance is meant to be a blessing to the one who receives it. Likewise, the one who receives wisdom is greatly blessed.

The first clause of verse 12 provides the Teacher's reasoning for saying wisdom is as good as an inheritance. It is because both wisdom and financial wealth provide **protection**. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Solomon had a significant monetary inheritance in mind in verse 11. The phrase **wisdom is protection** literally is "the shade of wisdom" in Hebrew. The idea of protection derives from the picture of one's being protected from the intensity of the sun's rays in the heat of the day. We understand how financial wealth provides protection in a financial crisis, but how does wisdom offer protection? The wisdom that others pass down provides a tried and true way of maneuvering through life. The Book of Proverbs is an example of this. Moreover, when thinking about the wisdom that those who fear the Lord inherit from Him, the security of this wisdom is even greater because it not only provides security in this life but also in the life to come.

The second clause in verse 11 states that wisdom is an advantage to **those who see the sun**. Most scholars understand this phrase to be synonymous with those “under the sun,” meaning every living person. In this case, it means wisdom is good for everyone, which is true. However, when understanding the phrase *who see the sun* in light of the following clause in verse 12, “the shade of wisdom,” it may be addressing extremely difficult times, when, metaphorically speaking, the sun blinds one’s eyes and its intense heat is unbearable. This is supported by the last part of verse 12 that states the lasting benefit of wisdom is that it **preserves the life of its owner**. The idea is that it not only preserves life but is also the source of life. Therefore, no matter how uncomfortably and intensely hot life can get, the one who possesses wisdom is secure. The wisdom that comes from God also leads to God, and the New Testament reveals that Jesus Christ is “the wisdom of God” unto salvation (1 Cor. 1:24). Those who trust in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ are given the gift of eternal life and are eternally secure (1 John 5:10-13).

VERSE 13

In verse 13, the Teacher asked a rhetorical question expecting the emphatic answer: “Nobody can.” Having wisdom involves recognizing God created everything and does all things according to His own purposes. What is more, He is in control of everything. Therefore, it is wise to submit to God as He works out His will because nobody can change what God has done, is doing, or will do. God always knows what is right and does what is right at the right time, in the right way, and to the right extent. In light of this truth, why should anyone want to change what God does? Nobody can, and nobody who is truly wise would want to.

VERSE 14

Expounding on verse 13, the Teacher anticipated and answered the question his readers must have been asking: “If we are powerless to change the way God has made things and what He does, then what can we do?” Solomon’s answer contains two imperatives given in two circumstances. In the first instance, when you are experiencing good times, rejoice and enjoy God’s blessings. However, when you experience seasons of **adversity**, then you must **consider**. This echoes

the beginning of verse 13, “Consider the work of God.” What work of God should one consider in times of adversity? We must remember that like the good times, the difficult times are also from the hand of God. (See Lam. 3:38.) As limited creatures we can never fully comprehend God or His ways. God deliberately demonstrates this truth to remind us we are incapable of ruling our own lives and thus need to trust Him (3:14; 7:14).

Why might people find it so difficult at times to trust that God’s ways are always best?

BIBLE SKILL: *Use a Bible concordance to compare how a word is used.*

In Ecclesiastes 7:14,24,26-29, Solomon repeatedly used the words “find” and “discover.” Look up the Hebrew word *matsa’* in a Bible concordance that includes Hebrew words and examine Old Testament passages that use the word. How does the use of this word in other passages help you gain a clearer understanding of why Solomon would have used the word in this passage?

FIND BALANCE (ECCL. 7:15-18)

¹⁵ In my futile life I have seen everything: someone righteous perishes in spite of his righteousness, and someone wicked lives long in spite of his evil. ¹⁶ Don’t be excessively righteous, and don’t be overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself? ¹⁷ Don’t be excessively wicked, and don’t be foolish. Why should you die before

your time? ¹⁸ It is good that you grasp the one and do not let the other slip from your hand. For the one who fears God will end up with both of them.

VERSE 15

The Teacher observed how the pervasiveness of sin and its effects in a fallen world have sullied every aspect of human virtue. In this verse, he pointed out a phenomenon that totally confounded the teaching of traditional wisdom: a righteous person can die young while a wicked person may live a long life. In Solomon's day, **someone righteous** was a person who by faith in God lived in accordance to God's law. It was understood that keeping the law would prolong one's life. (See Deut. 4:40; 5:33; 8:1; 30:20; Prov. 3:1-3.)

However, when Moses spoke of life that springs from obedience to God's law, it was set in contrast to the death that would come as a result of God's judgment for disobedience. The emphasis was on avoiding their lives from being cut short because of God's judgment. It was never meant to be a guarantee of an individual living a long life. As for the Book of Proverbs, one must remember it is a message of how the world works in general. It is like saying if people work hard they will have a job, but we have all witnessed hard-working people lose their jobs because of extenuating circumstances and no fault of their own. This reality does not keep parents from teaching their children that they will be rewarded for their hard work. Furthermore, there are numerous godly people in the Bible whose lives were cut off before old age, almost all of them on account of their righteousness. (See Heb. 11:36-40.) Remember Jesus was thirty-three years old when He was crucified. Life in a fallen world that is marred by sin is chaotic and unpredictable.

VERSES 16-18

The Teacher addressed a false philosophy that seeks the good life through strict religious commitments. Obviously, there is a difference between being **excessively righteous** and righteous, and being **overly wise** and wise. The *excessively righteous* and *overly wise* have given themselves to legalism (seeking righteousness by keeping the law or doing good works) and asceticism (self-denial in order to attain a spiritual ideal). The basic notion is that if you obey all the rules (and

perhaps even make up some new ones), then you will be righteous and have a wonderful life. Job's friends held to this philosophy and were proven wrong. It is a philosophy that is self-focused (what can I do?), arrogant (this is what I can do), and miserable (enjoying the simple pleasures of life is something I cannot do). Trusting in your own righteousness and wisdom is self-destructive.

Solomon was not saying in verse 17 that sinning in moderation is acceptable. Instead, while recognizing everyone sins (see 7:20), he was stating that the person who embraces wickedness as a way of life is heading for destruction. In addition to verse 16 that teaches not to think of oneself as being overly wise, here he instructed that one should not be foolish by ignoring God's wisdom.

People should avoid the path of self-righteousness and an inflated perception of how wise they are, while at the same time rejecting wickedness as a way of life. Religious legalism, asceticism, and licentiousness are each paths to destruction. True righteousness and wisdom coupled with the ability to enjoy life's blessings comes to ***the one who fears God*** in loving awe and devotion.

What is the difference between being a religious fanatic and being completely devoted to God?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Man*

By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race (Rom. 1:21-23).

ACKNOWLEDGE SIN (ECCL. 7:19-22)

¹⁹ Wisdom makes the wise person stronger than ten rulers of a city. ²⁰ There is certainly no one righteous on the earth who does good and never sins. ²¹ Don't pay attention to everything people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you, ²² for in your heart you know that many times you yourself have cursed others.

VERSE 19

Following the thought of verse 18, the Teacher surmised that wisdom found in the fear of God makes one stronger than the collective wise counsel of **ten rulers**. This is significant given the great value the biblical sages gave to having many counselors (Prov. 11:14). Our fear of God and our faith in Him and what He has done in the person and work of His Son saves us. Rulers attempt to curb sin, but only the wisdom of God through Christ can cleanse us of our sin.

How does being honest about our own sin open the door for us to gain perspective when dealing with other people?

VERSES 20-22

Recognizing we are all sinners (v. 20) should impact how we understand ourselves and others. We must learn to deal with people as they are—as sinners like us. In verses 21-22, the Teacher provided an example of what this looks like. He advised that we should not take too seriously everything people say because we are probably going to hear someone say something insulting about us. We ourselves have said unkind things about others too. Taking issue with those who speak wrongly of us serves to justly accuse us of our own culpability in relationship to others.

It is interesting that this example is of a **servant** doing the insulting. A person is much more likely to rebuke a subordinate than a superior. Nevertheless, it is wise to let it go. Just as we are sinners who have spoken unfair criticisms of others and are in need of God's grace, so is everyone else. Since the perfect, holy, sinless God who is our Superior has shown mercy and grace to us who have willfully rebelled against Him and offended Him, then how can we refuse to show mercy and grace to others?

How does recognizing the tremendous mercy, grace, and forgiveness God has shown us empower us to be merciful, gracious, and forgiving to others?

APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers can be sure that God’s plans for them are the best.
- Believers are to live reasonable and balanced lives.
- All people are sinners and therefore are in need of God’s grace and wisdom.

List areas in which you struggle to accept God’s plans. What steps can you take to more fully trust Him in each area listed?

Ask God to reveal things in your life that are out of balance. What actions do you need to take to get these things aligned with God’s purposes and plans? What does it mean to live a reasonable and balanced Christian life?

Discuss as a group why it is wise and good to always remember that all people, including ourselves, are sinners. How does doing so bring honesty and perspective to the group as a whole? As a group, hold one another accountable for memorizing Ecclesiastes 7:20 this week.

PRAYER NEEDS
