July 16/17, 2016

Competing Voices

Skillful Living

Proverbs 9:1-18

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As people made in the image of God, we all have both the ability and the responsibility to think, to reason and to choose. It's part of the freedom that God has given us. Every single person in this auditorium this morning: you have the freedom to believe whatever you choose to believe, but beliefs have consequences. You cannot expect reality to adjust to accommodate your belief system. At the end of the day truth is true no matter what you choose to believe. Reality is reality. In the words of the late Dallas Willard, "*Reality is what you run into when you're wrong*." Therefore, skillful living is not trying to get reality to adjust to your belief system; it is rather seeking to understand what is true and to adjust your beliefs to be in alignment with the truth. That's where you ultimately find life.

Well, that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 9. We're working our way through Proverbs. Chapter 9 is really the end of a long introduction to the book of Proverbs. The actual body of Proverbs begins in chapter 10; it's much more what we think of as the Proverbs. So 1 through 9 is a long introduction. In chapter 1 we heard from Lady Wisdom. In chapter 7 we heard from the adulteress or the seductress. In chapter 8 we heard again from Lady Wisdom. Now in chapter 9 we hear two competing voices: We hear from Lady Wisdom and we hear from the woman of folly or the woman of foolishness. When the story is told, the experience of your life will ultimately be decided by which voice you choose to listen to. Now Lady Wisdom is just a poetic way of referring to the wisdom of God. Wisdom is just personified as a woman, as kind of a creative technique to teach the proverbs. So we pick it up in chapter 9, verse 1:

Wisdom has built her house,
She has hewn out her seven pillars;
She has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine;
She has also set her table;
She has sent out her maidens, she calls
From the tops of the heights of the city:
"Whoever is naive, let him turn in here!"
To him who lacks understanding she says,
"Come, eat of my food
And drink of the wine I have mixed.
"Forsake *your* folly and live,
And proceed in the way of understanding." (*NASB, Prov. 9:1-6)

So the picture—the metaphor—Lady Wisdom has built a house and it's built out of these seven pillars. Now there's lots of discussion about what the seven pillars actually represent. It's really hard to be too dogmatic on that. Often the number 7 is a term of completion or perfection or kind of what's ideal. To me that makes the most sense. We learned last week out of chapter 8 that Lady Wisdom has been there from the beginning. She was the master craftsman of paradise; she knows what God intended; therefore, she offers the ideal; she offers what God intended for those who are willing to listen.

She's prepared this meal. Literally verse 2 says, "*She has slaughtered the slaughter*". In the ancient world it was a big deal to kill an animal to offer to eat. That was very costly to the owner, so this would be a banquet. This would be the best that she has to offer. She's mixing her wine with spices, so this would be the best of the wine, the best of a meal that she could offer. Her maidens have gone out to invite others to come and to listen to what she has to say.

Who is she inviting? Verse 4: **The naïve**. Now we talked about this last week from chapter 8. The naïve is a reference to those who are untaught, to those who lack understanding, for those that really don't get it. It's really important to understand *the naïve* makes no reference to someone who lacks intelligence. It's not a lack of intelligence; it's a lack of teaching. The default mode for every single person as fallen people in a fallen world is not toward wisdom. To pursue wisdom is an intentional choice. The default mode is toward *the woman of folly*. So if you think about a fallen culture, it's like a current in a river, and when a leaf falls into the river it just goes with the current. That is true of everyone. Therefore, we all have people around us—where we work, in our neighborhoods, in our families, at the coffee shop, or a group of friends. These are not bad people; these are not evil people. These are not people that wake up in the morning and say, "I think I'd like to ruin my life today." They're simply untaught. They don't know what Lady Wisdom has to say. They're simply going with the flow. They believe what they've been taught. They believe the lies of the culture. They're just going with that, and yet their lives are empty; they're dissatisfied. They're wondering if there isn't something more. So they just need to sit down at the banqueting table with Lady Wisdom and listen to what she has to say.

The other description in verse 4 is not only to the naïve, but **to him who lacks understanding**. The Hebrew word translated **understanding** is actually the word *heart*, which raises the question: Then why wouldn't the translators just use the word heart? And the answer is: Because what we mean by heart in English is dramatically different from what was meant by the Hebrew writers. When we say, "lacking heart" it carries the idea of lacking the willpower, lacking the discipline, or lacking the desire to try, but that's not at all what the Hebrew term referred to. In the ancient world they had no understanding of the brain. They had no idea what the brain does. Their understanding was that everything flowed from the heart. So if you think about it that way, then what they understood was your ability to think, to reason, to exercise your will, to figure it out, your ability to feel—all of that flowed from your heart. Of all of the kind of anthropomorphic (meaning human) metaphors in the Old Testament—so reference to eyes and ears and feet—by far the most significant is the heart. It's used forty-five times just in Proverbs alone, and it's used eight hundred fifty-eight times in the whole of the Old Testament. We have no English equivalent of the Hebrew concept of the heart. So when the writer says "lacking understanding" or "lacking heart" it's the idea again that this is someone who's never been taught. This is someone who just has believed the lies— going with the flow—but his or her life is empty; it's not working; it's not fulfilling; but there's no idea of another way to live. So Lady Wisdom is offering this banquet.

In the book of Proverbs, the food at the banquet would be everything from chapter 10 on. It could be the whole of Scripture. Lady Wisdom offers a different way of thinking, a different way of believing, a different way of making choices, and that's why verse 5 says, "**Come, eat of my food and drink of the wine I have mixed.**" Verse 6 is as close as Proverbs comes to the concept of repentance. It's the idea that, by default mode, everyone's traveling down a foolish path. But what Lady Wisdom says is, "*Forsake that path. Forsake those foolish ones; forsake the foolish path and choose a different path that will bring life.*"

Starting then in verse 7 through verse 12, the writer of Proverbs offers basically two different responses to Lady Wisdom's offer. One is to listen and to receive what she has to say and live. The

other is to plug your ears, to laugh, to mock, to scoff, and to suffer the consequences of an unwillingness to listen. Verse 7:

> **He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself,**
> **And he who reproves a wicked man *gets* insults for himself.**
> **Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you,** (Vs. 7-8a)

So first of all, what is a **scoffer**? A scoffer is another in the list of categories of fools in the book of Proverbs. Last week we talked about the fool from chapter 8 which is the "know-it-all". It's someone who knows everything, doesn't want to listen to what anyone else has to say, and every time Lady Wisdom speaks, the fool plugs his or her ears and says, "I don't want to hear it. I already know everything." The mocker is the same as that fool, but more. The mocker or the scoffer is one that doesn't want to listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say because of arrogance and pride. "I don't need to listen," but then pushes it beyond that with, "I also don't want anyone else to listen." Therefore, I mock or scoff or make fun of everything that Lady Wisdom has to say in order that others won't listen to what she says.

Now look carefully at what the Proverb says here: I think these are very important words in a 21st century culture if we're going to live skillfully. I think it's very common that Christians think, "If I'm going to be a good Christian, if I'm going to stand up for truth, if I'm going to stand up for God, if I'm going to stand up for Lady Wisdom, then I have to always correct, reproof, challenge, or argue with what the scoffer has to say. So every time somebody says something at school, at the market place, by the water cooler, we feel this obligation to reprove, to correct, to argue, to set them straight. Guess what? They're not listening! And what the text is actually saying is, "Don't do that!" Why? Because they're not listening. What the text just said is they will hurt you; they will attack you; they will sling mud on you, and they will hate you.

Part of skillful living is understanding the difference between those who are willing to listen and those who have virtually no interest in listening. There's nothing to be gained by correcting or attacking or reproving, or challenging those who simply don't want to hear it. You get hurt; you get hated; you get blemished; but more than that, the message of the Gospel gets blemished—it gets soiled. It feels angry; it feels hateful and doesn't do well for the Gospel. Now in my opinion, sadly, much of this discussion has moved to social media and so you have Christians that are well-intended but they are trying to reprove, correct, challenge and argue with the mockers on social media. We do this with the best of intents, but we have to come to grips with the fact they're not listening. They attack; they hate, and they sling mud. Not only are you blemished, but the message of the Gospel gets blemished. It sounds angry. It sounds hateful. It doesn't make the gospel of grace more appealing to the world. I plead with you, as Christians we have to stop all this angry rhetoric on social media! It is doing great damage to the cause of Christ! I would tell you this: If social media makes you angry—get off social media! You're not helping! (clapping) Again, it might be well intended, but according to Proverbs we have to be more skillful than that. We have been trying to correct, reprove and yell at the culture for thirty years and we are losing ground at an excellerated rate. At some point we have to say, "It's not working." So you say, "Okay, what should we do?" The Proverb answers that. We need to find those that want to listen, those who are willing to be taught, and we need to bring them to the banqueting table so that they might listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say, in order to create pockets of flourishing people. What we need are flourishing marriages, flourishing families, flourishing friendships, businesses, churches, communities, pockets of flourishing people where everyone flourishes together in such a way that the mocker sees it and potentially rethinks his or her position. It's exactly what the text says.

Middle of verse 8:

> **Reprove a wise man and he will love you.**
> **Give *instruction* to a wise man and he will be still wiser,**
> **Teach a righteous man and he will increase *his* learning.** (Vs. 8b-9)

The word **righteous man** is our word, *tzadik*. It's someone who is determined to see the community flourish, someone who is willing to disadvantage himself or herself in order to advantage the greater community and, as pockets of people flourish, we can begin to change the climate. What the text says is there is a dramatic difference between how people respond to Lady Wisdom's offer of wisdom. How people respond tells us a lot about people's core belief. So think of it this way: If I have bought in to the post-modern narrative and I am my own autonomous self, I have determined to be my own god; I will find my own morality; I will determine my own truth—I'm going to live my life my way. If that's my worldview, if that's what I have concluded, then I am deeply offended when someone corrects me. "How dare you correct me? I am the god of my little world. I define what's right; I define what's moral; I define what's true. You have no right to correct me." You hear it all the time in the culture. People are offended at this idea of being judged. "As god of my world, no one has the right to correct me."

How different it is if you have surrendered to God as God. Rather than me being a know-it-all, I've acknowledged God is the know-it-all. Lady Wisdom was there from the beginning. She does know it all, and I understand that I want to be counted among the righteous. This isn't just about me and my little world; this is about us together flourishing. I want to know how to do that, so I need to be taught; I need to be instructed; I need to be corrected; I needed to be reproved at times. So when I am surrendered to God as God, then I understand my need for instruction and correction and reproof. This is all a necessary process in order to grow in wisdom, to grow in my skills for living in order to help formulate a community where everyone flourishes. So the core issue is always the core issue. It comes down to whether I am functioning as my own god—therefore don't tell me what to do—or if I'm surrendered to God as God—and I need instruction and reproof in order to grow in my wisdom. So that's what the text says. Verse 10:

> **The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,**
> **And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.**

The fear of the Lord—a surrender to God, understanding that God is in charge, not me—is the beginning of my willingness to listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say.

> **For by me your days will be multiplied,**
> **And years of life will be added to you.**
> **If you are wise, you are wise for yourself,**
> **And if you scoff, you alone will bear it.** (Vs. 11-12)

Verse 12 is one of the strongest personal accountability verses in the Old Testament, similar to the New Testament, "*What you sow you reap*." What verse 12 just said is if you choose to listen to what Lady Wisdom has to say, you benefit from that. You experience the reward. But if you choose to scoff, if you choose to plug your ears and live life your own way, you will suffer the consequences of that and that is your fault. We really struggle with this in our community, in our culture. We really struggle with the idea of personal accountability. It's everybody else's fault but mine. But we have to address the hypocrisy in that. Think of it this way: If I bought in to the post-modern autonomous self—I am my own god; I define my own reality; I define my own morality; I

define my own truth; there are no moral laws; there are no spiritual laws; there are no social laws—I'm in charge of my own little world and I'm deeply offended when anyone corrects me. But when my choices as god of my little world lead to a mess, suddenly it's everyone else's fault. Do you hear the hypocrisy in that? It's not everyone else's fault; it's your fault. You're the one that chose to be god. You're the one that chose to define reality. You're the one that chose to walk that path. If it's a mess, it's your fault. Own it!

There has to be a sense in which we own our own story. The only way out of the mess is to start with owning your own story. This is my life and it's up to me to make choices that are going to define the path of my life, no matter what's your past, no matter what you've done, no matter what's been done to you. You have to own your own story and you have to decide for yourself, "Am I going to listen to Lady Wisdom or am I going to listen to the woman of folly?" How you answer that question will determine your experience in life. Life is not about luck; it's not about fate; it's not about chance; it's not like a lottery. It's not like that at all. It is about the choices you make every day—and you have to own your own choices.

I don't believe I could say to everyone in the room this morning that everyone has an equal opportunity to prosper, that everyone has the equal opportunity for education. I think there are a lot of things in our world where people don't have equal opportunity but I can tell you this morning with confidence: Every single person in the room has equal opportunity to sit down at Lady Wisdom's banqueting table and listen to what she has to say. It is freely and equally offered to everyone in the room. And ultimately it starts by entering into a personal relationship with the One who is wisdom—Jesus Christ. If access to God through Jesus was based on religious performance, it would not be equally available to everyone, but because it is based on the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, because it is offered freely as a gift to everyone in the room, every single person—old, young, black, white, rich, poor—has equal access to God's gift of salvation and an equal invitation to Lady Wisdom's banqueting table.

So what will define the experience of your life comes down to your choice as to which voice you're going to listen to. In verse 13 we hear the voice of the woman of folly:

> **The woman of folly is boisterous,**
> ***She is* naive and knows nothing.**
> **She sits at the doorway of her house,**
> **On a seat by the high places of the city,**
> **Calling to those who pass by,**
> **Who are making their paths straight:**
> **"Whoever is naive, let him turn in here,"**
> **And to him who lacks understanding she says,**
> **"Stolen water is sweet;**
> **And bread *eaten* in secret is pleasant."** (Vs. 13-17)

The woman of folly or the woman of foolishness, she's loud; she's boisterous; she's overpowering. As a matter of fact, oftentimes it's hard to hear the voice of Lady Wisdom because the woman of folly is so loud. She places herself in the cultural center of the city. She exalts herself, but the text says she doesn't know anything. She's naïve; she has no idea how to live, but she presents herself as an expert. The text says she calls out to those who are trying to walk a straight path. This again affirms our conclusion earlier that there are people everywhere around us—in our neighborhoods, our schools, in the work place, maybe in our family—they're not bad people. They're not evil people. They don't get up in the morning saying, "I wish I could ruin my life." They don't want to

ruin their marriage or ruin their children, but the voice of the woman of folly is so loud and so convincing that's all they know, and so they're trying to walk *the straight path*—and that's who she's calling to. Notice the text says it's the same two people: it's the naïve and those who lack heart. Lady Wisdom is calling to them; the woman of folly is calling to them, and life will be determined by which voice they listen to.

What's worth noting is what the woman of folly has to offer. Lady Wisdom slaughtered an animal, mixed the wine, created this magnificent feast. What does the woman of folly offer? Answer: bread and water. How could you possibly convince people that bread and water is better than the feast? Answer: You try and make bread and water seem more appealing than it is. So what does she say? "I know it looks like water, but it's *stolen water*. And I know it looks like just bread, but it's *secret bread*—and stolen water is sweeter and secret bread is better." In other words, because we're people made in the image of God, there is kind of this built-in sense of moral conscience that people have. But the woman of folly comes along and says, "You know life is found outside of those boundaries. It's when you cross those boundaries and taste some stolen water, when you pursue secret bread—that's where life is found; that's what your soul is looking for; that's what's going to bring you to life." So she tries to make her bread and water seem highly appealing. But – verse 18:

> **But he** (meaning the one who comes to her table) **does not know that the dead are there, *That* her guests are in the depths of Sheol.**

Verse 18 is a very graphic picture in the Hebrew. Basically the idea is the people that are there at the woman of folly's table are basically dead, not physically dead, but dead in terms of their ability to experience and enjoy life. And so what remains at the table are just shadows. The people are dead and they are casting a shadow on the table. So somebody shows up thinking this stolen water is going to be sweet and this secret bread is going to really be something special and I get to the table and I notice these aren't really people; these are just shadows. They are shadows of the corpses because the people that listened are dead already. It's a real graphic imagery of what you find at her table.

So competing voices in the culture: Lady Wisdom who offers life and the woman of folly who brings forth death. You have to own your own story. Whether you experience life or whether you experience heartache is determined in large part by which voice you listen to. The experience of your life is not determined by chance, fate, luck, or the lottery; it's determined by the choices you make every single day, and those choices are largely determined on the basis of which voice you listen to.

> *Our Father we are thankful again this morning that You have not left us to grope in the darkness trying to figure all this stuff out. But rather You have set a table, You have prepared a feast and Lady Wisdom has invited us to listen, to learn, and to become skillful at life. God, I pray that You would give us ears to hear what Lady Wisdom has to say. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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