July 1/2, 2017

Choices Matter

Skillful Living

Proverbs 14:1-35

Pastor Bryan Clark

It's not at all uncommon that I get in conversations with people who express a pretty deep level of disappointment in life. Life has become dissatisfying; they're disappointed—often times they're just miserable. But what seems to be more and more common is some people seem either unwilling or unable to make the connection between the choices they've made and the misery they're experiencing. They want to blame other people; they want to blame all kinds of circumstances, but there often seems to be this disconnect between their choices and their misery. Well that's what we want to talk about this morning, and remind ourselves that our choices do matter. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 14.

Over the last few years we've been chipping our way through the Book of Proverbs, kind of whenever we can find gaps. We're up to chapter 14. Proverbs isn't really easy to preach. It isn't organized topically; it isn't outlined. Typically any outline we impose on it is just that— imposed on the text—which makes it a little hard to deal with. There's also just simply not enough time to unpack every single proverb. So, we've just been going a chapter at a time, and I pick some of the core proverbs and try to pull them together in some sort of an organized way. Eventually we'll get all the way through the book of Proverbs—at least get a taste of what's found in this book. So, chapter 14, verse 1:

> **The wise woman builds her house,**
> **But the foolish tears it down with her own hands.** (*NASB, Proverbs 14:1*)

Throughout the Book of Proverbs there are certain very consistent patterns and contrasts and tensions. One of the most common is this tension between the wise and the foolish. The word wisdom is kind of vague. Sometimes it's hard to get your mind around it, but in the Book of Proverbs it's primarily talking about someone who is skillful at living, who has the skills to live well, which leads to a high level of satisfaction/fulfillment in life. So the **wise woman builds her house**—I'm not talking about a literal house, but house is metaphoric for a life—with a high degree of skill, and builds a life that is deeply satisfying. That's contrasted with the **foolish**. Proverbs uses a number of different Hebrew words to talk about the foolish, but by and large the foolish *tears her house down*. As a matter of fact, there's a repetition in that verse that she not only tears it down, but she **tears it down with her own hands.**

There is a reality that there are many things in life beyond our control. There are things that happen to us every day that I can't control. It's not my fault, and it has the potential of making life very difficult. That's not what we're talking about today. We're talking about tearing our own houses down with our own hands, primarily talking about the choices we make that begin to destroy our lives and leave us in misery and disappointment with life. Verse 2:

> **He who walks in his uprightness fears the LORD,**
> **But he who is devious in his ways despises Him**.

This is another contrast that's offered again and again in the Book of Proverbs. The contrast is first with *those who fear God*. To fear God is not talking about being afraid of God, but it's a sense of awe; it's a sense of reverence and worship. Basically it would carry the idea of surrender—that I believe that there is a God; I believe God created the universe and that His path is the right path and is the path that leads to life. So, all of us have legitimate needs and longings and desires. We feel them deeply in our soul. The question is, "What is the path that's going to ultimately satisfy those deep longings in our souls?" Those who fear God are those who believe it's found on God's path. Therefore, my life is dedicated to understanding God's path, to believing God's path, to obeying God's path, because I believe that's where I'll find the life I'm looking for.

That's contrasted with the fool, and *the fool despises the path of God*, so deviates from the path of God. "I don't want to travel God's path. I don't want to listen to what an archaic, two-thousand-year-old book has to say. I think I want to be in charge of my own life. I want to do it myself. I want to make my own decisions. Therefore, I'm going to deviate from God's path. I'm going to find my own path because that's where life will be found." It's a pretty common contrast. Proverbs chapter one says, "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom", but once you have rejected God's path, then you walk the path of the fool.*

Skip then to verse 12, which I think is like the heartbeat of this chapter:

> **There is a way *which seems* right to a man,** (or to a person)
> **But its end is the way of death.**

Death, here, isn't speaking of physical death so much as it is misery in life. Just like when we say that Jesus offers us life, we're not just saying that we breathe every day. We're saying He offers life that's fulfilling, life that makes life worth living. Well, this Hebrew word for death carries the idea of misery, of disappointment—it's just not the life that our souls are longing for. Stop and think about that, because it's a rather frightening statement. There is a way that seems right, but it's not! It's actually the pathway to misery! Think of the level of deception when I'm going down this path because I think this is the path of life. I think this is what's going to make me happy...what's going to make me fulfilled. I think this is going to satisfy the longings in my soul. I really do think that, but it's not! It's the wrong path, and it's only going to lead to misery.

This goes all the way back again to Genesis chapter 3. When the serpent was talking to Adam and Eve, what he was offering them was to think about being your own god, deciding your own path, making your own decisions about right and wrong. When Adam and Eve were contemplating what the serpent was offering, I don't think they thought, "You know, if we choose to be our own gods, if we decide to go our own way, if we decide to define for ourself right and wrong, if we dismiss the concepts of guilt and shame, I think life will be miserable, so let's do that!" I don't think that was the thinking at all. The thinking was, "Surely that's the right way! How do I get the most out of life? Well, I think by probably being my own god, by directing my own path. I don't want to be told what to do. I don't want to listen to some old book. I want to decide for myself. Surely that's the way to be happy. That's the way to be fulfilled. That's the way to get the most out of life. That seems right."

There's no question as a culture we've bought into that. We have drifted far from the path of God. God is kind of dismissed as a non-factor because we're absolutely convinced by being an individual, deciding myself what's right or wrong, deciding for myself what's good or bad, choosing my own path, deciding for myself what will make me happy, that *seems* like the right way! There's a way

that *seems right*, yet virtually every survey taken these days, demonstrates that we are more unhappy...more disappointed...more disillusioned, despairing, hopeless; we're more addicted... more medicated...more depressed, suicidal than any generation before us. And at some point, wouldn't we stop and consider: maybe this isn't the best way...and maybe there is another way?

Those who fear God understand some fundamentals that guide us through life. We believe that God is. We believe that God has created the universe and created the universe with certain laws in effect. There are natural laws, social laws, moral laws, and when you violate God's laws, you do so with consequence. No matter what you think, what you feel, what you believe, at the end of the day, God's laws prevail.

The easiest way to illustrate this is to think about the natural laws. So let's think about the law of gravity. You are free this morning to believe what you want about gravity. You can like it; you can dislike it. You can believe it's true; you can deny it's true. You are free to believe that the law of gravity is some sort of a conspiracy put together by the scientists to control your life. You can look at the birds and you can determine: certainly the law of gravity is not true. "If the birds can do it, so can I!" You're free to believe that. But when you go up on top of the building and you jump, you hit the ground. What you run into is reality. Dallas Willard used to say, "Reality is what you run into when you're wrong."

You are free to believe as you wish. You are free to believe that your way is the right way, that you have the right to decide for yourself what's good and bad, good and evil, and right and wrong. You're free to decide for yourself what's moral and immoral. You're free to decide what path you'd like to travel, but at the end of the day what you run into is reality, and reality always wins. At the end of the day there are moral laws and social laws that are just as powerful and true as the natural laws in the universe. No matter what you choose to believe, what you choose to feel, you can't beat the system. *So there is a way that seems right, but it only leads to misery*.

Then that begins to create certain characteristics of people that travel that path. So there is a way that seems right: "I'm going to do it myself. I'm going to decide for myself." One of those characteristics is found in verse 9: **Fools mock at sin.** You're well aware that sin is not a popular topic of conversation in our culture. As a matter of fact, the concept of sin is laughed at, scoffed at and mocked. It's basically the idea that there are no moral absolutes. Everybody's free to decide for themselves what's right and wrong, and the idea that there's such a thing as sin and guilt and shame is foolish. People laugh and make fun of that which then leads them farther down that path. Look then at verse 16:

A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil...

If I do believe that God's path is the right path, I try to be very thoughtful and cautious about the steps I take. I'm well aware of the fact that there are a hundred ways I can mess up my life today, and so I'm cautious with the steps I take.

But a fool is arrogant and careless.

That Hebrew word translated **arrogant** doesn't quite capture it. It's arrogant, but it's kind of the idea of *flaring up, of being agitated or offended.* The word **careless** is a term that means *reckless*. It means basically that I'm kind of offended that you would even suggest that what I'm doing is possibly wrong. I'm incredulous that you would say my path is the wrong path! So even though I'm kind of skipping around in the proverb, I'm trying to kind of build a thought here.

So there is a way that seems right, that by going my own way, defining my own reality, defining my own morality, travelling my own path, I think this is what's going to make me happy. Therefore, I scoff at the concept of sin. "There is no absolute morality. I'm free to make up right and wrong. How dare you suggest that what I'm doing is somehow not right!" And so the fool now is kind of offended, is agitated, is irritated at the suggestion that somehow my path isn't the right path. "As a matter of fact, I'm incredulous that you would even suggest that! Who do you think you are to question the path I'm on and to say that what I'm doing is wrong? It might be wrong for you, but it's not wrong for me, and how dare you even suggest that!" So this starts to build an attitude that just takes someone farther and farther down that path. Look then at verse 6:

> **A scoffer seeks wisdom and *finds* none,**
> **But knowledge is easy to one who has understanding.**

In other words, when I fear God I do believe that His path is the right path. Therefore my life is dedicated to understanding, to believing and obeying what God says. God has not left us alone to grope in the darkness, to figure our way out of the jungle. He's given us a roadmap. If I believe that, it is right here, and I can figure it out. I can be very thoughtful about my steps.

But the fool who rejects that, **a scoffer seeks wisdom, but finds none.** There is a way that seems right to a man. "I think this is the right path," and so the fool begins to travel down that path, begins to mock at sin, is actually kind of offended and reacts to anybody that suggests that my path is not the right path. But there's a problem, and the problem is: my life doesn't seem to be working out. It does seem like things are falling apart. I'm unhappy...I'm disappointed...I'm disillusioned. It does seem like there's a high level of misery, and I really would like to find something better, so I'm looking for the answer. I'm looking for a way out of the jungle. I'm looking for some sort of skilled living—a different path that will improve the experience of my life. The problem is once I have rejected God's path, there is no other path out of the jungle. So the **scoffer**, the **fool**, is seeking wisdom but finds none because once you've rejected the fear of the Lord, once you've rejected God's path, there is no other path. I'm stuck in the jungle and I can't figure a way out, which only intensifies my unhappiness, my bitterness. It makes me more disillusioned, feeling more hopeless. It makes me more dissatisfied with life. I'm just now stuck in this spiral and I have no understanding how to get out.

Turn over to verse 15: **The naïve believes everything**. The naive—which is another one of the fools identified in the Book of Proverbs—isn't someone who's dumb or stupid. It's someone who is untaught. It's someone who simply doesn't know the truth. So now imagine this scenario: There is a way that seems right but I'm going to go my way. It seems like that's the most likely way to make me happy, to give me what I'm looking for in life. So I scoff at the idea of sin. If somebody suggests that my path isn't the right path, I'm incredulous, I'm offended, and I react with a degree of anger. "How dare you say that!" But the problem is when I'm alone at night, I realize I'm really unhappy; I'm kind of miserable. My life isn't working. It feels like it's falling apart. I'm trying to find the path out of the jungle, but I can't, which means that now I'll believe anything. That's what the proverb just said. I am so desperate, now I'll believe anything to find some way out of the misery of the jungle in which I find myself.

It's a bit like a leaf being dropped in a river. The leaf drops in the river and just flows with the current. There's no shortage of teenagers, college students, 20-somethings, middle-age adults, who, in our culture all think they're cutting-edge, sophisticated thinkers. They're on the edge of new thought that defines the 21st century, but it is so new and sophisticated that actually it's the same

thing everyone is believing. It's the current of the culture. They're nothing more than a leaf falling into the river and the current's carrying them down, and they're all thinking the same thing. *There is a way that seems right.* "Well everybody's doing it." That must be the right way and so they'll believe anything and they find themselves travelling with the current of the culture but not finding what they're looking for.

The second part of verse 15: **But the sensible man considers his steps**. As I said before, there are hundreds of ways I can mess up my life today. The culture is filled with land mines that can dramatically change my life. Therefore, I'm very thoughtful about the steps I take.

Years ago when I was in grad school, Patty and I lived in Southern California, kind of in the L.A. area, and my job to get me through seminary was as a tow-truck driver. Well, I was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska, clear back in the '70s. It was fairly easy to navigate. The streets kind of went north, south, east, west. So I grew up at 24th and B, right down by Lincoln High. So A, B, C, D, E, those streets all went east and west; 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, north and south, so it made a nice little grid—fairly simple. Nothing in Southern California is like that. The streets are curvy, windy; there's no intuitive way to figure out an address. In our station, we had a very lucrative AAA license. According to the rules of AAA, when you got the call as a driver, you had 20 minutes to be at the call, which wasn't real pressing. But if you got four calls in a row, you did not get 20, 20, 20, 20; you had to be at the fourth call in 20 minutes. So it was a high level of stress. I'm pretty sure I was the only driver in our station that wasn't on something to deal with the pressure. *(laughter)* I was from Lincoln, transplanted into Southern California, so all of these roads and addresses were new to me. In Southern California, the roads wind around, then all of a sudden they dead end; they stop; they hit the expressway. It could take you 30 minutes to figure out how to backup, get over or under the expressway, and get back to where you're supposed to be. What it boiled down to is you simply couldn't make that mistake. So they gave you a book, we called it the "T-guide"—the travel guide—and basically it had every road, every alley—it had everything you needed. It was the most amazing resource! Every time I got a call, I went immediately to the travel guide. I couldn't afford to make a catastrophic mistake. I would map my route and I would go there. Eventually I kind of learned the routes and what's what, but there was no way for me to keep my job without the travel guide.

Over the years I've often thought of the Bible as being my travel guide. This is my "T- guide". I haven't been thrown in the jungle with no resources to just figure my way out of the jungle. There is no need to grope in the darkness. God has given me a travel guide. It starts with: I fear God; I respect and I worship God. I do believe His path is the right path. I've dedicated my life to understanding it, to believing it, to obeying it, to travelling His path. So the one who finds life is the one who carefully considers his or her steps in order to travel down the path of life. That's what it says in verse 27:

> **The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life**, (That's what my soul is looking for.)
> **That one may avoid the snares of death**. (...or the snares of misery)

It goes on in verse 29:

> **He who is slow to anger has great understanding,**
> **But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly.**
> **A tranquil heart is life to the body,**
> **But passion is rottenness to the bones.** (*Vs. 29-30*)

Passion there is not like we think of passion in a positive sense. It's a word that means to be hot, to be agitated, to be upset, to be reactive. So the proverb just said two things. One is: the fool that travels his own path is going to be characterized by being a hot-head, by being quick-tempered, by being angry and reactive all the time. Here's how it works: There is a way that seems right. I've determined that for me to be my own god, for me to determine my own reality, I'm going to decide for myself what's right and wrong. I'm going to make my own decisions. That seems like the right way, ultimately, to be happy. So I scoff at the concept of sin. When someone suggests that perhaps my behavior is offensive to God, I'm incredulous; I react to that. "How dare you say such a thing! Who put you in charge?" But I start to realize my life is not working. I'm really not happy. I'm kind of miserable. Everything seems to be falling apart. I feel like I'm stuck in the jungle. I need a path out, but I can't find the path out. So that's now starting to upset me. It's starting to make me angry. I'm getting a little bit desperate, so I'll believe anything, which is starting to make my problems worse. It's getting me deeper and deeper into the jungle with no path out, and now I'm really getting angry because my life isn't working and I'm tired of people judging me and now I'm hot-tempered, quickly reacting, and that starts to be what defines me, which just drives me deeper and deeper and deeper into despair.

I think we would all agree that the thing that characterizes our 21st century American culture is that we have, by and large, said, "No," to God. God is irrelevant. We've become our own gods. We've defined our own reality. We scoff at the concept of sin—where people are incredulous when somebody suggests that somehow our behavior might actually be offensive to God. We're now willing to believe anything, but our lives aren't working. The culture is falling apart. People's lives are falling apart. People feel that deeply and so they're getting more and more frustrated, and one of the things that defines our culture is we are very angry people. We're angry at the politicians. We're angry at the media. We're angry at the government. We're angry at the schools, our work associates, our children. We're angry at everybody. It's just like we have this anger inside of us, and when anything pops us with a pin, out comes anger. Why are we such an angry culture? The proverb puts it all together. *There is a way that seems right, but it's not working.* It's all falling apart and then people have the nerve to judge me, but I'm just getting deeper into the jungle. Nothing's working. It's making me more and more angry. It's making me more desperate. All of it fits together and defines our culture perfectly.

What the text also says is this creates **rottenness in our bones**. It's actually talking about the physical effects of anger. Google it up for yourself. There are countless studies that will tell you that that level of anger is destructive to the body, to your physical health. Now I'm even more upset with life, more disappointed, more disillusioned. Not only is my life not working, now physically my body's falling apart and I have headaches and anxiety. On and on it goes, and it just creates this miserable cycle—and yet so many people are unable to connect the dots. Your life is miserable because of the life choices you have made. Look at what it says then in verse 11:

> **The house of the wicked will be destroyed,**
> **But the tent of the upright will flourish.**

The contrast is between a **house** and a **tent**. The foolish have a house because they're living for the things of this world. They're permanent residents and that's what they live for. But the wise, who have lived skillfully, live in a tent, which is symbolic of the fact that this world is not my home. I'm not settling for this. I'm actually a pilgrim just passing through and I understand that the best is yet to come. The best is in the future, and those are the values I live for. So it's the **house** versus the **tent**, and yet it's the tent that endures forever, which gets us to verse 13:

Even in laughter the heart may be in pain,
And the end of joy may be grief.

Basically what that proverb is saying is: even on my best days, on my moments of greatest joy, there's something deep in my heart that still grieves me, because I know this is temporary. I know this won't last. I know the clock is ticking and everything's going to change and even in the best of moments, I'm going to grow old and diseased and I'm eventually going to die. That's everyone's story in the room. There is no way to avoid that. Therefore, even in the happiness moments of life, there is something inside of me that knows deeply this won't last...which gets us to the last part of verse 32:

But the righteous has a refuge when he dies.

The righteous understand I live in a tent. I'm a pilgrim. I'm passing through. The best days are yet ahead of me. Everything that my soul longs for will be perfectly fulfilled in the world to come. No matter what happens in this world, no matter what this world may do to me, I understand if I've lived for the things that matter, if I have travelled God's path, that the best is yet to come and the most wonderful moments of this life are but a glimpse of what will define my life for eternity. Even when I die, I have this place of **refuge**, of knowing the best is yet to come.

And of course we are reminded that that's all been made possible through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. All the way back to Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve found a way that seemed right to them and plunged the human race into sin, before the chapter was over, God had already made a promise—He would do something to bring life back out of death. Two thousand years ago God became flesh and died upon a cross in payment for your sin and mine. That if, by faith, we choose to believe that Jesus died for my sins, God offers the forgiveness of sin, that we may enter into a relationship with God now and forever. But here's the problem: The message of the gospel is counter-intuitive. There is a way that seems right, and the way that seems right is: I must get to God through religion. I must get to God through religious activity. I must get to God through self-performance. I must get to God by being good. As long as I'm better than the next guy, as long as God grades on a curve, that's the way everything in this world works. That's kind of intuitive. There is a way that seems right. At the end of the day, that must be the way, ultimately, to God.

But so much of our faith is counter-intuitive. Jesus said you have to die to live. Jesus said the last shall be first. Jesus said it's more blessed to give than to receive. There's so much within our faith that is counter-intuitive, that we believe *by faith*. It is not intuitive that God would somehow pay the penalty for our sin and offer salvation freely as a gift. Nothing in life works that way. But that is what God did—and He freely offers you salvation as a gift.

The first step to getting out of the misery, out of the jungle, is to enter into a personal relationship with the living God, made possible through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus—step one! And that is the beginning of your journey onto the path of life where you might find that which deeply satisfies your soul. There is this sobering reality that you don't get to live life twice. The choices I made when I was seventeen are the choices I made. I don't get to go back and do them again. And those choices do affect my experience in life! If I don't get to go back and do them again, I'd better be very, very thoughtful about the choices I make every day, because those choices will affect the experience of my life.

Our Father, we are soberly reminded this morning that choices matter. Lord, there are people in this room this morning who, if they were honest, they are miserable! They're disillusioned. They're disappointed. They're angry. They search for wisdom but there seems to be no wisdom to be found. God, I pray specifically that You would open up their hearts and minds this morning, for You have made a way out, freely offering this gift, if we choose to receive it. It's in the name of Jesus we pray this. Amen.

(Video)

Dear Zach,

This is your future self writing you a letter. I am 32 years old and I live in South Carolina. It is the summer of 2009. I am writing you this letter in an effort to give you a glimpse into your future. My hope is that you will read this, dwell on it, and modify your behavior appropriately. I know you better than anyone else does, except God, and I know you will be wary of the contents of this letter. You will want to avoid it because you think you can do better on your own. And you can, if you listen to me. Please accept this help.

You are 17 years old. You are about to graduate from high school and go off to college. You are excited about the adventure ahead. But this letter is not about telling you all of the details of your life—where you are going to live, who you are going to marry, all about your kids. I am writing this letter as a warning, and let me get right to the point. I have some news and it is not good.

It is very unlikely you will live another 17 years, for we now have cancer and it is bad cancer. In fact, it is really bad. You will have surgery one day to remove over two feet of your intestine and the cancer will keep spreading to other organs. You will undergo a nasty bunch of chemotherapy, and after that, I cannot say, for that is now the present situation.

I am now 32, and I may not make it to age 34. You may have already lived past your life's halfway point. I want to impress on you the gravity of this situation. As I reflect on the life I have led that you have not yet seen, I am deeply saddened. I always thought there would be more time. The things that are now important to me are not important to you. I'm specifically talking about your relationship with God and your outlook on humanity.

God is real. I know you know that. The things you have been taught in church, the things you have read about for so many years, they are all true. All humans will experience eternity after they die. Some will go to a very real place called Heaven and live. Others will go to a very real place called Hell and suffer forever. The time on earth is so short for humans, and for us it's even shorter. It would be amazing if we live half the time that most humans live. I want to teach you two things in life in light of this.

First, you need to recognize that God has given you many different gifts and talents and abilities. You are able to do much, and the way you have been wired up is unique. The Bible in 1 Corinthians 3 says that we will all be judged according to our works one day. If our works are like wood or straw or hay, we are told we will suffer loss. If our works are like gold or silver or precious stones, we will be rewarded. I want to be rewarded and so do you.

You have been given much and it will be tempting as you go off to college and into your independence, to squander your opportunities. You will be tempted to hide who you are, to hide what you believe, even the fact that you believe in God. I recognize now that there is much more that I could have done. I am now firmly wrapped in a sense of urgency. We can rest when we get to Heaven. Now is the time to get to work and put into practice what we believe. I am desperately trying to finish well, but if I can teach you anything, it would be to start right now. As you are at 17 years old, seek God and obey Him.

The second thing I want to teach you is how you can practically put this into play. You must break your heart for the people around you. You must love them. You must be passionate about them. John, the apostle, in his first letter says, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love, does not know God, because God is love.

You claim to love God. The very real tangible way to love God is to show that love to other people. You are going to live in a variety of different cities and states. You are going to travel to some fantastic countries around the world, and you are going to meet many, many people. Keep this at the forefront of your mind: Love them and show them the way to Jesus.

You will be faced with many struggles in this life. My encouragement is that you pick the harder path. You will be more like Christ and your character will be developed. Pick the harder path.

You will meet and interact with so many different people. Try to learn something from every one of them. It is not an accident that you have met them. And desperately try to leave each and every one of them better off than when you first met them.

I keep using the word desperate in this letter, for that betrays my urgency. Desperately pursue God and use the things that He has given you, and desperately pursue the people around you and love them. Our time is short, my friend. Let's get to work.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
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