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Listen, That You May Be Wise

Skillful Living

Proverbs 19: 1-29

Pastor Bryan Clark

On any given day we'll encounter dozens, maybe hundreds of people, and here's the deal: there isn't a single one of those people that *you* can control. *Skillful living* is about owning the fact that the only person on a daily basis I can control is *me*, so we want to talk about skillful living one more time. This is the last proverb of this summer, so a little bit of summary and then we'll remind ourselves again why this is so critically important. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 19. I'll just use a couple of these proverbs to do a little bit of a summary or review. The first one is in verse 1.

> **Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity**
> **Than he who is perverse in speech and is a fool.** (*NASB, Proverbs 19:1)

I mentioned several weeks ago that to understand Proverbs you have to understand there are certain topics that just cycle again and again through the Book of Proverbs. One of those we've seen is this idea: I'd rather be poor and get it, than to be wealthy and be a fool.

Now there is nowhere Proverbs says or the Bible teaches, "I'd rather be poor then wealthy." That's not a biblical value. There is nothing wrong with wealth. But in the ancient world, to be wealthy was often to disadvantage others...to take advantage of others...to use and abuse people. The courts were rigged; often the rich bribed and bought off the courts. That was just a common way of life. So you do have this repetition that, at the end of the day, kind of helps us remember what matters. I'd still *rather be poor and have my integrity, than to be wealthy and to be a fool.*

The other part of verse 1 that reminds us of some of what we've talked about is the idea of a *perverse mouth or twisted speech.* If you understand that wisdom is kind of the umbrella heading of the Book of Proverbs, then it would be correct to say there is no topic discussed more in the Book of Proverbs than the topic of the mouth...the tongue...words! So it would be right to say you stand virtually no chance of living skillfully if you can't control your mouth. We have talked about it a lot this summer; I am not going back through all that, just offer a reminder. Skip then to verse 11.

> **A man's discretion makes him slow to anger,**
> **And it is his glory to overlook a transgression.**

A man's discretion—the Hebrew there is *discernment* or we maybe would say *self-control*. One of the commentators says *the ability to rule one's spirit.* I like that as it has the idea that someone that is in control of his own spirit, of his own emotions, of his own mouth is someone **slow to anger.** Literally, the Hebrew is *long in the face* or maybe better *relaxed in the face.*

It carries the idea that throughout our days, because we live in a culture of despair, we live in a culture of misery—therefore we live in a culture of anger—that someone who is skillful at living has control of his or her spirit to such a degree that we choose not to enter into that. "I am not going to get sucked into the fool's folly. I am not going to live my days in anger and frustration. I'm not

going to be part of the problem. I want to be part of a different way. I want to be part of redemption and restoration and healing." In order to do that, I have to rule my own spirit. I have to be willing to put up with behavior that's rude or hurtful and not react or respond back and get sucked into that. So the idea of a *relaxed face* is not saying that when that happens, I grit my teeth and try to prevent myself from going off. That's not what it is at all; it's actually much more than that. It's this idea that I have my game face on from the time I get up in the morning. I understand the world we live in. I understand what I might encounter. I am just choosing not to enter into it. I am not going to fight; I'm not going to argue; I'm not going to get sucked into the fool's folly. I'm simply not going to live that way. Life is a gift too valuable to be wasted that way.

I actually find it helpful to kind of rehearse that. When people are rude or hurtful or mean or even if they cut me off in traffic, there's the tendency to react to that. But I actually rehearse in my head, "You know I am really sorry that you're miserable and that you're having a really bad day but I choose not to be that way. I choose not to get angry at that." I just choose not to be at the mercy of everybody else's bad behavior. So that's kind of what the proverb is talking about.

It is his glory. That word basically means it's his *beauty*; it's his *virtue*. It's kind of this winsome character quality that makes someone attractive, that makes someone desirable. We saw that earlier in the summer—that if we live with skill, we actually make what we have to say desirable to someone. We talked about this several weeks ago: There are certain people, whenever they enter a room, everyone tenses up. There's just this sense of the possibility of conflict, or something hurtful being said is now pretty high. You just feel it in the room and in many ways it actually creates the conflict you fear. There is just a sense about that. But there are other people, when they walk into the room, it's just the opposite of that. There's this sense of calm, a sense of quiet, a sense of peace, a sense of safety and security and there's a sense within us that you know everything is going to be okay. There's kind of this beautiful winsome quality about people who live their lives with skill that is very attractive to people living in a hurtful, despairing world.

So that's the idea of the proverb in verse 11. It carries the idea of Jesus saying, "Turn the other cheek." I am just not going to spend my life reacting, responding, at the mercy of every fool around me. I *choose* to live differently. But it does raise an interesting question. People might ask, "Well, what exactly does that mean?" I mean it's one thing if somebody cuts you off in traffic or maybe the cashier at Walmart is rude. But what if the fool is your spouse? A parent? A child? A co-worker? A neighbor? Somebody you encounter regularly? Does grace mean that we just continually put up with and overlook bad behavior? We just continually forgive that which is hurtful and allow ourselves to remain in hurtful and abusive situations? It isn't unusual that someone will come and ask those questions. These are very sincere, caring people, wanting to know what grace actually looks like in this kind of a circumstance, and that can be very difficult. So I appreciate the fact that Proverbs kind of balances itself out in verse 19 for example:

> **A *man* of great anger will bear the penalty.**

Now, specifically, it's talking about **anger** which is one of many characteristics of the fool, but in this verse you could put anything in there. This chapter talks a lot about *lying*, about the *sluggard* or the *lazy* or someone that goes off at the mouth. Whatever marks the fool—we talked about that last week—put whatever you want in there—but the man or woman that's a fool **will bear the penalty**, meaning there is a consequence. We talked early in the summer that there are natural laws, like the law of gravity, and there are social laws. There are moral laws that are just as powerful and binding.

It is how God created the universe, and when you violate those, there is a consequence every bit as predictable as violating the law of gravity. When a fool is being a fool, there will be a consequence, a penalty, some sort of payment for that. The problem is the second part of the proverb:

For if you rescue *him*, you will only have to do it again.

Basically the idea is: when people are being fools, there is a consequence and typically those are painful. But it is the painful consequences that often wake us up to our bad behavior and that God can use to produce necessary change in our lives. But when there is someone in our life that keeps rescuing us, keeps getting in the way of those consequences, we never really experience the consequence, so we never really change our behavior. Probably in our language today we would use the word *enable*. When someone enables bad behavior, they are pretty much guaranteeing that that behavior will continue again and again and again. So it's the whole idea of trying to understand grace. Skillful living, compassion and kindness don't mean we constantly overlook and just simply forgive bad, hurtful behavior. Sometimes the most kind, compassionate, caring thing we can do is to simply get out of the way and let the fool suffer the consequences of his or her foolish behavior in hopes that that will get his or her attention, where there can be necessary change.

During our study of 1 and 2 Samuel we talked often about the difference between Saul and David. The difference was not that Saul sinned and David did not. The difference was Saul never got out of the sin-sorry, sin-sorry cycle. David, on the other hand, was characterized by brokenness, true confession and repentance. There is a dramatic difference between sorry and brokenness with repentance. The sin-sorry, sin-sorry, sin-sorry cycle is a cycle of destruction. It's never really coming to grips with the sin.

Over the years I have come to realize that when people get caught in bad behavior—here's the newsflash—everyone is sorry! I have spouses come and say, "But you know, he's really sorry...she's really sorry," and I usually say, "I just need to tell you everybody's sorry when they get caught, but it creates a sin-sorry, sin-sorry, sin-sorry cycle." True repentance is dramatically different from that. The word *confession* means *to agree with God.* When I am truly confessing my sin, I am saying to God, "God, I agree with You; this is sin," and what's implied in that is that it's offensive to God and if it's offensive to God, I understand it must stop. *Repentance is putting a stake in the ground and going the other way*. It's saying, "I understand this is offensive to God and it must stop. I need to do whatever is necessary to get this stopped and go a different direction." For many people it's kind of a moment of truth. It is a life-change moment. Either they're going to self-destruct or there is going to be significant change. I can usually tell in the first ten minutes of a conversation if this is going to be a sin-sorry, sin-sorry conversation or if there is true brokenness and repentance.

I have an estranged friend, and we have been estranged for some time. Basically it's what the proverb is talking about. At some point there was nothing more I could do. I felt like I was simply getting in the way of what God needed to do to get his attention, so I simply pulled away. I hadn't seen him for years, and about a year ago he just showed up at my doorstep, which is somewhat of a commitment. We live twenty miles outside of town and I kind of wondered, "Well, what is the purpose?" Is it possible that finally after all this misery, he truly has hit bottom and there was going to be true change? So we began to talk and he told me about all the misery, pain and struggle, and everything that was going on. It was just kind of a nightmare. I kind of walked him back through all the people that he used and abused and taken advantage of, and immediately he became defensive.

You know it was everybody else's fault but his. He just kept sighing and saying "Ohhh, I just don't know what I am going to do." And so I would talk very clearly, "You know, here are the next steps. There is no shortage of people waiting to help you. You don't have to live like this." But as soon as I would go through that, he would sigh, "Ohhh, I just don't know what I am going to do," and after about three or four of those exchanges, I realized the conversation was over. I don't know why he came out but it clearly was not confession and repentance. Maybe it was for money, I don't really know. But it doesn't take long to figure out this is someone who really knows nothing more than a little bit sorry and living in misery.

When you have the conversation with someone who is merely sorry, the marks are clear. There's a high degree of manipulation, of maneuvering, of a feeling that they're still kind of in charge and trying to manage this thing. There's definitely some damage control. "I don't want other people to know." There's this sense of blame and finger pointing and it's everybody else's fault, and you quickly pick up that these are all the marks of someone who is nothing more then sorry. And when they leave, I often think, "Shall I just make an appointment for you next year?" because nothing's going to change. It is dramatically different when someone is truly broken and repentant. There is this deep sense of brokenness. There's no finger pointing, no blame; it's nobody else's fault. There's no damage control, no manipulation and maneuvering. There's no trying to control the situation. There is just a deep sense of brokenness, "Tell me what I need to do."

There are times when all of us are going to fail. We are going to biff it and hurt the people we love. In those moments when we're truly broken and repentant, we should absolutely ask forgiveness and begin to work on restoring the relationship. That's very different from someone who has a consistent pattern of sin-sorry, sin-sorry, sin-sorry. Where there's no true sense of brokenness or confession or repentance, sometimes we have to make the difficult decision to stop rescuing, to stop enabling, to stop preventing the necessary consequences in order for God to bring correction and discipline—to bring about change—or the fool is going to destroy himself. Sometimes the most compassionate, the most loving, the most grace-filled thing you can do is just get out of the way. To continue to enable, to continue to rescue is actually contributing to the demise of the fool.

Look at verse 29, the last verse of the proverb:

> **Judgments are prepared for scoffers,**
> **And blows for the back of fools.**

That's just a reminder that when fools get caught in the cycle, sometimes what's necessary to bring about real and lasting change is deep and very painful, and sometimes God just wants to shepherd us out of the way so He can do what is necessary before the fool destroys himself or herself. My experience has been that is usually a long, long, painful process. It moves then to verse 3, kind of in the sense of the logic of thinking this through. What often happens is verse 3:

> **The foolishness of man ruins his way.**

At the end of the day, the fool is responsible for ruining his or her own life. It's not everyone else's fault or the circumstance. That's what verse 3 says, but the second part of the proverb:

> **And his heart rages against the LORD.**

The fool ruins his own life but somehow it's God's fault. It's everybody else's fault, and it's God's fault. I've had these conversations again and again over the years, where someone will sit in my office who I know has lived the life of a fool. Now their lives are a mess and they are in misery and yet they'll say, "I just don't understand why God would do this to me." And there is this need to say, "God didn't do this to you. You did this to you." The fool ruins his or her own life, yet the evidence of a fool is somehow it's everyone else's fault, and ultimately it's God's fault.

I want to look then at a few of these proverbs that remind us why this matters so much. Verse 8:

> **He who gets wisdom loves his own soul;**
> **He who keeps understanding will find good.**

Why is this so important? Because skillful living is the path that gives my soul what it's desperately longing for. I was created for flourishing. I was created for a relationship with God. My soul longs for that and for my soul to experience peace and safety and security and quietness. For my soul to experience this life that it's been longing for, is to love my soul. It's good soul care. It's only going to be found down the path of wisdom. That's what's at stake. That's why this is so very important. Verse 16 is similar:

> **He who keeps the commandment keeps his soul.** When I walk in obedience to God, I'm actually traveling the path that's going to give my soul what it deeply wants.
> ***But* he who is careless of conduct will die.**..will be miserable. The person that continues to live as a fool is making himself or herself miserable.

I again go back to the fact that life is short. Life is a gift. Why would you choose to be miserable when the offer to find the life that your soul longs for is freely offered? Verse 20:

> **Listen to counsel and accept discipline or correction,** (Why?)
> **That you may be wise the rest of your days.**

I actually love the hope in that proverb. None of us can change the past. No matter what the past is, the past is past. You can't go back and change it. There is no point dwelling on that. But what the proverb is saying is that every single person in the room can live with a high level of skill. You can give your soul what it's longing for if you are willing to listen, if you're willing to learn. If you're willing to accept God's correction as He keeps maneuvering you to get you down this path that delivers life, ultimately every person in the room can live skillfully.

Over the years I have seen this play out again and again. I have been a pastor for about thirty-four years. I have seen stories that were absolutely heartbreaking, where people pulled away in order to let God do His thing. The story finally hits bottom and in brokenness and confession and repentance someone finally hits the point where something of significance changes. They begin to travel a different path and begin to live a life of skill. I look at them today and they are happy and joyful and they are flourishing, and most people around them would never know that part of their story.

I see others who are determined not to listen, determined to be the fool. No matter what happens, they are determined to travel their own path. They're miserable a year later...five years later...ten years later...twenty years later they're still absolutely miserable and I see the dramatic contrast between someone who is so happy and flourishing and someone who is in absolute misery. It all

goes back to one who was willing to listen, to be corrected and to be truly repentant, and someone who stubbornly was determined to go down the path of the fool. Verse 21:

Many plans are in a man's heart,
But the counsel of the LORD will stand.

That's a contrast. The plans of the heart are my own plans. There's a way that seems right to a man. "I'm going to do it my way. I'm going to travel my own path; I'm going to decide my own morality; I'm going to make up my own way." Those are the plans of **a man's heart**—a man or a woman's heart. **But the counsel of God will stand**. In other words, God always wins! You simply can't fight God and win. There are moral laws; there are social laws. You can't violate them without consequence. At the end of the day, no matter what, God wins. This is the conversation that God has with Cain in Genesis chapter 4, when Cain is stubbornly determined to live life on his terms. God comes along and says to Cain—and I love this moment in the story— "Cain, it doesn't have to be this way." It's like a loving, heavenly daddy saying, "Cain, all you have to do is rethink this. Make different decisions and life can be what your soul is longing for." But Cain bows his neck, digs in his heels, is determined to live life on his terms and he spends the rest of his days basically as a wanderer, a nomad, in misery because of his absolute determination to fight God. Verse 25:

Strike a scoffer and the naive may become shrewd,
But reprove one who has understanding and he will gain knowledge.

There are three players in that verse. There's the **scoffer**, the fool that makes fun of everything that is good and right. Then there's the **naïve**, the simple untaught fool. This is one that's kind of sitting on the fence deciding which way he or she's going to go and then there's the **wise**. The idea is that when you punish the scoffer—we saw this several weeks ago— thirty lashes on the fool and the fool is still a fool. You punish the scoffer and the scoffer is still a scoffer. But there's also a naïve fool, somebody kind of sitting on the fence still deciding which path to travel. They look at what's happening to the scoffer and may, as a result of the consequences to the scoffer, decide, "That is not the path for me," and they may choose the other path, the path of life. So it's good to remember just because the scoffer never gets it and lives in misery doesn't mean there isn't someone else watching and thinking, "You know, I don't think I want that path," and they choose to travel a different path.

And then the end of the proverb is the one who is wise: **reprove one who has understanding and he will gain knowledge,** meaning the one who is wise or living skillfully just keeps learning and growing and changing. The Mid-rash was a Collection of Rabbinical Sayings, and one of those sayings was, "To the wise a hint; to the fool a fist." Basically it's talking about for someone who is wise, for someone who is skillful at living, you just need to give them a hint that they're off track and they get back on track because that's what they want. That's what they're passionate about. They are always learning, growing and changing. It's kind of the idea for someone who is wise, you just need to whisper to them, "Hey, I think you are off track," and they hear it and they respond and they get back on the path. But to the fool it takes a fist! We would probably, in today's language, say a two-by-four, and the fool requires a two-by-four over the head to finally get his attention for something to actually change. The last proverb I want to look at is verse 27:

Cease listening, my son, to discipline,
***And you will* stray from the words of knowledge.**

When we stop listening or when we stop growing, then we begin to drift from the pathway of skillful living, and we're going to end up waking up one morning in misery and wondering what happened. The most dangerous Christians in the room this morning are those Christians who are bored. You're not really doing anything bad, not really in trouble—not really like way off the path—but you're just bored. You've got it all figured out. You're bored with your faith. You kind of come to church to make sure the pastor doesn't say anything out-of-line, but you're just kind of on auto-pilot and floating along. You stopped listening, stopped changing, stopped growing and you start drifting, and you are going to wake up one morning and you are going to wonder what happened. I have this conversation with people all the time. They sit in my office and they ask the question, "How did this happen?" It's a long, slow, gradual drift.

Why does this matter? It matters because we're talking about the stuff of our soul. We're talking about whether or not my soul is going to experience what it longs for or whether I am going to live a life of misery and foolishness and, ultimately, destruction. It's kind of like everything's at stake.

There are those of you in the room who, this summer, you have listened. You have been convicted; you've taken it to heart. You are continuing to change, to grow, to become more skillful in your living. Some of you may feel like you are so far down the path you have so far to go—but you're listening...changing...growing. There's no need to be embarrassed or ashamed. There's no reason to somehow feel bad about that. This needs to be a place where you can come and you can feel safe and you can learn and you can grow and you can change. We cheerlead you! We applaud you! "That's awesome—Way to go!" We're so pleased that you're listening and growing and changing and we're so glad to be a part of that story together. But there are others of you who just don't care. We've given everyone in the room more than enough this summer to be skillful at living, yet some of you just don't care. You don't want to listen; you don't want to change; you don't want to take it to heart. By the time you walk out the doors, it's gone. For whatever reason you're like, "I'm just not interested; I don't care." You're absolutely determined to travel the path of the fool!

I can't to do anything about that. I can't make you listen. If that's the path you're determined to travel, that's up to you. But I will tell you this: When you hit bottom and you're in absolute misery, and you knock on my door, do not say, "Nobody told me," because I did tell you. I told you again and again and again this summer! It's up to you if you choose to listen or not.

I just want to remind us one more time that it is not possible to be skillful at living, it's not possible to travel this pathway of life without a meaningful life-changing encounter with Jesus. It's not about just going out and trying harder. You might say the entrance ramp onto the path of life—this life of skillful living—is to accept God's offer of salvation, to recognize that I am a sinner and that sin separates me from a holy God, to recognize when I was lost with no hope, God sent His own son, ultimately to be nailed on a cross in payment for my sin. He would shed His blood to pay for my sin, that He might offer me life and forgiveness in return. I don't have to go out and get religious. I don't have to go out and perform. I don't have to achieve something. It's offered freely as a gift of God's grace to anyone who chooses to receive it. That is the first act of surrender. That is the first necessary step to experiencing the life that God freely offers you. My prayer for all of us is that we would live our lives as skillful people in a world full of misery and anger, that we would create pockets of flourishing around this community, platforms from which we share the message of Jesus that has so radically changed our life—that we actually do change our community one person at a time!

Our Father we celebrate this morning that in this very confusing world You did not leave us to wander in the darkness. You have given us the travel guide; You have given us the map; You've given us what we need for skillful living if we choose to listen and to learn. God, I pray that each one of us would take seriously the call to live as skillful men and women. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Speaker: I want to encourage you to listen with not only with your mind but also your heart as I read these excerpts from Proverbs that we've studied this summer:

Those who follow the right path fear the Lord.
Those who take the wrong path despise him. (*NLT Proverbs 14:2)

Fear of the Lord is a life-giving fountain;
it offers escape from the snares of death. (14:27)

Fear of the Lord leads to life,
bringing security and protection from harm. (19:23)

Fear of the Lord teaches wisdom... (15:33a)

The path of life leads upward for the wise;
they leave the grave behind. (15:24)

Sensible people keep their eyes glued on wisdom. (17:24a)

A wise person is hungry for knowledge,
while a fool feeds on trash. (15:14)

The wise are known for their understanding... 16:21a)

Wise words are like deep waters;
wisdom flows from the wise like a bubbling brook. (18:4)

Get all the advise and instruction you can,
so you will be wise the rest of your life. (19:20)

People ruin their lives by their own foolishness
and then are angry at the LORD. (19:3)

There is a path before each person that seems right,
but it ends in death. (16:25)

Commit your actions to the LORD,
and your plans will succeed. (16:3)

Those who follow the right path fear the LORD. (14:2)

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