

Ecclesiastes 7 • The Practical Application of Wisdom

Introduction

How do you measure wisdom? Wisdom is not necessarily the same thing as intelligence and other attributes associated with creativity and brain power. Is wisdom proved by credentials or achievements or a minimum score on an IQ test? The biblical definition of wisdom is, believe it or not, extremely measurable both by God and man. The proof is in the teaching of this chapter in which we are presented with the tangible proofs of the existence of biblical wisdom in any given life. These are the visible results of the practical application of biblical wisdom in our life—or the absence of same.

¹A good name is better than a good ointment,
And the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth.
²It is better to go to a house of mourning
Than to go to a house of feasting,
Because that is the end of every man,
And the living takes it to heart.
³Sorrow is better than laughter,
For when a face is sad a heart may be happy.
⁴The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning,
While the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure.
⁵It is better to listen to the rebuke of a wise man
Than for one to listen to the song of fools.
⁶For as the crackling of thorn bushes under a pot,
So is the laughter of the fool;
And this too is futility.
⁷For oppression makes a wise man mad,
And a bribe corrupts the heart.
⁸The end of a matter is better than its beginning;
Patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit.
⁹Do not be eager in your heart to be angry,
For anger resides in the bosom of fools.
¹⁰Do not say, "Why is it that the former days were better than these?"
For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this.
¹¹Wisdom along with an inheritance is good
And an advantage to those who see the sun.
¹²For wisdom is protection just as money is protection,
But the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the lives of its possessors.
¹³Consider the work of God,
For who is able to straighten what He has bent?
¹⁴In the day of prosperity be happy,

[Read v.1-14]

Q: Examples are given to show what specific form the application of biblical wisdom should take in life. List and re-state each characteristic in your own way. Provide a brief explanation of why each particular quality may be important. (Let the group discuss; these are provided to help facilitate discussion.)

1. (v.1) **Maintains a good reputation.** Provides the basis for a personal testimony to others of God's working in one's life.
2. (v.2-4) **Frequent meditation on mortality.** Prevents becoming overly fixated on the things of this life, focused on the eternal life to come.
3. (v.5-6) **Listening to wise rebuke and shunning the mirth of fools.** Rather than being swayed by the temporal ways of this world, seeking to be evermore refined for the kingdom.
4. (v.7) **Avoidance of behaviors producing oppression and injustice (bribery).** True spiritual authority is always tempered with love and mercy and never seeking to elevate one's self at the expense of another.
5. (v.8) **Patience to see things through properly.** Is a model of endurance to do the right thing regardless of the circumstances. This is the practical expression of the presence of faith in action.
6. (v.9) **In control of anger.** Is able to admonish, rebuke, or even chastise another with the appropriate tone for the maximum benefit of all involved.
7. (v.10) **Resisting the urge to look back and live in the past.** Recognizes the need to fix the present in order to assure the future.
8. (v.11-12) **Lives a sanctified (dedicated) life to God's ways.** Not a part-time Christian but wholly devoted to God's path alone.
9. (v.13) **Submits to the will of God.** Not only understands but lives according to the notion that one's knowledge is incomplete and God must be trusted for the whole.
10. (v.14) **Content in all circumstances, recognizing that God is in control.** Resistant to being pulled to extremes, living moderately so as to maintain the proper spiritual balance.

Q: Do these sound like unrealistic, "lofty" goals of wisdom that only a unique knowledge or extraordinary intelligence can possess?

A: No. They all have in common obedience to God's Word and its foremost commands to love God and love our neighbor.

Point: By the examples of its practical application, the definition of biblical wisdom is to live faithfully according to God's Word. Note how there is no insistence that proof of the existence of biblical wisdom is the ability to decipher prophecy, discern difficult mysteries, or speak new revelations. Biblical wisdom is the antithesis of worldly wisdom because it is wholly based on the degree to which one puts God's Word into practice in their life.

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

But in the day of adversity consider—
God has made the one as well as the other
So that man will not discover anything
that will be after him.

For it is written,

*"I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE,
AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE."*

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

¹⁵I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness. ¹⁶Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? ¹⁷Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? ¹⁸It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.

[Read v.15-18]

Q: What is the message of v.15 in the apparent discrepancy between a righteous man and a wicked man as observed here?

A: There is no guarantee in this life that being righteous automatically extends this life and wickedness automatically cuts it short. Final judgment comes after this life, which we must be prepared to acknowledge is not always fair and equitable during its short span.

Q: It's probably easy to envision what it means to be "excessively wicked" (v.17), but how is it possible to be "excessively righteous and...overly wise" (v.16)?

A: Think of the example of the Pharisees in Jesus' time. They had elevated earthly "righteousness" to the point that they added hundreds and thousands of additions to God's Law, what Jesus termed "traditions of men". Their pursuit of "righteousness" became a thing unto itself, its own institution that was worshiped in place of the One True God the original Torah pointed to.

Application: Do you know someone that seems to be more concerned about the rules than the heart? What are some of the cults and false teachings you've observed which in the end replace God with the burden of rules and institutions and traditions?

Q: What is the antidote? What ensures that we maintain the right path to God?

A: According to v.18, the fear of God. To the same degree that we fear God enough to voluntarily refrain from engaging in sin and wickedness, so our fear of Him is greater than the traditions of men that they try to impose on us.

¹⁹Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. ²⁰Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins. ²¹Also, do not take seriously all words which are spoken, so that you will not hear your servant cursing you. ²²For you also have realized that you likewise have many times cursed others.

[Read v.19-22]

Q: What is the practical meaning of v.19 that biblical wisdom makes one stronger “that ten rulers”?

A: Multiple rulers are often a better assurance of consistent justice than a single ruler prone to becoming the worst kind of dictator. It’s an elegant way of stating that biblical wisdom causes its possessor to always treat others as God would and is therefore in sync with God’s ways.

Q: How does this thought naturally extend into v.20 that no righteous man is ever perfect?

A: If one became “overly righteous” they would eventually render bad deeds according to their over-realized ideals. Righteousness is not a one-time anointing but a continual process to be worked through and striven for and, as necessary, course corrections administered.

Q. Why shouldn’t the wise man be so critical of what is spoken about him?

A: Beside being a variation of “The Golden Rule” – “Do to others as you would have them do to you”—it’s a practical protection against elevating one’s self to a more exalted position of authority than is otherwise healthy.

Q: What are these 3 traits attempting to teach concerning the practical application of wisdom?

A: That as humans prone to mistakes and improper influences, we constantly have to be on our guard to maintain a right relationship with both God and man.

²³I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, “I will be wise,” but it was far from me. ²⁴What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it? ²⁵I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness. ²⁶And I discovered more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains. One who is pleasing to God will escape from her, but the sinner will be captured by her.

[Read v.23-26]

Q: Is the Preacher of Ecclesiastes now making an about face and reversing his previous statements concerning the application of biblical wisdom?

A: He is **NOT** talking about biblical wisdom here; he is now talking about the effects of pursuing wisdom on one’s own apart from God. This is a testimony of the results of pursuing wisdom solely according to the flesh and one’s own strength. This is most evident in v.25 by his statement, “I directed my mind to know, to investigate and to seek”.

Q: To what kind of deception or weakness does such a pursuit open up to such a person seeking on their own apart from God?

A: It leads to unfaithfulness and deception as portrayed by “the woman whose heart is snares and nets, whose hands are chains.” She can be avoided only while maintaining the priority of a right and obedient relationship to God. Otherwise, she devours the seeker operating in their own strength.

Point: Regardless of one’s personal strength and personal depth of knowledge, apart from God they lead to deception and unfaithfulness. This is a further revelation of the true meaning of biblical wisdom, that it is evidenced by the quality of our faithfulness and devotion not just to God’s ways, but to God personally.

²⁷“Behold, I have discovered this,” says the Preacher, “adding one thing to another to find an explanation, ²⁸which I am still seeking but have not found. I have found one man among a thousand, but I have not found a woman among all these. ²⁹Behold, I have found only this, that God made men upright, but they have sought out many devices.”

[Read v.27-29]

Q: Is Solomon stating that all women are evil and incapable of living a life that applies the biblical definition of wisdom as discussed to this point?

A: Take note that this paragraph is a direct quote of Solomon’s words, a statement directly uttered by him about himself. This is actually a closing indictment of his own failure to walk entirely according to God’s ways. (Remember he had 300 wives and 700 concubines, totaling 1,000 women.) His statement is probably more along the lines, “I’ve never known any woman who returned to God after engaging in unfaithfulness, and so few men as to almost be zero.” It’s a very strong statement of the power of unfaithfulness to so strongly maintain its hold that very few escape and return from it.

Q: How is Solomon’s final statement in v.29 an indictment of his own life?

A: The capability to obey and follow God is present in man, but he often makes a contrary choice to do otherwise. It’s what we know Solomon to have done himself.

For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.

1 Kings 11:4

Q: What does this reveal about the origin of biblical wisdom? Is it only possible as the result of a special gift from God?

A: Biblical wisdom is, in reality, the result of our choice as to whether or not to follow God’s will and ways. Although Solomon was given a special dispensation of wisdom like no other, in the end it was his choice of whether or not to maintain it through a right relationship with God that cost him everything.

Overall Application

What choices have you made/do you make/are now before you, the decision of which will prove to be the application of biblical wisdom or the pursuit of self?