

The Heart That Has Understanding

Proverbs 15:14

“The heart of him that hath understanding seeks knowledge: but the mouth of fools feeds on foolishness.” - Proverbs 15:14 (Cf. ver. 21; 18:15).

Just by way of introduction, I want to notice that here, as well as a number of other passages in Proverbs, Solomon is speaking in an editorial fashion. In many places it is in a more 1st personal manner, as in a father to a son. But here he speaks in a manner suggestive almost of a sermonic discourse. The first 14 verses of chapter 15 have been in much the same fashion. Prior to that there was a lot of discourse in the same fashion that we find here, an editorial commentary on what is wise versus what is foolish, how the two character qualities show themselves, etc.

He has already developed his use of the mechanisms that he speaks of here prior to this in the book.

1. He speaks of the heart of the wise man with the implication that the heart of the fool is basic opposite to what he says. “Heart”, as he has said a number of times earlier, speaks of the fullness of man’s being, his mind, his will, his emotions, even the way his thinking processes conduct themselves.
2. Here, defines the wise man as one who has “understanding” and seeks “knowledge”.
 - We’ve noted before that “understanding” refers to the results of the consideration and pondering of the facts and world around him. As a result of that thoughtful thinking, he gains what can be called an “understanding” of whatever it was that he was pondering. As an illustration, we might use a theological doctrine; it can be presented in the Scripture or, we might say, by a preacher or teacher, and not be very clear to us. However, if we consider, ponder or think about it. It may be that we will come to “understand” it or, in Solomon’s word here, we come to an “understanding” of the matter.
 - “Knowledge” is used quite a number of times in the OT and usually speaks, more or less, of the ability to figure out how to accomplish a difficult or complicated thing.
3. “Seek” is a word with many facets. It can mean anything from requiring to requesting, perhaps enquiring, looking for, at times it is given as besought. In the simplest sense it can refer to asking, begging, etc.
 - The concept here is that the wise man, the one who has understanding, namely, who knows what is necessary to come to grips with a thing and to figure out how it works, is one who, then,

because of that understanding, does what is necessary to gain whatever knowledge is necessary to accomplish the goal that he has in view.

Of course, we are talking about godly matters here. We are not talking about this “wise” man figuring out how to go after some wicked goal.

“...but the mouth of fools feeds on foolishness.” (14b)

We can’t help but notice the contrastive conjunction standing at the beginning of this phrase... “But”. This sets the beginning of the statement over against the one at the end. Given the content at the beginning of the verse, we must see that the content at the end of the verse isn’t talking about the noise and yakking of the fool at a party or a bar.

We’ve talked a number of times in other documents, about just what a “fool” refers to. He is a stupid fellow, a dullard, a simpleton, even an arrogant one. This mental state, so Solomon has, in other places, is implied to be a state that is not entirely natural. Some people are not by nature the most intelligent people around. However, there are many who have the tools to have understanding, yet, they continue on the state of lacking any wisdom and do so, we might thus see, in a deliberate, choosing manner.

These are the ones Solomon has in view here. He is not speaking of the one who don’t have the tools needful to understand. He is speaking of the ones who are perhaps already a step or two on the way, but who decide to stay where they are. Perhaps it is because they don’t want to exert the effort or energy pursuing whatever aspect of knowledge is in view. Perhaps they are consumed with the pursuit of some other matter. Or, perhaps, they are convinced of another “truth” and that conviction causes or drives them to reject anything they don’t agree with.

Every time I read this verse I think of a couple things:

1. I think of the Atheist. I read their writings from time to time and I have yet to read one that is at all willing to honestly and openly think through the truth of the Scripture. At some time in the past, they made a choice for their point of view and have now become that this choice is a function of being the smartest around. They know better than any one and any other opinion. Don’t even bother speaking with them about any opposite or contrasting idea. I have and the result is mockery and ridicule.
2. The same basic things go for many Christians who are one of the difficult to understand doctrinal ideas. I think here of the truths put forth as a result of the Reformation. There are those on both sides of the particular idea and neither are willing to give even to the smallest degree. It is as if they view such consideration as dishonoring to God.
3. I think also of the various and sundry “religious” flavors there are around. Be they aspects of Christianity, or religious groups putting forth beliefs that resemble it. We can even suggest that any of the other

world religions have those who act in this fashion also. I think of the many who have decided that blowing themselves up in order to kill some people who aren't Muslim in this regard. For many of them (or pretty much the largest part of the other world's religions) there is absolutely so possibility that any part of their thinking, let alone the entire faith is rooted in falsehood.

Now, I understand that this can sound terribly harsh and unfeeling. But I remember the time before I came to Christ. My mother had come to Christ some months before and, being in the Air Force, I was housed on a floor surround on both sides (actually one side and across the hall) by believers who told me the truths of the Gospel. I would read my mother's frequent letters (containing the Gospel truth) as quickly as I could through them without getting nothing personal out of them and then toss the letter in the trash. I would listen to the witness of the Christians living near me ONLY as long was absolutely necessary (one was very, very big and I didn't want to offend them). The truth at that time was that I was convinced that I knew as much about "religion" as I needed to know. Being an intelligent fellow, I didn't NEED to learn any more. In the years and decades since I came to know the mercy and grace of my God, I have come to see just how hard hearted (and thick of skull) I really was; as well as how desperately unknowing of that truth I was. I was a fool and I can truthfully say that I wore interested in hearing my own voice (read... my own opinion and perception of reality) than anyone else could POSSIBLY tell me. It just wasn't possible that I could be wrong about these matters. That is, until the day that God broke my heart and will by means of the death of a friend and the power of His Spirit.

And so, by way of interpretation; "The man of understanding," in other words, the enlightened man, is here again contrasted with "the fool" of every class and degree - the godless one. The *heart* of the first having already received divine truth, is bent upon acquiring more and more of that best knowledge. While the other, with no "heart" for anything, gratifies a brutish appetite by feeding his mind upon what is purely "of the earth earthy." The proverb, in a sense secondary to the religious one, may be understood of a difference of tastes, that for what is high-toned and improving, and that for what is frivolous and low.

Interestingly, there are illustrations that are useful to us here:

- David, as we gather plainly from his Psalms, was always intent on adding to his stores of sacred knowledge.
- Solomon in his prayer sought wisdom from above, and by diligent application became conversant with all sorts of useful learning.
- The Queen of Sheba showed an understanding heart in her eagerness to gain information which she might turn to account for the benefit of her subjects.
- Nicodemus, and Mary of Bethany, and the Bereans, and the Ethiopian, were all wise enough to be teachable, and so obtained the precious knowledge they sought.

- The above has in contrast to their understanding the Athenians, with their ears only open to gossip, lost their opportunity of being made “wise unto salvation.”

By way of application we need to observe how widely different are the tastes of men, even men of equal standing and education! A grand generic contrast at once makes itself seen between those renewed by grace, and those who (though regenerated in baptism) still “mind earthly things.” Sin is the element of the one, just as holiness is of the other class, and each breathes most freely in its own element, and feeds upon that which is adapted to its own nature. So you will find, here, a hungering and thirsting after all good, pure, useful, elevating knowledge, divine and human. While there, the appetite is keen after knowledge only at the best “earthy,” and much of it not even useful in any way, but frivolous, sensational, debasing. Men betray their tastes by the books they read, the company they keep, the conversation they enjoy. To God and themselves their thoughts are known, and the bent of the thoughts is the index of the character. Let me try myself, then, by this criterion, with a view to my prospects in the future. For heaven will satisfy those only who have acquired a taste for heavenly things. It will not be changed to suit me; therefore I must be made meet for it. Those two divisions will outlive the world:

- The men of understanding and the fools. With which of these will my lot be bound up? We should ask ourselves:

According as my heart now seeks knowledge or my mouth feeds on foolishness, so must my final portion be.
