

Fearing and Departing from Evil

Proverbs 14:16

“A wise man fears, and departs from evil: but the fool rages and is confident.” - Proverbs 14:16 (Cf. 12:15; 22:3).

Once again we see Solomon setting those whom are “wise” over against those whom he defines as “fools”. Here he speaks of the characteristics of these two groups in their general manifestation of conduct in life. We should note that he does not tie all groups or identify, say, the rich to the wise or the poor to what he identifies as foolish. They to groups are NOT to regarded as the same. “Rich does NOT equal wise and poor does NOT equal fool.

There are many church leaders who would like us to think somewhere along the line of “... if you trust the Lord and ask Him (believing of course) He will absolutely give you what you ask for” and they claim that God is in the business of filling our lives with good things if we will but ask in faith. to try to support this they appeal to many passages of Scripture that, if understood in their twisted fashion, might seem to support this awful idea. Of course, for many of these false teachers there is a catch. You have to demonstrate you “faith” and you can do so by sending them money.

The problems with this are several and severe. Just to name one it seems to be, at least in part, a misunderstanding of this passage and others like it. Solomon is NOT tying the idea of wisdom to the actions of the individual and NOT to the reaping of some kind of material gain. It is simply saying what Solomon has sad quite a number of times before - that is that the wise ACT like they possess real wisdom and the foolish ACT like the fools that they indeed are.

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First, we want to notice that Solomon is, once again saying that those who “fear”, as in fearing the Lord, act in concert with that fear. Namely, in this verse, they depart from evil. The word “fear” as we have noticed before, refers to the generic fear that we all experience from time to time. But when it is used in connection with our relationship with the Lord, either actually possessed or which a writer is encouraging his readers to embrace or follow after, it is speaking of an honoring or giving to God and His Word that place in our lives that enables God to rule over and to direct our path of Life and direct our choices.

Solomon is making what, upon reflection on our part, is a very logical and easy to understand point, given that he is speaking to an audience that professed to know the living God. If a man, knowing the Lord, is one who puts that fear into action as a demonstration of the wisdom accrued as a believer who has walked with God.

Departing from evil is a concept that appears frequently in the OT, particularly in the Wisdom literature. Quite naturally, “departing from” speaks of a change of direction or a turn in ones’ path. In certain contexts, it can speak of standing away from, abandoning or desisting from a practice. In this case that context is the practicing of evil, to whatever extent happens to be in mind.

The wise man, Solomon says here, is one who understands what godliness is. BTW, he says this by implication because he clearly says that this wise man departs from evil. He wouldn’t depart from it if he did not know that godliness and obedience to God demanded it. This is NOT to say that once he realizes the need to depart from it and walk in obedience he never sins or indulges in evil again, but merely that he sees the need and requirement that he do so, and then pursues and submits to that requirement. He does this because he knows the holy God of heaven and “fears” or sees his responsibility to be holy or (as the word literally means in Hebrew) separate from worldly things.

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The idea we’ve talked about it underscored and made more clear by the second part of the verse. As we have noted before, this second phrase is joined with the first by what is called a “contrastive conjunction”, namely the word “but” which sets this second phrase against or in contrast with the first. Whereas the wise man fears God as well as the effect of evil; the fool, on the other hand has virtually the opposite reaction.

- The implication here is that the fool do NOT fear God or any effect that it might have in his (or her) life.
- The implication is, as well, that wickedness has had and is having, a distinct effect on this fool. It is causing him (not to say that he bears no responsibility for his actions) to demonstrate that foolishness in a number of wicked ways.

The text mentions two of them:

First, he “rages” meaning that he expresses anger in a raging sense. The implication is that of an intense anger, not merely irritation. It does not indicate just what the one in view gets angry about. It seems perhaps that this anger is intended to be understood it is not so much the cause as the fact of the quick demonstration that Solomon sees as the demonstration of the foolishness (not to mention the lack of a fear of God) that he speaks of.

Secondly, Solomon says that this foolish one is “confident”. It is interesting that this confidence is virtually joined with the rage mentioned first. This second idea is joined to the first with what is called a “coordinating” conjunction. Unlike what we said before, there is no contrast between the two, rather a, at least somewhat complimentary joining; that is the conjunction suggests that the two ideas are related in some similar fashion.

The “raging” or anger we have mentioned is somehow undergirded by the self-confidence that Solomon mentions after. The word used in the Hebrew

literally speaks of something that “falls or is falling on the ground”. Interestingly, the idea is that of surely proceeding toward a destination. Of course, in our context, the surety that underlies the progressing toward a destination lies in self, not in, as the literal meaning of the word implies, not in gravity. We might conclude that the subtle implication in this use of the word is that there is really an unsureness in the confidence of the one in view. I’m fairly certain that there is literally NOT any place in the entirety of the Bible where we are exhorted to place our confidence in ourselves. the place for our confidence is in our Lord and in His Word.

Solomon is saying that it is the fool who places confidence on his own abilities and wisdom. This is not to say that we can even be sure of our own knowledge or abilities; just we need to take care that this is not undue or presumptuous confidence that essentially takes the place our crying out to God in a given situation. What is interesting here, as well, is that “raging” seems to be function of false or inappropriate self-confidence he is speaking of. The um of this aspect of the verse is that they are both the expression of the foolishness that seems to being drawn attention to in contrast to the wisdom in the first phrase.

Just to summarize our interpretation in the verse - A wise man, through fear of God and of the consequences of a false step, will start back when advised of danger, or return from a perilous course on which he may have entered. The fool, on the other hand, will betray his folly by boldly rushing on in headlong self-sufficiency, and even upbraiding those who would keep him back from ruin.

The are several Biblical illustrations that can drive our point home:

- Lot showed wisdom at last in escaping from the judgment which his sons-in-law, seeing no signs of it, laughed to scorn.
- Goliath raged and was confident, while rushing on to his own destruction.
- Rehoboam acted the part of a madman when, in his arrogance, despising wise counsels, he threatened those he should have conciliated.
- Naaman began by acting foolishly when he was ready to turn away from Jordan in a rage, but, listening to counsel, proved himself wise in the end. Sennacherib, like a madman, defying the God of Israel, precipitated his own downfall.
- The obstinate incredulity of Gedaliah, in the teeth of warning, made it impossible to save him from assassination (Jer. 40; 41).
- How earnestly do we read of Peter, taught by sad experience, inculcate in his old age the wisdom of holy fear (1 Pet. 1:17; 5:5, etc.)!

Application.—Self-confidence imposes upon the world. By arrogant impetuosity men have pushed their way to high places. But the proportion of those who thus succeed is probably very small compared with those who fail. And in many instances it would be found, where the success appeared due to presumption, that there was more prudence and caution and management in the

background than was acknowledged. At any rate, it may be laid down as a rule that, in temporal matters, he will be most prosperous who is least rash, who weighs matters instead of deciding off-hand, is willing to hear opinions, and to retrace a false step if made. Whereas, he who resents the laws of prudence, and would rather be wrong in his own way than right in another's, will make many a grave mistake. Still more is this true with regard to the things eternal. A holy dread of displeasing God or disobeying His Law, and of the consequences of sin,—this is wisdom. And the fruit of this will be a prayerful spirit of dependence upon God for direction, a humble self-mistrust, a modest deference to the wisdom and experience of those who are competent and authorized to teach. In this spirit evil will be escaped and salvation wrought out (Phil. 2:12). While the heady and high-minded, giving the reins to his passions, rejecting counsel, and persisting in his own way, will confess as well as prove himself a fool at last. For “he who lives without fear shall die without hope.”