

Be Wise In Thy Latter End

Proverbs 19:20

*“Hear counsel, and receive instruction,
that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.” – Proverbs 19:20
(Cp. 12:15).*

This is a good and wise bit of advice that we find quite often in the Bible, particularly in the wisdom literature, that is, for men to take godly counsel in, and not just in their ears, in order that they might gain good and profitable benefit during their lives. That benefit is here spoken of as persisting all the way to the very end of their lives (the “latter end”).

This section (16-23) actually lays out several essential features of what Solomon, in several places, describes as “the good life”.

- Listening to instruction (v16. 20)
- Being kind to the poor (v17)
- Being involved in one’s children’s lives and disciplining them (v18)
- Avoiding friendships with those who lack self-control (v19)
- Acknowledging the Rulership of God (v21)
- Understanding that love and integrity are what bring real happiness (v22)
- Building and walking in the fear of the Lord (v23)

Solomon speaks, quite often about the “good life” and what makes that kind of life up. In light with what we have already said, it is interesting to note that Solomon connects listening to counsel and accepting discipline to the wisdom that the Word has to offer for the rest of “your days” or the rest of life.

How many times, throughout our lives, have we heard this same “kind” of direction, from parents, Pastors, and others that have input into our walk and living. “You’ve got to pay attention, you’ve got to listen, to amount to anything, you’ve got to pay attention and listen up! Though they, many times (but surely not always) have a kind of, skewed reason for the demand, the content is essentially the same. In any kind of leadership (or “follow-ship”) situation, the listening and following is an essential part of the equation.

This is why Solomon ties listening to counsel, along with “accepting discipline”. I can remember numerous times when I was a child and one or the other of my parents had to resort to some manner of discipline to “coach” me to accept what was necessary.

- For instance, I can remember an occasion at the dinner table when we were having one of my father’s favorite Vegetables, Brussels Sprouts, believe it or not. I refused to eat my portion, despite a significant amount of coaxing from both mom and dad. Finally,

my mother told me that if I did not eat, the sprouts would be my breakfast the next morning! I guess you can out how event proceeded from there!

- I can also remember a time when my Father caught me building a little cabin in the middle of the living room floor. I didn't see anything wrong with doing it, but my father (understandably from a more recent point of view) to issue with the wooden matches I was doing it with. I managed to beat him up the stairs, but what followed up there could, easily, be considered discipline.
- I remember when I was in training in the Air Force and had fallen down in the performance of some of my physical training. The Tech Sergeant that supervised our little squad became convinced that I was not giving it my best and he decided that I needed a bit of a lesson to teach me the importance of giving my best effort. What went on next was, in the bad heat of San Antonio, Texas learning that disciplinary lesson was, how shall we say, somewhat less than easy and definitely not enjoyable.

There were these and quite a number of other instances of needed discipline in my life. Suffice it to say that, what was necessary here and in the passages in the Bible that tell us, as this one does, to listen to counsel and to accept discipline, is to learn from what goes on life and from those whom God has put into our path and as a part of our surroundings. That is the instruction from Solomon, which he gives us time and time again.

Just by way of a summary of interpretation, we note that in ver. 18, the duty of parents to chasten a son betimes is set forth. Here, the duty of a son to submit to parental discipline, and imbibe in early years that counsel and instruction which shall make him wise in his future, both for this life and the next. This proverb is the summing up of much that has gone before.

There are a number of illustrations that we can use to underscore what is being said here:

1. Daniel is an example of a youth not only submitting to be taught and governed, but disciplining himself, and through human and divine counsel and instruction becoming competent to govern a hundred and twenty provinces, and wise with that wisdom which should enable him to stand in his lot at the end of the days (Dan. 12:13).
2. What a rich harvest resulted from Timothy's early attention to his mother's teaching, so that he was found meet to bear rule in the Church, and "wise unto salvation"!
3. But Rehoboam and Amaziah, through not heeding advice, spoilt their prospects in the future. What a pitiable spectacle was Rehoboam, at the age of forty, with no more wisdom or force of character than a boy (2 Chron. 13:7), spite of all the counsel and instruction offered him!

4. How little deserving of respect was that “old prophet,” who, employing his wits and his experience to cajole a younger prophet, stored up bitter remorse for his future (1 Kings 13)!

It is easy to apply this lesson to all, but I suspect this lesson is primarily for the young, or for the parents who are raising the young. To them it is of unspeakable importance to not only be teaching, but to be willing to be taught, reproved, disciplined, while the character is plastic and capable of being molded on a right pattern. But youth is apt to resent correction, to weary of instruction, and to despise the counsels of experience. Unless, however, this tendency be overcome at necessary times, the whole future of the youngster must suffer. An unprofitable life, an ill-esteemed old age, both follow after, as a rule to early days misspent. Yet, there have been instances of time redeemed, and seed late sown yielding a surprising harvest - enough to encourage the penitent, but not the careless. Most worthy to be admired and imitated, however, is the career of the wise man, commencing with “the day of small things,” then, like a river augmented increasingly by its tributaries, acquiring more and more the dignity of knowledge and experience, benefiting others in its course, and admired of men, till it terminates upon earth, only to expand in infinite grandeur beyond this earth. Who would not desire so to live as to have wisdom to impart to others, and wisdom wherewith to meet the tremendous crisis? Most men die as they live. Be it mine so to cultivate wisdom, that I may be found wise, not a fool, at my end (Jer. 17:11)!