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The Fool

Proverbs 15 v 1-21

Introduction

Last time I preached here I looked at a passage in Ecclesiastes which talked about the aging process. This time I've been given the title of The Fool. Maybe there's a reason for that.

Context

Proverbs is a funny book. It's not about the law, or prophecy, and it's not about God's promises. Rather it's about living a good life in God's world. It's not about certainties but probabilities. Look at the first verse. We read that a gentle answer turns away wrath. That's often true, but not all the time. Sometimes, no matter how gently we speak, the response can still be violent.

But in general the saying is true. And so with most of these verses. We have here a collection of advice from one who has lived and learned and wants to pass that advice on. He wants the reader to be wise, not to be a fool. And so he uses this figure of a fool to show all the ways we can go wrong in life.

I was wondering what sort of advice I'd write down for my daughter if I wrote my own book of proverbs. Perhaps something like the following:

The fool randomly drills holes in his bedroom floor,

While the wise checks where the hot water pipes are first, thus avoiding an indoor fountain.

Or maybe something like:

The wise man checks he has only his own keys before going on a long journey,

But the fool takes his wife's keys as well, and brings trouble on his head..

Maybe these are a bit specific. Let's look at what this passage in Proverbs tells us about the fool.

The Loose Tongue

Notice that quite a few of these proverbs talk about the tongue, the lips or the mouth. Words are the main way we communicate and one of the main ways we can show a lack of wisdom. James talks about the tongue being a small part of the body that makes great boasts. Its use can have big consequences, and dangerous ones:

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

[James 3 v 5-6]

If that was true in James' day, it's even more true now. Where once we could speak to a single person or a crowd of 10, 100 or a thousand, we can now type out a sentence that might be seen by millions. And not in a matter of years but in seconds. It can make us famous or infamous. Restraint is something that has never been more needed and yet seems to be missing altogether.

How then should a believer use their tongue?

A gentle answer turns away wrath,

but a harsh word stirs up anger.

[Proverbs 15 v 1]

You know, I've seen a lot of people in the media recently claim to be Christians, and yet what comes from their mouths are harsh words. They are words that stir up anger, that cause division and hatred. Jesus said you would be able to tell true Christians from false ones by their fruit. Have you ever looked at the fruit of the Spirit? You might imagine that the power of the third person of the Godhead living within you might manifest in great works of strength, of intellect, of power. And yet the list we are given includes patience, kindness, goodness and gentleness.

How do we deal with conflict in our lives? By winning the argument? By brow-beating our opponent? By pulling rank? No, by a gentle answer, that turns away wrath.

The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge,

but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.

[Proverbs 15 v 2]

This shouldn't be a problem in the modern age, should it? We have the knowledge of the world at our fingertips. Whether we want to find out the property of neutrinos, how mirrors work, or what a cashew looks like when it's growing, it's just a few seconds away. And yet the world seems to be full of those who gush folly.

One of my hobbies is watching the ramblings of people on YouTube who believe the world is flat, and not a globe. It's amazing that with so much information at hand, so many people can be so incredibly wrong. And yet I know I'm guilty of speaking before finding out. And when I go to find out and realise I was wrong I have to retract what I said. How much better to only speak when we know the truth of what we're saying.

The soothing tongue is a tree of life,

but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.

[Proverbs 15 v 4]

Have you ever played Minecraft? It was a hugely popular game, where you could create worlds, build houses, dig tunnels and be really creative. One thing that made it popular was that you could invite friends to join you in your world. They could wander about and see the things you had built, and maybe build some interesting structures themselves.

If you had the wrong type of friend, though, it could be disastrous. Show them your lovingly created building and they'll burn it to the ground.

Minecraft basically gives you tools to build up and to destroy. And the tongue is such a tool. We can speak words of encouragement and comfort. Or we can speak words that cut and hurt. I'm sure we were all taught that saying when we were young: "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me". But it's not true. Words can hurt. They can damage. They can crush.

What sort of words are we speaking day by day? Do they reflect the mind of Christ? Or do they cut, bruise and crush?

Correction

And with that in mind, what if I came to you and pointed out that something you said was hurtful - how would you respond? We don't like being corrected, do we? Well neither does the fool:

> *A fool spurns a parent's discipline,*
>
> *but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.*
>
> *[Proverbs 15 v 5]*

The Bible says we all have our gifts, and we are all made differently. Some gifts are to be highly prized in the church. Oh, it's easy to hold up great preachers, talented praise leaders, learned leaders. And so we should. But some gifts are less obvious and yet hugely important: the caring welcomer for one: that person who sees someone new come in, and goes and sits with them, introduces themself and gets to know them. The persistent prayer is another: they'll take away a prayer item from Sunday and pray about it all during the week. And another is the loving rebuker. We get plenty of criticism, but it's rare to be lovingly corrected.

So when it does happen we need to be open to correction, to assess what is being said, and be humble enough to admit our mistakes. The fool ignores correction. So much so that it can lead to church discipline:

> *Stern discipline awaits anyone who leaves the path;*
>
> *the one who hates correction will die.*
>
> *[Proverbs 15 v 10]*

The most important thing for someone who leaves the path is to be pointed back to the path. If they refuse to accept they need a change of direction they are lost.

But:

> *Mockers resent correction,*
>
> *so they avoid the wise.*
>
> *[Proverbs 15 v 12]*

We thought in the first section about using our tongues. But we must also be prepared to use our ears, to listen to wise words.

The Heart

The teacher here is not just concerned with the tongue and the ears, but also about the heart. After all, the words we speak are just an outward expression of what is within.

We have the deceitful heart:

The lips of the wise spread knowledge,

but the hearts of fools are not upright.

[Proverbs 15 v 7]

This doesn't seem to fit together at first. Most of the verses give us counter-examples, but these two lines don't seem so related. But if the heart of the fool is not upright, is twisted, then the words that they come out with will likewise be twisted and deceitful, not truth and knowledge.

We have to do a course at work which trains us to spot when someone is trying to scam us. It happens all the time these days: a phone call claiming your insurance has just run out; an email saying your rich relative has left you a fortune; a text saying you need to pay a bill. We're taught to look out for language that doesn't sound right, pressure to do something quickly, or a link to click on that could take you anywhere.

In a similar vein we need to train ourselves to watch out for false words from a deceitful heart. The Bible does warn us about the dangers of the world, but even more it warns us about false teachers within the church.

We also have a happy heart and a hurt heart:

A happy heart makes the face cheerful,

but heartache crushes the spirit.

[Proverbs 15 v 13]

It's uplifting to be among people who are happy, who are joyful in life. But look out for those who are hurting. They need compassion and we need to be able to see it to be able to respond.

We have a discerning heart:

The discerning heart seeks knowledge,

but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly.

[Proverbs 15 v 14]

Are you a discerning eater? Being careful what we eat is important for our health. Eating rubbish is bad for us. It's also true for what we feed ourselves intellectually. Are you feeding on good, solid sources of knowledge? Or are you taking in any old rubbish? Maybe I should stop watching the flat earthers!

And then the cheerful heart:

All the days of the oppressed are wretched,

but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.

[Proverbs 15 v 15]

If you're genuinely oppressed there's not a lot you can do about it, so I don't think this is what we're being told here. I think it's about an attitude. There are those who are never happy with life. They're always being put upon, and nothing is ever fair. They wallow in their martyrdom. It seems that having a positive attitude is much better for you.

But what have I to be positive about? Have you been saved from your sin through faith in the Lord Jesus? Have you had your sins forgiven? Do you know that your destination is heaven? How then can you have anything but a cheerful heart. We should be bursting with gratitude.

The Walk

And finally after tongues, ears and hearts we have our feet. Look at these three verses:

The Lord detests the way of the wicked,

but he loves those who pursue righteousness.

[Proverbs 15 v 9]

The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns,

but the path of the upright is a highway.

[Proverbs 15 v 19]

Folly brings joy to one who has no sense,

but whoever has understanding keeps a straight course.

[Proverbs 15 v 21]

The early Christians were often called followers of "the Way". Jesus called himself "the Way, the Truth and the Life". If life is a journey then it's important for the Christian to be on the right path.

It is said that when people lose their way, they often walk around in circles. We're not very good at walking in a straight line. We need some sort of landmark to aim at. Paul urges to keep our eyes on Jesus: the author and finisher of our faith. He is at the start of the journey and he is at the finish line.

The Lord

And the proverb writer wants us to know that we're not on this journey alone:

The eyes of the Lord are everywhere,

keeping watch on the wicked and the good.

[Proverbs 15 v 3]

Death and Destruction lie open before the Lord—
how much more do human hearts!
[Proverbs 15 v 11]

He sees us. He knows us. And it is in knowing him that we find wisdom:

Better a little with the fear of the Lord
than great wealth with turmoil.
[Proverbs 15 v 16]

The final verse of the chapter confirms this idea, and encourages us to have a proper view of self as we learn more about our God:

Wisdom's instruction is to fear the Lord,
and humility comes before honor.
[Proverbs 15 v 33]

Conclusion

What have we learned? Lots of things, that seems to be the nature of the book of Proverbs. But I think these lessons about the fool should teach us that we need to be careful of the words we speak, be willing to listen to loving correction, have a grateful heart for the salvation that is ours in Christ, keep our eyes on him throughout our walk, and be humble before the mighty Lord.

If you can do all that, I think you'll be all right. Probably.