

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT WISE PEOPLE DO – SOME GENERAL POINTS

*“Of Issachar men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.....”
1 Chronicles 12:32(a) (RSV)*

*Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
² but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
³ He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
Psalm 1:1-3 (ESV)*

*Keep your heart with all vigilance;
for from it flow the springs of life.
Proverbs 4:23 (RSV)*

*³⁰ The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom,
and his tongue speaks justice.
³¹ The law of his God is in his heart;
his steps do not slip.
³² The wicked watches the righteous,
and seeks to slay him.
³³ The Lord will not abandon him to his power,
or let him be condemned when he is brought to trial.
Psalm 37:30-33 (RSV)*

*He who is slow to anger has great understanding,
but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.
Proverbs 14:29 (RSV)*

*He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city.
Proverbs 16:32 (NASB)*

*A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger,
And it is his glory to overlook a transgression.
Proverbs 19:11 (NASB)*

*In everything a prudent man acts with knowledge,
but a fool flaunts his folly.
Proverbs 13:16 (RSV)*

Listen to counsel and accept discipline,

*That you may be wise the rest of your days.
Proverbs 19:20 (NASB)*

*Prepare plans by consultation,
And make war by wise guidance.
Proverbs 20:18 (NASB)*

*The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage,
But everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.
Proverbs 21:5 (NASB)*

¹³ *The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. ¹⁴ For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.*

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NASB)

*for a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again;
but the wicked are overthrown by calamity.
Proverbs 24:16 (RSV)*

*“...and by the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil.”
Proverbs 16:6(b) (RSV)*

²³ *Thus says the Lord:*

*“Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,
Let not the mighty man glory in his might,
Nor let the rich man glory in his riches;
²⁴ But let him who glories glory in this,
That he understands and knows Me,
That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth.
For in these I delight,” says the Lord.
Jeremiah 9:23-24 (NKJV)*

Unlike a fool, a wise person takes God and His future judgment very seriously. Merely *believing* in God does not make us wise. A wise person goes much further than just believing. He fears God and he values and pursues those things that God values. His persistent study of the Bible means that his thoughts, beliefs, attitudes and opinions are continually coming closer into line with God's. He even hates the things that God hates:

⁵ *A righteous man hates falsehood,
but a wicked man acts shamefully and disgracefully.
Proverbs 13:5 (RSV)*

Moreover, a wise person hates evil. And God strongly approves of us for hating it:

*The Lord loves those who hate evil;
he preserves the lives of his saints;
he delivers them from the hand of the wicked.
Psalm 97:10 (RSV)*

A wise person also conducts himself with holiness and sincerity towards other people. He doesn't use the wisdom of this world, i.e. feral cunning or craftiness. He only uses God's wisdom:

¹² Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

2 Corinthians 1:12 (NIV)

Let's now look at some more of the specific things that wise people tend to do or avoid doing:

Wise people live rightly and show their wisdom in their actions, choices and lifestyle

Wisdom is not only displayed in what people *say*. It is mostly seen in what they *do*, and also in what they *don't do*. Our actions speak volumes and clearly reveal what we are and how far we have got in acquiring wisdom. So, a wise person will show it by displaying the fruit of the Holy Spirit in his character, lifestyle, choices and actions. He will live right and do right:

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. ¹⁸And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James 3:13-18(RSV)

Furthermore, the fact that a person fears God, and lives in the right way so as to please Him, leads to a host of different blessings. God rewards the wise and the things that they do also lead to Him showing them His approval and giving them His protection and support:

¹ Praise the Lord!

*Blessed is the man who fears the Lord,
who greatly delights in his commandments!*

*² His descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.*

*³ Wealth and riches are in his house;
and his righteousness endures for ever.*

*⁴ Light rises in the darkness for the upright;
the Lord is gracious, merciful, and righteous.*

*⁵ It is well with the man who deals generously and lends,
who conducts his affairs with justice.*

*⁶ For the righteous will never be moved;
he will be remembered for ever.*

*⁷ He is not afraid of evil tidings;
his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord.*

*⁸ His heart is steady, he will not be afraid,
until he sees his desire on his adversaries.*

*⁹ He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures for ever;
his horn is exalted in honor.*

*¹⁰ The wicked man sees it and is angry;
he gnashes his teeth and melts away;
the desire of the wicked man comes to nought.*

Psalm 112:1-10 (RSV)

he will bless those who fear the LORD,

both small and great.

Psalm 115:13 (RSV)

*Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!*

*²You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.*

Psalm 128:1-2 (ESV)

These blessings do come in this life but, even if they don't all come before we die, then those rewards and blessings will assuredly come at the Judgment Seat of Christ. A wise person is well aware that God rewards and exalts those who live righteously. That awareness is one of the things which motivates wise people to make right choices, avoid sin and do what God wants them to do. All of this underscores the fact that wisdom is primarily expressed through our character and our lifestyle choices, not our intellectual abilities.

Moreover, we can also show wisdom and understanding in the practical things we do, i.e. the skill and expertise we use in our work. A person who is highly skilled and competent in their work as a craftsman is considered wise in God's eyes. We must not make the mistake of thinking that only intellectual types can be considered wise.

If someone you know is not particularly academic or bookish, but they are highly skilled in their practical work and do their tasks with diligence, care and skill, then God would consider them to be wise. At least He would view them as wise in regard to their work, which takes up half of our waking hours.

An example of this was a highly skilled craftsman called Hiram who came from Tyre. King Solomon engaged Hiram to work on the construction of the Temple. He knew how to work with bronze and how to design and make beautiful pieces of equipment and furniture that were needed for the Temple. In fact, this point is so important that God devotes nearly a whole chapter of the Bible in 1 Kings 7 to describing the bronze pieces that Hiram made. This was God's overall view of Hiram:

¹³Now King Solomon sent and brought Hiram from Tyre. ¹⁴He was a widow's son from the tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker in bronze; and he was filled with wisdom and understanding and skill for doing any work in bronze. So he came to King Solomon and performed all his work.

1 Kings 7:13-14 (NASB)

The way that God draws attention to Hiram and classes him as wise ought to encourage anybody whose main skills and abilities are practical rather than academic. In Great Britain there is an attitude of snobbery which causes people to look down on practical or manual work, even if done by craftsmen. That is absolutely not God's view. So, if you have been given mainly practical or craft-related skills then give thanks for them and pursue them. Become as skilled as you possibly can. Then you will be considered wise in God's eyes in the way you do your work, which matters very much to God.

My own Dad was a manual worker all his life, as a farm labourer and then as a coal miner, except for seven years in the army where he was also a truck driver. In every type of work that my Dad did he always excelled. He was graded as a 'first class shot' with a rifle and when he left the army his discharge certificate said he had given 'Exemplary Service'. Also, in his farming work he excelled and when he later worked on his two allotments near our house he did all things well. Everything he grew was large and successful.

He used to teach me things all the time when I worked with him on his allotments. I picked up lots of knowledge just by watching and copying. Even in something as ordinary as shovelling coal there is a

surprising amount of skill involved. My Dad could shovel coal for hours in the mine without tiring. Partly that was due to fitness, but mainly it was because of good technique. He spoke of how to use a shovel with the right movement, posture and rhythm, so as to maximise efficiency.

I say all that just to emphasise how important and valuable practical skills are in God's eyes. He wants all of us to aim to become wise, whatever jobs we may be in. He is not just speaking to those who are in academic professions:

Wise people are careful whom they confide in. They are not quick to trust other people.

Wise people are sensibly slow and cautious before being willing to trust other people. Unwise people tend to assume that everyone is the same as themselves. That is they impute their own character to others. However, their reasons for doing so are very different:

- a) Naive/simple people tend to be sincere and they often make the error of assuming that others are all equally sincere. Thus, they are prone to confiding in others too readily and are excessively open and transparent.
- b) Wicked people, being devious themselves, tend to assume that everybody else is equally devious. So they don't confide. They are cagey and careful.

Thus both groups, the simple and the wicked, make the same assumption, i.e. that other people are like themselves. Either way, it is wrong. A wise person makes neither of the above mistakes. For example, they themselves are sincere, but they have come to realise that probably over 90% of other people are not. Therefore, they have learned from experience not to assume that other people share their own sincerity.

The wicked already know that most other people are not sincere. They've always known that. They weren't under any illusions to begin with. The wise only tend to realise it later in life. Usually it comes from bitter experiences of being let down by other people's unfaithfulness, disloyalty, unreliability and dishonesty.

So, wise people are careful. They pick and choose the people with whom they can speak freely. Even then, they open up slowly, and only do so at all after they have made sure that the other person really is trustworthy. They don't rush in or assume that a person is to be trusted, even if they appear to be genuine. They know that it takes a long time to properly establish what another person really is and that first impressions and appearances can be very deceptive:

The sins of some men are conspicuous, pointing to judgment, but the sins of others appear later.
1 Timothy 5:24 (RSV)

Even after another person's trustworthiness appears to have been tested and established, wise people still disclose sensitive information slowly, and only where it is essential. They only reveal the minimum, rather than saying all they know. They have usually learned this from past experiences of being let down. I myself was let down by one person after another whom I had hastily assumed to be trustworthy. Eventually I learned to be much more cautious, even though I had thought I was being fairly cautious to begin with.

I have had an unusually high exposure to untrustworthy people, because I ran a business and employed a lot of staff, up to 80 at any one time. I therefore encountered more people at close quarters than the average person does. I also got to see them at their worst, i.e. the way they were at work. Therefore my attitude now is that I keep most of my thoughts to myself, especially when I am with people who seem to be eager to know what I'm doing or planning.

You need to be particularly wary of anybody who ever *asks you to confide in them*. Wise, godly, blameless people will not ask you to confide in them, but the wicked frequently do. It's a very bad sign and one that you need to watch out for. You need to see it as your cue to clam up and say nothing more.

Never confide in anybody who *wants* you to do so. That is especially important if they ask you outright. But it is still the case even if they are just hinting that you should confide in them, however subtle their hints may be. That desire, in itself, disqualifies them and should set off an alarm in you.

Trusting other people quickly is not a sign of goodness. It is a sign of your naivety, which is a fault, not a quality. We must not trust anybody until and unless sufficient evidence has been gathered to justify such trust. But that takes a long time. Likewise, when a person does *not* trust other people it is not necessarily a sign that that person is bad. It may actually mean they are being wise.

However, that is not always the case. The wicked are also reluctant to trust people, but not because they are wise. They operate in a quite different way. They are *suspicious* rather than cautious, and for very different reasons. They are suspicious precisely *because* they are wicked themselves and because they fully assume other people to be so as well.

There is even a third group of people who are reluctant to trust others, but they are neither wise nor wicked. They are just naive people who have been damaged by others so many times that they are now wary, like a wild animal is. But they are like that without having worked out why, or having given it any serious thought.

Therefore, observing whether a person is cautious in what they reveal about themselves is a useful litmus test. It can indicate that they are wicked, or it can mean that they are wise. Alternatively it can mean that they are merely a simple/naïve person who has been damaged and wounded. It all depends on their *reasons* and on the way they display their caution.

So, when you come across a person who is unusually slow to trust others, you will have to dig deeper to discover their individual reasons for that wariness. Only then can you assess them correctly and gauge whether they are doing it because they are wise, wicked or just naive but wounded. Your assessment will also be guided by other aspects of their speech, actions and character.

Wise people do not trust others until they have weighed them up properly. The Bible does not tell us to trust people

I was consulted some time ago by a Christian friend who wanted advice. He had gone into business with a man he did not know and had paid a lot of money to him, as well as signing papers redirecting some of his own future income stream to that man. The other man had initially been charming, but once the papers had been signed, he cut my friend off, and removed him from the business. By that stage the other man had got what he wanted, which was the money. It was only at that late stage, when the damage had been done, that my advice was sought. That is often the case.

I said "*..... why did you do it? Why did you trust someone you didn't yet know?*" He replied "*Well, I wanted to be 'Christian' about it and trust people, like the Bible says*". I then said "*Where did you get the idea that the Bible tells us to trust people?*" That question surprised him. He had just assumed that trusting others was a Christian trait and a good quality. He said "*Well, I don't know. It's just what you always hear in church*".

Even as he said it, he suddenly realised for himself that in the whole Bible we are never instructed to trust people that we do not know, or to be quick to trust others in general, even if we do know them. On the contrary, the Bible repeatedly tells us to do the exact opposite. We are told to be cautious, take

our time, and reserve judgment until we know people properly. It particularly warns us about smooth or charming people because they are even more likely to be deceitful and false:

²³ *Like a coating of glaze over earthenware are fervent lips with an evil heart.*
²⁴ *A malicious man disguises himself with his lips, but in his heart he harbours deceit.*
²⁵ *Though his speech is charming, do not believe him, for seven abominations fill his heart.*
²⁶ *His malice may be concealed by deception, but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.*
Proverbs 26:23-26 (NIV)

Although we are not to fear people, we are supposed to be wary of them. Jesus Himself commanded us to be so:

¹⁶ *“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.”* ¹⁷ *But beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues;*

Matthew 10:16-17 (NASB)

Wise people judge other people mainly by their fruit, i.e. what their lives produce, not solely by their words

We are therefore told in the Bible to assess other people by their fruit, i.e. what their lives produce, not only by what they *say*. There is no quick way of measuring fruit. It has to be done over months and even years, not hours or days. Moreover, we are also commanded to check the accuracy of what people teach in church, even if we know them well and even if they are famous. Perhaps the best example of how we should operate is seen in Acts 17:11. It refers to Luke’s assessment of the Christians in Berea.

Luke praises them because when apostle Paul spoke in their church they checked everything he said in the Bible to see if it was correct. They didn’t just accept what he said at face value. Even Paul’s teaching had to be checked out. They were right to do so. That is how we should all be, not only about doctrine and teaching, but about all relationships and transactions. Take plenty of time to assess all other people. Measure their fruit carefully and check the accuracy of their teaching.

You may have heard it said that you should “*think the best of everyone*” and that you should “*trust everyone until they do something to cause you to withdraw your trust*”. That is the wrong kind of default setting. We should in fact do the opposite. We should assume that people are *not* to be trusted until they do *a series of things*, not just one thing, which prove that they can be trusted.

The policy of assuming that every new person we meet is trustworthy, until they are proved not to be, possibly comes from misapplying a valid idea. That is that we should assume that people are *likeable* and *friendly* until they are proved not to be.

That is an entirely different assumption, and is both reasonable and helpful. It will assist us in forming friendships because if we assume that people are not going to be friendly then we will automatically be unfriendly to them, and vice versa. So, that is a quite separate, and very different, policy from the one I am advocating. Besides, the fact is that most people, *are* likeable and friendly, whereas most people are certainly not trustworthy. Thus, it is commonplace for a person to be entirely likeable, but still not to be trustworthy.

These are two entirely different concepts that we are speaking about here. We must never equate them, or mistake one for the other. If we do we will go very wrong. I have often considered people very likeable, for example at job interviews, and even afterwards when they worked for me. Yet they were anything but trustworthy.

We should imitate Jesus' approach when He was dealing with people. He had infinite discernment and could see what was in men's hearts. He knew whether they were true or false, sincere or insincere. In this next passage Jesus is questioned by a group of Pharisees. They were respectable and scholarly men who occupied senior positions in the community. Yet, despite all that, Jesus did not trust this delegation that had been sent to question Him. He knew that they had malice in their hearts and that their real motive was just to trip Him up and to get Him into trouble:

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to ¹⁹Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰ And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" ²¹ They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." ²² When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

Matthew 22:15-22(ESV)

One of the ways that Jesus was able to discern the falseness of this particular group of Pharisees was that they were *flattering* Him. We must always be especially wary of anyone who flatters us. If they really thought that He was "true" and that He "teach(es) the way of God truthfully....." then why were they disagreeing with Him and trying to catch Him out? Their own words proved their falseness. At any rate, the point is that Jesus did not trust them. Therefore He would not give them a full answer. He cleverly dodged their trick question.

We will not have the same perfect discernment that Jesus had and we certainly don't have His cleverness and His ability to think instantly of the ideal answer to give to every trick question. However, we can seek to move in that direction. We must therefore begin to watch out for falseness in others. And we must not trust anybody with our innermost thoughts and plans until it has been conclusively proved, over a long period of time, that they can be trusted.

In this next passage we see Jesus again refusing to answer what sounds like a reasonable question. It came from a group of the Chief Priests, Scribes and Elders. They were the senior religious leaders of that time. They asked Jesus by what authority He was doing the miracles. Jesus could have just answered them, but He chose instead to ask them a question first. He asked them to tell Him whether the baptism of John the Baptist was from God or just John's own idea. Jesus already knew that they did not accept John, or his teaching about repentance, and He wanted to expose that:

²⁷And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, ²⁸and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" ²⁹Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. ³⁰Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me." ³¹And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ³²But shall we say, 'From man?'--they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. ³³So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Mark 11:27-33 (ESV)

If the Jewish religious leaders in this passage had chosen to answer Jesus truthfully, then He would have given them an answer to their question. But they didn't, so He didn't answer them. In the same

way we need to test other people and find out whether they are sincere, genuine, honest, real etc before we tell them anything about our thoughts and plans. What Jesus did that day was wise and to have done otherwise may not have been.

God promises to give us wisdom, but only if we really want it very strongly

God wants us to pursue wisdom very earnestly, not just half-heartedly:

*Apply your mind to instruction and
your ear to words of knowledge.*

Proverbs 23:12 (RSV)

*Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom,
instruction, and understanding.*

Proverbs 23:23 (RSV)

*Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise,
and apply your mind to my knowledge;*

Proverbs 22:17 (RSV)

*The mind of him who has understanding seeks knowledge,
but the mouths of fools feed on folly.*

Proverbs 15:14 (RSV)

Wisdom cannot be gained easily or quickly. It comes slowly, and only to those who want it badly enough to work hard for it and to pay whatever price is needed to get it. That price is paid in terms of continued effort, diligence, obedience and persistence. Only a person who really wants it would be willing to pay such a high price, and to keep on paying it for long enough. Therefore, decide now to become such a person. Start to value wisdom that highly and to seek for it that fervently:

¹*My son, if you receive my words
and treasure up my commandments with you,
²making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
³yes, if you cry out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
⁴if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures;
⁵then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.*

Proverbs 2:1-5 (RSV)

We also need to ask God directly for the understanding that we will need if we are to become able to do his will and abide by His Word. Don't just wait passively for such understanding to materialise of its own accord. Seek for it actively and also ask God for it persistently:

*Give me understanding, that I may keep thy law
and observe it with my whole heart.*

Psalms 119:34 (RSV)

Although there is a very clear need for us to make the effort to seek for knowledge and understanding of God's Word and of His will, there is also a need for us to ask Him to help us in that. So, although it is our own duty to incline our own hearts towards God's Word, there is also a valid place for praying that God will help us to incline our hearts.

Likewise, you have a duty to turn your own eyes away from vanities, i.e. useless, fruitless things which lead a person astray. Yet, we can and should also ask God to help us turn our eyes away from such vanities. The responsibility is not entirely ours. Neither is it entirely up to God to achieve these changes in us. It involves willing cooperation between a sincere and repentant disciple, who truly wants to change, and a loving God who earnestly wants to help us to change. Here is the Psalmist asking for God's help in this area:

³⁶ *Incline my heart to thy testimonies,
and not to gain!*

³⁷ *Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
and give me life in thy ways.*

Psalm 119:36-37 (RSV)

Wise people do more than just listen. They also obey God's Word and put it into practice in their lives

It is not enough just to read God's Word as a purely academic exercise. We need to be determined to obey it by putting it into practice in our daily lives and actually doing the things that we are commanded to do:

Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.

Hosea 14:9 (RSV)

⁵*Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'*
⁷*For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day?*

Deuteronomy 4:5-8 (RSV)

We must be determined to continue to abide by, and keep on abiding by, God's Word and the lessons which He teaches us. We must keep these things in mind and continually remind ourselves, and our children, of what God has said and done:

"Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—

Deuteronomy 4:9 (RSV)

Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you this day, that it may go well with you, and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the LORD your God gives you for ever."

Deuteronomy 4:40 (RSV)

Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their children for ever!

Deuteronomy 5: 29 (RSV)

³²*You shall be careful to do therefore as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. ³³You shall walk in all the way which the LORD your God*

has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land which you shall possess.

Deuteronomy: 5: 32-33 (RSV)

⁵*Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you. ⁶So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him.*

Deuteronomy: 8:5-6 (RSV)

¹¹*“Take heed lest you forget the LORD your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day: ¹²lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage,*

Deuteronomy: 8:11-14 (RSV)

¹²*“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I command you this day for your good?*

Deuteronomy: 10: 12-13 (RSV)

Remember Jesus’ sobering words when speaking of those who claim to be His followers but who do not obey what He says:

²¹ *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. ²² Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ ²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’*

Matthew 7:21-23 (NASB)

The most alarming feature of what Jesus said above was that these people look and sound like followers of His. Indeed, they look and sound very impressive. Some even appear to have spectacular ministries. Yet Jesus still rejects them and states that He *never* knew them. That must imply that they were never real Christians at any point, despite all appearances. That has to cause us to stop and ask ourselves whether we are truly sincere. Are we genuinely obedient to God’s Word to the best of our ability? Or, are we people who just pick and choose what to believe and what to obey?

Wise people take care not to make God their opponent

Wise people realise that they must avoid angering God or arousing His opposition. If we act wrongly then God Himself will resist and oppose us. Thus, one reason why a wise man will seek to avoid sin is so as not to make God into his opponent. We see this point expressed in this next passage from Proverbs. It warns us not to steal the land of a poor person (by moving a boundary marker) or to oppress the weak in their use of their land. If we do, then God Himself will take up that poor man’s cause and plead it against the wrongdoer. He will do so even if that oppressor is a believer, and even if it is you:

¹⁰*Do not remove an ancient landmark
or enter the fields of the fatherless;*

¹¹*for their Redeemer is strong;*

***he will plead their cause against you.
Proverbs 23:10-11 (RSV)***

Realising that this is how God operates makes a wise person all the more careful to avoid oppressing or wronging other people. We should not have any wish to do so anyway, but this added factor dramatically raises the significance of how we treat others. It gives us a further incentive to act fairly and justly, especially towards the weak and the poor:

***The righteous care about justice for the poor,
but the wicked have no such concern.
Proverbs 29:7 (NIV)***

Having a genuine concern for the interests of others, especially the poor and the weak, is an important aspect of the fear of the LORD. Thus, the wise man does not envy or imitate those who seek to gain advantage by doing wrong. He does not want to be cut off by God, as such wrongdoers inevitably will be:

***¹⁷Let not your heart envy sinners,
but continue in the fear of the LORD all the day.
¹⁸Surely there is a future,
and your hope will not be cut off.
Proverbs 23:17-18 (RSV)***

Furthermore, a wise person wants to put himself in the right place and do the right things, so as to receive God's blessings rather than His curses. Any right-thinking person, knowing how God operates and what His Word says, would want to do those things which bring God's blessing. And he will want to avoid those things which result in His curses, opposition or judgment.

That is the choice we have to make many times each day and it is up to us to choose wisely. This is what God instructed Moses to tell the Israelites in relation to obeying the Law of Moses. Admittedly, we are not subject to the Law of Moses. Even so, this general principle of the need to seek God's blessing and avoid His opposition is still a valid one.

Although the Law of Moses is no longer in operation, there are many other commandments and principles which are still applicable to us. Examples include the command Jesus gave us to love one another, the law of sowing and reaping, and the law that all who exalt themselves will be humbled. At any rate, here is how Moses expressed this principle to the Israelites:

²⁶“Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: ²⁷the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day, ²⁸and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods which you have not known.

Deuteronomy 11:26-28 (RSV)

²⁸Be careful to heed all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and with your children after you for ever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God.

Deuteronomy 12:28 (RSV)

¹⁵“See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not

live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”
Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (RSV)

Where we face opposition and conflict, one possibility is that God Himself has raised up people to oppose us. We see this illustrated in the life of King Solomon. He began well but then degenerated into foolishness, evil and even idolatry. It was mainly because he married foreign women who worshiped false gods and they led him astray. God was angry with him about that and therefore raised up enemies to oppose King Solomon:

⁹ And the Lord was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, ¹⁰ and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not keep what the Lord commanded.
1 Kings 11:9-10 (RSV)

And the Lord raised up an adversary against Solomon, Hadad the E'domite; he was of the royal house in Edom.

1 Kings 11:14 (RSV)

²³ God also raised up as an adversary to him, Rezon the son of Eli'ada, who had fled from his master Hadad-e'zer king of Zobah. ²⁴ And he gathered men about him and became leader of a marauding band, after the slaughter by David; and they went to Damascus, and dwelt there, and made him king in Damascus. ²⁵ He was an adversary of Israel all the days of Solomon, doing mischief as Hadad did; and he abhorred Israel, and reigned over Syria.

1 Kings 11:23-25 (RSV)

Therefore if you are facing unusual or unexpected levels of opposition, then be willing to consider the possibility that God Himself may be opposing you and raising up adversaries against you. It could be as a result of some sin or rebellion in your life. If so, God may be using those adversaries to get you to wake up, examine your life and seek Him. Therefore, why make it difficult for yourself? Why require God to go to such lengths? You could simply ask Him to reveal to you anything in your attitudes, speech or conduct which is not pleasing to Him. He will be sure to answer a request like that, if it is sincerely made.

Also, do not be so complacent as to assume that God would never act in this way towards a real Christian. I am confident that He would. In my own life He has sent a number of people to oppose me, even after I was saved. More importantly God opposed King David. He sent him many adversaries after he had sinned in the episode involving Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah. Yet David was a believer at all times.

Actually, Solomon himself died as a believer and was saved, even though God opposed him. Indeed, it may well be that the very reason he came back to God, and to faith, was *because* God had opposed him. At any rate, the point is, so far as we are concerned, that we must not make God our opponent. We need to recognise the possibility that what happened to Solomon could also happen to us, and may already be happening.

Wise people therefore learn God's principles, i.e. how He operates and how He wants us to operate

If we are wise, or want to be, then we will make it our business to find out about the principles by which God operates and how to apply them. Then we can obtain God's blessing and support and

avoid His opposition. Why not start to look into these more closely? There are many such principles, which will become a useful guide to us as we face new or complicated situations.

Even if the Bible does not contain any specific advice or instruction which deals with your exact circumstances, the application of biblical principles will always be helpful. We shall look at some below, though the Bible contains many more such principles. We need to familiarise ourselves with them so that when we do face a new or difficult situation, we are more ready to face it. We will be better informed as to how God generally operates and wishes us to operate.

We must also familiarise ourselves with God's many promises and with the statements that He makes about cause and effect. Here is an example:

***The reward for humility and fear of the LORD
is riches and honor and life.***

Proverbs 22:4 (RSV)

The Bible is saying that if a person has humility and the fear of the Lord, then they will eventually receive riches, honour and life as their reward. Those things will be received either in this life, or the next, and probably in both. A wise person will take that statement seriously. Therefore he will seek to develop those qualities of humility and the fear of the Lord in order to qualify to benefit from that promise.

In other words, a wise person does not seek directly for riches or honour, at least not in this life. He seeks instead for those things which God says will lead to us being given those things as rewards. So instead of asking for the reward itself, it would be wiser to ask God to help us to develop those *character qualities that He has promised to reward.*

In this world, and even in the church, there are plenty of people seeking for riches and honour, i.e. in this life, not the next. But very few are seeking to develop humility or the fear of the Lord. However, if we are wise we will realise that in God's economy the one must come before the other. Therefore we should *put our main focus on the cause, not on the effect.* That is the way God thinks and it is how He wants us to think.

Wise people do not take offence at what Jesus says or at what the Bible says in general

It is remarkable how many people take offence at what Jesus says or at what the Bible in general says. Then, having been offended or irritated, they refuse to listen or read any further. They harden their hearts so as to resist what God is saying. Such offence can be taken over a wide range of issues, but the general result is to cause that person to then close their mind. Then they no longer want to know what the Bible says. They are hardened or prejudiced against it.

A wise person realises the harm that is caused by becoming hardened due to taking offence at, or stumbling over, something that the Bible says. It makes a person less receptive, obedient and motivated and reduces their love for Jesus. It creates a barrier where there ought not to be one. Jesus Himself warned us not to take offence at Him because He knew that many of us would do so:

And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.

Matthew 11:6 (RSV)

When some people take offence at Jesus it results in them despising Him or having contempt for Him. That is mainly done by simply failing to value Him as they should. In Jesus' own day many of the people who lived near to Him, in his home town of Nazareth, despised him. They thought little of Him and under-estimated Him, mainly because he was local and therefore familiar to them.

Many people take the same attitude today with men who preach the gospel and teach the Bible faithfully but who are “only” local, or who are not big names or in senior positions. By despising the messenger in this way they also undervalue the message, simply because of their prejudice against the man giving it:

⁵⁴ He came to His hometown and began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? ⁵⁵ Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶ And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” ⁵⁷ And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.” ⁵⁸ And He did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.

Matthew 13:54-58 (NASB)

The approach taken by many of Jesus’ neighbours causes a person to undervalue both the message and the messenger. It also causes unbelief. Then we are left with a shrunken level of faith in God and His promises because of our hardened, disrespectful attitude. So taking offence leads to hardness of heart, which leads in turn to a closed mind, and finally to unbelief.

Far too many people take offence at Jesus, or at any true and accurate presentation of what the Bible says. They often do so because it does not fit in with their traditions, customs or preconceived ideas about how things should be done. Most of us have become familiar with certain denominational traditions and practices. We may then feel a strong sense of allegiance to those things that we are used to and comfortable with.

Then, woe betide anyone who comes along and questions those traditions and points us instead to what the Bible says. The person who is devoted to customs and familiar practices will take offence and resist any such challenge to their conventions, even where it is Jesus Himself who is speaking:

*He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. ² They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. ³ He *said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” ⁴ And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent. ⁵ After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He *said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.*

Mark 3:1-6 (NASB)

In the passage above the Pharisees took offence simply because Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath day. The Bible does not forbid that. Therefore Jesus was acting perfectly properly. He was just cutting across their own man-made rules and regulations about what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath. They had, over many years, added layer upon layer of additional requirements and prohibitions. These had no biblical basis and were not from God. Jesus therefore deliberately ignored those man-made rules and went ahead and healed the man right in front of the Pharisees.

Instead of being amazed and delighted, or wanting to find out more about Jesus and His teaching, they just took offence. They were affronted and thought “*How dare He not honour us and our beliefs and practices? How dare He contradict us, especially in public?*” That was their reaction, rather than “*What He has done goes against what I have been used to up to now. Therefore have I been wrong? How do my thinking and assumptions need to change to fit in with Him?*”

It would be very unrealistic to imagine that such narrow-minded attitudes and reactions were only a feature of the Pharisees and are not to be found in us today. We do have such attitudes and need to

take active steps to look for them in ourselves and to recognise and remove them. If not, we will think and act as the Pharisees did. Many of us already do, without even being aware of it.

We might not be offended by precisely the same things that irritated the Pharisees. Most of us have not grown up in Judaism and have not been taught to value the so called 'oral law' or the traditions of the Rabbis more highly than the Bible. Yet we have still been taught, or have absorbed, other sets of man-made rules and regulations or other belief systems and assumptions.

Thus a person today might be offended or irritated by what the Bible has to say about the role of women in the church or within marriage. Or they may take exception to what the Bible teaches about creation or adultery or divorce or homosexuality or financial giving or a host of other things. Many people have thoroughly absorbed the values and beliefs of the secular world on issues such as these. Therefore they are irritated by, and even ashamed of, what the Bible says about these things

I know one man personally who reacted very negatively when someone quoted from one of apostle Paul's letters in a Bible study. He said caustically: "*Apostle Paul and I don't get on.*" What he meant was that he did not like Paul's teaching because it contradicted his own personal opinions and beliefs. It did not occur to him that his reaction was absurd. How can any right-thinking person who claims to be a Christian say: "*Apostle Paul thinks X but I think Y and I believe Paul is wrong and I am right.*"?

It ought to be obvious that if you and apostle Paul, or any other writer of the Bible, disagree on anything then it is *you* who is wrong, not them. Thus you never have any valid basis for being offended by what they say. Few people would put it into such stark words as that man did. But they still think the same way, albeit more subtly. The net effect is the same. They ignore what the Bible says and cling on to their own man-made tradition, belief, opinion or practice instead.

Jesus directly confronted the Pharisees about this attitude in this next passage. They were upset because His followers were not washing their hands in the formal way that their man-made oral law required. Despite all the miracles which they were seeing at first hand, and the teaching which Jesus was giving, all they could focus on was the ways in which Jesus and His followers did not abide by their rules and traditions:

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." ³ And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,' and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.' ⁵ But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God," ⁶ he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:

⁸ 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,

BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.

⁹ 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,

TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'"

*¹⁰ After Jesus called the crowd to Him, He said to them, "Hear and understand. ¹¹ It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man."¹² Then the disciples *came and *said to Him, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?" ¹³ But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit."*

Matthew 15:1-14 (NASB)

Jesus' disciples told Him that His response had offended the Pharisees, which it had. However, He said that they were just blind guides. The same will be true of us if we allow ourselves to focus on any man-made tradition in place of what the Bible says.

Some people are made angry at what Jesus says, or at what the Bible says, because it is critical of their attitudes or behaviour. This arose when Jesus criticised the people in the synagogue at Nazareth. In fact they were enraged:

***And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things;
Luke 4:28 (NASB)***

The fact that what is being said is true does not stop people from being angry at it being said. On the contrary, the more accurate the statement is, the more angry people usually become. This was the case with Herodias, the woman who was cohabiting with Herod even though she was married to Herod's brother, Philip. John the Baptist pointed this out and said that it was wrong, which it obviously was. Herodias held a grudge from then on until she eventually got the chance to have John killed:

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent and had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, because he had married her. ¹⁸ For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹ Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death and could not do so;

Mark 6:17-19 (NASB)

²¹ A strategic day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his lords and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee; ²² and when the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you want and I will give it to you." ²³ And he swore to her, "Whatever you ask of me, I will give it to you; up to half of my kingdom." ²⁴ And she went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist."

Mark 6:21-24 (NASB)

So, what John the Baptist said about Herodias was entirely true, but she resented it all the more for that. She is not the only one who does that. We all have a dislike of criticism, especially when it is justified. But we ought not to. We should positively *want* to know the truth about ourselves. A wise person will therefore force himself not to take offence at what the Bible says, even when it is critical of him, and even when it shows him to be plainly in the wrong

Wise people do not mock or despise their political rulers and governments

It is fashionable to disrespect and even mock our political leaders, i.e. MPs, Congressmen, Cabinet Ministers, Prime Ministers and so on. We regularly see and hear such ridicule in the media. It both causes and expresses the disrespect that people feel. But the question a wise person will ask themselves is "What does God want? How does He want us to speak of, and relate to, our political leaders and rulers?" One thing we can be sure of is that He does not want us to speak evil of them or to curse them. On the contrary, we are to honour them whether or not we think they are doing a good job:

***"Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people.
Exodus 22:28 (NIV)***

***Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.
1 Peter 2:17 (ESV)***

The word 'curse' in the verse above from Exodus means in the sense of reviling or insulting. Paul quotes this verse with that meaning in the book of Acts:

And Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

Acts 23:5 (RSV)

Apostle Peter also gives instruction on how we are to speak and act in relation to our political rulers:

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme,¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing right you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.¹⁶ Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God.¹⁷ Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

1 Peter 2:13-17 (RSV)

How many of us give any thought the question of to how God wants us to think of our leaders? That includes political rulers and also those who are in authority over us at work, or police, councils, courts etc? In all of those cases God wants us to show respect and honour to those rulers. They have all been put into those positions of authority *by God Himself*. It is He who creates and maintains governments and every other form of authority, so as to keep order and restrain wickedness. He therefore wants us to cooperate with such rulers and to show them honour. To do otherwise is to disrespect, or even to oppose, God Himself:

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.² Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer.⁵ Therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.⁶ For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.⁷ Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Romans 13:1-7 (RSV)

Moreover God wants us to pray for our rulers of every kind and at all levels of authority and seniority:

¹First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men,² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.³ This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior

1 Timothy 2:1-3 (RSV)

Actually, our duty to pray for our rulers and political leaders is made all the more urgent and serious by the fact that God may well hold us responsible for what our leaders do. That may sound unfair, but we need to remember that, at least in democratic countries, our leaders are in place *because most of us voted for them*. More importantly, it may well be that it is *our failure to pray* for our political leaders that leads to them making wrong decisions and enacting ungodly laws

For example, would David Cameron have pushed through the "gay marriage" legislation if the churches in the United Kingdom had been faithful in their proclamation of the truth of the gospel and had taught the Bible properly in recent years? And would he have done it if enough Christians had prayed for him to have wisdom and to do God's will? We in the churches might blame the Prime Minister for what happened. However, it may be that God also holds the British people, and

especially the churches, blameworthy alongside the politicians. Perhaps He blames us even more than He blames them.

Also bear in mind that there is another logic at work. That is that *we get the politicians we deserve*. So, since 1992, we in Great Britain have elected governments which have gone ever farther away from God's standards and principles. They cannot begin to compare in stature with some of the great political figures we have had in our history.

My point is that one reason why we are getting these awful leaders is because we have not been a faithful church in general and because we have not prayed for our governments in particular. That is one reason why we in the UK have got David Cameron leading us and the Americans have Mr Obama. Men with their views would not have been able to get elected as parish councillors a few decades ago. Now they are leading governments.

At any rate, it may be that God will hold us accountable for the decisions that our politicians make, which our earnest prayers could have avoided. An example of this is the way that God brought judgement on the people of Judah as a whole. At least in part, this was because of the wicked things done in their name by the evil King Manasseh:

² And when they ask you, 'Where shall we go?' you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord: "Those who are for pestilence, to pestilence, and those who are for the sword, to the sword; those who are for famine, to famine, and those who are for captivity, to captivity."

³ "I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, says the Lord: the sword to slay, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth to devour and destroy. ⁴ And I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh the son of Hezekiah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 15:2-4 (RSV)

Therefore instead of reviling or despising our political and civic leaders, or even just ignoring them, we need to actively support them and pray for them. To mock them, as so many of our comedy programmes do on our behalf, is directly contrary to what God wants. Moreover, it is often unfair. Some of our political leaders are more hard working, and more committed to what they believe in, than many Christians are.

In fact I can speak from personal experience. I was a Borough Councillor and was also the Chairman of a Conservative Association, helping to organise the local party and various elections etc. I frequently found that people involved in politics were sincere, dedicated, public-spirited and unselfish. That side of things rarely ever gets reported in the media, but it is real. And there would be even more of such people, and they would be in higher positions of authority, if we were more faithful in praying for our political leaders.

Wise people reject the world's values

This world is run by Satan at present and it operates according to his ways and principles. Therefore this world will inevitably be hostile to Jesus, and to all who follow Him:

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. ²¹ But all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know him who sent me. ²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sinned; but now they have

no excuse for their sin. ²³He who hates me hates my Father also. ²⁴If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. ²⁵It is to fulfil the word that is written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause.'

John 15:18-25 (RSV)

Wise people will therefore shun the values of this sinful world and dissociate themselves from all that it stands for. They do so because they are already wise to some extent. However, the very fact that they separate themselves from the world and its values makes them wiser still. We cannot have one foot in each camp, i.e. God's kingdom and this world, which is Satan's kingdom. We have to choose which one to be in. Any form of compromise or hypocrisy will make us behave in foolish or even wicked ways.

Wise people know that it is sometimes very difficult to tell the difference between good and evil and that we need God's help to do so

Sometimes it is obvious that one particular option or course of action is good and righteous and that another is not. However, that is not always so and the higher you go in managing people or running organisations the harder it gets. You find that you have to choose between people or options where what is right can seem wrong, and what is wrong can appear to be good.

Moreover, you have to make many more decisions, and they have to be made very rapidly, or even simultaneously. Therefore you may not feel confident that you can accurately discern which, if any, of the various options available is right and whether a particular proposal is good or evil. It can sometimes be far from obvious.

It may also be that the advice you get from others is contradictory because they too find it hard to discern and to see complex things the way God sees them. King Solomon was well aware of this problem. Therefore when he met the Lord in a dream and was asked what gift he would choose for himself, he concentrated on this issue of being able to know the difference between good and evil. That may sound easy, but it isn't, as Solomon had already realised:

Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this thy great people?"

1 Kings 3:9 (RSV)

If you believe that it is always easy to tell the difference between good and evil then the chances are that you have never really considered the question thoroughly enough. Or it may be that you have not yet been put into a position where you have been seriously tested on that issue. For fallible human beings like us, good and evil can often closely resemble each other, especially when decisions have to be made at speed or while you are under great stress and pressure. The only solution is to do as Solomon did: Ask God, and keep asking, for the ability to distinguish accurately and reliably between good and evil. And ask Him to enable you to see the evil, even when it is heavily disguised.

Wise people choose to get their ideas and beliefs from the Bible, not from the world or from what people say.

Most people, even if they are part of a church, get the majority of their ideas, reasoning and beliefs from the media, the internet and the world around them, rather than from the Bible. That's hardly surprising when you consider that an average Christian in the West spends only minutes per day, or even per week, in the Bible. But that same Christian will probably spend many hours on twitter, facebook and various websites, plus watching TV or listening to radio. Much of what they absorb is worldly and of questionable value.

If you gorge yourself on what the world has to offer, but put yourself on starvation rations when it comes to the Bible, then it is inevitable that the world will have a far greater influence on you than the Bible does. A wise person consciously sets out to do the exact opposite. He minimises the influence that worldly thinking and propaganda has on him and maximises his exposure to God's Word.

As a simple starting point, why not just do a straight swap of the respective amounts of time that you spend watching TV or on the internet for the amount of time you spend in your Bible? Choose to abandon a lot of your activity watching TV or on social media and, instead, spend say two hours per day, or more doing the following:

- a) reading the Bible
- b) reading good Christian books and commentaries (you will have to be very discerning because a high percentage of what is sold in Christian bookshops is either heretical or of no nutritional value. Please therefore visit the Approved Ministries section of the Real Christianity website which sets out a large number of ministries and Bible teachers, i.e. those whom I feel able to recommend wholeheartedly.)
- c) listening to good Christian teaching on CD or MP3 etc (again, you will have to be discerning)

If you do these things then your life will be transformed. Some people have told me that the idea of spending two or more hours per day on such things is unrealistic. But why is it? At the time of the Reformation and in the days of the Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and of the early Methodists of the eighteenth century, ordinary people would go to extraordinary lengths to study the Bible.

The same is true in the developing world today, where there is a much greater hunger for God's Word. That is how a wise person should be. Too many nominal churchgoers, and even real Christians, allow their minds to be saturated with godless, atheistic, humanistic material. Therefore they find themselves unconsciously adopting all sorts of unbiblical opinions and beliefs without even realising:

- a) that they are doing so
- b) that those ideas are wrong
- c) that they are unbiblical
- d) where they got them from
- e) why it matters what we think anyway

Wise people do not follow any crowd or crave for the approval of others. They aim to do what is right, even if that makes them the odd one out.

The reason that the Bible so often refers to people as sheep is because we share so many of their foolish character qualities. One of those features, which most of us have, is the tendency to want to follow the crowd. We like to do whatever the people around us are doing, regardless of whether it is right or wrong:

God specifically warned the Israelites not to follow the practices and ways of the people of Egypt from which they had escaped. He also warned them not to imitate or follow the ways of the Canaanites, but to take care instead to follow His rules and abide by His Word:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. ³ You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴ You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. ⁵ You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

Leviticus 18:1-5 (ESV)

Human beings have a strong craving to fit in and to be accepted and popular. That desire alone is enough to make us into followers and conformists. But the problem is that fitting in frequently means that we have to compromise because we have to imitate those around us rather than do what God says. We know that doing what is right will often bring us into conflict with the views of those whom we are seeking to impress and fit in with. But we must never follow or imitate a crowd if what they want to do is wrong:

“Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd”

Exodus 23:2 (NIV)

It is not only ordinary people who follow crowds. Those who are meant to be leaders often do so as well. A weak, cowardly leader or manager will allow himself to be intimidated and pressurised by those under him. Then he will do things that he knows to be wrong just for a quiet life. An example of this is Pontius Pilate. He was the Roman Governor and was one of the people who presided over the trials of Jesus before He was sentenced to death.

Pilate knew that Jesus was a good and worthy man who had done nothing wrong. Indeed, he knew that Jesus was the rightful King of the Jews. He therefore wanted to release Jesus. He knew that that was the right thing to do. Yet, he did not do it, because he was afraid of the Jewish leaders and of the crowds who were shouting for Jesus to be crucified:

¹³ Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, “You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. ¹⁵ No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him. ¹⁶ Therefore I will punish Him and release Him.” ¹⁷ [^uNow he was obliged to release to them at the feast one prisoner. ¹⁸ But they cried out all together, saying, “Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!” ¹⁹ (He was one who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection made in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰ Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, ²¹ but they kept on calling out, saying, “Crucify, crucify Him!” ²² And he said to them the third time, “Why, what evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death; therefore I will punish Him and release Him.” ²³ But they were insistent, with loud voices asking that He be crucified. And their voices began to prevail. ²⁴ And Pilate pronounced sentence that their demand be granted. ²⁵ And he released the man they were asking for who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, but he delivered Jesus to their will.

Luke 23:13-25 (NASB)

We can't even say that Pilate gave way because he was in fear of his life. He cannot have been, because he had a large number of Roman soldiers under his command and was in no personal danger. He was just swayed by the pressure of the public, who were clamouring for him to do what they said. He wanted their approval and to avoid their disapproval and criticism.

So, for those paltry reasons, he issued a death sentence against a man whom he knew to be innocent. We know that, because Pilate had just said so. He was therefore guilty of a gross neglect of his judicial duty, based on selfishness and the desire to avoid hassle for himself.

Yet there is nothing unusual or rare about the Pilate did. There are countless politicians, managers, officials, headmasters and so on who regularly do the very same things. It is normal rather than exceptional for such people to fail in their duty. They habitually choose the line of least resistance rather than being willing to face the flak that comes to those who do what is right but unpopular.

A wise person recognises his own fear of public opinion. He knows that his flesh nature has a tendency to follow other people and imitate their standards. He also knows that it will lead him astray if he does so. Therefore he exercises authority over himself and forces himself to do what is right, even if it means standing alone.

That is hard enough to do when dealing with the unsaved, unbelieving people around us. It is even harder when the people whose example we must not follow are in the church, or claim to be. In fact, they may well be the leaders. But your conscience, and God's Word, may be telling you that what they are saying and doing is wrong.

A real Christian who wants to be wise must be willing to check everything and everyone against the Bible. He must also refuse to follow any leader or group that is going in the wrong direction. And he must also be willing to pay the price for that conviction, no matter how unpopular that may make him. We must seek only for the praise of God, not for the praise of other people. Seeking their approval will only cause us to make wrong choices and to go the wrong way:

“⁴² Nevertheless many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: ⁴³ for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.”

John 12:42-43 (RSV)

Wise people seek God's Kingdom first and are serious about staying on the narrow path

Jesus told us very clearly to seek His Kingdom first, ahead of anything else:

³³ But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

Matthew 6:33 (RSV)

If we do seek His Kingdom first we are much more likely to make right decisions and to get our other priorities in the right order. It also leads to us receiving many other things from God in return. There are rewards for putting God first. We are commanded to seek first His Kingdom here and now. We do that by operating each day in accordance with His principles and obeying His commands. If we do we will receive His blessing here and now, in this life.

However, seeking His Kingdom first also means focusing on the life that is to come, after we have died or been raptured. When that time comes we will enter into His Kingdom in a much fuller way. Both of these aspects of seeking His Kingdom are valid, i.e. in the present and also in the future.

Let's look now at what Jesus said about the narrow gate and the narrow way or path and about those who choose the wrong way and are subsequently locked out:

¹³ *“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. ¹⁴ For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*

Matthew 7:13-14 (NASB)

²³ *And someone said to Him, “Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?” And He said to them, ²⁴ “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open up to us!’ then He will answer and say to you, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets’; ²⁷ and He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you are from; DEPART FROM ME, ALL YOU EVILDOERS.’ ²⁸ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being thrown out.*

Luke 13: 23-28 (NASB)

Jesus did not use words loosely. He said what He meant and meant what He said. In the verses above He is making it very plain that:

- a) we have a choice as to whether to go to destruction or to life, i.e. to end up in the Lake of Fire or to have eternal life in God’s presence.
- b) most people do not choose life and thus they go to destruction
- c) some people are not even aware (or concerned) that they are on the wrong path and will only find out the truth when it is too late.

As with most of the things Jesus said, the modern day Western churches tend to water them down or ignore them. However, if we want to become wise, we will pay close attention to Jesus’ words. Whatever he is saying, whether about seeking His Kingdom first, or choosing life rather than destruction, a wise person will be determined to take Jesus’ words very seriously. He will continue to bear them in mind and to act on them.

Only a fool would be willing to ignore the things that Jesus says, especially His warnings. Indeed the same is true of the whole Bible, even where what is said comes via one of the prophets or apostles. It is all God’s Word.

Therefore, when Jesus warns us of the eternal consequences of the daily choices we make, such as whether we choose the narrow or broad way, a wise person will not brush that warning aside. He will listen reverently and keep it very much in mind. The truth of Jesus’ words, i.e. that few people enter by the narrow gate or choose the narrow way, is demonstrated by the fact that most people, even in the churches, do not take seriously what He said. We can see that just by looking around us in the churches and by hearing what people say and focus on. It is also demonstrated by what they do not say, and what they do not focus on.

The narrow gate is not easy to go through and the narrow way is not comfortable to travel on. They involve difficulty, trouble and opposition. However, the wise person still chooses the narrow way, because he knows it is right and because it is worth it:

²⁸ *And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.*

Matthew 19:28-39 (NASB)

Those who choose to enter and remain upon the narrow path, and to focus on and invest in the Kingdom of God, will build up treasure for themselves in Heaven:

¹⁹ “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust^l consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Matthew 6:19-21 (RSV)

Conversely, those who focus on this present world and on pursuing power, fame, wealth and prestige here and now, instead of seeking the Kingdom of God, will find when they die that they will lose everything. And it will be lost eternally:

*¹⁶ Be not afraid when a man becomes rich,
when the glory of his house increases.*

*¹⁷ For when he dies he will carry nothing away;
his glory will not go down after him.*

*¹⁸ For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed
—and though you get praise when you do well for yourself—*

*¹⁹ his soul will go to the generation of his fathers,
who will never again see light.*

²⁰ Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish.
Psalm 49:16-20 (ESV)

Wise people realise the great danger of sexual immorality

Possibly the greatest danger we face as disciples is sexual temptation. I can think of a number of students who were committed Christians at university, both male and female. Each of them fell away from the faith due to getting into sexual relationships. The temptation is great, especially for young people, and it is much worse now than it was in the 1980s when I was a young Christian. There is now so much immorality, not to mention pornography, that it is very difficult for a Christian to avoid being led astray.

But we must do all we can to avoid such danger, because, sexual sin is a sure route to spiritual disaster. That is partly because it is a sin against one’s own body, which is a temple of the Holy Spirit. It is also because of the soul ties which sexual intercourse creates with the other person. It has very long lasting consequences, which the people concerned would never expect.

Therefore, the Bible has much to say to warn us against getting into sexual sin of any kind. For example, consider these passages from Proverbs. They speak of a man being led astray by the enticements of an immoral woman. However, the warning is equally applicable to women being led astray by men:

*²³ For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light,
and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life,*

*²⁴ to preserve you from the evil woman,
from the smooth tongue of the adventuress.*

*²⁵ Do not desire her beauty in your heart,
and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes;*

*²⁶ for a harlot may be hired for a loaf of bread,
but an adulteress stalks a man’s very life.*

*²⁷ Can a man carry fire in his bosom
and his clothes not be burned?*

²⁸ *Or can one walk upon hot coals
and his feet not be scorched?*
²⁹ *So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife;
none who touches her will go unpunished.*
³⁰ *Do not men despise a thief if he steals
to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry?*
³¹ *And if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold;
he will give all the goods of his house.*
³² *He who commits adultery has no sense;
he who does it destroys himself.*
³³ *Wounds and dishonor will he get,
and his disgrace will not be wiped away.*
Proverbs 6:23-33 (RSV)

⁶ *For at the window of my house
I have looked out through my lattice,
⁷ and I have seen among the simple,
I have perceived among the youths,
a young man without sense,
⁸ passing along the street near her corner,
taking the road to her house
⁹ in the twilight, in the evening,
at the time of night and darkness.
¹⁰ And lo, a woman meets him,
dressed as a harlot, wily of heart.
¹¹ She is loud and wayward,
her feet do not stay at home;
¹² now in the street, now in the market,
and at every corner she lies in wait.
¹³ She seizes him and kisses him,
and with impudent face she says to him:
¹⁴ "I had to offer sacrifices,
and today I have paid my vows;
¹⁵ so now I have come out to meet you,
to seek you eagerly, and I have found you.
¹⁶ I have decked my couch with coverings,
colored spreads of Egyptian linen;
¹⁷ I have perfumed my bed with myrrh,
aloes, and cinnamon.
¹⁸ Come, let us take our fill of love till morning;
let us delight ourselves with love.
¹⁹ For my husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey;
²⁰ he took a bag of money with him;
at full moon he will come home."
²¹ With much seductive speech she persuades him;
with her smooth talk she compels him.
²² All at once he follows her,
as an ox goes to the slaughter,
or as a stag is caught fast
²³ till an arrow pierces its entrails;
as a bird rushes into a snare;
he does not know that it will cost him his life.
²⁴ And now, O sons, listen to me,
and be attentive to the words of my mouth.*

²⁵ *Let not your heart turn aside to her ways,
do not stray into her paths;*

²⁶ *for many a victim has she laid low;
yea, all her slain are a mighty host.*

²⁷ *Her house is the way to Sheol,
going down to the chambers of death.*

Proverbs 7:6-27 (RSV)

A wise person will take these warnings to heart and seek God's help to avoid falling into sin. A fool, or even a simple person, does not see the danger. Or perhaps he is overly sure of himself and therefore sees no possibility of falling into this sin. Whatever the background reasons may be, anyone who engages in sexual sin will pay a heavy price, both in this life and the next. Therefore be wise, at least on this issue, and pay close attention to God's many warnings.

Wise people know their days are numbered

There is no getting away from the fact that we only have a short life span on this earth, whether we are wise or wicked. Whoever we are, this life is only for a short time:

*The years of our life are threescore and ten,
or even by reason of strength fourscore;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.*

Psalm 90:10 (RSV)

¹⁴ *For he knows our frame;*

he remembers that we are dust.

¹⁵ *As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;*

¹⁶ *for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.*

¹⁷ *But the steadfast love of the LORD
is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,*

Psalm 103:14-17 (ESV)

⁴ *O LORD, make me know my end
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting I am!*

⁵ *Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.*

Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!

⁶ *Surely a man goes about as a shadow!
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!*

Psalm 39:4-6 (ESV)

*For he sees that even the wise die;
the fool and the stupid alike must perish
and leave their wealth to others.*

Psalm 49:10 (ESV)

Wise people realise that this earthly life span of 70 or 80 years or so is not what really counts. It is really just a preparation or testing ground for the next life in Jesus' Millennial Kingdom and then in

eternity. What really matters is using whatever time we have left in pleasing God and growing as disciples and in the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Then we can gain His approval and praise at the Judgment Seat of Christ. That is the real point of what this life is all about. (Please see Book Four where the Judgment Seat of Christ is discussed in great detail.)

Moreover, no matter how good or wise we may be, we have all got to die, unless we are part of the generation which gets caught up in the rapture. Therefore, we can have only a limited impact on this world, whoever we may be. Then we will be forgotten by all except Jesus:

¹⁴ The wise man has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness; and yet I perceived that one fate comes to all of them. ¹⁵ Then I said to myself, "What befalls the fool will befall me also; why then have I been so very wise?" And I said to myself that this also is vanity. ¹⁶ For of the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise man dies just like the fool!

Ecclesiastes 2:14-16 (RSV)

None of us know how long we have got left to pass God's tests. We could die tonight. Therefore we need to focus today, and every day, on living to please God. We must do so not in order to earn salvation, but to receive His praise and reward. Treat every day as if it was the very last day before the Judgment. See it as being possibly your last ever opportunity to gain a reward and to lay up treasures for yourself in heaven, as we saw above:

*Teach us to number our days aright,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
Psalm 90:12 (NIV)*

Once we realise that every day could be our last, before we die or are caught up in the rapture, it will help us to prioritise correctly and to do what is right. Then we will be better able to live in obedience and faithfulness and to turn away from temptations. We will do so not *in order to be saved*, but *because we have been saved*.

Wise people generally live longer. Wisdom, knowledge and the fear of the LORD are a protection to them

Ironically, despite being ready to die at any moment, the wise tend to have a longer life span than the wicked. Consider the relative lengths of the reigns of the Kings of Judah, some of whom were good and some were bad, in comparison with the Kings of Israel, all of whom ended up wicked. Their different standards of behaviour had a definite effect on their respective life spans. The Kings of the Southern Kingdom of Judah lived much longer on average than the Kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The realisation that God holds your life in His hands, and can end it whenever He chooses to do so, is intensely sobering. It alters the way you live and the decisions you make day by day. Let's look at a few of the many passages which emphasise this remarkable fact about the longer average life expectancy, and better health, of the righteous as compared to the wicked:

For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it.

Ecclesiastes 7:12 (ESV)

*¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
¹¹ For by me your days will be multiplied,*

*And years of life will be added to you.
Proverbs 9:10-11 (NASB)*

*The fear of the LORD prolongs life,
But the years of the wicked will be shortened.
Proverbs 10:27 (NASB)*

²⁶ *In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence,
And his children will have refuge.
²⁷ The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,
That one may avoid the snares of death.
Proverbs 14:26-27 (NASB)*

*The fear of the LORD leads to life,
So that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil.
Proverbs 19:23 (NASB)*

Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.

Ecclesiastes 8:12 (NASB)

Wise people also survive longer in a job or business. That's partly because they are better prepared and better positioned to face difficult times. However, it is also because when they face crises, recessions or problems, God lifts them up and rescues them, whereas He does not do so for the wicked:

*for a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again;
but the wicked are overthrown by calamity.
Proverbs 24:16 (RSV)*

God also sides with the blameless man and vindicates him, whereas He opposes and exposes the wicked:

²⁰ *“Behold, God will not reject a blameless man,
nor take the hand of evildoers.
²¹ He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,
and your lips with shouting.
²² Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,
and the tent of the wicked will be no more.”
Job 8:20-22 (RSV)*

Wise people realise that they are not the centre of the universe and they don't allow themselves to be ruled by self-interest.

The more you put God and other people at the centre, and yourself at the edge, the wiser and happier you will be. You can never be happy if you want to take centre-place in your own universe. One reason is that others will not cooperate with you. They tend to want that central place for themselves.

In my law firm the way the best staff ran their files was to keep the client at the centre, putting his interests first, with the firm in second place and themselves in last place. Such staff always did well and had satisfied clients. By contrast, the worst staff always put themselves first. They were the ones who ended up having discontented clients and doing badly in their careers.

Self-centred members of staff won't choose any course of action which would involve additional difficulty or pressure for themselves, or which requires them to have to admit an error and seek help to put it right. We had several bad staff like that. None of them survived long term. They all failed in the end and had to be removed. Ironically, one of the reasons why such selfish staff behaved as they did was in order to promote their own interests. But it never worked. They always ended in failure, whereas the unselfish ones always succeeded.

Wise staff put their clients first and themselves last. The clients and I would inevitably notice that. I then promoted and rewarded that unselfish employee, precisely because they were not seeking to look after their own interests. It is my place to promote staff, not theirs. Likewise, it is God's place to promote us, not ours. Therefore not putting oneself first is actually enlightened self-interest. It is the surest way to promotion, both in this life and the next.

Wise people don't assume that they are automatically in the right. They accept correction and are open to being shown to be in the wrong.

The wiser a person is the more they will realise the power of their own sinful flesh nature and their capacity for self-deception. Also the more easily they can see their own faults and bad habits. Therefore, when a wise person faces disputes or difficult situations his first thoughts will be along the lines of:

- a) am I acting wrongly, selfishly or unfairly here?
- b) who is really in the right on this issue, me or the other person?
- c) what does God think about this situation?
- d) what does God want me to do?
- e) am I being carnal or reacting to this dispute in a fleshly way?

Wise people do not automatically assume they are in the right, whereas virtually everybody else does. A wise person is more concerned to avoid wronging another person, or treating them unfairly, than he is about avoiding being wronged himself. It makes logical sense to think that way. If we are wronged there are no eternal consequences for us. We will not have to answer for it at the Judgment Seat of Christ. We may even be vindicated there. However, if in our haste to defend or promote our own self-interests we do wrong to another person, then we will have to answer for it.

Once you see it that way, and the prospect of judgment becomes real to you, then you can see why it makes sense not to use your elbows when dealing with other people today. You will have to answer for it face to face with Jesus one day. Therefore, a really wise person is not merely *willing* to be corrected now, and to have his wrong ideas, attitudes and behaviour exposed and rebuked. He positively *wants* to be corrected, because he knows he will benefit from it. Consider how King David and also King Solomon put this:

*Let a righteous man strike me
- it is a kindness; let him rebuke me
- it is oil for my head;
let my head not refuse it....
Psalm 141:5 (a) (ESV)*

*A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding
than a hundred blows into a fool.
Proverbs 17:10 (ESV)*

***Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold
is a wise reprovener to a listening ear.
Proverbs 25:12 (RSV)***

Paradoxically, the wiser a person becomes, and the more knowledge and understanding he has, the more he will listen to advice. Wise people realise that they cannot safely rely on their own ability or judgement and that they need other people:

***Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king,
who will no longer take advice,
Ecclesiastes 4:13 (RSV)***

***Listen to advice and accept instruction,
that you may gain wisdom for the future.
Proverbs 19:20 (RSV)***

Not only do wise people actively seek for advice, they also see the value of correction. They even value being rebuked. Sometimes such correction comes from wise people and is given graciously. Other times it comes from ungracious people and is given rudely. Either way, it is best to listen to it and to weigh it up open-mindedly.

A wise person will listen to good advice, and act upon it, even if it is given rudely or by someone with whom they are not on friendly terms. Consider this example where King David listened to the advice of one of his generals, Joab, even though he spoke very bluntly. It was also at a time when David was grieving over the death of his son, Absalom. Joab was critical, but David did not allow himself to get offended or angry. He knew that he was wrong and that Joab was right. Therefore he listened and changed course:

⁵ Then Jo'ab came into the house to the king, and said, "You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life, and the lives of your sons and your daughters, and the lives of your wives and your concubines, ⁶ because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you; for today I perceive that if Ab'salom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. ⁷ Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants; for I swear by the Lord, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night; and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now." ⁸ Then the king arose, and took his seat in the gate. And the people were all told, "Behold, the king is sitting in the gate"; and all the people came before the king. Now Israel had fled every man to his own home. ⁹ And all the people were at strife throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "The king delivered us from the hand of our enemies, and saved us from the hand of the Philistines; and now he has fled out of the land from Ab'salom.

2 Samuel 19:5-9 (RSV)

Sometimes it is only those who are rude, or even hostile, towards us who are willing to tell us the real truth about ourselves or our situation. Our friends are usually too polite to be really blunt. They therefore won't point out the deeply ingrained faults that we are sensitive about, or even blind to. So, harsh, rude people, and even our enemies, have a valuable role to play in correcting us. Even better though is the rebuke of a wise man:

***It is better for a man to hear the rebuke
of the wise than to hear the song of fools.
Ecclesiastes 7:5 (RSV)***

Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold

is a wise reprover to a listening ear.
Proverbs 25:12 (RSV)

Best of all is to receive God's correction and reproof. We should not only be willing, but eager, to receive that and wise people are:

¹⁷ *“Behold, how happy is the man whom God reproves,
So do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.*
¹⁸ *“For He inflicts pain, and gives relief;
He wounds, and His hands also heal.*
Job 5:17-18 (NASB)

*Examine me, O Lord, and try me;
Test my mind and my heart.*
Psalms 26:2(NASB)

*Teach me your way, O LORD,
that I may walk in your truth;
unite my heart to fear your name.*
Psalms 86:11 (ESV)

Wise people have the love of the truth. They will 'interrogate' or 'interview' themselves to find out whether they are in the right, rather than just assume it.

A wise person is so concerned not to do wrong to others that he will interrogate himself to establish who is really right or wrong. He will never just assume it to be himself, or that his own cause is obviously right. Neither will he assume that his own interests and needs automatically come ahead of other people's. He will be slow to form a conclusion about who is right and wrong and will not want to lash out or act on impulse.

Our flesh nature is very strong, and the habits of selfishness and self-justification are deeply ingrained. We will never naturally or instinctively do right. Every right choice, or right action, is automatically contrary to the wishes of our flesh nature. We have to impose it on ourselves by choosing to insist that our new man prevails and has his way. That will never happen by itself.

To have the love of the truth means that you love the truth for its own sake. It means that you would rather know the truth even if you were to be shown to be wrong on a point of doctrine, or to have behaved wrongly. Most people do not love the truth. Therefore they hate to be challenged, questioned or corrected. They view it as an impertinence and feel diminished and threatened if it is suggested that they are wrong in their beliefs or conduct.

On many occasions I have encountered the defensive and resentful reactions of church leaders when I have attempted to raise with them some point in their teaching. I remember once speaking to a leader who had given a talk on a particular book of the Bible. I felt he had misunderstood both the book and the prophet who wrote it and was missing the point. I went up to him privately, one to one, and tried to explain how I saw it. But he had no interest at all. He didn't want to know. But surely, if he had just spent time studying that book of the Bible he ought to have been interested in it and open to hear more, even if I was wrong.

Indeed, if he felt that I was wrong then, surely, a right-thinking person would want to correct me, if only for my benefit, and to clarify what he had really meant? One might imagine that would be the common reaction in such situations, but it rarely is. On that occasion that leader was uninterested and resentful. He was unwilling, or perhaps unable, to answer my points. He could have said: *“I hadn't realised any of that. I'd like to hear more about it.”* Or he could have said *“Actually I think you may*

have misunderstood me. Let me clarify what I meant to say.” But he did neither. He just looked irritated, had nothing to say, and wanted to change the subject.

For him to respond in that way was foolish. I imagine that he was motivated by a mixture of pride, insecurity and laziness. There was probably also a belief that he was ‘clergy’ and ought not to be challenged or corrected by a mere ‘lay person’. However, in my estimation, it was also that he did not have the love of the truth. When faced with a chance to learn something that he did not know, he chose not to learn it, simply because doing so would involve a loss of face, even though only in his mind, not in mine.

Thus he would prefer to be wrong, and stay wrong, rather than get the truth, if getting the truth would cost him anything, such as loss of face. A wise person would rather get the truth, even if it did mean a loss of face. That said, why should it involve that? What is wrong with being corrected or having someone fill up a gap in your knowledge? Why should that mean any loss of face or embarrassment? It only does so if our attitude is wrong to begin with, i.e. where we love our own image and reputation more than we love the truth.

Therefore a wise person sets out to find the truth even if it means he has to change his mind publicly, such that people can see his error and be made aware that he used to be wrong on a certain point. A prime example of that kind of wisdom and humility is the Bible teacher Chuck Missler of Koinonea Institute. Over the years he has redone a number of his teaching series when he has discovered errors or gaps in his own knowledge or understanding. He actually redid his series on Matthew’s gospel three times. But that doesn’t diminish Chuck Missler. On the contrary, it enhances him, at least in the eyes of any right-thinking person.

Therefore make a decision to seek to develop the quality known as the love of the truth. Seek the truth even if it means that your current *opinion* will be shown to be wrong. Seek the truth even if it means that your own *conduct or attitude* will be shown to have been wrong.

Why would you want to try to preserve the appearance of having been right when you now know you were actually wrong? It will all come out anyway at the Judgment Seat of Christ (see Book Four) Therefore why not positively prefer to let the truth come out now so that you can correct your opinions, teaching, attitudes or conduct, even if that has to be done in public? It will do you no harm and a great deal of good.

There are many advantages and benefits that come from being corrected. Therefore a wise person will actually pray that God will expose his errors so that he can become more aware of them. Why not pray something along these lines:

“Lord, please point out to me any mistakes in my logic, or errors of fact, or gaps in my knowledge, or anything else of which I am unaware. Speak to me through the Bible or other people and let me know where such errors are. Please also let me see my own sins and character faults as clearly as other people can see them.”

Sadly, that is not what most of us actually pray. Instead, we tend to fight to maintain our dignity and to appear to be in the right, even when we know full well that we were wrong. I believe that the leader I spoke of earlier had simply downloaded a sermon from the internet, complete with overhead projector images. It was plain that he had done little or no genuine study for himself. He was just reading out some other man’s sermon. Therefore he was not actually able to engage in a meaningful discussion with me. If he had attempted it he would have been exposed as having done no real study of his own.

So rather than learn the truth, he chose the avoidance of exposure, even in a private one to one conversation, which would have gone no further. Therefore, at that moment, he was being a fool. He was trying to save his own face, rather than find out whether his teaching was right or wrong.

A person who does not love the truth does not necessarily *want* to be wrong. Neither does he want to believe lies. He would obviously prefer the truth, but only up to a certain point. He only wants the truth *if it does not cost him something*, or involve him in any inconvenience. That is the attitude of a fool. And it is the majority view, at least in the Western world.

If a person persists in maintaining their own opinions, rather than accepting what God says, then there will come a point when God will '*hand them over*' or '*give them over*'. That means that He will leave them alone to get on with pursuing their own foolish opinions rather than listening to Him. That is a very dangerous position to be in:

¹¹ ***"But my people did not listen to my voice;
Israel would not submit to me.
¹² So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,
to follow their own counsels.
Psalm 81:11-12 (ESV)***

Wise people take care not to be "*wise in their own eyes*"

A wise person realises that such wisdom as he does have is only very limited. He therefore knows that he needs God's help and guidance every day. He does not trust himself, or rely on his own knowledge or ability. Instead, he gradually learns to rely on God and to seek His help at all times, rather than being what the Bible calls "*wise in your own eyes*". That expression means having an over-confident belief in your own ability to understand situations and to decide what to do:

⁵***Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
⁶In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
⁷Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD,
and turn away from evil.
Proverbs 3:5-7 (RSV)***

***Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!
Isaiah 5:21 (RSV)***

***Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.
Proverbs 26:12 (RSV)***

***He who trusts in his own mind is a fool;
but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.
Proverbs 28:26 (RSV)***

***A man's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor
Proverbs 29:23 (RSV)***

Jesus strongly rebuked the people of the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum which were on the edge of Lake Galilee. They had seen and heard Him in person and yet they did not repent or believe in Him. One of their key problems was that they were wise in their own eyes. They were self-sufficient and did not see their own need or realise that they lacked anything. Conversely, the humble people were able to believe Jesus' words very easily, because they had the humility and sense

of dependency that children have. It is only to such babes, both literal and metaphorical, that God reveals the truth:

At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.

Matthew 11:25 (NASB)

Apostle Paul also spoke on this theme, pointing out that "*the wisdom of this age is folly with God*". He meant that what we think of as wisdom is often just man-made thinking. It does not come from God and does not tally with God's thinking. Therefore it is futile and if we adopt such beliefs and views then we would be fools, even if we consider ourselves to be wise. Instead, we must adopt God's thinking on every possible point. If we do that then we shall actually be wise, even though those around us will regard us as fools for holding views so very different to theirs:

¹⁸ Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

1 Corinthians 3:18-20 (ESV)

Wise people choose to accept the advice which is right and true, not the advice they prefer or that makes them feel better.

Even when we do take advice, there is a strong temptation to go along with whichever advice is most to our liking, i.e. least critical, most flattering, least painful to implement, and most in line with our selfish flesh nature. A wise person will be aware of all that and especially of the role his flesh nature plays in warping his choices. So, he will force himself to do what is right, not what makes him feel or look better. There is a big difference.

In the passage below we see King Rehoboam, Solomon's son. He has just become King of Israel and is taking advice from two different groups of counsellors. The first group is the old men who worked for his father. They advise him to lighten the burdens on the people and to be merciful. However, the second group are his own friends, young men of his own age. They advise him to be even more tough and demanding than his father was, to increase the tax burden on the people even further, and to show how strong he is.

Their macho approach appeals to Rehoboam, despite being bad advice, because it makes him feel big. It boosts his ego and sense of self-importance. So, despite taking some good advice and hearing both sides of the argument, he still goes wrong because he allows his pride and his flesh nature to have the deciding say on what to do. By contrast, a wise person wants to choose the right advice, regardless of what that does for his ego. Sadly, that's not what Rehoboam did:

⁹And he said to them, "What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me, 'Lighten the yoke that your father put upon us'?" ¹⁰And the young men who had grown up with him said to him, "Thus shall you speak to this people who said to you, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but do you lighten it for us'; thus shall you say to them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. ¹¹ And now, whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.'" ¹²So Jerobo'am and all the people came to Rehobo'am the third day, as the king said, "Come to me again the third day." ¹³And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel which the old men had given him, ¹⁴he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."

1 Kings 12:8-14 (RSV)

Wise people are careful and prudent. They don't take unnecessary risks:

I have regularly had to make business decisions that could make or lose the firm a lot of money. These are calculated risks. We need to be able, when necessary, to make such carefully balanced decisions. But wise people do not go looking for any unnecessary risk. They don't take risky decisions unless it is essential to do so:

*A prudent man sees danger and hides himself;
but the simple go on, and suffer for it.*

Proverbs 22:3 (RSV)

*One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil,
but a fool is reckless and careless.*

Proverbs 14:16 (ESV)

Prudent people minimise risk and arrange their affairs so that, even if things do go wrong, they have allowed for it, contained it and made contingency plans to cover it.

Wise people don't take to heart the unfair or critical things that other people say

Wise people also know that whatever is said about them, however harsh or unkind, they themselves have said the same, or worse things, about other people in the past. Moreover those who insult or abuse us are only here for a very short time. They will soon be gone. Thus, we must try hard not to place too much importance on the untrue or unfair things that other people will inevitably say about us:

²¹Do not give heed to all the things that men say, lest you hear your servant cursing you; ²²your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.

Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 (RSV)

⁷"Hearken to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear not the reproach of men, and be not dismayed at their revilings. ⁸ For the moth will eat them up like a garment, and the worm will eat them like wool; but my deliverance will be for ever, and my salvation to all generations."

Isaiah 51:7-8 (RSV)

Wise people know that, despite all God's blessings on them, they are still subject to the randomness of time and chance, just like everyone else

Although there are a number of general principles to the effect that a wise person will succeed, prosper, live longer, enjoy protection etc, that is not an absolute rule. The only thing that is definite is that such people will prosper and be rewarded *in the next life*, when they are resurrected. However, in this present life there are no such absolute guarantees. So we all have to face the ups and downs and the random events, both good and bad, that are brought by time and chance to both the righteous and the wicked:

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 (ESV)

Wise people know their limitations and they still find life baffling sometimes

Wise people know that however hard they try, they will never know everything. They are keenly aware of how much they do not know or understand. Some things are just beyond us, however wise we may get:

*O LORD, my heart is not lifted up,
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
Psalm 131:1 (RSV)*

¹⁶When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night one's eyes see sleep; ¹⁷then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out; even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

Ecclesiastes 8:16-17 (NIV)

Even for the wisest of people, life is baffling at times. We will never have enough knowledge to be able to understand all of life or to know at all times what to do. God has chosen only to provide us with a limited measure of wisdom, no matter who we may be. So, wise people realise that they cannot know or understand all things.

They are willing to live with an element of uncertainty and inadequacy. That keeps them dependent on God to provide, day by day, the wisdom that they lack. But, even if that understanding is never given to them, they still press ahead anyway. They do what they know to be their duty, even when they are confused or unsure about what God is doing and why.

Indeed, the wiser a person becomes, the more clearly they realise the extent to which they lack knowledge and understanding. Even King Solomon, who had more wisdom than any other man, found that he could not achieve total wisdom, no matter how hard he studied or thought. In the end, even for him, there was frustration, vexation and a sense of failure and futility at times. In fact, the more wisdom he acquired, the more it added to his concerns and sorrows in some ways:

¹²I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. ¹³I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! ¹⁴I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ¹⁵What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted. ¹⁶I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." ¹⁷Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. ¹⁸For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 (RSV)

Also, although we have a measure of understanding of what God has done in the past and what He will do in the future, God puts a limit on how much we can grasp. He will not allow any person, however wise they may be, to have complete knowledge or understanding:

He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (RSV)

There is an element of chance which God has built into the way life operates. No matter what we may do to plan or prepare, and no matter how wise we may become, there will still be random, meaningless events and disasters. Things will not always work out the way they should or the way we expect. The best people do not always win, because the outcome of life is also affected by *time and chance* as well as by hard work and ability.

If we can recognise this, and learn to live with it rather than rail against it, we will avoid some of the vexation that life brings. One important point that arises from the book of Job is that Job's friends make a series of comments about his situation and give him a lot of advice. The truth is that quite a lot of what they say was actually right. It would have been good advice, and even right theology, if it had been given on a different day to a different man in different circumstances. However, Job's situation was a strange one and it didn't fit their own experience.

Thus the things they had to say, although generally true in many other people's situations, were not true of Job or of his circumstances. That is because Job's friends could not see the whole picture as God could see it. Therefore, God was angry with them for criticising and condemning Job when, on this particular occasion, there was a lot more to it than they realised. Thus they were wrong in what they said about Job, even though most of what they said was generally right and would have applied very well to lots of other people:

⁷ It came about after the Lord had spoken these words to Job, that the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends, because you have not spoken of Me what is right as My servant Job has. ⁸ Now therefore, take for yourselves seven bulls and seven rams, and go to My servant Job, and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves, and My servant Job will pray for you. For I will accept him so that I may not do with you according to your folly, because you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has."

Job 42:7-8 (NASB)

A lesson to draw from the book of Job and the mistakes made by Job's friends is that even as we grow in wisdom, and even if we know the whole Bible, there will still be times when the complexity of the issues that we face is beyond our capacity to understand. God has not chosen to share all His knowledge and understanding with us, as he pointed out to Job:

*² "Who is this that darkens counsel
By words without knowledge?"*

*³ "Now gird up your loins like a man,
And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!"*

*⁴ "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell Me, if you have understanding,*

*⁵ Who set its measurements? Since you know,
Or who stretched the line on it?"*

⁶ "On what were its bases sunk?"

Or who laid its cornerstone,

*⁷ When the morning stars sang together
And all the sons of God shouted for joy?"*

*⁸ "Or who enclosed the sea with doors
When, bursting forth, it went out from the womb;*

*⁹ When I made a cloud its garment
And thick darkness its swaddling band,*

¹⁰ And I placed boundaries on it

And set a bolt and doors,

*¹¹ And I said, 'Thus far you shall come, but no farther;
And here shall your proud waves stop'?"*

¹² "Have you ever in your life commanded the morning,

*And caused the dawn to know its place,
13 That it might take hold of the ends of the earth,
And the wicked be shaken out of it?
14 "It is changed like clay under the seal;
And they stand forth like a garment.
15 "From the wicked their light is withheld,
And the uplifted arm is broken.
16 "Have you entered into the springs of the sea
Or walked in the recesses of the deep?
17 "Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
18 "Have you understood the expanse of the earth?
Tell Me, if you know all this.*

Job 38:2-18 (NASB)

*3 Then Job answered the Lord and said,
4 "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You?
I lay my hand on my mouth.
5 "Once I have spoken, and I will not answer;
Even twice, and I will add nothing more."*

Job 40:3-5 (NASB)

Thus a wise person knows that although it is right to pursue wisdom, we must never speak or act as if we had fully acquired it or were fully able to apply it. If we do, then we will end up making pronouncements which go too far, or which are based on incomplete knowledge. Then we will be wrong overall, as Job's friends were, even though the details of much of what we are saying could be correct.

One can see that Job's friends obviously had a lot of genuine understanding. They probably knew more than most believers know, and they were sincere and earnest too. Their error was to presume to pronounce, with excessive confidence, on matters which went beyond their capacity to understand.

They also assumed that just because they knew a *general* principle about how God operates, then that must mean that God *always* operates in that way with *all* people and in *all* situations. That would be to go much too far. It would be like saying that because on several occasions you have seen doctors giving antibiotics to patients, then that means that antibiotics are always appropriate for all patients.

Quite possibly Job's friends went wrong because they expressed their own opinions and beliefs without ever asking God for specific wisdom relevant to Job's situation. There is no evidence in the text that any of them ever made such a prayer. Instead, it seems that they just unleashed what they had to say without ever praying something along the lines of:

"Lord, this situation appears to be very complex. What should I say to Job? Or, should I say nothing at all at present? Please guide me and prevent me from misrepresenting you, or misapplying the limited knowledge that I do have".

Such a prayer would have been well worth making and would be a good prayer for us to make too. Job speaks in that way to God at the end of the book of Job when he realises his own smallness and the limited extent of his understanding in comparison to what God knows:

*Then Job answered the Lord and said,
2 "I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.
3 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'
Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand,*

Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”

⁴ ‘Hear, now, and I will speak;

I will ask You, and You instruct me.’

⁵ “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear;

But now my eye sees You;

⁶ Therefore I retract,

And I repent in dust and ashes.”

Job 42:1-6 (NASB)

Wise people will choose to humble themselves rather than exalt themselves

A vast number of promises are made in the Bible to those who are willing to humble themselves. It is clearly a major issue to God, presumably because pride was the first sin ever to take place, i.e. when Lucifer became proud and began to want to take the place of the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. His sin is what led to every other sin and so pride has a lot to answer for. Accordingly, many blessings and benefits will be given to those who choose to turn away from their own pride and to voluntarily humble themselves.

The other side of the same coin is that God will personally oppose, obstruct, diminish and ultimately destroy, all those who are proud and exalt themselves. Wise people realise all of this and take it very seriously. They know that God really means what He says and will fully carry out all of the promises, and warnings, that He has made.

We shall look at just a few of these statements that God makes as to what He will do for the humble and to the proud. However, please be aware that there are many more of these. Therefore this subject is worthy of a lengthy study just by itself.

God hates pride and shuns proud people. He only has regard for the humble:

For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly;

but the haughty he knows from afar.

Psalms 138:6 (RSV)

God has created a specific law which governs the whole universe, whether we are believers or not:

whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Matthew 23:12 (RSV)

We are also told in Proverbs of another principle which applies everywhere:

Pride goes before destruction,

and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Proverbs 16:18 (RSV)

A man’s pride will bring him low,

but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.

Proverbs 29:23 (RSV)

It doesn't matter who you are; God will arrange for these laws or principles to operate automatically. As we can see from the verses above, it works in both directions. Therefore, wise people, knowing of this law and taking it seriously, will humble themselves whenever they can and avoid exalting themselves. That way, they know that they can rely on God to exalt them in due course.

This is the exact opposite of what our flesh nature instinctively wants to do. So, humility always has to be imposed on ourselves by a deliberate decision. It is never the choice that our flesh would make for itself if it was allowed to choose. When a person does choose to humble themselves then God is so pleased He will intervene in their lives to teach and guide them and give them wisdom:

***He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.***

Psalm 25:9 (RSV)

***When pride comes, then comes disgrace;
but with the humble is wisdom.***

Proverbs 11:2 (RSV)

Humbling oneself also causes God to be willing to hear our prayers and to be willing to use us in His service:

because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants that they should become a desolation and a curse, and you have torn your clothes and wept before Me, I truly have heard you,” declares the Lord.

2 Kings 22:19 (NASB)

***All these things my hand has made,
and so all these things are mine,
says the Lord.
But this is the man to whom I will look,
he that is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word.***

Isaiah 66:2 (RSV)

Humbling ourselves is also the only way to enter the Kingdom of God:

Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.”

Luke 18:17 (NASB)

Avoiding conceit and being willing to associate with the lowly is how God wants all disciples to live:

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited.

Romans 12:16 (RSV)

A wise person will realise that there is no point in boasting about themselves, their abilities or their achievements. The only thing we should ‘boast’ about is God. We must not seek to promote ourselves or make ourselves well-known or approved of. Neither should we praise ourselves or seek the praise of others:

***Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;
a stranger, and not your own lips.***

Proverbs 27:2 (RSV)

The only commendation that really counts is when God commends us:

¹⁷ “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” ¹⁸ For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

2 Corinthians 10:17-18 (ESV)

In conclusion, therefore, a wise person will realise that it is entirely in his own best interests to humble himself, take the lowest place, and shun all boasting and pride. In this life, and in the next life, that is a guaranteed route to success. As the late Derek Prince famously put it, “*the way up is down*”.

Wise people do not allow their hearts to become hard. They take steps to soften their own hearts

A hard heart is one of the main things that prevents a person hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit and from accepting and responding to what the Bible says. But it is a much more widespread problem than most of us imagine. It does not only apply in the case of very hostile people who are angry or embittered towards God. It also applies in the case of ordinary people, including believers, who are:

- a) complacent
- b) indifferent
- c) sceptical and unbelieving
- d) irreverent
- e) presumptuous
- f) unrepentant
- g) slow to respond or obey
- h) determined to stick with their own opinions and traditions rather than what God says.

For all these reasons, and more, any one of us can become hard-hearted. That makes us resistant to what God is saying to us and slow to grasp it. An example of this can be seen even in the case of the apostles. On many occasions they were slow to understand what Jesus said, such as here:

¹¹The Pharisees came out and began to argue with Him, seeking from Him a sign from heaven, to test Him. ¹²Sighing deeply in His spirit, He said, “Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” ¹³Leaving them, He again embarked and went away to the other side. ¹⁴And they had forgotten to take bread, and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. ¹⁵And He was giving orders to them, saying, “Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” ¹⁶They began to discuss with one another the fact that they had no bread. ¹⁷And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? ¹⁸Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember,
Mark 8:11-18 (NASB)

Have you ever stopped to consider how many astonishing statements the Bible makes which we allow to wash over us or pass us by, without taking them seriously and without changing our lives in response? We can become almost immune to the Bible, as if we were coated with some oil which causes God’s Word to run off us like water off a duck’s back.

It is not only unbelievers who are like that. It affects believers too, including genuinely born-again Christians. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews addresses this issue and remember that he is writing *to* believers and *about* believers, not the unsaved:

⁷ *Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says:
“Today, if you will hear His voice,
⁸ Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
In the day of trial in the wilderness,
⁹ Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me,
And saw My works forty years.
¹⁰ Therefore I was angry with that generation,
And said, ‘They always go astray in their heart,
And they have not known My ways.’
¹¹ So I swore in My wrath,
‘They shall not enter My rest.’”*

¹² *Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; ¹³ but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, ¹⁵ while it is said:*

*“Today, if you will hear His voice,
Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”*

¹⁶ *For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? ¹⁷ Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? ¹⁹ So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief*

Hebrews 3:7-19 (NKJV)

The writer of Hebrews (apostle Paul in my personal view) wanted the readers of his letter to take conscious, deliberate steps to avoid becoming hardened by sin, lack of repentance, rebellion and unbelief. He wanted them to ensure that they listened sensitively and receptively to the voice of the Holy Spirit and that they did not allow their hearts to become hardened. He put the responsibility for preventing that upon *them*. It was *their own duty* to become soft-hearted and to avoid becoming, or remaining, hard-hearted.

Hard-heartedness is not something that happens to you randomly, or by accident. It is something that you bring upon yourself by lots of small decisions to ignore or disobey what the Bible says, or what your conscience says, and to go your own way instead.

It usually does not involve any spectacular acts of rebellion. Mostly it comes from a series of very ordinary and unremarkable little choices. But each one leaves us just a tiny bit harder, duller and less sensitive to our consciences, or to what the Bible says. As time passes, unless you take decisive action to repent and change your attitude, then you will eventually sink into a condition of much deeper hardness of heart. If so, that is very dangerous.

Therefore a wise person does not assume that such hardening of the heart could never apply to him. Nor does he fail to take it seriously. He takes active steps to ‘tenderise’ his own heart by regularly humbling himself and repenting. He also asks God to expose and deal with any remaining hardness of heart.

On another occasion we see Jesus becoming amazed and exasperated at the unbelief being displayed by His disciples. It was in relation to a demonised boy. The boy’s father had asked the disciples to cast a demon out of his son but they were unable to do so. Jesus’s response to their failure is surprisingly frank:

¹⁷ *And one of the crowd answered Him, “Teacher, I brought You my son, possessed with a spirit which makes him mute; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it slams him to the ground and he foams at*

the mouth, and grinds his teeth and stiffens out. I told Your disciples to cast it out, and they could not do it.”¹⁹ And He *answered them and *said, “O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!”²⁰ They brought the boy to Him. When he saw Him, immediately the spirit threw him into a convulsion, and falling to the ground, he began rolling around and foaming at the mouth.

Mark 9:17-20 (NASB)

However, before we get too critical of the disciples, we need to ask ourselves how well we would have done if we had been faced with that demonized boy. Most of us would have shown even less faith than the apostles had. If so, what would Jesus say of us, given that we are probably better informed than the apostles were at that point. Unlike them, we have the whole New Testament, in addition to the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet most of us would not attempt to cast a demon out of anybody, or even consider doing it.

The attitude of the boy’s father is helpful to note and imitate. He is eager to believe, but he openly admits to Jesus that he is struggling with unbelief. He has the good sense and the honesty to say, frankly, where he really stands and to ask Jesus to help him to overcome that unbelief:

²¹And He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood.²² It has often thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!”²³ And Jesus said to him, “If You can?” All things are possible to him who believes.”²⁴ Immediately the boy’s father cried out and said, “I do believe; help my unbelief.”

Mark 9:21-24 (NASB)

Where we see hardness of heart in ourselves, or even where we cannot see it but we suspect it to be there, we should ask God to expose it. Ask Him to do whatever it takes to help us to soften our hearts and to become responsive to His voice. That is a prayer well worth making and one which God will delight to answer. The benefits which will flow from it are enormous. Yet how often have you done this, or heard anybody urge you to do so?

Sometimes we just need to ask God to help us to see our own hardness of heart and to tackle it. However, if we do that then sometimes we will need to make difficult decisions or do painful and costly things in order to obey God and to develop as disciples. On such occasions the price is worth paying because it will tenderise us and help us grow in maturity

The policy of deliberately seeking to soften our own hearts and to humble ourselves involves becoming rather like small children in our attitudes towards God. But, at least in this sense, God wants us to have that childlike heart-attitude:

¹³ And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them.¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, “Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.¹⁵ Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.”

Mark 10:13-15 (NASB)

In the light of what Jesus says, taking the lowest place is actually enlightened self-interest. That is how we rise up in His Kingdom. Conversely, grasping for seniority, status and recognition in this life only causes us to be brought lower down in God’s eyes. I can remember an occasion when I got the chance to put this principle into operation. I was at a funeral and some formal cars had been hired to take certain people to it. A complication arose and it had to be decided who should be in the car nearer the front of the line of funeral cars.

A particular woman spoke up and insisted that she and her family travel in the car nearer the front, i.e. rather than my family. I immediately agreed to what she was demanding and we went to a car farther

back. I did it firstly to avoid an unseemly scene, but also because I could not bear the thought of demanding the higher place. I would have felt ashamed to do so.

As we drove along behind her, in a supposedly lower place *as she saw it*, it occurred to me that we had actually ended up in the higher place. At any rate, that was what it was *in God's eyes*. To Him, the highest place is at the bottom. Or, as Derek Prince used to say, "*The way up is down*".

Wise people fear God and honour Him

It is probably true to say that more things are promised in the Bible to those who fear the LORD than to those who have any other single characteristic. In particular, we are told that the fear of the LORD makes us become wise:

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
a good understanding have all those who practice it.
His praise endures for ever!*

Psalm 111:10 (RSV)

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Proverbs 1:7 (RSV)

And he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.'

Job 28:28 (RSV)

It is not only wisdom, knowledge and understanding that we will be given if we fear the LORD. There are many other gifts and qualities which God will bring into the lives of those who fear and honour Him. Wise people therefore *choose* to fear God and thus to benefit from His many promises. Here are just a few verses which show that those who are wise enough to fear the LORD will be prosperous, honoured, sustained and delivered from danger:

¹²*Who is the man that fears the LORD?
Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.*

¹³*He himself shall abide in prosperity,
and his children shall possess the land.*

¹⁴*The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,
and he makes known to them his covenant.*

Psalm 25:12-14 (RSV)

.....for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.

1 Samuel 2:30 (b) (RSV)

¹⁸*Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,*

¹⁹*that he may deliver their soul from death,
and keep them alive in famine.*

Psalm 33:18-19 (RSV)

*The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him,
and delivers them.*

Psalm 34:7 (RSV)

If you feel you don't yet have the fear of the LORD, or that you don't fear God enough, then you can develop it. Partly you do that by simply choosing to honour God and His word. As we diligently study God's Word with a determination to take it seriously and apply it, then God will *teach us* the fear of the LORD and build it into our lives:

*Come, O sons, listen to me,
I will teach you the fear of the LORD.
Psalm 34:11 (RSV)*

The wise know that they can be deceived by others and that they will be. They also know that their own hearts are deceitful, such that they deceive themselves, and they make allowances for that

No matter how wise you may become, you will never reach the point where you are beyond being deceived by other people. It will still happen, though you should obviously seek to minimise it. We should be on our guard, seeking as best we can to avoid being deceived. But we should not be surprised when we still are, no matter how hard we try to avoid it. The best policy when that happens is to admit that you have been deceived, rather than pretend that you never were.

Moses warned the Israelites that they must *take care* to make sure that their own hearts were not deceived. He clearly didn't think that there was anything automatic about it or any room for complacency:

*Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them;
Deuteronomy 11:16 (ESV)*

Every person's heart is deceitful, no matter who we are. While ever we have a flesh nature, which we shall have until we die, our own heart will lie to us, *even if we are wise*. We lie to ourselves about our own motives, our responsibilities and whether we were right or wrong in the things we have done.

The point is that wise people recognise that self-deceiving tendency in themselves and *make allowances for it*. They realise how much delusion and self-deception their own hearts are capable of. Jeremiah, one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history, knew that this was even true of himself:

*The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?
Jeremiah 17:9 (RSV)*

Not only should we not trust other people; *we should not even trust ourselves*. Our own heart will lie to us whenever it gets the chance. We need to cross-examine ourselves regularly, and be willing to say to ourselves: "*Come off it - you are in the wrong here*". If we can do that to ourselves we will prevent many problems. It will also reduce the need for God to discipline us.

Consider King Solomon's eventual conclusion, at the end of all his writings. He knew that even he had to face God's judgment, despite being aware that he was the wisest man who would ever live. He also knew that there were areas of sin within his own life that were kept secret but which will also come under God's judgment:

¹³*The end of the matter;
all has been heard. Fear God,
and keep his commandments;
for this is the whole duty of man.
¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment,*

with every secret thing, whether good or evil.
Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (RSV)

Wise people know when it is right to take a firm stand and confront people and when it is better to be diplomatic, seek consensus, or even remain silent

We saw earlier in chapter three, when discussing discretion that *a wise person knows the time*. They know when to do a certain thing, when to do the opposite, and when to do nothing at all. We are told in Ecclesiastes that there is a time for everything:

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—

² *A time to give birth and a time to die;*

A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.

³ *A time to kill and a time to heal;*

A time to tear down and a time to build up.

⁴ *A time to weep and a time to laugh;*

A time to mourn and a time to dance.

⁵ *A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;*

A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.

⁶ *A time to search and a time to give up as lost;*

A time to keep and a time to throw away.

⁷ *A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;*

A time to be silent and a time to speak.

⁸ *A time to love and a time to hate;*

A time for war and a time for peace.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NASB)

The Bible sets out many *general principles* relating to a host of different issues. But, concerning those same issues, it also gives us a number of other *counter-balancing principles*. We then have to work out when to apply one principle and when to apply the opposite one. So, for example, Jude speaks of certain people who cause damage in the church with their false teaching and wrong behaviour. He then urges us to stand up to such people and to defend the church and the faith from their bad influence:

³ *Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. ⁴ For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*

Jude 3-4 (NASB)

Likewise, we see both apostle John and apostle Paul publicly exposing and rebuking certain people who were causing harm in the church, or who were wrong on important points of doctrine or practice:

⁹ *I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. ¹⁰ For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.*

3 John 9-10 (NASB)

¹⁴ *Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.*

¹⁵ *Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching.*

2 Timothy 4:14-15 (NASB)

On one occasion apostle Paul even publicly opposed and criticised Peter:

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. ¹³ The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Galatians 2:11-14 (NASB)

Paul also tells us to watch out for those who cause dissension by teaching false doctrine and he tells us to turn away from them:

¹⁷ Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. ¹⁸ For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

Romans 16:17-18 (NASB)

Yet, in the book of James we are told *not to speak against one another*:

¹¹ Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. ¹² There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?

James 4:11-12 (NASB)

Moreover, in Romans, Paul tells us to be *at peace with all men* where possible:

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.
Romans 12:18 (NASB)

Paul also tells Titus not to get drawn into unnecessary controversies over minor matters:

But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile.

Titus 3:9 (RSV)

There may appear to be a contradiction here, but actually there isn't any. At any given moment, whether we should make peace or make a stand depends on all the circumstances and on the importance of the issues, principles or doctrines which are at stake. It also depends on who or what might be damaged or put at risk either by our silence or by our speaking out.

Accordingly, it is not possible to write down a categorical set of rules as to when we should and should not speak out, take a stand, confront a person, create a controversy or even risk the splitting up of a church.

There are times and places when any one of those options may be the only right course of action. There are also times when we should instead compromise, conciliate, overlook a matter, turn a blind eye, seek to build bridges, try to keep people together and so on. An example of when it may be right to overlook another man's error or wrong thinking is if we are dealing with someone who is weak in the faith or only a new believer:

¹Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. ²One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. ³The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. ⁴Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

Romans 14:1-6 (NASB)

¹³Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. ¹⁴I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. ¹⁵For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. ¹⁶Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

¹⁹So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. ²⁰Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. ²¹It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. ²²The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Romans 14:13-23 (NASB)

We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ²Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. ³For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."⁴ For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. ⁵Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, ⁶that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans 15:1-7 (NKJV)

The point is that a wise person is aware of *all* of the different guiding principles and instructions set out in the Bible. He also knows how and when to apply each one and *how to hold them all in tension simultaneously*. Therefore he achieves a good overall balance. That is not done by applying every principle every time, but by knowing which principle, or which opposite, counter-balancing principle, should be applied at any given time.

I was speaking to a man recently who told me of a situation that arose in his church over 20 years ago. He had wanted to pursue a particular policy and others wanted to do the opposite. He told me that he had given way because he "wanted to preserve unity and avoid any split in the church".

I said to him that I felt he had possibly made the wrong decision all those years ago and I asked to what extent he had considered the counter-balancing principle that we are to contend earnestly for the faith and to take a stand, as Paul did when he publicly challenged and corrected Peter. I also asked him what made him think that preserving unity and avoiding church splits was the main or all-important objective. I reminded him that Jesus had told us clearly that He had not come to bring peace but division:

⁵¹ *Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; ⁵² for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.*"

Luke 12:51-53 (NASB)

This does not mean that everything that Jesus said and did will always bring division. Nor does it mean that we should be actively seeking division, or even unconcerned when it arises, despite all our best efforts to prevent it. The point is that Jesus is warning us that if we teach and practise the truth then controversy, division and even hatred *will inevitably arise*, no matter how much we might wish it was otherwise.

Consequently, although we should want unity in the church, and take all reasonable steps to create and maintain such unity, there are limits. A point can be reached where the doctrine or principle that we are upholding is sufficiently serious to justify causing or allowing a split in the church. Indeed, there are times when the only way that the true church can be seen is when there is division. It is at such times that the true believers can, and should, separate themselves from the false.

Thus an over-emphasis on maintaining unity can actually cause us to harm the real Church and the cause of the genuine gospel. In other words, it is wrong to pursue unity slavishly, or to pay too high a price for maintaining, it as if it was the most important thing. It clearly isn't. For one thing, truth is more important than unity. Indeed, truth is the only real basis for genuine unity, of the type that God wants the Church to have.

Conversely, there is another group of people who do grasp the need for truth and for faithfulness to the real gospel and to the scriptures. But they don't realise, or sufficiently emphasise, the need to try to preserve the unity of the Church. The error can be made in either direction, just as it can be on any other issue.

There is something about our fallen nature which causes us to tend to be attracted to one particular school of thought or principle, to the exclusion of others. We then elevate that principle and understate, or even forget, any counter-balancing principles. That's the way most of us are and we need to recognise that weakness and take steps to counteract it.

Some of us are the type of person who can see the need for unity and for keeping the peace. Others of us contend earnestly for the true faith and for true doctrine. Very few of us can manage even to be aware of *both objectives*, let alone to seek them both *simultaneously*.

Therefore some people will readily engage in conflict and controversy to defend the truth on every issue, without regard to the disruption it may produce. Others will seek to preserve unity and peace at all costs, without regard to the loss of truth which that approach causes.

However hard it may be, we should at least aim to emphasise both of these objectives and principles at the same time. Thus we are meant to become "*diplomatic contenders for truth*". Or you could say we should be "*honest and doctrinally faithful pursuers of peace*".

Where such a balance cannot be achieved or where, despite all our best endeavours, the controversy persists and does not appear to be capable of resolution, then we have a choice to make. One or other objective must prevail and the one we choose in any given situation will depend upon the gravity of the issues over which there is disagreement.

So, if it is the classic, and probably apochryphal, situation of a church facing a split over what colour of carpets to have, then the right answer is for you to give way. Let the other people have whatever

colour of carpets they want. Over such a trivial issue it is far more important to preserve peace and unity than for you to get your own way, even if you believe you are right.

However, if it was a debate as to the nature of the gospel message, or an important issue of practice such as whether there can be same-sex marriage, then it is essential that there be a church split if the alternative is for such things to be approved. Thus, if a person is a member of a church which has decided that it is going to marry homosexuals, they should be willing to leave that church and also to encourage other people to leave that church as well, if they are willing.

Moreover, prior to that, they should speak out openly in opposition to the proposals, even if that causes unrest and ill will amongst others. There should, of course, be no ill will on *your* part. However, there needs to be a willingness to accept the ill will of *others* which will probably arise in response to the stand you take.

Accordingly, we might summarise the right overall balance by saying that we should:

- a) be very willing to concede ground on any *non-essential issue* which is not an important question of doctrine
- b) use diplomacy, compromise and conciliation *as far as we can*, provided we do not go farther than our conscience, or the Scriptures, permit.
- c) avoid controversy and conflict *if we can*, but not be afraid of causing or permitting those things if they are genuinely needed and unavoidable
- d) be willing to engage in confrontation, debate and controversy if those things are genuinely needed, but *not to desire them, or to take pleasure from them*
- e) not rush to confront but, instead begin with tact, diplomacy and persuasion and only go to the stage of confrontation once all peaceful approaches *have been tried but have failed*
- f) even so, not be *so timid or reluctant* about the prospect of controversy as to *leave it too late* to take a stand

It might assist if I identified four broad issues over which there can be no compromise and where there is no room for differences of opinion. These are, therefore, four situations where we would need to take a stand and be willing to leave a church and/or break off fellowship with another Christian:

- a) where the dispute concerns *the identity of Jesus Christ i.e. who and what He is*. So, for example, if a church is denying that Jesus is both fully God and fully man, then that is a clear basis for you to leave. However, if the dispute was only about the precise interpretation of prophecy, or the sequence of prophesied events, then there is plenty of room for disagreement and no need to break fellowship. Indeed, it would be wrong to do so.
- b) where the dispute concerns *the nature of the gospel*, such that a church is preaching a gospel which is false or incomplete. For example where sin, judgment, Hell, the Lake of Fire or repentance are left out of the message, or minimised, then that church has a false gospel. That too is a valid basis for leaving.
- c) where the dispute concerns *the nature of God's Word, the Bible*. So, if a church is teaching that the Bible is not infallible, or that it is not God's Word, or that one need not obey it, then that is a basis for breaking off fellowship. However, disagreements as to the meaning of particular passages, whilst all concerned are accepting that the Bible is God's infallible Word, is not such a basis.

d) Where there is *clear and serious immorality on the part of a believer* (not an unsaved, unbeliever or enquirer) and where there is *a refusal to repent*, then a church can and should break off fellowship with him. So, if for example, a fellow Christian, and especially a leader, is engaging in sexual sin or financial dishonesty or is telling lies or engaging in the occult or other serious sins, then we would need to break off fellowship with them. But we would not need to do so where the sins in question are not gross, or where the person is repenting and seeking to put things right. In such a case that person needs our help and support. But if they are continuing in their sin we should leave them. Here is what Paul says on this:

⁹I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; ¹⁰not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹But rather I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one. ¹²For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³God judges those outside. “Drive out the wicked person from among you.”

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (RSV)

Other than in these four broad areas, we should aim to agree to disagree and maintain fellowship with a fellow believer or with a church. We should always try hard *not* to break off fellowship with other believers *unless we really have to*.

Being realistic, there are few, if any, people who consistently know, for every issue and situation, what the right time is and whether/when/how to take a stand or give ground. Yet a wise person at least knows that such questions need to be asked and that there are valid biblical principles which can point in both directions simultaneously. Conversely, most of us are simple and are therefore only aware of, or only emphasise, one principle or another, rather than both or all.

The wicked can, and do, cause real harm, even to the wise

Nobody is immune to the harm that is caused by wicked people. Just as there is a randomness factor in life, there is also a 'wickedness factor'. Even the wisest people will sometimes become victims of that. It can be watched out for and reduced, but never completely eliminated from life. Therefore wise people know that they need God's protection, in addition to doing all they can for themselves, in order to avoid the harm that the wicked can do:

*¹Give ear to my prayer, O God;
and hide not thyself from my supplication!
²Attend to me, and answer me;
I am overcome by my trouble. I am distraught
³by the noise of the enemy,
because of the oppression of the wicked.
For they bring trouble upon me,
and in anger they cherish enmity against me.
⁴My heart is in anguish within me,
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
⁵Fear and trembling come upon me,
and horror overwhelms me.
⁶And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;
*Psalm 55:1-6 (RSV)**

Wise people know what will eventually happen to the wicked. Therefore they try hard not to be influenced by them or discouraged by their apparent success or ‘invincibility’.

It takes some wisdom to really grasp the fact that the wicked are not going to be there permanently and that they are all doomed. A fool or a simple person will not realise this, or not realise it adequately:

*⁶ The stupid man cannot know;
the fool cannot understand this:
⁷ that though the wicked sprout like grass
and all evildoers flourish,
they are doomed to destruction forever;
Psalm 92:6-7 (ESV)*

There are many passages in the Bible which deal with the problem of why the wicked seem to do so well and why God’s judgment on them appears to be delayed, such that for long periods of time they prosper, and even seem to be invincible, while they continue doing evil. That is how it *appears to us* because we don’t have God’s long term perspective about time. A wicked man being in power for 13 years, as Hitler was, seems a long time to us. Others have lasted even longer than that.

It is not only the great dictators and world leaders that we are speaking of here. The same is true in our own personal lives at a local level. Wicked people can, and do prosper. They become rich. They gain power and possessions. They exert great influence. Conversely, those who do what is right are often obstructed, held back and unrecognised and they can seem to be unsuccessful and unimpressive in the world’s eyes.

In the face of this common experience, it is easy to become demoralised and discouraged. Some even feel tempted to join in with the wicked, to imitate them, or at least not to oppose them, in the hope that compromise, or even cooperation, may bring us greater success. But we must hold on to the facts that the Bible sets out about the inevitable long-term destiny of all who are wicked. They will *all* fail and be brought down in the end.

At the very least, they will be brought down by death, after which they will face the full severity of God’s judgment. That is the ultimate long stop which limits the power and influence of every wicked person. King David struggled with this issue of the prosperity of the wicked and addressed it in the Psalms, for example here:

*Fret not yourself because of evildoers;
be not envious of wrongdoers!
² For they will soon fade like the grass
and wither like the green herb.
³ Trust in the LORD, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
⁴ Delight yourself in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
⁵ Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.
⁶ He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday.
⁷ Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;
fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way,
over the man who carries out evil devices!
⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!
Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.
⁹ For the evildoers shall be cut off,*

but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

¹⁰ *In just a little while, the wicked will be no more;
though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.*

¹¹ *But the meek shall inherit the land
and delight themselves in abundant peace.*

¹² *The wicked plots against the righteous
and gnashes his teeth at him,*

¹³ *but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he sees that his day is coming.*

¹⁴ *The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose way is upright;*

¹⁵ *their sword shall enter their own heart,
and their bows shall be broken.*

¹⁶ *Better is the little that the righteous has
than the abundance of many wicked.*

¹⁷ *For the arms of the wicked shall be broken,
but the LORD upholds the righteous.*

¹⁸ *The LORD knows the days of the blameless,
and their heritage will remain forever;*

Psalm 37:1-18 (ESV)

²⁷ *Turn away from evil and do good;
so shall you dwell forever.*

²⁸ *For the LORD loves justice;
he will not forsake his saints.*

*They are preserved forever,
but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.
The righteous shall inherit the land
and dwell upon it forever.*

Psalm 37:27-29 (ESV)

³⁴ *Wait for the LORD and keep his way,
and he will exalt you to inherit the land;
you will look on when the wicked are cut off.*

³⁵ *I have seen a wicked, ruthless man,
spreading himself like a green laurel tree.*

³⁶ *But he passed away,¹ and behold, he was no more;
though I sought him, he could not be found.*

³⁷ *Mark the blameless and behold the upright,
for there is a future for the man of peace.*

³⁸ *But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed;
the future of the wicked shall be cut off.*

Psalm 37:34-38 (ESV)

²⁰ *Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
those who frame injustice by statute?*

²¹ *They band together against the life of the righteous
and condemn the innocent to death.*

²² *But the LORD has become my stronghold,
and my God the rock of my refuge.*

²³ *He will bring back on them their iniquity
and wipe them out for their wickedness;
the LORD our God will wipe them out.*

Psalm 94:20-23 (ESV)

A wise person therefore knows that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, it is the wicked who are failing and who will one day be stopped, exposed and punished. No matter how it may appear now, they have no long term future and are doomed to fail. That being so, a wise person will ally himself with God's people, and will shun the wicked and their influence, even if that appears to be costly at present:

*For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.
Psalm 84:10 (ESV)*

In the end we shall all see the stark contrast between God's judgment of the wicked and His handling of the righteous:

¹⁶ Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. ¹⁷ "They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. ¹⁸ Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³ And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi 3:16 - 4:3 (ESV)