

CHAPTER 7

WHAT WISE PEOPLE DO - PART ONE

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

¹ *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)*

*For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those
whose heart is blameless toward him.....
2 Chronicles 16:9(a) (ESV)*

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)*

³ *The LORD was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the earlier ways of his father David. He
did not seek the Baals, ⁴ but sought the God of his father and walked in his commandments, and not
according to the practices of Israel. ⁵ Therefore the LORD established the kingdom in his hand. And
all Judah brought tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he had great riches and honor.
2 Chronicles 17:3-5 (ESV)*

*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)*

Wise people hate the things that God hates

Merely *believing* in God does not make us wise. A wise person goes much further than that. He fears God and he also values and pursues those things that God values. His persistent study of the Bible means that his thoughts, beliefs and attitudes are continually coming closer into line with God's. But it goes even further than just agreeing with God, valuing the things that He values, and loving the things that He loves. A wise person also *hates* the things that God hates, such as falsehood and evil:

⁵ *The boastful shall not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.*

⁶ *You destroy those who speak lies;
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.
because God wants us to hate those things:*

Psalm 5:5-6 (ESV)

*The LORD tests the righteous,
but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.*

Psalm 11:5 (ESV)

What is more, God *wants* us to hate those things too:

*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 righteous man hates falsehood,
but a wicked man acts shamefully and disgracefully.*

Proverbs 13:5 (RSV)

²¹ *Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?*

²² *I hate them with complete hatred;
I count them my enemies.*

Psalm 139:21-22 (ESV)

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, but only God's wisdom:

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 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 maturity and wisdom. So, a wise person will show his wisdom by displaying the fruit of the Holy Spirit in his character, lifestyle, choices, actions and reactions. 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)

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 for the way they choose to live. The things 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)

¹ *Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!*

² *You 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 rewards and blessings will often come in this life, although God never guarantees that. But, even if they don't all come before we die, what is guaranteed is they will come at the Judgment Seat of Christ. A wise person is well aware that God rewards and exalts those who live righteously. That fact motivates wise people to make right choices, avoid sin and do what God wants. A recurring theme in the Bible is that wisdom is primarily expressed through our character, attitudes, values and lifestyle choices, not our intellectual abilities.

We can also show wisdom in the practical things we do, i.e. the skill and expertise we use in our work, because a person who is skilled and competent in their work is considered wise in God's eyes. Never make the mistake of thinking that only intellectual types can be wise. If someone is not academic or bookish, but excels in their practical work, and if they do their tasks with diligence, God would consider them wise, at least in regard to their work. That is crucial, because it takes up half our waking hours.

An example of this was Hiram who came from Tyre. King Solomon engaged him 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 for the Temple. This point is so important to God that He 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 him:

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 God draws attention to Hiram, and classes him as wise, ought to encourage anyone whose main talents are practical rather than academic, which applies to 75% or more of the population. In the U.K. there is an attitude of snobbery which causes some to look down on manual work, even if it is done by craftsmen. That is not God's view. If you have been given mainly practical or craft-related abilities, then give thanks for them and seek to become as skilled as possible. Then you will be considered wise in God's eyes in the way you do your work, which matters very much to Him.

My own Dad was a manual worker all his life, first 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 he ever did he 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, and when he later grew vegetables, he did all things well. Everything he grew was successful. He taught me things all the time when I worked with him on his allotments. I also picked up a lot just by watching.

Even in something as ordinary as shovelling coal, a surprising amount of skill is 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, to maximise efficiency. I say all that to emphasise how important practical skills are in God's eyes. He wants all of us to aim to become wise, whatever jobs we may be in, not just those who are in academic professions.

Wise people are careful whom they confide in and are not quick to trust 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 grave error of assuming that other people 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, even if they aren't. So they don't confide. They are cagey and careful with everyone.

Thus, both groups, the simple and the wicked, make the same assumption, i.e. that all other people are like themselves. Either way, it is wrong. Wise people make neither of the above mistakes. They

themselves are sincere, but they know that 90+% of other people are not. Therefore, they have learned not to assume that other people are sincere, whereas the wicked have always known that and weren't under any illusions to begin with. But the wise only tend to realise it later in life, due to bitter experiences of other people's unfaithfulness, disloyalty and dishonesty.

So, wise people are realistic and careful. They pick and choose the people with whom they can speak freely. Even then, they open up slowly and only let their guard down 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, on the face of it, to be genuine. They know that it takes a long time to properly establish what another person really is. First impressions and appearances can be very deceptive, such that a person's falseness only becomes apparent later on:

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 in stages, and only where it is essential. They only reveal the minimum, rather than saying all that they know. They have usually learned this from past experiences of being let down. I myself was let down, or even betrayed, 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, where people's sins, faults and bad habits are revealed by pressure and by being in close proximity with others for long periods. Therefore, my approach now is to 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 do that, but the wicked frequently do. It's a very bad sign and one that you need to watch out for. See it as your cue to clam up and say nothing more. In short, never confide in anybody who *wants* you to do so. That is especially important if they ask you outright, or 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, but of naivety, which is a fault, not a quality. We must not trust anybody until sufficient evidence has been gathered to justify it, which takes a long time. When a person does *not* trust other people, it is not necessarily a sign that they are bad. They may actually be being wise, though not always. The wicked are also reluctant to trust people, but not because they are wise. They operate in a different way and are *suspicious* rather than cautious, and for different reasons, i.e. *because* they are wicked themselves, and fully assume that others are too.

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 constantly wary, like a wild animal is. But they are like that without ever 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 wise, or that they are merely a simple/naive person who has been wounded by others.

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 have to dig deeper to discover their reasons for that wariness. Only then can you gauge whether they are doing it because they are wise, or wicked, or just naive but wounded. Your assessment will also need to be guided by other aspects of their speech,

actions and character. An example of this is a man, whom we'll call *Jason*. He naively told the whole truth to a family court when in a child access dispute with his ex-wife.

He had become a Christian after they split up, but was not saved some years earlier when he married her and when they had a son, who was now about seven. She had gone in the opposite direction spiritually and had married a Muslim and she had been given care and control of the child. Jason had only limited access, which she obstructed further as she became increasingly hostile to his Christian faith. She hit back at him by being difficult over access and, even worse, by trying to poison his son's mind against him.

Jason made an application to enforce his rights to access and to increase them, so he could see his son more often and try to counteract the lies she was telling the boy. This all happened before I knew Jason and before I had a chance to advise him. He was therefore naïve and made the mistake of being very open about his Christian faith when speaking to his own lawyers and, even more unwisely, in his dealings with the court. He told them plainly that he was a committed Christian, and that his wife was denigrating both himself and Christianity when speaking to their son.

He also pointed out that she had become a Muslim and was seeking to bring their boy up as a Muslim, which he opposed. In his naivety, Jason imagined that the court would act impartially and that the judge would respect his Christian beliefs and take them into account. He also assumed that the judge would not unfairly favour Islam. However, it turned out very badly. The judge did not respect him, or his beliefs, at all and became hostile, seeing Jason as the problem for disturbing the boy's Muslim upbringing. Predictably, the politically correct judge respected Islam, but not Christianity.

I could have warned Jason that that would almost certainly happen if I had known him at the time. I later told him that he should have said nothing about his own Christian faith and should not have mentioned how he felt about his ex-wife's new Muslim faith. It was virtually inevitable, given the modern UK legal system, that any such arguments would go badly for him. Thus, a policy of silence and keeping his beliefs to himself would have been far wiser. He should have expected the court to despise his beliefs, as it was far more likely to do that than to be supportive, or even neutral.

Thirty years ago things may well have been different, but not today. Having said all that, let me give another counterbalancing example of a situation where outright openness about your Christian faith could well be a wise policy. I refer to the position when you are applying for jobs and the question arises as to whether to mention that you are a Christian and that you go to church. People have asked me whether to put this on their CV and whether to be open about their faith and their church activities when in a job interview.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the points made above concerning Jason's naïve openness, I have generally advised people to be straightforward about their faith *when applying for jobs*, because you do not currently work for that employer. Therefore, even if he hates Christianity, he cannot do anything to harm you, other than reject you. But if he does hate Christianity, as so many do, then rejecting you would actually be a big favour. The alternative would have been for you to only discover his hostility to Christianity *after* you begin working for him, which would be vastly worse for you.

Given that so many employers are hostile to Christianity, and that you don't know who they are, but wish to avoid them if you can, being open on your CV makes sense. It gives your potential future enemies a reason to identify themselves and to reject you at the outset. That then helps you to make sure that you and they never actually work together. If you make 20 job applications, and if even 10 of the employers were hostile to your faith, you would still have the other 10 applications to pursue. They would all then, by definition, be employers who are *not hostile* to your faith.

Although it might seem that you are losing half of your opportunities by being open, you aren't really, because you would never have been happy at those firms anyway. Neither would you have prospered, unless you had been willing to compromise and fit in with their standards. But that would be even

worse than being persecuted. Therefore, with job applications, a higher level of openness is appropriate to maximise your chances of avoiding a hostile employer and of finding one who is at least neutral.

When I used to sift through CVs when recruiting, the ones who said they were Christians generally got an interview, unless they were clearly unsuitable for other reasons. From then on, however, they had to progress solely on their merits. But even if 5-10% of employers are positive towards Christianity, not merely neutral, there is actually scope for you to gain something from your transparency. It could cause some doors to open which might otherwise have remained closed.

Another reason for being open on your CV is that it is important to be open about your faith and not ashamed of it when you join a new firm. The easiest way to do that is to put it on your CV as it will soon get around, because people talk. That is an advantage as it means you don't need to be quite so brave when you begin in the job, by explicitly announcing that you are a Christian. Many find that difficult and therefore never get around to it, which causes them, and others, to lose out. The best thing in a new job is to start as you mean to go on, by being open on your CV, right at the start.

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. The other man had got what he wanted, which was the money. It was only at that late stage, when the damage had already been done, that my advice was sought.

Sadly that is often the case. I then 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, but he then said "*Well, I don't know. It's just what you always hear in church*".

Even as he said it, he suddenly realised that, in the whole Bible, we are never once 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 and 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 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. by what they do*, and 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. That said, 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 handle other men’s teaching is seen in Acts 17:11, about 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 it at face value. Even Paul’s teaching had to be checked out, and they were right to do so, even if he had been well known to them. 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 deeds and their fruit carefully and check the accuracy and faithfulness of their teaching.

You may have heard it said that you should *“think the best of everyone”* and *“trust everyone until they do something to cause you to withdraw your trust”*. That is very unwise advice and is the wrong default-setting. We should in fact do the very opposite and assume 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 misguided 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 also 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. However, that is a quite separate, and very different, policy from the one I am advocating, because most people *are* likeable and friendly, but most people are not trustworthy.

It is commonplace for a person to be entirely likeable, and yet still not be trustworthy, because these are two entirely different concepts. We must never equate them, or mistake one for the other, or 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 dealing with people. He had infinite discernment and could see what was in men’s hearts.

He therefore 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. Despite all that, Jesus did not trust this delegation that had been sent to question Him. He knew they had malice in their hearts and that their real motive was to try to trip Him up and get Him into trouble:

¹⁵ *Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶ And 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. ¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” ¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹ Show 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, because they contrasted with their actions. At any rate, the point is that Jesus did not trust them. Therefore, He would not give them a full answer and 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 at least seek to move in that direction. We must therefore begin to watch out for falseness in others and not trust anybody with our innermost thoughts and plans until it has been proved, by many different means, and over a long period of time, that they can be trusted.

In this next passage we see Jesus again refusing to answer what sounds, on the face of it, like a reasonable question. It came from a group of the Chief Priests, Scribes and Elders, 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, i.e. 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 He would have given them an answer to their question. But they didn't answer Him, so He didn't answer them. In the same way we need to test other people and find out whether they are sincere and genuine before we tell them anything about our own 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. The instruction to seek for it whole-heartedly is given over and over again in the Bible, as in these few examples:

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)*

*An intelligent heart acquires knowledge,
and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge.
Proverbs 18:15 (ESV)*

*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 wisdom very intensely would be willing to pay such a high price, and to continue to pay it, for long enough. Decide now to become such a person. Start to value wisdom that highly and to seek for it that fervently:

*¹My 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)*

In Proverbs chapter 8 wisdom is ‘personified’. That is ‘wisdom’ speaks within the chapter as if it was a person and was urging you to pursue him diligently and love him with all your strength. In this verse wisdom promises to love those who love ‘him’, and that ‘he’ will be found by those who seek him diligently. That is no coincidence, because Wisdom really is a person and that Person is Jesus. Indeed, one of His many titles is “*the Wisdom of God*” and thus it is literally true that to pursue Wisdom is to pursue Him:

*I love those who love me,
and those who seek me diligently find me.
Proverbs 8:17 (ESV)*

Ask God directly and regularly for the understanding you will need 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.
Psalm 119:34 (RSV)*

There is even a sense in which God deliberately hides certain truths so that they are available to be found, but only by those who make a sufficient effort to search for them:

*It is the glory of God to conceal things,
but the glory of kings is to search things out.
Proverbs 25:2 (ESV)*

God hides some things in the Bible in the way that coal is hidden under the ground at various different depths. Some is on the surface and easy to get. Some is 10-50 metres down. Some is 500 metres down. Some is a mile underground. Finding and extracting that coal brings glory to those who mine for it. Likewise, God hides knowledge and understanding within the Scriptures. His hiding of it glorifies Him, whereas our finding it glorifies us, and brings great benefits.

Although we need to make the effort to seek for knowledge and understanding of God's Word and of His will, we also need to ask Him to help us in doing that. It is our duty to incline our own hearts towards God's Word, but 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, worldly things which lead a person astray.

Yet, we should also ask God to help us turn our eyes away from such vanities. The responsibility is not entirely ours. But neither is it entirely up to God to achieve these changes in us. It is a 'joint venture' and involves willing cooperation between a sincere and repentant disciple, who truly wants to change, and a loving God who earnestly wants to help him to change. Here is the Psalmist asking for God's help in this area, just as we should:

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.

It is not enough just to read God's Word as a purely academic exercise. We also need to *obey* it by putting it into practice in our daily lives and by actually doing the things 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.' ⁷For 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 abide by, and to keep on abiding by, God's Word. We must always keep it in mind, not just now and then, or in church meetings. We must continually remind ourselves, *and our children*, of what God has said and done, and especially His commands to us:

"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.* ³³*You 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.* ⁶*So 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:* ¹²*lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them,* ¹³*and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied,* ¹⁴*then 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,* ¹³*and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I command you this day for your good?*

Deuteronomy: 10:12-13 (RSV)

Remember also 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 and can even seem very impressive, and 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, do we just pick and choose what to believe and what to obey?

If we persistently refuse to listen to God, he will eventually refuse to listen to us.

In addition to all of the many other reasons why we should listen to God, take His Word seriously and obey it, there is this further sobering thought. That is that if we ignore His voice, and persistently disobey our conscience and the Bible, then a point will eventually be reached where God 'hands us over'. That means that He leaves us to get on with whatever we choose to do, and to suffer the consequences of our own foolishness and rebellion. He may also cease to listen to us when we do get

so deeply into trouble that we belatedly seek His help. Proverbs chapter one speaks of this and you must never act in such a way as to cause this to happen to you:

²³ *If you turn at my reproof,
behold, I will pour out my spirit to you;
I will make my words known to you.*
²⁴ *Because I have called and you refused to listen,
have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded,
²⁵ because you have ignored all my counsel
and would have none of my reproof,
²⁶ I also will laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when terror strikes you,
²⁷ when terror strikes you like a storm
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
when distress and anguish come upon you.
²⁸ Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;
they will seek me diligently but will not find me.
²⁹ Because they hated knowledge
and did not choose the fear of the LORD,
³⁰ would have none of my counsel
and despised all my reproof,
³¹ therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way,
and have their fill of their own devices.
³² For the simple are killed by their turning away,
and the complacency of fools destroys them;*

Proverbs 1:23-32 (ESV)

However, this terrible end can be so easily avoided if we will simply *listen* to what God says and obey it:

*but whoever listens to me will dwell secure
and will be at ease, without dread of disaster.”*
Proverbs 1:33 (ESV)

Consider also this stark warning given by Azariah to King Asa and the people of Judah. He told them not to forsake God or else He will forsake them, i.e. by stepping aside and handing them over to face the consequences of their actions:

¹ *The Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded, ² and he went out to meet Asa and said to him, “Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The LORD is with you while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you.*
2 Chronicles 15:1-2 (ESV)

Although it is a clear warning, the passage also contains a promise, in that if we seek God we will find Him, in the sense that He will allow Himself to be found and even ensure that He is found by us. So this is an explicitly clear statement, in both directions, and must be taken seriously and acted upon. Indeed, once you know all of this, as you now do, how can you possibly justify, ever again, not seeking God, or choosing to ignore or disobey His voice?

That same point applies whatever way He might choose to express Himself, i.e. whether it is through your conscience, or His written Word. Don't take any chances over this. It is a deadly serious issue. Therefore, resolve to listen to God's voice at all times, and always to obey it quickly and willingly. Don't ever put yourself into a position whereby God considers it necessary to stop speaking, or listening, to you.

Wise people know that they need to change, and they actively seek to do so

One obvious fact about ourselves, which few people know, and even fewer take seriously, is that we need to *change*. Not only is change plainly needed, but we are also explicitly commanded to do so, over and over again, all over the Bible. Most of us don't even notice those commands in the Bible, or we think they don't apply to us. Or we complacently assume that we have already changed, or that the changes will occur automatically and that we need not do anything to cause them to happen.

Only those who are wise, or becoming wise, can see that God commands us to change and that they therefore need to do something to make that happen. The wicked, fools, and often even the simple, see no need to change and are therefore taking no steps to do so. Only the wise give this any thought. They examine themselves and criticise their own character, attitudes, habits and priorities to identify areas in which they are lacking or are at fault. Unwise people are complacent and self-righteous and see no need for any improvement, let alone repentance.

They don't actually say it out loud, or even to themselves, but their working assumption is that whatever they think, feel, say or do is obviously right. They think it represents the norm, and that there is nothing wrong with it. Thus they see themselves and their own standards as the model or yardstick by which to measure everyone else. They also see themselves as 'good' people and they think that bad people, bad attitudes and bad behaviour, are only to be found amongst *other people* or groups, not in themselves. A wise person can see that such self-righteous assumptions are ridiculous.

He therefore willingly examines himself to identify, remove and correct his own sins, faults, errors, weaknesses, deficiencies, bad habits or wrong attitudes. A fool won't do any of these things and will resent anyone who suggests that he should, or who tries to do it for him by correcting him or offering advice. Therefore, unless a person is wise, he will be blind and deaf to his own faults and will remain so, even if people point them out to him. This condition can affect people even if they are talented and highly successful. We are *not* just looking at unsuccessful low-achievers.

Even famous people at the top of their professions can still be extremely unwise, and entirely blind to faults in themselves, which everyone else can see clearly. An example from military history is Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, or '*Monty*', the most famous British general in World War Two. He was an extremely clever man and a highly efficient and imaginative planner. He also had the gift of being able to inspire those who served under him. Yet, in one area of his life he was blind to the point of crassness.

He was arrogant about his enormous ability and also tactless and insensitive in how he spoke to and about others. An example of this is the appalling way he spoke to the media during the '*Battle of the Bulge*' in the winter of 1944. The Germans launched a surprise counter-attack in the Ardennes on a huge scale and pushed the American army back a long way, almost driving a wedge between the Allied forces. In the end, the Germans were stopped, partly by the Americans, but also by British forces under Montgomery.

On 20 December 1944, Eisenhower gave Monty command of American forces, including US 1st Army under General Hodges and US 9th Army under General Simpson. The battle then turned in the Allies' favour, partly due to Monty, but also to the information now coming in from deciphered German messages. These had not been available to the Americans as the Germans had initially maintained radio silence. Monty used the deciphered '*Enigma*' information to move the American and British forces to exactly where they needed to be to halt the German advance.

This information gave him a huge advantage, which had not previously been available to the American generals Hodges or Simpson. Then, at a staff meeting, Monty humiliated Hodges in his hour of shame by asking for an update from a junior British officer and pointedly ignoring General Hodges himself, even though he was present. Hodges was a shy and sensitive man and this slight was felt very deeply.

To make matters worse, on 22nd December, Monty reported to his superiors: “*We have tidied up the mess and got two American armies properly organised*”.

The next day, he said: “*I do not think 3rd US Army will be strong enough to do what is needed. If my forecast proves true, then I shall have to deal unaided with both 5th and 6th Panzer armies. I think I can manage them, but it will be a bit of a party*”. These arrogant remarks caused deep offence and harmed relations between British and American forces for a long time. Ironically, it turned out that the US 3rd Army, under General Patton, was wheeled around brilliantly. They intervened with great success, such that Monty did not, in the end, have to “*deal unaided*” with the 5th and 6th Panzer armies.

To further compound the series of insults, Monty then said at a press conference in January 1945: “*As soon as I saw what was happening in the Ardennes, I took certain steps myself to ensure that if the Germans got to the Meuse, they certainly would not get over that river. The battle has been most interesting, I think possibly one of the most interesting and tricky battles I have ever handled*”. Every American who read Monty’s boastful words was disgusted and it was not forgotten.

The point is this was a brilliant man with a hugely successful career who was, nevertheless, a fool when it came to diplomacy and tact. He could not see the effect of his own words on the feelings of others. He also had no ability to see these faults in himself, or why they mattered. Above all, he had no intention to change, or to do anything about his faults. Whether you are successful or unsuccessful, senior or junior, talented or untalented, always be willing to examine yourself, to identify your faults, and to be concerned about them. Above all, be determined to change. Montgomery was a great man, but these fatal flaws of vanity, pride and boastfulness seriously tarnished his reputation. Yet they could so easily have been avoided, and his place in history made even higher, if he had only set out, early in his career, to root out those faults.

Had he done so, his public statements during and after the Battle of the Bulge would have been very different. He could have dealt sensitively with General Hodges and praised the American forces for what they had achieved, which was actually substantial. They had slowed down the German attack, despite being taken completely by surprise by the strategic stupidity of what Hitler had ordered his armies to do. Hitler threw away Germany’s entire mobile strategic reserve, and more besides, on a doomed counter-attack. Therefore, in fairness to Hodges, no reasonable general would ever have foreseen it, precisely because it was so insane.

Accordingly, Monty could have given proper recognition to the Americans, for what they did achieve, without lessening the praise due to his own British forces. Above all, he should have behaved modestly, claiming no credit for himself, and leaving it to others to congratulate him. Had he done so, we would all be praising him today for his tact and diplomacy, as well as for his military brilliance. Contrast Field Marshal Montgomery’s attitude with that of Moses. The Bible says he was the meekest man on the face of the Earth, i.e. the humblest, most modest, most self-controlled man and the least boastful or proud:

***³Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.
Numbers 12:3 (ESV)***

Consider Moses’s attitude, even after meeting God face to face, receiving the Law and being made the leader of God’s people. He still had a remarkably humble and teachable heart. Note how he speaks to God, asking Him to show him His ways so that he can know Him and find favour in His sight. He also speaks of the Hebrew nation as *God’s* people, not his own. He had no illusions about himself and no self-importance. In his place, many would assume they already had God’s favour and didn’t need to learn or change. Moses didn’t see it that way and he is an example to us all of how to pray:

***Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.”
Exodus 33:13 (ESV)***

The need to change is meant to be at the forefront of our minds

The need for each of us to change is a central issue throughout the whole Bible. God continually urges us to repent, listen to Him, obey His commands, stop sinning and grow in character, maturity and wisdom. The need to change is meant to be at the forefront of our minds. Yet, for most of us, the thought never even enters our heads, let alone preoccupies us. To illustrate how central this theme is, consider this series of verses from Jeremiah. The tragic fulfilment of his prophecies need never have occurred if only the people had listened and been willing to change:

*In vain have I struck your children;
they took no correction;
your own sword devoured your prophets
like a ravening lion
Jeremiah 2:30 (ESV)*

*O LORD, do not your eyes look for truth?
You have struck them down,
but they felt no anguish;
you have consumed them,
but they refused to take correction.
They have made their faces harder than rock;
they have refused to repent.
Jeremiah 5:3 (ESV)*

*But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart;
they have turned aside and gone away.
Jeremiah 5:23 (ESV)*

*To whom shall I speak and give warning,
that they may hear?
Behold, their ears are uncircumcised,
they cannot listen;
behold, the word of the LORD is to them an object of scorn;
they take no pleasure in it
Jeremiah 6:10 (ESV)*

²⁴ *But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward.* ²⁵ *From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day.* ²⁶ *Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers.*

Jeremiah 7:24-26 (ESV)

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words.”

Jeremiah 19:15 (ESV)

You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the LORD persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets,

Jeremiah 25:4 (ESV)

Jeremiah later wrote the book of Lamentations after the disaster had occurred and the people of Judah had been taken into exile. In that book he then includes this verse, urging the people to test and examine their ways and to return to the LORD. That is exactly what each of us need to do:

*Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the LORD!
Lamentations 3:40 (ESV)*

You may only have a short period of time left before you face the Judgment Seat, so don't waste your opportunities to change.

The Bible says “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*”. One reason for that is that fearing God causes you to focus on the Judgment and on what will be said and done to us on that awesome day. But even if you are young, your death could come unexpectedly early, perhaps even today. If so, you might have only a short period of time left in which to change and to become the sort of person that Jesus feels able to praise and reward at the Judgment.

Surely it is obvious, once you start to think about it, that you ought to be examining yourself and also looking for criticism, correction, and even rebuke, from other people, and from God's Word, to help you to see your faults. When the Bible criticises certain actions or attitudes, instead of assuming that it is obviously speaking about other people, and doesn't apply to you, stop and ask yourself: “*Do I do that? Does this apply to me? Is this an area where I need to change?*”

Although it is plain that we ought to ask such questions when we read the Bible, very few of us actually do. But it is not only in the pages of the Bible that we should be seeking to make discoveries about our own faults, bad habits and sins. We should also become open to hear about these from other people and to allow others to tell us things which we might not *like* to hear, but which we *need* to hear. Again, it is obvious that we should be open and receptive to criticism, but very few of us actually are.

That is not to say that we need to enjoy being criticised, or find it easy. That would be unrealistic. It is simply that we need to be *willing* to receive it and to make it clear to certain people (not everybody) that they have *permission* to point out our faults. You even could ask them to do so. It is rather like taking cod liver oil as a vitamin supplement. Probably nobody actually likes cod liver oil, but some people recognise the benefits it brings and are therefore willing to drink it. They even request it from others, in order to benefit from it.

One of the biggest obstacles to making discoveries about your own faults is the tendency to justify yourself. A person who does that is more concerned about proving to himself, or to others, that he is not guilty, or does not have the fault in question, than in actually finding out whether he is guilty or does have that fault. Consider the lawyer in Luke 10. He sought to justify himself, rather than truly listening to Jesus and then finding out *whether*, and if so *how*, Jesus' words applied to him:

*But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?
Luke 10:29 (ESV)*

Rather than speak in that way he could, and should, have spoken as Job did, asking God to enable him to see his own sins:

*How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make me know my transgression and my sin.
Job 13:23 (ESV)*

Instead of trying to prove that you are not guilty, or are not at fault, cooperate fully with God, and with those who are close to you and know you well. Allow yourself to be convicted about your sins and to be told where you are at fault. You can sometimes even benefit from the things that are said by your enemies and by those who dislike you. At times, those are the only people who are willing to say unpleasant things to you. Your family, friends and colleagues would not dare, or would be too kind to

say it. However, an enemy, or someone who cares nothing for you, may be willing to tell you exactly what they think, without any attempt to spare your feelings.

Such an enemy is not seeking to benefit you, and may just want to let off steam. Even so, if you assess what they say, you may find elements of truth in amongst the criticisms, accusations and insults. You may have to ‘spit out the bones’ where some of their remarks are exaggerated, unfair, or even false. But you can still accept, and learn from, some of the other things they say, which may be true, or partly true, even if their remarks are made ungraciously and with no desire to help you. Sometimes their comments can contain real insights which others would never have been willing to share with you.

We also need to ask God Himself to speak to us, and even to discipline us, when we are going wrong. God disciplines His children anyway, whether or not we ask Him to. Nevertheless, this divine discipline and correction will be more effective, and will take less time, if we welcome it and even ask for it. A person who is asking for God’s correction and discipline is also more likely to recognise and understand it when it comes. They will also learn the lesson less painfully. It is common sense, therefore, that we should invite God to teach and correct us:

***Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD,
and whom you teach out of your law
Psalm 94:12 (ESV)***

Therefore, why go in the opposite direction, whereby you resist God’s discipline? Why even prolong the process? Instead, you could simply say to God: “*Is there a lesson for me here? Are you trying to teach me something through this painful trial or adversity? If so, please help me to grasp it fully, and more quickly, so that the lesson can be ended sooner and need not be extended or repeated.*”

Most of the character changes and growth in wisdom that we achieve comes by a long series of small and apparently insignificant steps, rather than huge quantum leaps.

Most people don’t have any desire to change in their character or to grow in wisdom. But for the minority who do, and who are pursuing wisdom, there is a temptation to be impatient and to imagine that it can all be achieved quickly, by a few quantum leaps forward. Sadly, that is not how it works. A wise person reconciles himself to the fact that most of the progress he will make in improving his character, or growing in wisdom, will come by the accumulated effect, over many years, of thousands of small and seemingly insignificant steps.

At the time when he takes each step, or learns each lesson, or gains each experience, he moves forward by an imperceptibly small distance. It might be only one hundredth of one percent of the overall journey. Thus, on the face of it, nothing has noticeably changed. He may seem to others, and to himself, to be no further forward. But a wise person knows that *if he persists* he will eventually get there. This applies not only to acquiring wisdom, but to all of the worthwhile things that we seek to achieve in life.

Whilst quantum leaps forward can certainly be made, they are exceptionally rare. I would say that over the last three decades or more I have only made about half a dozen quantum leaps, whereby I have been catapulted forward and my understanding has grown, or the direction of my life has altered, radically overnight. Throughout the rest of the time, for well over 30 years since I was converted, my progress in every part of my life, not just growing in wisdom, has been steady and *incremental*.

If you are at least wise enough to want to become wiser, then you will have to accept that this is how God works, at least so far as growth in wisdom and character development are concerned. Resolve now to keep going, not just for months or years, but for *decades*, in developing a godly character, and in achieving God’s objectives for your life. That means right across the board, including marriage, family, career and ministry. If a person is not willing to get to his objective by taking 1000 small steps, he will never get there.

If you yearn for quantum leaps and shortcuts, such that you can make huge progress overnight, you won't be willing to settle down to a life of diligent, step by step, progress. Your unrealistic expectations will prevent you from taking those small steps and will also discourage you when quantum leaps don't happen. Ironically, on those rare occasions when gigantic steps forward are made overnight, they only occur in the lives of people who have already taken hundreds of small steps.

Such dramatic leaps are not a substitute for steady, diligent progress. They are God's reward to those who have been willing to seek Him faithfully and to obey Him hundreds of times already. In other words, quantum leaps are a bonus, given on rare occasions, *to faithful people*, and only when God chooses to give them. You must not expect them or make them your objective. Instead, focus on long term diligence and leave the quantum leaps for God to hand out when He chooses to.

Adopting this patient, persistent, realistic approach will make you undefeatable and you will eventually achieve your goals. There is a quotation from President Coolidge which I like. It speaks of the enormous importance of persistence if you are to be successful in any area of life. That principle applies right across the board, not only in spiritual growth. I rarely quote from anything other than the Bible, but this one is worth including:

"Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not: unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."
President Calvin Coolidge

Wise people take care not to make God their opponent.

Wise people avoid angering God or arousing His opposition. It is as simple as this - if we act wrongly then God Himself will resist and oppose us, but if we do good He will support us:

*Seek good, and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
as you have said.*

Amos 5:14 (ESV)

Zechariah also tells us what God does to those who lie and steal, whoever they may be. No distinction is drawn, at least within the passage, between believers and unbelievers. 'Everyone' who lies or steals will be affected by a curse which God sends out and which will pursue them and cause them to be 'cut off' and 'consumed':

¹ Again I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, a flying scroll! ² And he said to me, "What do you see?" I answered, "I see a flying scroll; its length is twenty cubits, and its breadth ten cubits." ³ Then he said to me, "This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land; for every one who steals shall be cut off henceforth according to it, and every one who swears falsely shall be cut off henceforth according to it. ⁴ I will send it forth, says the LORD of hosts, and it shall enter the house of the thief, and the house of him who swears falsely by my name; and it shall abide in his house and consume it, both timber and stones."

Zechariah 5:1-4 (RSV)

We are also told that the LORD is avenging and wrathful on His enemies:

*The LORD is a jealous and avenging God;
the LORD is avenging and wrathful;
the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries
and keeps wrath for his enemies.*

Nahum 1:2 (ESV)

⁶ *Who can stand before his indignation?
Who can endure the heat of his anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire,
and the rocks are broken into pieces by him.*

⁷ *The LORD is good,
a stronghold in the day of trouble;
he knows those who take refuge in him.*

⁸ *But with an overflowing flood
he will make a complete end of the adversaries,
Nahum 1:6-8 (ESV)*

Thus, one of the many reasons to avoid sin is so as not to make God into our 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;
¹¹for 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 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 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)*

A genuine concern for the interests of others is an important aspect of the fear of the LORD. The wise man does not envy, or imitate, those who seek to gain advantage by doing wrong. One reason for that is that he does not want to be cut off by God, as such wrongdoers inevitably will be:

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

See the statements made in the book of Hosea about how God viewed the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel prior to the invasion by the Assyrians, which God allowed as a judgment upon them. Note what God says of them, and how He responds to the sins of His people, which must be taken to apply equally to us. It serves as a stark warning, which a wise person will take seriously:

*Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel,
for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land;
Hosea 4:1 (ESV)*

*And it shall be like people, like priest;
I will punish them for their ways*

*and repay them for their deeds.
Hosea 4:9 (ESV)*

*With their flocks and herds they shall go
to seek the LORD,
but they will not find him;
he has withdrawn from them.
Hosea 5:6 (ESV)*

*⁹ Ephraim shall become a desolation
in the day of punishment;
among the tribes of Israel
I make known what is sure.
¹⁰ The princes of Judah have become
like those who move the landmark;
upon them I will pour out
my wrath like water.
Hosea 5:9-10 (ESV)*

*I will return again to my place,
until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face,
and in their distress earnestly seek me.
Hosea 5:15 (ESV)*

*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 (ESV)*

A wise person will want to put himself in the right place and do the right things, because any sensible person, knowing how God operates, and what His Word says, would want to do those things which bring God's blessing. He will also want to avoid those things which result in His curses, opposition or judgment:

*³³ The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked,
but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous.
³⁴ Toward the scorers he is scornful,
but to the humble he gives favor.
³⁵ The wise will inherit honor,
but fools get disgrace
Proverbs 3:33-35 (ESV)*

We have to choose each day whether to act wickedly or righteously. 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, because it ceased when Jesus died. Even so, this general principle of the need to seek God's blessing and avoid His opposition is still valid. Although the Law of Moses is no longer in operation, there are many other commandments and principles which still apply to us, such as the command to love one another, the law of sowing and reaping, and the law that all who exalt themselves will be humbled. Here is how Moses expressed this general principle:

²⁶ "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: ²⁷ the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day, ²⁸ and 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)

Be 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)

If you face opposition bear in mind the possibility that it might be God Himself who is opposing you

Where we face opposition, one possibility, which must at least be considered, is that God Himself may have 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 led him astray. God was angry about that and therefore raised up a number of 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)

If you are facing unusual or unexpected levels of opposition, consider the possibility that God Himself may be opposing you and also 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. Why make it more difficult for yourself? Why require God to go to such lengths? Why make it necessary for Him to have to impose these revelations upon you? You could simply *ask Him* to reveal 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, because it is in accordance with His will. Also, do not assume that God would never act in this way towards a real Christian. I am quite sure that He would. At any rate, there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that He would not. In my own life He has sent a number of people to oppose and chasten me, even after I was saved. More importantly, God opposed King David. He sent him many adversaries after he sinned in the episode involving Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah.

Yet David was a genuine believer at all these times, before, during and after his sins. Solomon also died as a believer and was saved and yet, as we saw, God frequently opposed him. Indeed, it may well be that the very reason Solomon came back to God, and recovered his faith, was precisely *because* God had opposed him. At any rate, the point is that, so far as we are concerned, we must take care not to make God our opponent. Recognise the possibility that what happened to Solomon, David, and many others, could also happen to you, and may already be happening.

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

If we want to be wise, we will also make it our business to learn all the other principles by which God operates and how to apply them. Even if the Bible does not contain any specific advice or instruction which deals with your exact circumstances, the application of these broad biblical principles will always be helpful. We need to familiarise ourselves with them all. We will then be better informed as to how God *generally* operates and how He wishes us to operate. We must also familiarise ourselves with God's many promises, and also the statements 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)

If a person has humility and the fear of the LORD, they will eventually receive riches, honour and life as their reward, either in this life, or in the next, probably in both. A wise person will take that statement literally and seriously, and seek to develop those qualities in order to benefit from that promise. A wise person does not seek *directly* for riches or honour, at least not in this life. He seeks instead for those things which will lead to us being given those rewards. Instead of asking for the reward itself, it is wiser to ask God to help us to develop those *character qualities that He has promised to reward*.

Many are seeking for riches and honour, but very few are seeking the humility or fear of the LORD, which qualify us to receive these. However, if we are wise, we will realise that, in God's economy, the one leads to the other and *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. Another thing which God has promised to reward is where a person loves and cherishes the Bible and is determined to study it. We are told of the many benefits that will come to those who revere God's Word and desire to obey it:

⁷ ***The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;***
⁸ ***the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;***
⁹ ***the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.***
¹⁰ ***More to be desired are they than gold,***

*even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.
¹¹ Moreover, by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
Psalm 19:7-11 (ESV)*

Therefore, do as the Psalmist did. Greatly increase your regard for God's Word, until you too take delight in it and actually love to obey it, rather than doing so reluctantly:

*I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart."
Psalm 40:8 (ESV)*

Also, be like the writer of Psalm 1 who delighted in the law of the LORD and meditated on it day and night. Look at the benefits which the Bible says will come to such a man:

*¹ 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.
⁴ The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
⁶ for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.
Psalm 1:1-6 (ESV)*

Note also the stark principle stated by Azariah. He warned King Asa, and all the people of Judah and Benjamin, that God will be found by those who seek Him, but will forsake those who forsake Him:

*¹ The Spirit of God came upon Azariah the son of Oded, ² and he went out to meet Asa and said to him, "Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The LORD is with you while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you.
2 Chronicles 15:1-2 (ESV)*

Should it not be obvious, to any sensible person that we need therefore to seek for God, and to be with Him, and, in particular, never to forsake Him? Given the frank way in which Azariah puts it, none of us has any excuse for not being aware that it is our responsibility to stay faithful and to be determined to avoid the dire consequences of forsaking God. On a more positive note, Hanani, who was another seer or prophet at the time of King Asa, also said:

*"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless towards him....."
2 Chronicles 16:9(a) (ESV)*

If this is what God is doing, then, unless we are fools, it ought to be obvious that we should seek to be blameless. Then we can qualify to receive this “strong support”, which God desires to give to those who are blameless. How can any rational person think otherwise? One of Asa’s successors, King Jotham, took this principle seriously. He pleased God by his actions, such that we are told: “*And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD according to all that his father Uzziah had done...*” As a result of his conduct, and right choices, Jotham received God’s blessing and became mighty:

***So Jotham became mighty, because he ordered his ways before the LORD his God.
2 Chronicles 27:6 (ESV)***

By contrast, King Ahaz did not do what was right and did not please God. Therefore, God did not support him, but actively opposed him instead and caused him to be defeated by the King of Syria:

¹ Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as his father David had done, ² but he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He even made metal images for the Baals, ³ and he made offerings in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. ⁴ And he sacrificed and made offerings on the high places and on the hills and under every green tree. ⁵ Therefore the LORD his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him and took captive a great number of his people and brought them to Damascus. He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel, who struck him with great force.

2 Chronicles 28:1-5 (ESV)

Wise people do not take offence at what the Bible says

It is remarkable how many people take offence at what Jesus says, or at what the Bible in general says. Having been offended or irritated, they then refuse to listen or read any further and 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 close their mind. Then they no longer want to know what the Bible says and are prejudiced against it.

A wise person realises the harm that is caused by becoming hard-hearted due to taking offence at, or stumbling over, something that the Bible says. It makes a person less receptive, obedient and motivated and also reduces their love for Jesus. That therefore creates a barrier where there ought not to be one. Jesus Himself warned us not to take offence at Him, precisely 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 people take offence at Jesus they become distanced from Him. In Jesus’ own day many of the people who lived in his home town of Nazareth, despised Him, and under-estimated Him, because He was local and therefore familiar to them:

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)

Taking offence leads to hardness of heart which leads to a closed mind and finally, to unbelief. Far too many people take offence at Jesus, or at what the Bible says, because it tells them the truth about themselves, or does not fit in with their own customs and opinions. Most of us have become familiar with certain denominational traditions and practices. Then, woe betide anyone who questions those and points us instead to what the Bible says. The person who is devoted to customs and familiar practices is likely to take offence and will resist any challenge to these, even from Jesus Himself:

¹ 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)

Those Pharisees took offence simply because Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath day, which the Law of Moses does *not* forbid. 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 which had no biblical basis and were not from God. Jesus obeyed every tiny detail of the Law of Moses, but He deliberately ignored those man-made rules, known as '*the oral law*'.

Therefore, He healed the man right in front of the Pharisees. However, instead of being delighted, or wanting to find out more about Jesus and His teaching, they 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 saying "*What He has done goes against what I have been used to up to now. Therefore, have I been wrong? How do my thinking, traditions and assumptions need to change to fit in with Him?*"

Such narrow-minded attitudes and reactions were not only a feature of the Pharisees. They are also found in us today. Many of us we need to look for these attitudes in ourselves and remove them. We might not be offended by the same things that irritated the Pharisees, because most of us have not grown up in Judaism. Therefore, we 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 unconsciously absorbed, other equally man-made rules, regulations and beliefs. Thus, a person today might be irritated by what the Bible says about the role of women in the church or within marriage. Or they may object to what it teaches about Israel, creation, adultery, divorce, homosexuality, gender, financial giving or a host of other things. Many people have so thoroughly absorbed the values and beliefs of the secular world on such issues, they are irritated by, and even ashamed of, what the Bible says.

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

If you and apostle Paul, or you and any other writer of the Bible, disagree on anything whatsoever, then it is *you* who is wrong, *not them*. You never have any valid basis for disagreeing with them at all, let alone being offended by what they say. Few people would ever put it into such stark words as that man did. But they still think the same way, albeit more subtly, and the net effect is the same. They ignore what the Bible says and cling instead to their own man-made tradition, opinion or practice.

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

¹ *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’ response offended the Pharisees but He was unmoved and said that they were just blind guides. That is what we will become too if we put any man-made tradition above the Bible. Some people get angry when the Bible is critical of their attitudes or behaviour, as when Jesus implicitly criticised the people in the synagogue at Nazareth:

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

The mere fact that what is being said is true does not stop people from being angry. On the contrary, the more accurate the statement is, the more enraged they become. This was the case with Herodias, who was cohabiting with Herod Antipas, her half-uncle, while she was still married to Herod’s brother, Philip, also her half-uncle. John the Baptist pointed this out and said it was wrong, which it obviously was, in many ways. Nevertheless, 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)

What John the Baptist said about Herodias was entirely true, but she resented it all the more for that very reason. She is not the only one who does that. Our sinful flesh nature means that we all dislike criticism, *especially when it is justified*. But we ought not to. We should positively *want* to know the real truth about ourselves, even if it is upsetting. A wise person will therefore force himself not to take offence at what the Bible says, even when it is critical of him, or contradicts his opinions, or his much-loved traditions, and even when it shows him to be in the wrong.

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

It has become fashionable to disrespect and mock our MPs, Congressmen, Cabinet Ministers, Prime Ministers, and so on. We regularly see and hear such ridicule in the media which causes additional disrespect, but also expresses the disrespect that people already feel. A wise person will ask himself: *“How does God want us to speak of, and relate to, our political leaders and rulers?”* We can be sure that He does not want us to speak evil of them or to curse them. Even if we need to criticise them, we are still 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*. It does not mean where we simply disagree with a politician and criticise his policies or his conduct. Paul quotes this verse from Exodus 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 even a moment's thought to how God wants us to speak about our political rulers and also those in authority over us at work, or the police, councils, courts etc? God wants us to respect and honour *all* of those rulers. They have all been put into those positions *by God Himself*. He creates governments, and every other form of authority, to keep order and restrain wickedness. He wants us to cooperate with such rulers and to show them honour, even while we campaign against their policies. To do otherwise is 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. ⁷Pay 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 at all levels of seniority:

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

1 Timothy 2:1-3 (RSV)

God may also hold *us* responsible for what *our leaders* do. That may sound unfair but, at least in democratic countries, they are only in those positions *because most of us voted for them*. It may also be that it is *our failure to pray* for our political leaders that leads to them enacting such ungodly laws. For example, would David Cameron, have pushed through the “*gay marriage*” legislation if the churches had been faithful in their proclamation of the Gospel and had taught the Bible properly?

More to the point, 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 our former Prime Minister for what happened, and we would be right to do so, as the idea came directly from him and his wife, not from the Conservative Party. However, it may be that God *also* holds the British people, and especially the churches, blameworthy alongside him and the other politicians who voted for it. Indeed, He possibly blames us even more than them.

There is also another logic at work, which is that *we get the politicians we deserve*. So, since 1992, we in the UK have elected governments which have gone ever farther away from God’s standards. Today’s politicians cannot even begin to compare in stature with the great men we have had in our history. One reason why we now get these awful leaders is because we have not been a faithful church in general and have not prayed for our governments in particular. Consequently, we got David Cameron and the Americans got Hussain Obama, the first Muslim president.

A few decades ago, men of such dismally low calibre would not have been able to get elected at all, even as MPs or Congressmen, given their perverse beliefs. Now such misguided and wicked men are leading whole nations. The point is, however, that God may hold us accountable for the decisions our politicians make, which our bold witness and earnest prayers could have avoided. For example, God brought judgement on the people of Judah as a whole 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 Manas’sseh the son of Hezeki’ah, king of Judah, did in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 15:2-4 (RSV)

Instead of ridiculing, or even just ignoring, our political leaders, we need to actively support them where we feel we can. If we cannot, in good conscience, support them, we can at least pray for them, even while opposing their policies. But to mock them, as our comedy programmes do, is contrary to what God wants. Moreover, it is often unfair, as some politicians are more hard-working and committed to what they believe in than many Christians are. I can speak from personal experience, as I used to be a

Borough Councillor and also the Chairman of a Conservative Association, helping to organise the local party and elections etc.

I found that many of the people involved in politics were sincere, dedicated, public-spirited and unselfish. That rarely gets reported in the media, but it is real. However, there would be even more of them, and they would be in higher positions, if we were more faithful in praying for our political leaders and if more Christians joined political parties and became active, or at least voted. Instead, most Christians play no part in politics, in the misguided belief that we are not supposed to.

Wise people reject the world's values, principles and practices and are careful as to whom they spend time with.

This world is run by Satan at present and operates according to his values 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. ¹⁹If 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. ²⁰Remember 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. ²¹But all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know him who sent me. ²²If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; 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 system and all that it stands for. We cannot have one foot in each camp, i.e. God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom. We have to choose which one to be in. Any form of compromise will make us behave in foolish or even wicked ways. Consider what happened to the northern Kingdom of Israel in the time of King Hoshea. The people were engaging in idolatry and were imitating the sinful sexual practices of the surrounding nations, rather than following God's commands. Their compromise with the world led to disaster and they came under God's judgment:

⁶ In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

⁷ And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and had feared other gods⁸ and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced. ⁹ And the people of Israel did secretly against the LORD their God things that were not right. They built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. ¹⁰ They set up for themselves pillars and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree, ¹¹ and there they made offerings on all the high places, as the nations did whom the LORD carried away before them. And they did wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger, ¹² and they served idols, of which the LORD had said to them, “You shall not do this.” ¹³ Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.”

¹⁴ But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. ¹⁵ They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they

should not do like them.¹⁶ And they abandoned all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal.¹⁷ And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.¹⁸ Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only.

2 Kings 17:6-18 (ESV)

Unsaved people speak and act as they do because their minds have become darkened and their thinking is futile. That, in turn, is the result of their hardness of heart and callousness, which causes them to refuse to repent. Instead they plunge ever further into indulging their sensual passions:

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

Ephesians 4:17-19 (ESV)

Paul tells us that we must not ‘walk’ as they do, but “*put off (our) old self*” and “*...be renewed in the spirit of (our) minds...*”. When we “*put on the new self*” it means we choose to do what is right, not the sinful things which our ‘flesh’, or old self, wants to do. It also means refusing to think in the way that the people around us think:

²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!—²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:20-24 (ESV)

In Colossians, Paul is equally stark about the thinking and standards of the unsaved world when he says:

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,

Colossians 1:13 (ESV)

A wise person sees the enormity of the gulf between the way this unsaved world thinks and operates and how we, as Christians, are meant to live. We have to choose every day, in almost every way, to be different from the people around us. We must set our minds on doing what God wants, and on thinking as He thinks, rather than trying to fit in with the values and practices of this lost world. A wise person will also avoid going to places, or being with people, or getting into situations, which might lead him into sin, or cause him to be influenced, or to be drawn into bad relationships.

Therefore, a wise person does not just resist temptation. He also avoids the places, people and situations which are likely to produce temptation. Many unwise decisions and sinful actions can be avoided by simply being careful about where you go, with whom you spend time, and what you get involved with. Merely being with, or even nearby, such people or places can make you more likely to fall into sin, just as playing with hot coals, makes you more likely to get burnt than if you kept away from them:

*²⁷ Can a man carry fire next to his chest
and his clothes not be burned?*

*²⁸ Or can one walk on hot coals
and his feet not be scorched?*

Proverbs 6:27-28 (ESV)

Many sins, hazards and bad influences can be avoided by merely joining different clubs or circles of friends and by going to different places, or even by going at safer times of day. I patrolled a town centre as a police officer and I can tell you that the chances of getting into a violent incident are a hundred times higher at 1.00 am than at 1.00 pm. Likewise, the chances of you doing well at university are vastly higher if you choose friends who are serious about their course than if you hang around with a group of idlers, or with those whose focus is on endless ‘socialising’.

On the same point, if a young person wants to stay solid as a disciple, and not be led astray into worldly pursuits, they should join the Christian Union and a youth group at church and be active in both. That is vastly better than joining some rugby club which is likely to draw you into social activities which will harm your spiritual growth. Don’t wait for things to actually go wrong. Look ahead and foresee what is *likely* to happen in these groups or places. Then choose those which offer the greatest probability of meeting sensible people and the lowest chance of meeting fools. Then you maximise your own chances of being influenced for the good, not the bad.

Wise people have nothing to do with superstition, horoscopes, fortune telling, witchcraft, or anything of the occult.

The world is also steeped in superstition and has a fascination for fortune telling, witchcraft and the occult in general. The word ‘occult’ means *hidden*. God has withheld certain things from us as He does not even want us to enquire into them, just as you would keep medicines away from small children. So, to use God’s terminology, if you saw your three year old trying to open a bottle of bleach, you might say: “No – *that is occult!*” What you would mean is: “*That is dangerous and I have hidden it from you, and forbidden you to touch it, for your own protection.*” These are classified by God as “*the secret things*” and He has commanded us to stay away from them and to be content with what He has revealed to us:

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Deuteronomy 29:29 (ESV)

King Manasseh was probably the wickedest king that Judah ever had. Yet, when God criticises him, He focuses primarily on his idolatry and his involvement in the occult, more so than on any of his other sins, thereby showing how important those sins are in God’s eyes:

⁵ And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. ⁶ And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

2 Kings 21:5-6 (ESV)

God therefore forbids us to have anything to do with any aspect of the occult. That includes any form of superstition, horoscopes, fortune telling, tarot cards, ouija boards, palm reading, consulting mediums or any other such thing. The list is very long because there are all sorts of off-shoots and variations, which all come under the broad umbrella term ‘the occult’. These expose us to danger even if we aren’t aware that they are forbidden, just as a child who drinks bleach will suffer harm even though he did not know it was dangerous. There are many passages like this which warn us against the occult:

⁹ “When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. ¹⁰ There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer ¹¹ or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, ¹² for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. ¹³ You shall be blameless before

the LORD your God, ¹⁴for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.

Deuteronomy 18:9-14 (ESV)

Someone might argue that this is said within the Law of Moses, which we are not under, and therefore that the occult is no longer forbidden. However, the same prohibition is repeated elsewhere, including within the New Testament. More to the point, the Canaanites were not under the Law of Moses either. Yet, their occult activity was still classed as wickedness, because it is inherently wrong. Therefore, the occult is off limits for the entire human race, not just Jews or Christians.

Therefore, if you want to become wise, have nothing to do with any aspect of the occult, witchcraft, idolatry, fortune telling or superstition of any kind. The parts of the future which we are allowed to know about are set out for us in Bible prophecy. Everything else is forbidden. It is interesting therefore that so many people, even in the churches, have no interest in Bible prophecy, which makes up about 30% of the Bible, but have a deep fascination with the occult. They long to find out about the future via illegitimate sources like horoscopes, fortune tellers and mediums, but ignore all the legitimate information about the future, which God does want us to know, which is set out in the Bible.

The tragedy is that when they make such enquiries anything they are told will be a lie, either because the fortune teller is a fraud, or because the information comes from a demon. There are no other places it can come from. Another problem is that if we ever get involved with the occult we are also opening a 'window', allowing demons access to our lives and giving them power over us. This is one of the main ways in which people become 'demonised', whereby a demon gains access to their life, to one extent or another. They may even be able to enter into the person and live within them.

No right-thinking person would ever want that. Yet it is very likely to happen to us if we ever have any form of involvement in the occult. A related issue is 'accursed' or 'devoted' objects, such as lucky charms, amulets, rabbits' feet, crystals, St. Christopher medals, or any other item connected to superstition or the occult. These need to be got rid of completely from your body, home, office, car or anywhere else, even if they are hidden away in an attic, as is frequently the case. Sometimes people know it is wrong, but they don't want to part with it. So they often hide the object away, rather than display it.

If that is your situation, it is all the more vital to get rid of such objects. The very fact that you are reluctant shows they have some hold over you. Indeed, the demons in your life are probably doing all they can to persuade you not to part with the objects. But look how seriously God takes this. In this passage God tells Joshua to instruct the people to get rid of any 'devoted things' which they have taken from the Canaanites and kept in their homes. This was the reason for their defeat at Ai as He would not support them unless they got rid of the devoted things:

¹⁰The LORD said to Joshua, "Get up! Why have you fallen on your face?"¹¹Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings.¹²Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies. They turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become devoted for destruction. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you. ¹³Get up! Consecrate the people and say, 'Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the LORD, God of Israel, "There are devoted things in your midst, O Israel. You cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you."

Joshua 7:10-13 (ESV)

In this next passage Joshua is even more emphatic about the need to get rid of all 'foreign gods', otherwise God would "turn and do you harm and consume you....." These are widely defined and include all occult objects, charms, idols, or symbols of superstition. Therefore, if in doubt, get rid of it:

²⁰If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the LORD.” ²²Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” ²³He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

Joshua 24:20-23 (ESV)

It may be that you have not known until now that there is anything wrong with the occult. Thus you might have got involved, even in the distant past, with horoscopes or fortune telling or mediums or something else. If so, the first thing you need to do is *repent of it now*, however long ago it was. Also ask God to cleanse you of the effect or consequences of that sin in your life. You may also need deliverance from demons. In that case, please refer to my books 7 and 9 which look in much closer detail at what demons are, what they do, and how we can get rid of them.

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

Even if they are part of a church, most people get their opinions and beliefs from the media rather than from the Bible. That’s hardly surprising when you consider that the average Christian in the West spends only minutes per day in the Bible, if even that, but many hours online and on Twitter, Facebook, TV or radio. Much of what they absorb is worldly and of questionable value at best. They gorge themselves on what the world says, but are on starvation rations when it comes to the Bible.

It is inevitable therefore that the world will have a greater influence than the Bible. A wise person sets out to do the exact opposite. He minimises the influence that the world has on him and maximises his exposure to God’s Word. As a starting point, why not swop the amounts of time you spend watching TV, or on the internet, or on social media for the amount of time you spend in your Bible? Choose to abandon a lot of that and, instead, spend one to two hours per day, or more, on:

- a) reading the Bible
- b) reading good Christian books and commentaries. NB. You will have to be very discerning, as much of what is sold in Christian bookshops today, or on Christian websites, is either heretical or of little or no nutritional value. See the Approved Ministries section of the Real Christianity website which sets out some ministries and Bible teachers which I feel able to recommend.
- c) listening to good Christian teaching on CD or MP3 etc. Again, you will have to be discerning.

If you do these things, and keep on doing them, 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 and non-conformists in the 16th and 17th centuries, and of the early Methodists of the 18th century, people went to extraordinary lengths to study the Bible and to hear good preachers.

The same is true in parts of the developing world today, where there is a much greater hunger for the Bible. That is how a wise person should be. Too many nominal churchgoers, and even real Christians, allow their minds to be saturated with godless, worldly, 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

why it matters what we think anyway