

CHAPTER 8

WHAT WISE PEOPLE DO - PART TWO

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

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

*Listen to counsel and accept discipline,
That you may be wise the rest of your days.
Proverbs 19:20 (NASB)*

*..... They cast lots also for his son Zechariah, a shrewd counsellor.....
1 Chronicles 26:14(b) (ESV)*

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

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

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

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NASB)

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

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

*.....Nevertheless, the heart of Asa was wholly true all his days.
2 Chronicles 15:17(b) (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)*

Wise people don't follow any crowd or crave for people's approval.

Wise people aim to do what is right, even if that makes them the odd one out. The Bible often refers to us as sheep because we share so many of their foolish characteristics. One of those is the desire to do

whatever the people around us are doing, whether good or bad. God specifically warned the Israelites not to follow the practices and ways of the people of Egypt, from whom they had escaped. He also warned them not to imitate the ways of the Canaanites, but to take care to abide by His Word:

¹ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. ³ You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. ⁴ You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. ⁵ You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.

Leviticus 18:1-5 (ESV)

Human beings have a deep longing to be accepted and popular. That desire makes most of us into followers and conformists. The problem is that fitting in means we have to compromise and imitate those around us, rather than do what God says. Doing the right thing will often bring us into conflict with others. Even so, we must never follow a crowd if what they want to do is wrong, or if what they say is untrue:

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

Exodus 23:2 (NIV)

A cowardly leader or manager will also let himself be intimidated and pressurised by those under him and do things which he knows to be wrong just for a quiet life. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, presided over one of Jesus’ trials and he knew Jesus had done nothing wrong and that He was the rightful King of the Jews. Pilate therefore wanted to release Jesus and knew that that was the right thing to do. Yet, he did not do it, because he feared the Jewish leaders and also the crowds who were shouting for Jesus to be crucified:

¹³ Pilate summoned the chief priests and the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, “You brought this man to me as one who incites the people to rebellion, and behold, having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man regarding the charges which you make against Him. ¹⁵ No, nor has Herod, for he sent Him back to us; and behold, nothing deserving death has been done by Him. ¹⁶ Therefore I will punish Him and release Him.” ¹⁷ Now he was obliged to release to them at the feast one prisoner. ¹⁸ But they cried out all together, saying, “Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!” ¹⁹ (He was one who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection made in the city, and for murder.)

²⁰ Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, ²¹ but they kept on calling out, saying, “Crucify, crucify Him!” ²² And he said to them the third time, “Why, what evil has this man done? I have found in Him no guilt demanding death; therefore I will punish Him and release Him.” ²³ But they were insistent, with loud voices asking that He be crucified. And their voices began to prevail. ²⁴ And Pilate pronounced sentence that their demand be granted. ²⁵ And he released the man they were asking for who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, but he delivered Jesus to their will.

Luke 23:13-25 (NASB)

We can’t even say that Pilate gave way because he was in fear for his life. He cannot have been, because he had a large number of Roman soldiers under his command. Therefore, he was in no personal danger. He was just swayed by the pressure of public opinion as the crowd was baying for Jesus’ execution and he wanted to avoid their disapproval. So, for those paltry reasons, he issued a death sentence against a man whom he *knew to be innocent*. We know that, because Pilate himself had just said that he had found no guilt in Him.

He was therefore guilty of a gross neglect of his judicial duty, based on selfishness and the wish to avoid hassle for himself. Yet there is nothing unusual about what Pilate did. Countless politicians, managers,

officials, headmasters and church leaders regularly do the very same. It is entirely normal for people to fail in their duty and choose the line of least resistance rather than face the flak that comes to those who do what is right, but unpopular. A wise person recognises his own fear of public opinion and knows that his flesh nature causes him to follow other people and fit in with their standards.

He also knows that it will lead him astray if he does so. Therefore, he exercises self-control and forces himself to do what is right, even if it means standing alone. That is hard enough to do when dealing with the unsaved, unbelieving people around us. It is even harder when the people whose example we must not follow are in the Church, or claim to be. They may well even be the leaders. Even so, your conscience, and God's Word, may be telling you that what they are saying and doing is wrong.

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

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

John 12:42-43 (RSV)

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

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

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

Matthew 6:33 (RSV)

If we do seek His Kingdom first we are much more likely to make right decisions and to get our other priorities in the right order. We must seek it here and now, by operating each day in accordance with His principles and commands. It also means focusing on the life that is to come, after we have died or been raptured and enter into His Kingdom in a much fuller way. Both of these aspects of seeking His Kingdom are valid, i.e. in the present and the future. Jesus also spoke of the narrow gate and the narrow way or path and said that those who choose the wrong way, which will be the majority, will be locked out of the Kingdom:

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

Matthew 7:13-14 (NASB)

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

Luke 13: 23-28 (NASB)

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

- a) We have a choice as to whether to go to destruction or to life, i.e. to end up in the Lake of Fire or to have eternal life in God's presence.
- b) Most people do not choose life and thus they go to destruction. Therefore, being on the side of the majority is generally not a good idea.
- c) Some people are not even aware (or concerned) that they are on the wrong path and they will only find out the truth when it is too late.

As with most of the things Jesus said, modern-day Western churches tend either to water them down or ignore them. However, if we want to become wise, we will pay close attention to Jesus' words. Whatever He is saying, whether about seeking His Kingdom first, or choosing life rather than destruction, a wise person will take Jesus' words extremely seriously. Only a fool would ignore them, especially His warnings.

The same is true of the whole Bible, even where it comes via one of the prophets or apostles. It is all equally God's Word. Therefore, when Jesus warns us of the eternal consequences of the daily choices we make, a wise person will not brush it aside. He will listen reverently and keep it very much in mind. The truth of Jesus' words, that *few* people enter by the narrow gate or choose the narrow way, is illustrated by the fact that most people, even in churches, don't take seriously what He said.

We can see that just by looking around us in the churches and by hearing what people say and what they focus on. It is also demonstrated by what they *do not say*, and what they *do not focus on*. The narrow gate is not easy to go through and the narrow way is not comfortable to travel on. They both involve difficulty, trouble and opposition. However, a wise person still chooses the narrow way regardless, firstly because he knows it is right, and secondly because it is worth it:

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

Matthew 19:28-30 (NASB)

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

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

Matthew 6:19-21 (RSV)

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

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

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

¹⁸ For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed

—and though you get praise when you do well for yourself—

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

²⁰ Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish.

Psalm 49:16-20 (ESV)

Wise people realise the great danger of sexual immorality.

Possibly the greatest danger we face as disciples is sexual temptation. A number of Christian students I knew at university fell away from the faith due to getting into sexual relationships. The temptation is great, especially for young people, and it is even worse now than in the 1980s. There is now such widespread immorality, plus the expectation that everyone else will be promiscuous, that it is difficult to avoid being led astray. However, we must do all we can to avoid such danger, because, sexual sin is a sure route to spiritual disaster.

That is partly because it is a sin against one's own body, which is a temple of the Holy Spirit. It is also because of the *soul-ties* which sexual intercourse creates, so as to connect us with the other person, with very long-lasting consequences, which we might not expect. Therefore, the Bible repeatedly warns us against getting into sexual sin of any kind. Consider these passages from Proverbs about a man being led astray by the enticements of an immoral woman. However, the warning is equally applicable to women being led astray by men:

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

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

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

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

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

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

*²⁹ So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife;
none who touches her will go unpunished.*

*³⁰ Do not men despise a thief if he steals
to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry?*

*³¹ And if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold;
he will give all the goods of his house.*

*³² He who commits adultery has no sense;
he who does it destroys himself.*

*³³ Wounds and dishonor will he get,
and his disgrace will not be wiped away.*

Proverbs 6:23-33 (RSV)

*⁶ For at the window of my house
I have looked out through my lattice,*

*⁷ and I have seen among the simple,
I have perceived among the youths,
a young man without sense,*

*⁸ passing along the street near her corner,
taking the road to her house*

⁹ in the twilight, in the evening,

at the time of night and darkness.
¹⁰ *And lo, a woman meets him,*
dressed as a harlot, wily of heart.
¹¹ *She is loud and wayward,*
her feet do not stay at home;
¹² *now in the street, now in the market,*
and at every corner she lies in wait.
¹³ *She seizes him and kisses him,*
and with impudent face she says to him:
¹⁴ *“I had to offer sacrifices,*
and today I have paid my vows;
¹⁵ *so now I have come out to meet you,*
to seek you eagerly, and I have found you.
¹⁶ *I have decked my couch with coverings,*
colored spreads of Egyptian linen;
¹⁷ *I have perfumed my bed with myrrh,*
aloes, and cinnamon.
¹⁸ *Come, let us take our fill of love till morning;*
let us delight ourselves with love.
¹⁹ *For my husband is not at home;*
he has gone on a long journey;
²⁰ *he took a bag of money with him;*
at full moon he will come home.”
²¹ *With much seductive speech she persuades him;*
with her smooth talk she compels him.
²² *All at once he follows her,*
as an ox goes to the slaughter,
or as a stag is caught fast
²³ *till an arrow pierces its entrails;*
as a bird rushes into a snare;
he does not know that it will cost him his life.
²⁴ *And now, O sons, listen to me,*
and be attentive to the words of my mouth.
²⁵ *Let not your heart turn aside to her ways,*
do not stray into her paths;
²⁶ *for many a victim has she laid low;*
yea, all her slain are a mighty host.
²⁷ *Her house is the way to Sheol,*
going down to the chambers of death.

Proverbs 7:6-27 (RSV)

If you need any further persuading of the danger of sexual immorality, consider what happened in the book of Numbers when Balaam advised Balak, the King of Moab, how to undermine the Israelites. Balak had offered Balaam money to curse God’s people, but Balaam refused to do so, because God met him and forbade it. However, Balaam found a way to get round this.

He advised Balak to entice the Israelites into sexual sin with the Canaanites, and also, of course, into idolatry. The people fell for this trick and large numbers of them began to engage in the worship of Baal, and other forms of idolatry, all of which involved having sex with prostitutes who served Baal. This resulted in God bringing a very severe judgment on His people, including a plague, such that 24,000 were killed by God’s intervention:

¹ *While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab.* ² *These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.* ³ *So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.* ⁴ *And*

the LORD said to Moses, "Take all the chiefs of the people and hang] them in the sun before the LORD, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel." ⁵ And Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor."

⁶ And behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁷ When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand ⁸ and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. ⁹ Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.

Numbers 25:1-9 (ESV)

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

Do not pursue a promiscuous lifestyle and do not watch or participate in anything, however small, brief, or infrequent, which is not godly and pure. In particular, keep well away from internet pornography of any kind. Have your PC, laptop and phone set to block all such material, as it is utterly poisonous. Those who allow it to get its hooks into them tend to become addicted. Do not let that happen to you and, if it already has, get help to break away from it completely.

Wise people know their days are numbered.

We only have a short life span on this earth, whether we are wise or wicked:

*¹ "Man who is born of a woman
is few of days and full of trouble.
² He comes out like a flower and withers;
he flees like a shadow and continues not.
Job 14:1-2 (ESV)*

*Man is like a breath;
his days are like a passing shadow.
Psalm 144:4 (ESV)*

Whoever we are, this life is only for a short time and the possessions we gather are only briefly held by us, after which they will go to someone else:

*The years of our life are threescore and ten,
or even by reason of strength fourscore;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
Psalm 90:10 (RSV)*

*¹⁴For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.
¹⁵As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;
¹⁶for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.
Psalm 103:14-16 (ESV)*

*⁴O LORD, make me know my end
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting I am!
⁵Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!
⁶Surely a man goes about as a shadow!
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
man heaps up wealth and does not know who will gather!*
Psalm 39:4-6 (ESV)

*For he sees that even the wise die;
the fool and the stupid alike must perish
and leave their wealth to others.*
Psalm 49:10 (ESV)

This earthly life span of 70-80 years is not what really counts. It is just a preparation or testing-ground for the next life, in Jesus' Millennial Kingdom, and then in eternity. What matters is using whatever time we have now to please God and grow as disciples. Then we can gain His approval and rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ. That is what this life is really all about. No matter how good or wise we may be, we all have to die, unless we are part of the generation which gets caught up in the rapture. Then, once we are gone, we will quickly be forgotten:

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

Ecclesiastes 2:14-16 (RSV)

None of us know how long we have got left to pass God's tests. We could die tonight. Therefore, we need to focus every day on living to please God, not to earn salvation, but to receive His praise and reward for how we serve Him, and for the fruit we bear, after being saved. Our time on this Earth is like a fleeting shadow and none of our possessions will remain forever. Therefore, treat every day as if it was your last day before the Judgment and your final opportunity to gain a reward and to lay up treasure for yourself in Heaven:

.....Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.
1 Chronicles 29:15(b) (ESV)

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

Once we realise that every day could be our last it will help us to prioritise correctly. Then we will be better able to live in obedience and turn away from temptations, not *in order to be saved*, but *because we have been saved*. So, we need to focus on the fact that this world is going to end, either before or after we ourselves die, and seek to help as many other people as possible to be saved before then. We can't save the world, or the planet itself, but we can help individuals. Such an attitude will keep our minds focused on the right things rather than wasting our time on things that do not matter.

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

Despite being ready to die at any moment, the wise tend to have a longer life span than the wicked. Consider the relative lengths of the reigns of the Kings of Judah, some of whom were good, in comparison with the Kings of Israel, all of whom ended up wicked. Their different standards of faith and behaviour affected their life spans, as the Kings of the Southern Kingdom lived much longer on average than the Kings of the Northern Kingdom. Many passages speak of the longer average life expectancy, and better health, of the righteous as compared to the wicked:

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

Ecclesiastes 7:12 (ESV)

¹⁰ *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

¹¹ *For by me your days will be multiplied,
And years of life will be added to you.*

Proverbs 9:10-11 (NASB)

¹² *The righteous flourish like the palm tree
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.*

¹³ *They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.*

¹⁴ *They still bear fruit in old age;
they are ever full of sap and green,*

Psalms 92:12-14 (ESV)

*The fear of the LORD leads to life,
So that one may sleep satisfied, untouched by evil.*

Proverbs 19:23 (NASB)

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

Ecclesiastes 8:12 (NASB)

In this next passage we are told that those who “*consider the poor*”, i.e. those who are kind and generous towards the needy, will be specially protected by God, not only from enemies, but from illness too, and will be healed when they get sick, such that they are kept alive:

¹ *Blessed is the one who considers the poor!*

In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him;

² *the LORD protects him and keeps him alive;
he is called blessed in the land;*

you do not give him up to the will of his enemies.

³ *The LORD sustains him on his sickbed;
in his illness you restore him to full health.*

Psalms 41:1-3 (ESV)

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

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

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

²⁰ *“Behold, God will not reject a blameless man,
nor take the hand of evildoers.*

²¹ *He will yet fill your mouth with laughter,
and your lips with shouting.*

²² *Those who hate you will be clothed with shame,
and the tent of the wicked will be no more.”*

Job 8:20-22 (RSV)

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

The more you put God and other people at the centre, and yourself at the edge, the wiser and happier you will be. You can never be happy if you take centre-place in your own universe. One reason is that others will not cooperate with you. They want that central place for themselves. In my law firm the way the best staff ran their files was to keep the client at the centre, always putting his interests first, with the firm in second place and themselves in last place. Such staff always did well and had satisfied clients.

By contrast, the worst staff always put themselves first. They were the ones who ended up having discontented clients and doing badly in their careers. Self-centred employees won't choose any course of action which would involve additional difficulty or pressure for themselves, or require them to admit an error. We had several bad staff like that and none of them ever survived long term. They all failed in the end and many had to be removed. Ironically, one of the reasons why such selfish staff behaved as they did was to promote their own interests. But it never worked for them.

They always ended in failure, whereas the unselfish ones always succeeded. When the wise staff put their clients first and themselves last, both the clients and I would inevitably notice. I then promoted and rewarded them precisely because they were not making themselves the priority or seeking to promote themselves. It was *my* place to promote staff, not theirs. Likewise, it is God's place to promote us, not ours. Therefore, choosing not to put oneself first is actually enlightened self-interest and the surest way to promotion, both in this life and the next.

Moreover, wise people don't automatically assume that they are in the right. They accept correction and are open to being shown to be in the wrong. The wiser a person is, the more they will realise the power of their sinful flesh nature and their own capacity for self-deception. Also, the more easily they can see their own faults and bad habits. Therefore, when a wise person faces disputes or difficult situations, or when he is corrected or rebuked by a boss or senior colleague at work, his first thoughts will be along the lines of:

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

An incident occurred recently when my wife and I were on holiday in the Lake District. It illustrates, what it is to be self-absorbed, whereby a person sees themselves as being at the centre. We stayed in a large old mansion which had been split up into apartments. There was a warden whose job it was to look after all the apartments and guests. Parking was limited, and we were allocated a space at the rear.

On the day when we were setting off to go home, another visitor had parked his car badly, in a position which did not block us in, but prevented the warden getting past.

The warden then drove up and stopped immediately behind our car. This prevented us from driving off, even though our car was packed up and ready to go. The warden then got out of his car, leaving it parked right behind us, and went off to find the visitor who was preventing him from driving forwards to where he wanted to go. I got out of our car and said to the warden that we were about to go and asked if he could just *reverse* back a little first, in order to let *us* out.

However, he brushed *our* concerns aside and said he was going to find the owner of the car that was preventing *him* from driving forwards. He just said dismissively “*I won't be long*” and walked off towards the apartments. The warden was so absorbed with himself and his own concerns that our needs were a matter of complete indifference to him. I don't think his mind was even capable of registering the thought that *he* was blocking *us* in. He could only think in terms of somebody being in *his* way. Anything other than that did not matter enough even to allow the thought to form prior to dismissing it.

The point is, however, that we were paying guests, whereas he was just an employee of the company. Thus, it would have been obvious to a right-thinking person that he should reverse his own vehicle first, *for a mere moment*, to allow us to get out. Then he could address his own problem of being unable to go forward. Indeed, even if he had been a fellow guest, and not the warden, it would still have been obvious that he should not keep someone else waiting while he firstly tried to solve his own problem.

However, that was not how he saw it. From his self-centred perspective, it was an outrage that a motorist had blocked *his* way. The fact that he himself had blocked *our* way was neither here nor there. That is the essence of self-centredness. It enables a person to face two identical situations and to be animated by the one, but indifferent to the other. The only difference is that the one situation affects himself, whereas the other only affects someone else.

After some minutes, the warden emerged from the apartments together with the owner of the badly parked car who then moved it, enabling the warden to drive forward at last. However, even after that period of time, in which he might have taken the opportunity to reflect on how he was holding us up, the warden never apologised. He never even acknowledged that he had delayed our departure. He was either oblivious to that fact, or indifferent to it.

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

A self-absorbed person is so pre-occupied with themselves that they can become forgetful of other people's needs, or even their existence. Instead, we need to become so single-minded about serving God, serving others and pursuing the 'Great Commission' of making disciples, that we become forgetful of ourselves and of our own anxieties and preferences.

The pursuit of something far bigger than ourselves makes us willing to relegate our own interests in order to benefit others. Self-absorption makes us into a fool, but focusing on God, and on other people, makes us wise. I am not saying that we should *think less of ourselves*, in the sense of running ourselves down or belittling ourselves. I mean that we should simply *think of ourselves less*, in the sense of less often, less intensely and less selfishly.

Wise people are also willing to be corrected and to listen to advice

If the prospect of the Day of Judgment becomes real to you, then you will be able to see why it makes sense not to use your elbows when dealing with other people. One day you will have to answer for it face to face with Jesus, so it would be better to change now.

Therefore, a wise person is not merely *willing* to be corrected now, and to have his own wrong ideas, bad attitudes and selfish behaviour exposed. He positively *wants* to be corrected, because he knows he will benefit from it. Consider how King David and King Solomon put this:

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

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

Paradoxically, the wiser a person becomes, and the more knowledge and understanding he has, the more he will question himself, accept correction, and listen to advice. Wise people realise that they cannot safely rely on their own ability or judgement and that they need other people to assist them in the vital process of self-examination and self-improvement:

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

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

Sometimes advice and correction comes from gracious people and is given politely. Other times it comes from ungracious people and is given rudely. Either way, it is best to listen to it and to weigh it up open-mindedly. A wise person will listen to good advice, and act upon it, even if it is given harshly or by someone with whom they are not on friendly terms, as when King David listened to the advice of Joab, one of his generals, even though he spoke very bluntly. David was grieving over the death of his son, Absalom and Joab was sharply critical, but David did not allow himself to get offended. He knew that he was wrong and that Joab was right. Therefore, he listened and changed course:

⁵ Then Jo'ab came into the house to the king, and said, "You have today covered with shame the faces of all your servants, who have this day saved your life, and the lives of your sons and your daughters, and the lives of your wives and your concubines, ⁶ because you love those who hate you and hate those who love you. For you have made it clear today that commanders and servants are nothing to you; for today I perceive that if Ab'salom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased.

⁷ Now therefore arise, go out and speak kindly to your servants; for I swear by the LORD, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night; and this will be worse for you than all the evil that has come upon you from your youth until now."⁸ Then the king arose, and took his seat in the gate. And the people were all told, "Behold, the king is sitting in the gate"; and all the people came before the king. Now Israel had fled every man to his own home. ⁹ And all the people were at strife throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, "The king delivered us from the hand of our enemies, and saved us from the hand of the Philistines; and now he has fled out of the land from Ab'salom.

2 Samuel 19:5-9 (RSV)

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

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

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

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

²³ *Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!*
²⁴ *And see if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!*
Psalms 139:23-24 (RSV)

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

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

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

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

Though open to correction, a wise person will not passively submit to being falsely accused or let himself be cursed or violated.

Although a wise person is willing to listen to sincere criticism, and does not take offence when he is validly rebuked, he also knows when it is a false accusation. Sometimes the person criticising you is malicious and is trying to damage you. They might be spiritually mixed up and emotionally damaged themselves and they want to dump their resentments and anger onto you. If so, then instead of being open, you need to put up an 'umbrella' to prevent their poisonous words being sprayed all over you and seeping into you.

Or one could think in terms of the metaphor of 'fiery darts', which Paul speaks of, against which we need to raise the 'shield of faith'. As for whether to listen receptively, or to defend ourselves, it all

depends on who is talking to you, what their nature is, and what motivates them. Some people are just downright malicious, and their accusing words can operate as curses. They can get through your 'skin' and poison you if you let them speak into your life. In the past, when I had less discernment, I allowed false, malevolent people to violate me by their venomous words, which I naively listened to.

The problem is it isn't easy to know who the malicious people are, especially if you are inexperienced in handling them. But you can at least be aware that such people exist and be on the lookout for them. This problem can particularly arise where you are involved in a dispute and accusations and insults are aimed at you. At such times it is wise to keep your distance, maintain your 'guard', and to limit such people's ability to get to you. You might even ask someone whom you trust to look at any letters or emails before you read them, or even *instead* of you reading them.

You could also refuse to meet with them, or at least without a witness present who will support you and help you to deal with the toxic things that may be said. A friend of mine was once involved in a dispute with someone who was very mixed up and emotionally unstable. That person was therefore lashing out with wild, unfounded accusations and wounding remarks. When yet another inflammatory email arrived, I suggested that she print it off and show it to me first, rather than just open it and read it immediately on her own. We then read it together, side by side.

I was therefore able to counsel her, there and then, and to instantly refute the false accusations and insults and reassure her of their falseness. I did that right at the start, before the 'fiery darts' had any chance to get through her skin and cause damage. She found that screening process very helpful and it prevented her being violated by the other person's outpouring of bile. If such letters or calls keep on coming, you might choose not to read them at all, or refuse to meet up, or to take the person's phone calls. Then you can keep all of their poison away from you entirely.

There are times when such defensive measures are essential for your own protection, and it is not wrong. It does not mean that you are behaving wrongly, or being a fool for not being willing to hear their accusations. That is only the case when you are *in the wrong*, or are *insincere*, and are refusing to listen to a *sincere* person who is *in the right* and is seeking to correct you. But if the other person is insincere, or even malicious, there is no longer any duty to listen to them.

Indeed, it may be very unwise for you to do so, as you would be allowing them to harm you. To passively let them unload their accusations onto you would be like standing still in the path of a farmer's slurry spreader and letting it spray its load all over you. You have no duty to submit to such abuse or to make yourself an outlet for other people's rage or venom. They must solve their own problems, without using you as a punch bag.

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

A wise person is so concerned not to do wrong to others that he will interrogate himself to establish who is really right, or "in the right". He won't just assume it to be himself, or take it for granted that his own cause obviously has merit. Neither will he assume that his own interests and needs automatically come ahead of those of other people. He will be slow to form a conclusion about who is right and wrong and will avoid lashing out or acting on impulse.

Our flesh nature is very strong, and the habits of selfishness and self-justification are deeply ingrained. We will therefore never do right naturally or instinctively. Every right choice, or right action, is always contrary to the wishes of our flesh nature. We therefore have to impose it on ourselves by insisting that our new man prevails over our old man. That will never happen by itself, but it is far more likely if you have '*the love of the truth*'. That means you love the truth for its own sake and would rather know the truth, even if it proves you wrong, or shows you to have behaved wrongly.

However, most people do not love the truth. Therefore, they hate to be challenged, questioned or corrected. They view it as an impertinence and feel outraged if it is suggested that they are wrong in their beliefs or conduct. In fact, I have often encountered such defensive and resentful reactions from church leaders when I have attempted to raise some point concerning their teaching. For example, I once spoke to a leader who had just given a talk on the book of Jonah. I felt he had misunderstood both the book and the prophet and that he was missing the point.

I went up to him afterwards privately, one to one, and, very quietly, tried to explain how I saw it, but he had no interest at all and didn't want to know. It seemed to me that if he had just spent time studying that book, he ought to have been interested in it and open to hear more, even if I was wrong. Indeed, if he truly felt that I was wrong then, surely, he would want to hear from me, if only to correct me for my benefit and to clarify what he really meant. One might imagine that would be the common reaction in such situations, but it rarely is.

However, he was completely uninterested and was unwilling, or perhaps unable, to answer my points. He could have replied: *"I hadn't realised any of that. I'd like to hear more about it."* Or he could have said *"Actually, you may have misunderstood me. Let me clarify what I meant."* But he did neither. He just looked irritated, had nothing to say, and wanted to change the subject. I imagine he was motivated by a mixture of pride, insecurity and laziness. He probably also felt that he was 'clergy' and ought not to be challenged or corrected by a mere 'lay person'.

However, I think that, above all, it was because he did not have the love of the truth. Therefore, when faced with a chance to learn something, he chose not to learn it, simply because it could involve a loss of face, though only in his mind, not mine. Thus, he would prefer to remain wrong, rather than get the truth, whereas a wise person would rather learn the truth, even if it did mean a loss of face. That said, why should it mean that? What is wrong with being corrected or having someone fill a gap in your knowledge? Why should that embarrass you?

It only does so if our attitude is wrong to begin with and we love our own image more than the truth. A wise person sets out to find the truth even if it means he has to change his mind publicly, such that people can see his error. A prime example of that kind of integrity is the Bible teacher *Chuck Missler* of *Koinonea Institute*. Over the years he redid a number of his teaching series when he discovered errors or gaps in his own understanding. He redid Matthew's gospel three times. But that doesn't diminish Chuck Missler. It enhances him, at least in the eyes of right-thinking people.

Therefore, make a decision to develop the love of the truth. Seek the truth even if it means that your current opinion, or your conduct or attitude, will be shown to have been wrong. Why would you want to preserve the *appearance* of having been right when you now know you were actually wrong? It will all come out anyway at the Judgment Seat of Christ. (See my Book 4.) Therefore, why not prefer to let the truth come out now, so that your opinions, attitudes or conduct can be corrected, even if that has to be done in public? It will do you no harm and a lot of good.

There are many benefits that come from being challenged and corrected. Therefore, a wise person will actually pray that God will expose his errors, so he can become more aware of them. Why not pray something along these lines: *"Lord, please point out to me any mistakes in my logic, or errors of fact, or gaps in my knowledge, or anything else of which I am unaware. Speak to me through the Bible or other people and let me know where such errors are. Please also let me see my own sins and character faults as clearly as other people can see them."*

Sadly, that is not what most of us actually pray. Instead, we tend to fight hard to maintain our dignity and to *appear* to be in the right, even after we know we were wrong. I believe that the leader I spoke of earlier had simply downloaded another man's sermon from the internet, complete with overhead projector images. It was plain that he had done little or no genuine study of the book of Jonah for himself. He was just reading out an entire sermon which was not his own work. Therefore, he was not actually *able* to engage in a meaningful discussion with me.

He knew that if he had spoken with me he would have been exposed as having done no real study of his own. Therefore, rather than learn the truth, he chose to avoid exposure, even in a private one to one conversation which would have gone no further. At that moment, I believe he was being a fool. He was trying to save his own face, rather than find out whether his teaching was right or wrong. Strictly speaking, a person who does not love the truth does not actually *want* to be wrong. Neither does he want to believe lies.

He would probably prefer the truth, *but only if it does not cost him something*, or involve any inconvenience. That is the attitude of a fool, and yet it is how most of us operate. If a person persists in maintaining their own opinions, rather than accepting what God says, there will come a point when God will *'hand them over'* or *'give them over'*. That means He will step back and leave them to get on with pursuing their own foolish opinions, and even engaging in sinful behaviour, rather than listening to Him. That is a very dangerous position to be in:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Before destruction a man's heart is haughty,
but humility comes before honor.
Proverbs 18:12 (ESV)*

*Pride goes before destruction,
and a haughty spirit before a fall. Proverbs 16:18 (ESV)*

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

Jesus strongly rebuked the people of the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum on the edge of Lake Galilee. They had seen and heard Him in person and yet they still did not repent or believe. They were wise in their own eyes and also self-sufficient and therefore they did not see their own need or realise that they lacked anything. Conversely, the humble people were able to believe Jesus' words very easily because they had that humility and sense of dependency that children have. It is only to such infants, both literal and metaphorical, that God reveals the truth:

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

Matthew 11:25 (NASB)

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

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

1 Corinthians 3:18-20 (ESV)

Wise people willingly humble themselves

Given that so many benefits and blessings are promised to those who humble themselves, common sense dictates that we should all do so. God repeatedly denounces pride, arrogance, and haughtiness. Therefore, it can only be described as foolishness if we refuse to humble ourselves. Let's look at just a few examples beginning with this well-known verse in which God promises to hear the Jewish people, and to heal their land *if they will humble themselves*:

if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7:14 (ESV)

Note also what James, the half-brother of Jesus, says about how God deals with those who will humble themselves:

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

James 4:6 (ESV)

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

James 4:10 (ESV)

Jesus Himself makes the point even more explicitly and establishes a law that all who humble themselves will be exalted, whereas all who exalt themselves will be humbled:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Luke 14:11 (ESV)

The point is that God hates pride and distances Himself from all who are haughty. Yet He has regard for the lowly:

*For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly,
but the haughty he knows from afar.
Psalm 138:6 (ESV)*

Therefore, we should all be eager to humble ourselves and take every opportunity to do so. However, the question then is *how exactly should we do it?* Due to our sin nature, humility doesn't come naturally to us. Therefore, it involves a deliberate choice to do the opposite of what our flesh wants, like holding a cork underwater. It means forcing yourself to do what your proud, selfish nature doesn't want to do. Jesus told the apostles that anyone who wants to be great must become a servant. That means focusing on the needs of others, and on meeting their needs, rather than our own:

⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Mark 10:42-45 (ESV)

None of this will come naturally. The mere fact that we may have become a Christian does not mean that we lose our flesh nature. It does not go away and has to be denied its own way, or 'crucified', by regularly denying ourselves, serving others and repenting willingly when we are wrong or in sin. God's willingness to respond graciously when we humble ourselves applies to everyone, no matter how bad they are, or what they have done, even the wicked King Ahab of Israel, upon whose descendants God pronounced judgment via the prophet Elijah:

¹⁷ Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ¹⁸ "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. ¹⁹ And you shall say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Have you killed and also taken possession?"' And you shall say to him, 'Thus says the LORD: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth shall dogs lick your own blood."'"

²⁰ Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you, because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD. ²¹ Behold, I will bring disaster upon you. I will utterly burn you up, and will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. ²² And I will make your house like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah, for the anger to which you have provoked me, and because you have made Israel to sin. ²³ And of Jezebel the LORD also said, 'The dogs shall eat Jezebel within the walls of Jezreel.' ²⁴ Anyone belonging to Ahab who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone of his who dies in the open country the birds of the heavens shall eat."

²⁵ (There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. ²⁶ He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the LORD cast out before the people of Israel.)

1 Kings 21:17-26 (ESV)

When Ahab realised this, and reflected on his own sin, even he chose to repent and humble himself. When he did so, God's heart was touched. He therefore chose to delay the judgment on Ahab's family line so that it would only come after Ahab's death:

²⁷ And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. ²⁸ And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ²⁹ "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house."

1 Kings 21:27-29 (ESV)

Whoever you are, this law about humbling and exalting operates automatically, and in both directions. Therefore, wise people will choose to humble themselves whenever they can, and they will avoid exalting themselves. Then they can fully rely on God to exalt them in due course. When a person humbles themselves, God is so pleased He intervenes in their lives to guide them and give them wisdom:

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

Psalm 25:9 (RSV)

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

Proverbs 11:2 (RSV)

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

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

2 Kings 22:19 (NASB)

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

Isaiah 66:2 (RSV)

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

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

Luke 18:17 (NASB)

God also wants us to avoid conceit, and to be willing to associate with the lowly:

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

Romans 12:16 (RSV)

There is actually no point boasting about ourselves or our abilities or achievements. The only thing we should ever 'boast' about is God. We must not promote ourselves or desire to be well-known or approved of. Neither should we ever praise ourselves or seek the praise of others:

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

Proverbs 27:2 (RSV)

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

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

2 Corinthians 10:17-18 (ESV)

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

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

Wise people know that whatever is said about them, however harsh or unkind it may be, they themselves have said the same, or worse, about others in the past. Moreover, those who insult or abuse us are only here for a short time and will soon be gone, so try not to place much importance on the untrue or unfair things that others say:

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

Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 (RSV)

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

Isaiah 51:7-8 (RSV)

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

The general principle set out in Scripture is that a wise person will succeed, prosper, live longer and enjoy protection. However, that is not an absolute rule. The only certainty is that such people will prosper and be rewarded *in the next life*, when they are resurrected. In this present life, there are no guarantees. We all have to face the random events, both good and bad, that time and chance bring, both to the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the foolish. Therefore, we are all subject to the ups and downs of life, no matter how wise we may become:

¹ But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. ² It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. ³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

Ecclesiastes 9:1-3 (ESV)

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

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 (ESV)

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

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

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

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

Ecclesiastes 8:16-17 (NIV)

Even the wisest of people find life baffling at times, so we will never understand everything or know at all times what to do. God has chosen only to provide us with a limited measure of wisdom, no matter who we are. Wise people come to terms with this and are reconciled to having to live with an element of uncertainty and inadequacy. That keeps them dependent on God to provide, day by day, the wisdom they lack. Even if that is never given to them, they press ahead anyway and don't consider God to be at fault for requiring them to live in a world that is subject to such limitations.

They do what they know to be their duty, even when they are confused or unsure about what God is doing and why. Ironically, therefore, the wiser a person becomes, the more they realise that they *lack* knowledge and understanding. Even Solomon, who had more wisdom than any other man, could not achieve total wisdom, no matter how hard he studied. Even for him, there was still frustration, vexation and a sense of failure and futility at times. In fact, the more wisdom he acquired, the more it added to his concerns and sorrows in some ways:

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

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 (RSV)

Although we have a measure of understanding, God puts a limit on how much we can grasp. He will not allow any person, however wise they may be, to have complete knowledge or understanding:

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

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (RSV)

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

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

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

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

Job 42:7-8 (NASB)

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

² "Who is this that darkens counsel

By words without knowledge?

³ "Now gird up your loins like a man,

And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!

⁴ "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell Me, if you have understanding,

⁵ Who set its measurements? Since you know.

Or who stretched the line on it?

⁶ "On what were its bases sunk?

Or who laid its cornerstone,

⁷ When the morning stars sang together

And all the sons of God shouted for joy?

⁸ "Or who enclosed the sea with doors

When, bursting forth, it went out from the womb;

⁹ When I made a cloud its garment

And thick darkness its swaddling band,

¹⁰ And I placed boundaries on it

And set a bolt and doors,

¹¹ And I said, 'Thus far you shall come, but no farther;

And here shall your proud waves stop?'

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

And caused the dawn to know its place,

¹³ That it might take hold of the ends of the earth,

And the wicked be shaken out of it?

¹⁴ "It is changed like clay under the seal;

And they stand forth like a garment.

¹⁵ "From the wicked their light is withheld,

And the uplifted arm is broken.

¹⁶ "Have you entered into the springs of the sea

Or walked in the recesses of the deep?

¹⁷ "Have the gates of death been revealed to you,

Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?

¹⁸ "Have you understood the expanse of the earth?

Tell Me, if you know all this.

Job 38:2-18 (NASB)

³ *Then Job answered the LORD and said,*
⁴ *“Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You?
I lay my hand on my mouth.*
⁵ *“Once I have spoken, and I will not answer;
Even twice, and I will add nothing more.”*
Job 40:3-5 (NASB)

Although it is right to pursue wisdom, we must never imagine we have acquired it all, or are fully able to apply it. If we do, we will end up applying it wrongly, or at the wrong time, or making pronouncements which go too far, or are based on incomplete knowledge. Then we will be wrong overall, as Job’s friends were, even though much of what we say could be correct in itself or in principle. Job’s friends obviously had a lot of genuine understanding and knew more than most believers today. They were sincere and earnest too.

Their error was to presume to pronounce with excessive confidence on matters which went beyond their capacity to understand. They also assumed that just because they knew a *general* principle about how God operates, that must mean that God *always* operates in that way, with *all* people, and in *all* situations. Quite possibly Job’s friends went wrong because they expressed their own opinions and beliefs without ever asking God for specific wisdom relevant to Job’s situation. There is no evidence in the text that any of them ever made such a prayer.

Instead, it seems that they just unleashed what they had to say without ever praying something along these lines: *“Lord, this situation appears to be very complex. What should I say to Job? Or, should I say nothing at all at present? Please guide me and prevent me from misrepresenting you, or misapplying the limited knowledge that I do have”*. Such a prayer would have been well worth making and would be a good prayer for us to make too. Job speaks in that way to God at the end of the book of Job when he realises his own smallness and his very limited understanding in comparison to God’s:

¹ *Then Job answered the LORD and said,*
² *“I know that You can do all things,
And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.*
³ *‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.”*
⁴ *‘Hear, now, and I will speak;
I will ask You, and You instruct me.’*
⁵ *“I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear;
But now my eye sees You;*
⁶ *Therefore I retract,
And I repent in dust and ashes.”*
Job 42:1-6 (NASB)

Wise people are not insecure or envious. But if somehow they still are, they recognise these traits as faults, seek to deal with them, and refuse to be influenced by them

In my long experience of both workplaces and churches, I have come to the view that a large proportion of the population are insecure in one or more ways. That insecurity causes profound problems and much unhappiness. People seek to defend themselves from imagined threats, or they compete with others when there isn’t actually any competition. They then knock others down to avoid being out-done in these imaginary contests. The tragedy is that those problems could be avoided if the person concerned was to learn:

- a) to be content with his own abilities, talents, possessions and calling and not crave to be someone else, or to have what others have

- b) to be content for other people to have different, or even better, abilities talents possessions and callings than himself and not to resent the fact that those people have what they have, or seek to knock them down, or take away what they have.

The sin we are looking at here is *envy*. It is terribly damaging and causes untold misery to all concerned, both the one who envies, and the one who is envied. The essence of envy is:

- a) wanting to have what has not been given to you, is not yours, and is not meant to be yours
- b) wanting others *not to have* what has been given to them, and which is theirs.

Envy is a very serious sin but it is important to distinguish it from *jealousy* which is not a sin at all. Many people assume that it is just another word for envy, but it isn't. Jealousy means wanting to get back from someone else something which is *rightfully yours* and which they have *wrongfully taken from you*. Thus, if you see another man walking down the street with your wife, whom he has stolen away from you, and if you want to get her back, then that is to be jealous. You are being jealous for your own wife, and that is *not a sin*.

If instead you saw a man walking along the street with his own wife and you wanted her that would be envy. You would be wanting something which is not, and never can be, yours. In that context, insecurity involves fearing that some other man will take your wife away from you, or that she might wish to go with him or is planning to do so. Envy and insecurity extend far beyond the issue of wives. People feel insecure about themselves, and envious of others, in just about every way you could imagine. Thus, in the workplace, but also in churches, there are many people who:

- a) believe they are not sufficiently able or talented, or that they have been given fewer, or lesser, gifts than others, such that their own achievements are insignificant by comparison, and even worthless.
- b) Even if they are talented and have been given important roles or duties, and even if they know that, they can never stop fearing that someone else may come along later who has more to offer or is more talented. They fear that that person could do a better job, or take their job, or their opportunity for promotion, or outshine them in some way.

That nagging anxiety can ruin a person's own life and cause them to act sinfully towards others who might pose a 'threat'. In my Book 6 I tell the story of 'Tracey', a secretary who became a menace in my law firm. She caused terrible damage to others by lying to them, and about them, all because she felt insecure and wanted to advance her own career prospects by undermining others. Please see Book 6 for the whole story, plus other stories of people I have known who behaved in wicked ways due to being insecure.

The tragedy of such insecurity is that it is all entirely unnecessary. A lot of it is caused by the lies whispered into people's minds by demons, which they wrongly assume to be their own thoughts. Please see my Books 7 and 9 for an explanation of what demons are capable of. They operate skilfully, and covertly, to undermine us and to cause us to harm ourselves and others.

Nobody ever needs to feel insecure. If we think as we ought to think, and see ourselves, the world, and our position within it as they really are, then everything becomes much clearer. We are not actually meant to be competing against other people. From God's perspective, that is not what life is about. We must certainly do our best to bear fruit, to be 'overcomers', and to do God's will. But we are not being measured by how we compare to others in our abilities, or in what we achieve in *comparison to them*. The Judgment Seat of Christ will not include any such comparisons.

What talents other people had in this life, and whether they did better than you, will not be on the agenda when Jesus assesses you. He will measure you by reference to *what you did with what you were given*. Whether your talents were great or small will make no difference to the outcome. You don't need, therefore, to do better than others, or to prevent them from outshining you. Each of them will be judged

on a stand-alone basis, in exactly the same way. Thus, your achievements won't be mentioned in their judgment, any more than their achievements will be mentioned in yours.

Once the reality of this sinks in, it is life-changing. You suddenly realise that you can be a great success, and hear the words "*Well done, good and faithful servant,*" even if every other person in your church of workplace had more talent and ability than you and ends up being promoted to a higher position and a bigger ministry during this life. Imagine that you work alongside Fred Smith, Joe Bloggs and Jack Jones, or that they are part of your church, and that they each have different roles.

Suppose each of them has more natural ability than you, more ministry gifts, more spiritual gifts, are better known than you, and have risen to a higher level of leadership. Or, perhaps, imagine that you are not in a leadership position at all, whereas all of them are. None of that matters in the slightest to Jesus, and His view is all that ultimately counts. He is the one who will judge us and His assessment of us will stand for all eternity as the final word on how well each of us did.

Many people aim to do better than others, or to prevent others doing better than them. But Jesus actually wants each of us to *want others to do well and to help them to do so*. Imagine that as a result of your encouragement, support and mentoring, Fred, Joe, and Jack all end up rising higher than you and doing 'better', so far as you and others can tell, in the work of the ministry. Jesus might still praise you more than them, reward you more, and allocate you a higher place in His Kingdom, on the basis that *you helped those servants of His* to do better than they otherwise would.

Many people are unaware that the extent of our help for others, and our unselfishness in encouraging them to achieve things for Jesus, is one of the criteria by which He will judge us. Therefore, they misguidedly cause themselves to score 0/100 on this vital criterion because they did not realise this was something they were expected to do, or that they would ever be assessed on that basis. How sad is that?

Therefore, the very steps they take to hinder their 'rivals' and to undermine and discourage them, with the aim of doing better than them, will actually only reduce their own 'score' at the Judgment Seat. It could also cause them to lose the rewards which they would otherwise have been awarded and to be given a lower position in the Kingdom. Therefore, a wise person will not try to compete with others in their ministry, or in their walk as a disciple, and will instead:

- a) be content with whatever talents they have been given, small or large, and thank God for them
- b) be relaxed about others having more talent than them, or being able to do things they cannot do
- c) encourage others to go further, achieve more, and do better, regardless of whether they end up doing 'better' than himself
- d) see himself as part of a worldwide *team* of Christians, all of whom are *playing on the same side*, seeking to reach the lost, to make disciples, and to be salt and light to a fallen world, rather than competing against each other.

When you see things this way it suddenly makes sense that you should be content with your own gifts and talents, whatever they may be. Then you can encourage all other Christians to fulfil their potential, without feeling that their success would diminish you in any way. A person who is wise enough to see this is able to embark upon 'the ministry of encouragement', which is possibly one of the best ways of being highly rewarded at the judgment.

They will see it as their aim to lift others up, not to knock them down and will want others to do their best for the 'team', even if they are seen to be doing better than themselves. The ministry of encouragement is vitally needed within the Church, and is also a source of great pleasure and satisfaction for those who engage in it. Yet it is very rarely sought after or practised due, in large part, to this problem of insecurity and envy. Please refer to my Book 7 in which I refer to this in more detail.

A wise person is open to see the sin, and the faults, in himself and will want to take every opportunity to repent and to change.

If God was a doctor, the main medicine He would prescribe to His patients would be repentance. It would be dispensed on a regular basis and in large doses. It is central to the whole Gospel message, which is why the public ministries of both John the Baptist and of Jesus began with the word *'repent'*. It was also virtually the first word which Peter said too, when preaching his first sermon after the resurrection. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of repentance or to 'over-prescribe' it to yourself as a remedy.

A wise person will take every opportunity to repent, not only at the start of his Christian life when he is first converted, but on a regular basis thereafter. Repentance is also a vital ingredient if we want to grow and mature as a disciple, not only in order to be saved to begin with. Ongoing repentance is what we are all meant to be doing, *throughout our entire lives*. You will never reach a stage where you outgrow that and no longer need to do it, or at least not until you die.

¹² *"Yet even now," declares the LORD,
"return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
¹³ and rend your hearts and not your garments."*
*Return to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love;
and he relents over disaster.*
¹⁴ *Who knows whether he will not turn and relent,
and leave a blessing behind him,
a grain offering and a drink offering
for the LORD your God?*
¹⁵ *Blow the trumpet in Zion;
consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly;
¹⁶ gather the people.
Consecrate the congregation;
assemble the elders;
gather the children,
even nursing infants.
Let the bridegroom leave his room,
and the bride her chamber.*
¹⁷ *Between the vestibule and the altar
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep
and say, "Spare your people, O LORD,
and make not your heritage a reproach,
a byword among the nations.
Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?'"*

Joel 2:12-17 (ESV)

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

A hard heart prevents a person hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit and from accepting and responding to what the Bible says. It is a very widespread problem and does not only apply to those who are embittered towards God. It is also found in ordinary people, *including believers*, who are:

a) complacent

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

Any of us can become hard-hearted. It is a condition which makes us resistant to what God is saying to us and slow to grasp it. Even the apostles were sometimes remarkably slow to understand what Jesus said:

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

Mark 8:11-18 (NASB)

If you continue hardening your heart and refusing to listen to God, a point may be reached where He *refuses to listen to you*. If so, He effectively *hands you over* and leaves you to take the path that you have chosen for yourself, however foolish or wicked it is. That is what God did with the Jews when they “*made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law....*”

¹¹But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. ¹²They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts. ¹³“As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,” says the LORD of hosts,

Zechariah 7:11-13 (ESV)

Have you ever considered how many astonishing statements the Bible makes which we allow to wash over us without taking them seriously or changing our lives in response? Due to our hardness of heart we can become immune to the Bible, as if we were coated with oil which causes God’s Word to run off us like water off a duck’s back. It is not only unbelievers who are like that. It affects believers too, including genuine Christians. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews addresses this issue and remember that he is writing *to and about believers*, not the unsaved:

*⁷Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says:
“Today, if you will hear His voice,
⁸Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
In the day of trial in the wilderness,
⁹Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me,
And saw My works forty years.
¹⁰Therefore I was angry with that generation,*

*And said, 'They always go astray in their heart,
And they have not known My ways.'*

¹¹ *So I swore in My wrath,
'They shall not enter My rest.'*

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

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

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

Hebrews 3:7-19 (NKJV)

The writer of Hebrews (apostle Paul in my personal view) wanted his readers to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and not let their hearts become hardened. Moreover, he put the responsibility for preventing that upon *them*. It was *their own duty* to become soft-hearted and to avoid hard-heartedness. That is not something that happens to you randomly, or by accident. You *bring it upon yourself* by lots of small decisions to ignore or disobey the Bible, or your conscience, and to go your own way instead. It usually does not involve any spectacular acts of rebellion.

Mostly it comes from a series of small choices, each of which leaves us a little bit harder and a little bit less sensitive to our consciences, or to the Bible. Unless you take decisive action to repent and change your attitude, you will sink into a much deeper hardness of heart, which is very dangerous. A wise person does not assume that this hardening process could never happen to him. Nor does he fail to take it seriously. He takes active steps to 'tenderise' his own heart by regularly humbling himself, repenting, and forgiving others, so as to remove any bitterness. He also asks God to expose and deal with any remaining hardness of heart.

Where we see hardness of heart in ourselves, or even where we suspect it to be there, we should ask God to expose it. Ask Him to do whatever it takes to reveal the hardness and to help us to soften our hearts and become responsive to His voice. That is a prayer which is well worth making and which God will delight to answer. The benefits which will flow from it are enormous. Yet how often have you done this, or heard anybody urge you to do so?

We all need to ask God to help us to see our own hardness of heart and to tackle it. If we do that then God's will may sometimes be such that we need to make difficult decisions, or do painful and costly things, to obey Him and develop as disciples. On such occasions the price is worth paying because it will tenderise us and help us grow in maturity. Persistently softening our hearts and humbling ourselves causes us to become like small children in our attitudes towards God. At least in this sense, God wants us to have that childlike heart-attitude:

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

Mark 10:13-15 (NASB)

In the light of what Jesus says, taking the lowest place is actually enlightened self-interest. It may sound counter-intuitive, but that is how we rise up in His Kingdom. Conversely, grasping for seniority, status and recognition in this life brings us lower down in God's eyes.

Wise people know what will eventually happen to the wicked and are not discouraged by their apparent success or ‘invincibility’.

The wicked are not going to be there permanently. A fool or a simple person will not realise this and will therefore be discouraged, but a wise person will not because he has a more accurate, and longer term, perspective on the fate of the wicked:

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

The Bible deals with the problem of why the wicked seem to do so well and why God’s judgment on them is delayed. They prosper, and even seem to be invincible, while they continue doing evil. That is how it *appears to us*, because we don’t have God’s long term perspective about time and eternity. A wicked man being in power for 12 years, as Hitler was, seems a long time to us. Others have lasted even longer than that.

It is not only the great dictators that we are speaking of here. The same is true in our own personal lives at a local level. Wicked people can and do prosper. They get promoted. They become rich. They get elected – and re-elected. They exert great influence. Conversely, those who do what is right are often obstructed and unrecognised and can seem unsuccessful in the world’s eyes. In view of this, it is easy to become discouraged.

Some even feel tempted to join in with the wicked in the hope that cooperation may bring us a quieter life. But we must hold on to what the Bible says about the inevitable long-term destiny of the wicked. They really will *all* fail and be brought down in the end, at the very least, by death. After that they will face God’s judgment, which is the ultimate long-stop and it limits their power and influence. Even King David struggled with this issue and addressed it in the Psalms:

*¹ Fret not yourself because of evildoers;
be not envious of wrongdoers!
² For they will soon fade like the grass
and wither like the green herb.
³ Trust in the LORD, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
⁴ Delight yourself in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
⁵ Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.
⁶ He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday.
⁷ Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;
fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way,
over the man who carries out evil devices!
⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!
Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.
⁹ For the evildoers shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.
¹⁰ In just a little while, the wicked will be no more;
though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.
¹¹ But the meek shall inherit the land
and delight themselves in abundant peace.*

¹² *The wicked plots against the righteous
and gnashes his teeth at him,
¹³ but the LORD laughs at the wicked,
for he sees that his day is coming.
¹⁴ The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose way is upright;
¹⁵ their sword shall enter their own heart,
and their bows shall be broken.
¹⁶ Better is the little that the righteous has
than the abundance of many wicked.
¹⁷ For the arms of the wicked shall be broken,
but the LORD upholds the righteous.
¹⁸ The LORD knows the days of the blameless,
and their heritage will remain forever;*
Psalm 37:1-18 (ESV)

²⁷ *Turn away from evil and do good;
so shall you dwell forever.
²⁸ For the LORD loves justice;
he will not forsake his saints.
They are preserved forever,
but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.
The righteous shall inherit the land
and dwell upon it forever.*
Psalm 37:27-29 (ESV)

³⁴ *Wait for the LORD and keep his way,
and he will exalt you to inherit the land;
you will look on when the wicked are cut off.
³⁵ I have seen a wicked, ruthless man,
spreading himself like a green laurel tree.
³⁶ But he passed away, and behold, he was no more;
though I sought him, he could not be found.
³⁷ Mark the blameless and behold the upright,
for there is a future for the man of peace.
³⁸ But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed;
the future of the wicked shall be cut off.*
Psalm 37:34-38 (ESV)

²⁰ *Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
those who frame injustice by statute?
²¹ They band together against the life of the righteous
and condemn the innocent to death.
²² But the LORD has become my stronghold,
and my God the rock of my refuge.
²³ He will bring back on them their iniquity
and wipe them out for their wickedness;
the LORD our God will wipe them out.*
Psalm 94:20-23 (ESV)

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

*For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.*

Psalm 84:10 (ESV)

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

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

¹ "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³ And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi 3:16-4:3 (ESV)

Wise people know that they could fall into sin, or even fall away, and they are not complacent about the potential to become unfaithful in later life

There are many examples in the Bible of people who began well, but then fell away. I can also think of many such examples amongst the people I know. They start out well, and even continue well for a while, acting wisely and remaining true. But, over time, perhaps due to the complacency and over-confidence that can come from success, they slacken off. They then become less honest, choose less wisely, and act less faithfully. Eventually they can reach a stage where they have fallen away completely and their Christian walk has become shallow or non-existent.

In some cases it occurs due to the death or departure of a godly mentor who was a significant influence in their younger years. They only remain faithful while they still have that godly person as a guide or 'pillar'. But when they have to stand alone, relying only on God's Word and their own conscience, they begin to do what is easy or expedient, rather than what is right. A classic example of this is the life of King Joash of Judah. Please see 2 Chronicles, chapters 22-24 for the full account.

Joash became king when he was only about 7 years old. He only survived to that age because he was rescued as a baby by his aunt, Jehoshabeath, and her godly husband, Jehoiada, who was a priest. If they had not hidden him away for six years he would have been murdered by the wicked 'Queen' Athaliah, his own grandmother. She killed the whole royal family when her son, King Ahaziah, died. She then reigned in his place as a usurper for six years until the chance came to assassinate her and put the young boy, King Joash, on the throne:

¹⁰ Now when Athaliah the mother of Ahaziah saw that her son was dead, she arose and destroyed all the royal family of the house of Judah. ¹¹ But Jehoshabeath, the daughter of the king, took Joash the son of Ahaziah and stole him away from among the king's sons who were about to be put to death, and she put him and his nurse in a bedroom. Thus Jehoshabeath, the daughter of King Jehoram and wife of Jehoiada the priest, because she was a sister of Ahaziah, hid him from Athaliah, so that she did not put him to death. ¹² And he remained with them six years, hidden in the house of God, while Athaliah reigned over the land.

2 Chronicles 22:10-12 (ESV)

¹ But in the seventh year Jehoiada took courage and entered into a covenant with the commanders of hundreds, Azariah the son of Jeroham, Ishmael the son of Jehohanan, Azariah the son of Obed, Maaseiah the son of Adaiah, and Elishaphat the son of Zichri. ² And they went about through Judah and gathered the Levites from all the cities of Judah, and the heads of fathers' houses of Israel, and they came to Jerusalem. ³ And all the assembly made a covenant with the king in the house of God. And Jehoiada said to them, "Behold, the king's son! Let him reign, as the LORD spoke concerning the sons of David.

2 Chronicles 23:1-3 (ESV)

¹¹ Then they brought out the king's son and put the crown on him and gave him the testimony. And they proclaimed him king, and Jehoiada and his sons anointed him, and they said, "Long live the king." ¹² When Athaliah heard the noise of the people running and praising the king, she went into the house of the LORD to the people. ¹³ And when she looked, there was the king standing by his pillar at the entrance, and the captains and the trumpeters beside the king, and all the people of the land rejoicing and blowing trumpets, and the singers with their musical instruments leading in the celebration. And Athaliah tore her clothes and cried, "Treason! Treason!" ¹⁴ Then Jehoiada the priest brought out the captains who were set over the army, saying to them, "Bring her out between the ranks, and anyone who follows her is to be put to death with the sword." For the priest said, "Do not put her to death in the house of the LORD." ¹⁵ So they laid hands on her, and she went into the entrance of the horse gate of the king's house, and they put her to death there.

2 Chronicles 23:11-15 (ESV)

For many years, King Joash reigned in Judah and made wise decisions as he sought to cleanse the nation of idolatry. He did all that because he had the wise advice and godly influence of Jehoiada, his aunt's husband, who was a pillar in Joash's life:

¹ Joash was seven years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Zibiah of Beersheba. ² And Joash did what was right in the eyes of the LORD all the days of Jehoiada the priest.

2 Chronicles 24:1-2 (ESV)

However, when Jehoiada eventually died, Joash had to reign without his influence. Joash then began to come under the influence of ungodly men and ended up abandoning the house of the LORD and serving false gods and idols instead. Even when God sent prophets to warn Joash, he would not listen:

¹⁵ But Jehoiada grew old and full of days, and died. He was 130 years old at his death. ¹⁶ And they buried him in the city of David among the kings, because he had done good in Israel, and toward God and his house. ¹⁷ Now after the death of Jehoiada the princes of Judah came and paid homage to the king. Then the king listened to them. ¹⁸ And they abandoned the house of the LORD, the God of their fathers, and served the Asherim and the idols. And wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this guilt of theirs. ¹⁹ Yet he sent prophets among them to bring them back to the LORD. These testified against them, but they would not pay attention.

2 Chronicles 24:15-19 (ESV)

Joash fell away so completely that when Jehoiada's own son, Zechariah, tried to warn him about the wicked things he was now doing, Joash ignored him and listened to his new advisers, who conspired against Zechariah. He even gave the command for Zechariah to be stoned to death:

²⁰ Then the Spirit of God clothed Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, and he stood above the people, and said to them, "Thus says God, 'Why do you break the commandments of the LORD, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has forsaken you.'" ²¹ But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the LORD. ²² Thus Joash the king did not remember the kindness that Jehoiada, Zechariah's father, had shown him, but killed his son. And when he was dying, he said, "May the LORD see and avenge!"

2 Chronicles 24:20-22 (ESV)

Some people will listen to advice when they are starting out in their career or ministry. But they become proud and overly self-reliant when they grow older and they have ‘arrived’. It may occur when they qualify in their profession, or gain promotion, or become the manager or leader and begin to rely on themselves, or ‘*lean on their own understanding*’ as the Bible says. They then cease to listen to advice, or to pray for guidance, or to obey God’s commands. One example of this is King Rehoboam, Solomon’s son. We are told that when he was younger he ‘*dealt wisely*’:

22 And Rehoboam appointed Abijah the son of Maacah as chief prince among his brothers, for he intended to make him king. 23 And he dealt wisely and distributed some of his sons through all the districts of Judah and Benjamin, in all the fortified cities, and he gave them abundant provisions and procured wives for them.

2 Chronicles 11:22-23 (ESV)

However, when he grew older, and his rule became established, he came to think that he knew how to be King and felt strong and confident. He then became unfaithful and “*abandoned the law of the LORD*”:

When the rule of Rehoboam was established and he was strong, he abandoned the law of the LORD, and all Israel with him.

2 Chronicles 12:1 (ESV)

I have been giving all this detail about Joash and Rehoboam because there is a danger that we could go wrong in the same way. We must therefore keep examining the level of our own faithfulness, integrity and obedience as we grow older. Don’t imagine that age or experience in themselves, or even promotion and success in one’s career or ministry, will necessarily bring wisdom. They may, to some extent, but they may also produce pride, arrogance, self-sufficiency and the cutting of corners on issues of integrity.

If so, you are actually just becoming a fool as you grow older, or even wicked, rather than growing in wisdom as you might imagine yourself to be doing. The best way to avoid the dangers of growing proud, complacent or unfaithful, or of even falling away entirely, is to focus your mind on three key objectives. These three things, if diligently and persistently pursued *for your whole life, not just for a while*, will keep you on the ‘narrow path’ and prevent you from backsliding or losing your integrity. The three things you need to do are:

- a) fear the LORD
- b) humble yourself
- c) love the truth – which means to genuinely *want* to know the truth, even if it shows you are wrong or does not suit your interests

I define each of these things more fully elsewhere in this book, but also in my other books. Developing each of these traits, and making them into established habits, will preserve you. Even if you begin to stray away from the narrow path for a while, one or other of these three policies will draw you back to it, if you apply them genuinely and seriously.