

## PRUDENCE: A VALUABLE ATTRIBUTE

### **Introduction**

One summer a couple was vacationing in Door County, Wisconsin. As a final activity before driving home, they decided to photograph the red lighthouse at the end of the breakwater in Algoma. Although the day was chilly and foggy, they decided to do it anyway.

As they walked along the breakwater, returning to their car, a young boy suddenly came out of the fog, riding towards them on his bicycle. On this damp and chilly day he was only dressed in a shirt and jeans—no jacket, and his right arm was in a cast. As he rushed past on his bike, the wife thought to herself, “That crazy kid! It’s so cold and windy; he’s going to catch his death of cold. I hope he has enough sense to stop when he gets to the end of the breakwater.”

Not long after, the boy came riding back past the couple. But instead of pedaling down the center of breakwater, he rode along the edge, above the deep mist-shrouded water. As the couple walked along, the wife glanced up just in time to see the boy fall: as if in slow motion, the boy and his bicycle toppled into the cold waters of Lake Michigan. Her husband and several nearby fishermen managed to reach the boy and drag him back onto the breakwater, where he stood, soaked and shivering. The couple offered to drive him home, but he pulled away from them. Running down the breakwater towards the shore, he was soon once more lost in the fog. (*POWER*, 8/5/90)

That boy and his conduct serve as a good illustration of the way many people live: running in a fog, casting caution to the wind when it comes to the care of their eternal soul, barely surviving one disaster and racing on to the next, and maybe the final, spiritual disaster. Our next topical study from the Book of Proverbs recommends to us an alternative to that lifestyle; we come now to consider the valuable attribute of prudence.

### **I. Prudence: What are Its Characteristics?**

**(Prov. 14:8; Prov. 13:16; Prov. 14:15; Prov. 12:23; Prov. 22:3)**

A PRUDENT MAN POSSESSES SPIRITUAL AWARENESS.

***The wisdom of the prudent is to thoughtfully consider his way, but the folly of fools is deceiving.*** (Prov. 14:8)

What makes the prudent man wise is the fact that he “*thoughtfully considers his way.*” He seeks to understand who he is, where he is going, what he is doing. The prudent man has a moral standard and compass; he has moral and spiritual direction and discernment, and he stays on course. Note Psalm 119:105, “*Your*

*word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*" The testimony of the Psalmist is the testimony of the prudent man.

All this is in contrast to the fool. The fool practices "*folly*" (impiety,) without comprehending how destructive it is; he is self-deceived, as Proverbs 1:32b indicates, "*the 'security' of fools will destroy them.*" The Hebrew word (שְׁלֵמָה) has both the meaning of "quietness" and "carelessness," or "negligence." Thus, what is being referred to is that false confidence the fool entertains—namely, that all will be well with his soul, even though he ignores and rejects the commandments of God and refuses to surrender his life to Christ the Savior. Note that Proverbs 14:8 contrasts spiritual comprehension and awareness (a characteristic of the prudent) with self-deception (a characteristic of the fool.)

The prudent man is also contrasted to the naïve, or, the simple, he is described in Proverbs 14:15, "*The naïve believes every word, but a prudent man carefully considers his steps.*" The naïve lack discernment and sound judgment, because they lack a moral standard and authority. Like the young boy from Algoma mentioned in the Introduction, the naïve run around in the fog without direction or purpose, susceptible to the lure of any voice or suggestion. The Beetles' song, *Nowhere Man*, is an apt description of the naïve: "He does not have a point of view, he knows not where he's going to ..."

A PRUDENT MAN VALUES KNOWLEDGE.

*Every prudent man works with knowledge, but a fool flaunts folly.* (Prov. 13:16)

A prudent man "*works with knowledge,*" as opposed to working **against** knowledge or **without** knowledge. The prudent man ascertains the facts, he accumulates the necessary data, then he proceeds, and as he proceeds he is always ready and alert to absorb more knowledge and a greater depth of knowledge.

This is all in contrast to a fool who flaunts his folly. A fool unwittingly puts his foolishness on public display by the way he acts: he operates without knowledge or in defiance of the truth, and the ridiculous or tragic consequences identify him as a fool. Jesus describes such a man in His parable of the imprudent builder:

*Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? <sup>29</sup>If he lays the foundation but is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, <sup>30</sup>saying, "This man began to build, but was not able to finish." (Lk. 14:28-30)*

Why does the fool operate without knowledge or in defiance of truth? The answer is provided in Proverbs 1:22, "*how long will fools hate knowledge?*"

As an example of men operating in defiance of knowledge, as opposed to working with knowledge, consider the interaction between the Lord Jesus and the Jews as described in John 10:31-33,36-38,

*Again the Jews picked up stones, intending to stone him. <sup>32</sup>Jesus asked them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of those works are you seeking to stone me?" <sup>33</sup>The Jews answered him, "We are not seeking to stone you for a good work, but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, claim to be God." .... <sup>36</sup> [Jesus asked], "How can you say to the one whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming;' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?' <sup>37</sup>If I do not do the works of my Father, do not believe me. <sup>38</sup>But if I am doing those works, even though you do not believe me, believe the works; so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:31-33,36-38)*

Jesus' argument is "Actions speak louder than words;" if you do not believe Me for what I say, then believe Me for what I do, My miraculous and godly works verify what I say to be true. The Jews' response may be summarized as follows: "We cannot deny your actions, but we still will not accept what you have to say about yourself"—such is the reasoning of the fool who hates knowledge and refuses to accept it. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once observed, "There are two ways to be fooled: one is to believe what isn't so; the other is to refuse to believe what is so."

We must remember that a prudent man works **with** knowledge. With this in mind, we would do well to heed the advice of a Christian pastor/teacher who writes:

Every day we make many decisions with no more effort than it takes to breath. But those big ones, where a lot is at stake, often give us trouble. Here are a few guidelines: 1) Pray to the heavenly Father about the issue; 2) Write out the pros and cons of each option; and 3) Ask questions based on biblical principles: What does God's Word say about it? What will it cost? How will it affect you and others? Will it hinder your obedience to God? What do spiritually mature people say? If you are pressed for a decision but are unsure, ask God to block any action you might take that would be a mistake. Then make your choice and be confident that God is working out His will in your life. (*Our Daily Bread*, 3/19/93)

***The naïve believes every word, but a prudent man carefully considers his steps.*** (Prov. 14:15)

The prudent man has an examining, evaluating, discriminating mind, note 1 John 4:1, "*Beloved ones, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*"

The Word of God is to be our standard of judgment and our moral authority. In praying to His heavenly Father, the Lord Jesus declared, *“your word is truth”* (Jn. 17:17.) In Romans 2:18 the Apostle Paul reminds the Jews that they *“know [God’s] will ... because you are instructed by the Law”* [a reference to the Old Testament law of God.] We should imitate the example of the Bereans:

*Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.* (Acts 17:11)

***A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims foolishness.*** (Prov. 12:23)

A prudent man sees more than he says—a prudent man is quick to take in knowledge, but he is not so quick to proclaim all that he knows.

This is not a matter of deceit, but a matter of discretion; as Ecclesiastes 3:7 informs us, *“[there is] a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”* In a similar way, the Apostle James counsels the church: *“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry”* (Jam. 1:19.)

One characteristic of prudence is discretion and the ability to practice self-control, especially over one’s speech.

A PRUDENT MAN EXERCISES SELF-CONTROL.

***A prudent man sees the evil and hides himself; but the naïve keep right on going and suffer for it.*** (Prov. 22:3)

A prudent man, because of his respect for godly knowledge and his receptivity to such knowledge, is able to *“see the evil.”* He has foresight: based upon the commandments of God and a knowledge of his own heart, he can recognize a dangerous situation of temptation at a distance before he runs headlong into it.

Then, upon seeing the evil, the prudent man *“hides himself.”* The prudent man acts upon his knowledge by avoiding the danger zone and taking a detour around it—not to do so would make him a fool: recognizing danger to his soul and heedlessly walking right into it.

In contrast to the prudent man, *“the naïve keep right on going and suffer for it.”* The naïve, being oblivious to any danger signs, walk right into an evil situation and suffer for it—literally, they *“are mulched.”*

There is a holy boldness that trusts God and obeys Him whatever the situation; and there is an unholy boldness that tests God and disobeys, such a one may

think in terms like the following: “I’ll flirt with evil, trusting God to deliver me.” “I’ll be reckless with my spiritual life, trusting God to preserve me.” Our victory over temptation must begin with complete reliance upon the Holy Spirit, and upon that foundation we must, by His grace, build the acts of faithful obedience: *“Trust in Jehovah and do good”* (Psl. 37:3.)

## II. Prudence: How Is It Acquired? (Proverbs 15:5; Proverbs 19:25)

PRUDENCE IS ACQUIRED BY BEING RECEPTIVE AND RESPONSIVE TO DISCIPLINE AND INSTRUCTION.

*A fool despises his father’s discipline, but whoever heeds rebuke shows prudence.* (Prov. 15:5)

“*Discipline*” involves every part of the training of one’s life; including correction, chastening, and instruction. A fool *“despises”* all such discipline: refusing to accept it, rebelling against it, walking away from it. But the man *who “heeds rebuke”* (i.e., pays attention to it, appreciating the father’s motivation of love and concern and his intention of directing his son in the way of life) *shows prudence.*”

The man who regards rebuke is demonstrating prudence and is further developing the valuable attribute of prudence, note Hebrews 12:11, *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”* **The acceptance of discipline**, however difficult it may be, eventually yields the fruit of righteousness. This acceptance of discipline is what the godly father of Proverbs seeks for his son, and he does so by directing his son’s attention to the consequence of rejecting such discipline: *“Stop listening to instruction, my son, but then you will stray from the words of knowledge”* (Prov. 19:27.) The father facetiously instructs his son to *“stop listening to instruction”* (stop paying attention and submitting to parental authority and counsel)—the father is saying to his son, “I know what your heart is inclined to do, what you by nature desire to do; namely, to stop submitting to the burden of parental authority.” But the father informs his son that should he, indeed, give in to that impulse of his heart and actually carry out that desire to stop submitting to the authority and counsel of his parents, he will *“stray from the words of knowledge.”*

PRUDENCE IS ACQUIRED BY ASKING FOR A RECEPTIVE HEART.

*Flog a scoffer, and the naïve will learn prudence; rebuke a man who has discernment, and he will gain knowledge.* (Prov. 19:25)

When a scoffer (a man who openly defies the authority and commandments of God) is publicly disciplined, a naïve man (a man who is impulsive and aimless and careless about his spiritual life) learns prudence—i.e.; he learns to be

cautious and careful about his conduct. Note: Not even a flogging has any corrective affect on the scoffer.

When a discerning (or, prudent) man is rebuked—a mere word of instruction or correction or warning is addressed to him, in contrast to the physical flogging administered to the scoffer—he will grow in knowledge (i.e., he will take the rebuke to heart and learn from it.)

The point of the proverb is this: the state of the heart determines the ability of a man to receive instruction and profit from it. As Proverbs 17:10 indicates, *“A rebuke goes deeper into someone who has understanding than a hundred lashes administered to a fool.”*

Consider the prayer of Solomon: *“Give your servant a discerning heart ... so that I may distinguish between good and evil”* (1 Kgs. 3:9.) Consider, too, the prayer the Apostle Paul makes for the Colossian Christians:

*For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. <sup>10</sup>And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God. (Col.1:9-10)*

## **Conclusion**

That young boy from Algoma and his conduct on the breakwater serves as a good illustration of the way many people live: running around in a spiritual fog; ... casting caution to the wind; ... barely surviving one disaster only to race off to the next (and maybe final) disaster to their soul.

Our topical study from the Book of Proverbs recommends to us an alternative to that kind of lifestyle: the valuable attribute of prudence.