

Book:	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
Series:	<i>Two Ways to Live: Under the Sun or In the Fear of God</i>
Lesson 11:	<i>Wisdom for Living, Part 2: Outlook on Life</i>
Text:	<i>Ecclesiastes 7:15-29</i>
Date:	<i>Sunday, April 14, 2013</i>

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

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Next Lesson:	<i>Ecclesiastes 8:1-17</i>



TEACHING TIP

Since we have been out of this study for two weeks, a review is undoubtedly necessary (especially because this lesson builds upon the last). That review has been succinctly included in the introduction.

For your own personal teaching notes, consider handwriting bullet points on the lesson handout. Then, when you teach from that, you won't be bound by this word-for-word lesson, but will be able to teach it in your own style while still maintaining a though-by-thought progression.

To generate more discussion, ask questions throughout each point's explanation, rather than just reading the material. In essence, dialogue with the class in such a way that they end up filling in the outline themselves and teaching themselves the material.

INTRODUCTION

In basic geometry, we learned the difference between 2D and 3D. 2D or two-dimensional space is represented by width and length, or the *x*-axis and *y*-axis. 3D or three-dimensional space is represented by width, length, and depth, or the *x*-axis, *y*-axis, and *z*-axis. A simple object on paper is in two-dimensions, while what we see around us is in three-dimensions (because of the added element of actual depth). While in geometry and physics, mathematicians and scientists talk about up to eight dimensions, most of us stop with three. We are 3D people living in a 3D world.

A WISE OUTLOOK REQUIRES PATIENT OBEDIENCE (vv. 15-18).

Read verses 15-18.

Solomon's comments in these verses can be traced along three points.

1. *Solomon's observation (v. 15)*

As he has lived his life “under the sun” (i.e., “in the days of my vanity”), Solomon has “seen” two² occurrences which are contemporarily discussed under the heading “the problem of evil”—the righteous suffer (i.e., “perisheth in [spite of]³ his righteousness”) and the wicked prosper (i.e., “prolongeth his life in his wickedness”).⁴ Elsewhere, Solomon has professed belief in a doctrine of retribution—that wickedness will be punished and righteousness will be rewarded (3:17; 8:12-13; 11:9; 12:14; cf. Deuteronomy 28:1-14 vs. 28:15-68). Here, however, he observes all the exceptions to that rule, especially in this time/space continuum “under the sun.” This enigma is again mentioned by Solomon in 8:14 and by numerous other biblical writers elsewhere (cf. Job; Psalm 37; 73; Habakkuk 1:13–17); Naboth (1 Kings 21:13) and Jezebel (1 Kings 18-19, 21) illustrate this exception.

“The blunt statement with no explanation (except perhaps 7:29 [—it's due to man's fault; and 7:13-14—it's due to God's will (cf. 3:11, 14-15; 6:10-12)]) demands simply that the believer face life in this world as it really is. Forewarned is forearmed (cf. 1 Pet. 4:12).”⁵

2. *Solomon's caution (vv. 16-17)*

Solomon clarifies that forewarning and forearming in verses 16-17. As was his observation, so his caution is also two-fold. First, he warns us against being “righteous over[ly] much” and “mak[ing] thyself over[ly] wise” (v. 16). Solomon is not recommending here a moderation principle (that is, “don't be too good, but don't be too bad,

However, speaking non-mathematically and non-scientifically, but merely illustratively, much about life suggests a fourth-dimension. The elusiveness, enigmas, anomalies, and mysteries of life leave us feeling like we're groping after something that we cannot understand. Indeed, then, from that perspective, we're 3D people living in a 4D world.

All of us have to grapple with that disconnect, and as we do so on a daily basis, we each turn into individual philosophers, attempting to answer those puzzling questions and navigate an uncertain future. Each day, we entertain numerous observations and make countless interpretations about life, upon which we seek to make informed and beneficial decisions within life.

To 3D people living in a 4D world, Solomon recommends “the fear of God”—a simple blend of righteousness and wisdom—to help us navigate. He has discovered that unlike any other perspective, this God-fearing mindset will help us begin to make sense of our world and live at peace within it. But, we need to make sure that we're thinking wisely about wisdom and rightly about righteousness; because in this “under the sun” dimension, neither wisdom nor righteousness are foolproof or infallible.¹

Last week, Solomon taught us how to apply righteous wisdom to living in Ecclesiastes 7:1-14. To review, he wrote that we must not escape from life, but embrace it with God-given, God-oriented wisdom. Such wisdom is being serious about life, being selective about companions, being steadfast against obstacles, being safeguarded against harm, and being surrendered to God's sovereignty.

Now, Solomon builds upon that last point in particular. Whereas 7:1-14 dealt more with our decisions within life (Part 1: Operations), 7:15-29 concentrates on our observations and interpretations about life (Part 2: Outlook). He's addressing our perspective, our outlook, our viewpoint, and if we fail to apply righteous wisdom here, then we will reap vanity in our decisions, pursuits, and lifestyles. Therefore, **we must develop a wise outlook on life.** Throughout this section, the Teacher (v. 27) has three key truths to communicate to us about a wise outlook on life.

either”). His comments on righteousness/wisdom and wickedness/foolishness must be interpreted in light of his larger “argument against the rigid application of the doctrine of retribution in God’s distributing adversity and prosperity.”⁶ In other words, he is not talking about the nature or amount of righteousness/wisdom as much as he is about our view of it.


Because the doctrine of retribution has exceptions, an excessive dependence upon righteousness and wisdom to safely navigate through life has little “profit”⁷ and may instead cause us to “destroy” ourselves. In this particular form, the verb for “destroy” is better rendered “disappointed” or “dumbfounded” (cf. Psalm 143:4; Isaiah 59:16; 63:5; Daniel 8:27). “[Solomon] meant they should not depend on their righteousness or wisdom to guarantee God’s blessing because *they* might be confounded, dismayed, or disappointed like the righteous people whom Solomon had seen perishing in spite of their righteousness (Ecc. 7:15).”⁸


Complementing his first warning is a second in verse 17. Here, Solomon warns us against being “over much wicked” and “foolish” (v. 17). Lest we view the exceptions to the doctrine of retribution (i.e., that God doesn’t always immediately punish sin) as freedom to push the envelope and enjoy some “free” wickedness/foolishness (cf. Romans 6:1 for the New Testament rendition—indeed, as we’ve already seen, Paul may have spent much time studying Ecclesiastes before he wrote his epistles to the Romans), Solomon returns us to the doctrine itself which teaches that principally wickedness brings death (i.e., “die before thy time”; cf. Psalm 55:23).


3. **Solomon’s admonition (v. 18)**


The KJV accurately translates verse 18, but the meaning is a bit unclear to the English reader. We’ll allow another


version to clarify it for us: “It is best to take hold of one warning [i.e., v. 16] without letting go of the other warning [i.e., v. 17]; for the one who fears God will follow both warnings” (NET). Because temporal observation doesn’t always seem to fit with heavenly wisdom, we must persevere in patient obedience with an eternal perspective. The one who lives his “under the sun” existence in the context of “the fear of the Lord” will heed both of the previous warnings without neglecting either one—“the proper fear of God will [1] prevent a person from trusting in righteousness and wisdom alone for his security, and it will also [2] prevent indulgence in wickedness and folly.”⁹ This is “good,” and is part of the answer to Solomon’s quest for ultimate “good” (6:12; 2:3; cf. Proverbs 1:7; 9:10).

 **Application:** What do we call this kind of thinking about and dependence upon one’s righteousness? *self-righteousness*¹⁰—*trying to earn God’s favor or blessing through our own goodness; depending upon our own righteousness to “twist God’s arm” and force Him to do something for us*

 So, understanding that righteousness does not always equal blessing, what is the proper motivation for being righteous? *The fear of God (v. 18)—fundamentally because obedience (wisdom/righteousness) pleases God and will be vindicated at the judgment; practically, because obedience can provide temporal protection and blessing (vv. 19, 26)*

 How is the righteous person assured of God’s favor, even when he seems to be experiencing the exception to the doctrine of retribution (i.e., adversity) ? *The New Testament teaches “justification by faith, which is based on God’s acceptance of Christ’s righteousness, not on our offering to God our own righteousness (Phil 3:4b-9), wisdom (1 Cor 1:18-25), or the foolishness that supposes that freedom in Christ means freedom to sin (Rom 6:1-14).”¹¹*

 How should a believer think and respond when he's experiencing the exception to the doctrine of retribution? *He must patiently preach to himself and rest in (1) God's sovereignty over good and bad circumstances in his life (7:13-14), (2) the necessity to obey God (i.e., righteousness and wisdom) merely because of His authority (7:18; 5:1-7), and (3) God's promise of future vindication (3:17; 12:14).*

 What does a believer demonstrate about his beliefs and heart when he chooses wickedness and foolishness (cf. Romans 6:1ff)? *He doesn't fear God, in that—(1) He forgets that such wickedness and foolishness was awfully judged in Jesus; (2) He disbelieves that sin still has consequences (cf. 3:17); (3) He reveals a tremendous lack of love for the One who sovereignly experienced adversity on his behalf (7:13-14 applies to the cross) so that he might have everlasting prosperity (cf. Colossians 3:1-4); (4) He fails to practice the same mindset of Jesus toward adversity (cf. Hebrews 12:2-3; 1 Peter 4:1-2); (5) He fails to think heavenly/eternally about his present adversity (cf. Psalm 73:17-20, 23-24; Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17-18)—he's merely living "under the sun."*

Transition: In verses 19-24, Solomon offers a second truth about a wise outlook on life.

A WISE OUTLOOK RECOGNIZES PERSONAL WEAKNESS (vv. 19-24).

Read verses 19-24.

As a God-fearing believer cultivates the gift of wisdom, he will increasingly discover two aspects of personal weakness.


1. Wisdom recognizes personal failure (vv. 19-22).


Verse 20 adds insult to injury, as it were. Solomon recognizes that God unevenly applies the doctrine of retribution, even toward the apparently righteous; now, he adds that, in all honesty, no person is truly righteous

anyways—"There is not a just [lit. righteous] man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not" (v. 20; cf. 1 Kings 8:46; Romans 3:10-18). That is, all of us are tremendously weak in our very core—committing both sins of omission ("doeth good") and commission ("sinneth not").

Therefore, the God-fearer will cultivate the gift of wisdom in order to navigate his own sin-sick landscape (James 1:2-8; 3:13-18). This wisdom "strengtheneth the wise more than ten mighty men which are in the city" (v. 19). There is a kind of strength that wisdom provides (cf. Colossians 1:9-11) that far supersedes physical or political power.

Yet, even this wise and strengthened individual is a man of sin, and he knows his own failures (inconsistency/hypocrisy) by experience, even as verses 21-22 illustrate. Knowing that he himself has "cursed others" (v. 22), the imperfect, but wise individual will disregard the curses of his associates (v. 21). Thus, his lack of righteousness compels him to cultivate wisdom, which in turn unmasks further unrighteousness. At the heart of wisdom (and righteousness), then, is humility.

 **Application:** How does this wise analysis of one's own heart-condition affect our interaction with others (specifically, consider how it should affect your interactions with your children, spouse, students, employees, teammates, etc.)? *"One's attitude to other human beings should be conditioned by the awareness of one's own flawed humanity. The truly wise person who fears God and remembers who he is (vv. 15-18, 20) will also remember who one's neighbor is and will behave accordingly."¹²*

 How has your growth in spiritual maturity (i.e., wisdom) heightened your awareness of personal failure? *open discussion*



In what ways does wisdom provide strength to deal with the revelations of verses 20 and 13-15 (cf. James 1:2-8; 3:13-18)? *open discussion*

2. **Wisdom recognizes personal finiteness (vv. 23-24).**

According to these two verses, wisdom is as inaccessible as righteousness. Verses 23-24 read, “All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, ‘I will be wise,’ but it was far from me. That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?” Solomon had made a concerted effort (e.g., “all this...I have tested,” “I will”) to understand life’s elusiveness (3:1-11) and enigmas (7:14-15), but he came up miserably short (e.g., “far from me,” “far off,” “deep,” “very deep,” “who can find it out”—cf. 1:17-18; 2:15-16). All of this reminds us how small and finite we are in comparison with the God who is in heaven (cf. 5:2; 6:10-12). Consider the following commentary:

Qohelet’s reflections on wisdom in this section (“all this,” v. 23), motivated by a determination to be wise, have convinced him of the complexity of it all. No one can “discover” (mš; lit., “find”) wisdom itself in all its mystery (v. 24); it is “beyond” (lit., “far off from”) the inquirer (v. 23). No one can come to a comprehensive understanding of the universe, for the data are “far off and most profound” (lit., “deep, deep”); that is, the ocean of knowledge is too wide and deep. It is impossible to grasp the whole “scheme of things” (ḥešbon, v. 25; cf. also v. 27), to articulate the whole sum of the matter. Understanding, investigating, and searching out have not led Qohelet to the achievement of this larger goal (v. 25). This is not surprising, for as Job 28:20–23 tells us: “Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell? It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds of the air. Destruction and Death say, ‘Only a

rumor of it has reached our ears.’ God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells.”¹³



Application: How has your growth in spiritual maturity (i.e., wisdom) heightened your awareness of personal finiteness? *open discussion*



Application: What response should that awareness evoke from us (cf. Psalm 84:12; Proverbs 2:1-12; James 1:5; 1 Peter 2:1-4)? *open discussion*



Application: To navigate the enigmas and elusiveness of life, man needs to fear God with righteousness and wisdom. Where does both righteousness and wisdom come from (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30; Colossians 2:3, 9-10; James 1:5, 17; 3:17)? *Jesus Christ!*

Transition: So far, our passage has continued to wonder at the 4D nature of life—its enigmas and elusiveness; the total depravity of man; the inaccessibility of wisdom; etc. It leads us to one haunting question, “Why is life like this, and is God to blame?” Solomon answers that question in his final truth regarding a wise outlook on life.

A WISE OUTLOOK RECALLS PEOPLE’S BROKENNESS (vv. 25-29).

Read verses 25-29.

While Solomon was unable to attain a comprehensive grasp of reality and humanity (vv. 23-24—the “scheme of things” according to vv. 25, 27), he was able to discover some helpful individual findings (vv. 25, 27). He shares three of these findings with us (i.e., “I found” in verses 26, 27, 29).

“men” in Ecclesiastes 7:29 is “they” in Hebrew (i.e., both men and women).¹⁴

1. **Wisdom can protect people (v. 26).**

As he wrote in Proverbs 2:12-19, God-given (cf. 2:26) wisdom and righteousness does protect an individual from moral entrapment and destruction (cf. Ecclesiastes 9:13-18). Meanwhile, the sinner who lacks the powerful motive of fearing God falls headlong into that “worse than death” captivity. Thus, Solomon’s inquiry discovered the surpassing value of wisdom over foolishness. This is a promising and encouraging discovery, but it is quickly followed by a second and discouraging finding.

2. **Many people lack wisdom (vv. 27-28).**

Unfortunately, although Solomon learned that the one who “pleaseth God” was blessed far beyond “the sinner” (v. 26), he also found that there weren’t many people who pleased God. Solomon writes, “[What] yet my soul seeketh...I find not: one [God-pleasing] man among a thousand have I found, but a [God-pleasing] woman among all those have I not found” (v. 28). While some have considered Solomon to be rather sexist in these verses, the following commentary helps us understand his point:

This does not mean that one out of every thousand males is pleasing to God and that no women at all please Him. Such a point hardly fits Solomon’s argument. Instead, in the last line of Ecclesiastes 7:28 Solomon used (a) a kind of complementary parallelism in which the generic term ’ādām (“man”) is explained as including also the feminine gender in the sense of “mankind,” and (b) a kind of graded numerical sequence in which the second of two terms gives the climax or point (cf. Prov. 30:15, 18, 21). In this parallelism and numerical sequence his purpose was to say that such people—both men and women—are not only scarce but are nonexistent; there is “not one” among them all. This is also supported by the fact that

3. **This is not God’s fault (v. 29).**

Solomon’s final finding is given in verse 29—man’s universal perversion is due to man’s devising, not God’s. God is not to blame for the confusion of human existence. Rather, “God hath made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions [lit. schemes—same word as in 7:25, 27; 9:10].” “In other words, though people cannot know God’s ‘scheme of things’ [vv. 23-24], they do follow their *own* schemes, which causes them to lack true uprightness, true righteousness, and true wisdom, and to fail to please God.”¹⁵ Carson explains this more theologically: “Despite an original righteousness, sin has come in. It is perverse (*schemes* speaks of a contrivance for overcoming what would be otherwise expected), deliberate and universal (*men* refers to all people).”¹⁶

Application: People’s lives are messed up and the way they go about their lives is messed up. Many of them sense that, too, and the way they try to fix it is messed up. They don’t need more education, a better model, different legislation—they need a Savior who can fix what is broken. What a tremendous message is our gospel! It boldly proclaims that people created their own problem when they chose to rebel against God (v. 29); but it complements that message with the good news of One who would be broken for them (Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 53) so that they might know His recreative power both now in part and fully in eternity (2 Corinthians 3:18ff).

Illustration: “An elderly lady was once asked what cosmetics she used to maintain her beautiful complexion. She replied, ‘For my lips, truth; for my voice, prayer; for my eyes, pity; for my hands, charity; for my figure, uprightness; and for my heart, love!’ All this is to be found in the one who is the personification of wisdom—

Jesus Christ (Prov. 8:22-31; John 1:1-14).¹⁷ He alone can fix the broken!



What connection between the gospel and wisdom is drawn in James 1:5, 17-18; 3:13-18? *There can be no wisdom apart from a personal response to the gospel; part of the gospel's gifts is providing a righteously wise outlook on life that ministers peace and hope and, eventually, eternal healing.*

CONCLUSION

While life will not be completely solved until eternity, wise living—both in its operation and its outlook—will help us 3D people navigate courageously in our 4D world.

ENDNOTES

¹ “Wisdom is clearly attractive to many people, as the book has shown, precisely because it appears to offer the possibility of control over life. The wise, and consequently righteous, person (it is thought) can guarantee for herself divine blessings, including long life and wealth, while the foolish, and consequently wicked, person guarantees for herself only doom.” “The crucial thing to be remembered about the universe is that God has created it (vv. 13–15). Wisdom is not a key that can be used in independence of the Creator to unlock the secrets of the universe, to shape existence after mortal desires, and to control life. Although certain ways of being and behaving are wiser than others and in general tend toward life rather than death, yet in the end we must remember that the universe is not a predictable machine but a personally governed and complex space. Wisdom is not magic. God is not an object to be manipulated, nor does God’s world belong to human beings. If God makes something crooked, it is beyond human power to make it straight (v. 13; cf. 1:15).” “Thus does Qohelet continue to balance appreciation for wisdom with critique of its potential and, no doubt, of the way that it was sometimes used within his own culture and time.” (Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, The NIV Application Commentary* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001], 151-52.)

² The context indicates that “all things” should be translated “both things” (cf. 2:16; 3:19-20; 6:6).

³ For the translation of the Hebrew *bet* as “in spite of” instead of the customary “in,” see “in spite of” (e.g., Leviticus 26:27; Numbers 14:11; Deuteronomy 1:32; Isaiah 5:25; 9:11, 16, 20; 10:4; 16:14; 47:9; Psalm 27:3; 78:32; Ezra 3:3).

⁴ It is interesting to note that Solomon doesn’t attempt to solve the “problem of evil”; instead, with wisdom, he acknowledges that it does exist, and he instructs us on how to respond in light of it. In other words, he simply surrenders to God’s sovereignty (vv. 13-14) and attempts to live out that surrender in righteous wisdom.

⁵ Michael A. Eaton, vol. 18, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 130.

⁶ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, vol. 1, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 994.

Also, cf. Provan, 152:

While he agrees that people should avoid excessive foolishness and wickedness, since (in spite of acknowledged exceptions, v. 15) this does represent a path to destruction (v. 17), he is equally concerned that they should avoid excessive righteousness and wisdom (v. 16). The dogged pursuit of the latter, just as much as the committed quest after the former, brings bad consequences, for both are incompatible with the fear of God (v. 18). Both represent, in their own way, a refusal to accept the limitations God sets on mortal beings.

Those who pursue wisdom or righteousness for “profit” in this sense (note that “neither be overwise” in v. 16 is in Heb. *we’al tithakam yoter*; cf. the comments on *yoter* at 2:15; 6:8, 11; 7:11), hoping to gain an edge over God and force his hand, are in no different a position to those who pursue foolishness and wickedness. Both are guilty of *hubris*—the arrogant self-deification in which mortal beings so regularly indulge as they seek to fashion reality after their own liking

⁷ Notice that the word “over” (or “overly,” “too,” “excessively”) in “over wise” shares the same root as “profit” or “advantage” in 2:13, 15; 6:8, 11; 7:11.

In 2:15 the adjective *yoter* [יֹתֵר, “excessively”] is used with the noun *yitron* (יִתְרוֹן, “advantage; profit”) in a wordplay or pun: The wise man has a relative “advantage” (יִתְרוֹן) over the fool (2:13–14a); however, there is no ultimate advantage because both share the same fate—death (2:14b–15a). Thus, Qoheleth’s acquisition of tremendous wisdom (1:16; 2:9) was “excessive” [יֹתֵר] because it exceeded its relative advantage over folly: it could not deliver

him from the same fate as the fool. He strove to obtain wisdom, yet it held no ultimate advantage. Likewise, in 7:16, Qoheleth warns that wisdom and righteous behavior do not guarantee an advantage over wickedness and folly, because the law of retribution is sometimes violated” (NET Bible, note # 56 in 7:16).

Therefore, don't be excessively dependent upon them in neglect of simply accepting God's unavoidable providence (7:13-14).

⁸ Walvoord, 994.

⁹ NET Bible, note #63 in 7:18. Also, NET Bible, note #64 in 7:18—“He will not depend upon his own righteousness and wisdom, but upon God's sovereign bestowal of blessings. Likewise, he will not exploit the exceptions to the doctrine of retribution to indulge in sin, rationalizing sin away just because the wicked sometimes do not get what they deserve.”

¹⁰ “This view is confirmed in the next line where the Hebrew for *Do not make yourself overwise* (rsv) contains a Hebrew hithpael which may mean ‘to play the wise man’ (cf. Num. 16:13 ‘play the part of a prince’; and 2 Sam. 13:5 ‘pretend to be ill’). Play-acting righteousness delights in the reputation of wisdom (cf. Matt. 23:7)” (Eaton, 130). Cf. also *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer and G. J. Wenham, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), Ec 7:15–18.

¹¹ J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes" In , in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1176.

¹² Provan, 153.

¹³ Provan, 153-54.

¹⁴ Walvoord, 995-96.

¹⁵ Walvoord, 996.

¹⁶ *New Bible Commentary*, Ec 7:25–29.

¹⁷ Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes*, *Opening Up Commentary* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 100-01.