

## Introduction

In 1732, Benjamin Franklin published his celebrated work *Poor Richard's Almanac*, which contains a host of maxims. Let me give you a sampling of those: **"Visitors and fish stink after three days."** **"Well done is better than well said."** **"He that lieth down with dogs, shall rise up with fleas."** **"Better slip with foot than tongue."** **"Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards."** **"'Tis easier to make habits than to break them."** **"If Jack's in love, he's no judge of Jill's beauty."** And finally, **"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."** Those are insightful maxims that we'd do well to live out, especially the last one. An ounce of prevention truly is worth a pound of cure and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## Ruins Our Way

Let's begin with Proverbs 19:3 and the clause, **"ruins his way."** A ruined way refers to something gone wrong. Something happens that harms us or causes us loss. The first line of a poem titled *Don't Quit* goes like this: **"When things go wrong as they sometimes will."** That's a fact isn't it – for us all. A friend of mine had emergency room surgery on a burned and blood poisoned finger. The head gasket in his car blew. And his furnace went out. All on the same day – December 24. He illustrates that things, big and small, routinely go wrong for us all.

But why do they? The things gone wrong are the effects. What are their causes? It's ultimately one of two things.

One cause is factors and forces beyond our control. Maybe it's a cutback at work, lack of rain, an illness, a crime, a death, a person's negligence, a person's sin, a natural law, and on it goes.

Consider my friend's head gasket and furnace, for instance. The head gasket blew and the furnace quit working for a reason. It's the Second Law of Thermodynamics. In layman's terms, things atrophy and break down over time. That just the way the universe is and there's

nothing we can do about it. Factors and forces beyond our control are one cause of things going wrong in our lives.

There's a second cause. Notice what ruins the man's way in Proverbs 19:3. It's his "**foolishness.**"

Solomon, who wrote this verse, defines what foolishness is in another verse he wrote, Ecclesiastes 10:3. The Hebrew word translated "**heart**" there connotes "**the mind.**" Notice what the mind does. It "**directs**" us. There are two or more options before us and our mind directs us to choose one of those. We call that deciding. Solomon observes something in that regard. The foolish man's mind directs him "**toward the left.**" The left side is symbolic in both the Old and New Testaments. Most decisively, it represents what is morally wrong. Less decisively, it represents what is harmful. That helps us define what foolishness is. It's choosing what is morally wrong on the one hand or what is harmful on the other. It's making bad decisions in other words.

Now, our texts reveal what bad decisions do. They ruin our way, Proverbs 19:3. They make a stink or a mess, Ecclesiastes 10:1. Both verses mean the same thing. Bad decisions sabotage or subvert our lives. They harm us or cause us loss in a host of ways, big and small.

Several hours after my friend burned his finger, he scrubbed his dirty kitchen floor. That in turn ruined his way. It infected and poisoned his finger. My point is this. A bad decision, to immerse his burned and unprotected finger in dirty water, made a mess. By mess, I mean a painful, sleepless night and medical expenses he couldn't afford to pay.

That then is what ruins our way. It's either factors and forces that are beyond our control or bad decisions that are within it.

### **Bad Decisions**

With that in mind, do this sometime. Write down the last ten things that have gone wrong in your life, big or small. Then, thoughtfully and objectively trace back each of the ten to its primary cause. After that, calculate how many of the causes were factors and forces beyond your

control and how many were bad decisions within it.

In one of his books, Robert Schuller asserts this, **“Ninety percent of the people who face problems must eventually admit that these problems were the result of a decision they either made or failed to make.”** That figure is probably high. I’d say it’s more like 75%. Either way though, bad decisions are the primary cause of the large majority of things that go wrong in people’s lives.

The problem is most don’t grasp that. Solomon makes just that point in Proverbs 19:3. In the first line, a man’s bad decision ruins his way. Then, in the second line, his **“heart”** or mind **“rages against the Lord.”** He’s mad at God, in other words, because of what happened to him. He’s totally oblivious to the fact that he, not God, caused it.

I’ll never forget a testimony I heard. It was in a Sunday evening church service in Barberton years ago. A woman in the church, against the advice of her friends there, decided to marry a troubled alcoholic. They then had a child, which only compounded the deep seated problems they already had. That evening, she stood up, rehearsed some of those problems, and then concluded with this: **“I don’t know why God is making me go through all of this, but I’m going to be faithful to Him no matter what.”** She didn’t exactly rage against the Lord but she did blame Him didn’t she? In her mind, He was **“making me go through all of this.”** He, not she, was the cause.

Proverbs 19:3 implies that people routinely do what she did. They’re defensive or thoughtless, which blinds them to the truth. The truth is that bad decisions made the mess they’re in. But they don’t blame themselves. They blame someone else or something else including, sometimes, God.

Don’t do that. Be in touch with reality instead.

There’s a legal principle called **“proximate cause,”** which is one of the essential elements in personal injury cases. The proximate cause isn’t necessarily the cause closest to the injury in time or space. It also isn’t necessarily the first event of a series of events that caused the

injury. But it is the primary cause of the injury.

That illustrates how we get in touch with reality. We do sometime what attorneys do in personal injury cases. We determine the proximate cause of the thing that's going wrong in our lives. We trace it back to its primary cause. We discover when we do - if we're objective and thoughtful at least - what that primary cause almost always is. It's a bad decision or a series of bad decisions that we ourselves made.

Take my friend's blood poisoned finger. Most people would trace its proximate cause to the dirty water. That was a cause but the primary cause goes back further. It was my friend's decision to stick his finger in it, not the water itself that primarily caused it. The moral of the story is clear. The proximate cause of 75% of the things that go wrong in our lives is a bad decision or bad decisions we make.

### **A Pound of Cure**

But thankfully, there's usually **"a cure"** to quote Benjamin Franklin. To **"cure"** means to make the things that are going wrong go right or at least go better. That's what we want to do and Solomon tells us how in Ecclesiastes 10:3. He writes, **"A wise man's heart directs him toward the right."** The right side is symbolic in both the Old and New Testaments. Most decisively, it represents what is morally right. Less decisively, it represents what is beneficial. According to verse 3, a wise person chooses what is morally right on the one hand or what is beneficial on the other.

And that's the cure. I've discovered that messes are cleaned up in the same way they're created - by making decisions. When most people go to a counselor, they think they have problems to solve, but they don't. They don't have problems to solve as much as they have decisions to make. There are rarely any quick fixes, fast answers, or easy ways out. It was bad decisions that got them into the mess. It's good decisions that will get them out of it or if it can't be gotten out of, make it better.

Three things direct the decisions we make: values, beliefs, and

information. Values refer to the things we consider important. Beliefs refer to the things we assume are so. And information refers to the things we know are so. Those three things direct every decision we make, which reveals why we make bad decisions that get us into messes. We value, believe, and/or know incorrectly. So, to make good decisions that get us out of messes, we need to value, believe, and know correctly.

A drug using 17 year-old, with little family support, got pregnant out of wedlock. She made a bad decision that ruined her way. At that point, she could have made one of two other bad decisions. She could have kept the baby, to his detriment and hers, or she could have aborted him, which is murder. But she didn't. Believing correctly about adoption and abortion, and valuing correctly (the baby's well-being over hers) she made a good decision instead. She gave him up for adoption through Lutheran Children's Services. I know all of that because that baby became my adopted son, Aaron.

It's true and we're all thankful it is. When things go wrong as they sometimes will, there's usually a cure - making good decisions.

### **An Ounce of Prevention**

But there's something better than curing. That something is preventing. To prevent means to keep things from going wrong by making them go right in the first place.

But how do we do that? It's by making the right decision (meaning a good decision as I defined it) at the right time. There's a contrast between curing and preventing. We cure by making the right decision at the wrong time - after the mess is made. We prevent by making the right decisions at the right time - before the mess is made. We choose what is morally right or what is beneficial to begin with. That in turn keeps things from going wrong, but makes them go right instead.

Now, consider what Franklin contended in that regard. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That is one of the most critical insights about human life we'll ever learn. I'd say it this way. One right

decision at the right time, before the mess is made, is worth a dozen right decisions at the wrong time, after it's made. Or as another old axiom says it, "**Prevention is the best medicine.**"

Take the abortion debate as an example of what I mean. According to the National Abortion Federation (an anti-life group), 83% of the women getting abortions are unmarried. With that statistic in mind, I'm pro-choice when it comes to abortion – **in this sense**. The right choice, not to have pre-marital sex, at the right time, before the pregnancy begins, would almost eliminate abortion as an issue in America.

Or consider one of Franklin's other maxims I read, "**'Tis easier to make habits than to break them.**" I'd change it to say, "**'Tis easier not to make habits than to break them.**" For instance, the right choice (not to smoke cigarettes) at the right time (before the first is smoked) is far easier and better than the right choice (not to smoke cigarettes) at the wrong time (after we're addicted).

We all know it, by experience, don't we? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Prevention is the best medicine, which leads us to what I call the ultimate prevention. It's the decision to follow Jesus. We make the decision to be with Him in order to learn and do all that He says. We then arrange all of our affairs around carrying out that decision. It's never too late to make that decision. But the sooner we make it the better. That's because following Jesus makes us what Paul called "**new creatures.**" By new creatures, he meant people who are in touch with reality and able to live consistently with it. And being that prevents the vast majority of messes that normal human beings get themselves into.

## **Conclusion**

I close with a penetrating insight. Choice is where wisdom and foolishness dwell. So be wise. Make the best possible decision, to follow Jesus, at the best possible time, now. That ounce of prevention, believe me, is worth far more than a pound of cure.