

Introduction

Back in 1972, J.R. Bailey, Rudy Clark, and Ken Williams wrote an R&B Song that rose to number 3 on the Top 100 Chart. Its title was intriguing, **"Everybody Plays the Fool."** One of the stanzas goes like this: **"Everybody plays the fool, sometime. There's no exception to the rule. Listen, baby, it may be factual, may be cruel. I ain't lyin'; everybody plays the fool."** All of us can relate to that because we've been there and done it. We've all played the fool.

But we don't have to again, and won't – if we learn and live out what God says in the Book of Proverbs. Proverbs is a unique book in the Bible. It addresses details of character and behavior that the other books don't. It teaches us in doing so how to be a wise guy not a fool. Some of us remember the Reggie's Wise Guy comic book series. When I say **"wise guy,"** I don't mean it in that sense, a smart aleck. I mean it in a good sense. A person routinely recognizes and pursues the best courses of action in the circumstances and settings of everyday life. That's a wise guy and what Proverbs calls us and equips us to be.

Our text, 14:15-18, particularizes that call. It teaches us three courses of action that a wise guy pursues. Let's examine each one.

Be Sensible not Naïve

The first, in verse 15, is to be **"sensible"** not **"naïve."**

Notice the word **"everything"** here. It refers to information that people give us – information that's impacting enough that it matters to others or us. A woman I knew was about to marry a man who had been divorced three times. He explained those divorces to her in ways that laid the blame for them on his ex-wives. Her fiancé gave that woman information. Or a *Parade Magazine* article claimed that Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship Ministries, **"got very drunk"** at a dinner he attended at the home of John Dean. That article gave *Parade's* readers information. The fact is that all of us receive a constant and

daily flow of information that matters in one way or another to us.

Now, some people are **“naïve”** or gullible in that regard and **“believe everything.”** That’s the course of action they pursue. They assume and act as if everything that everybody tells them is true, without any supporting evidence that it is. Consider the woman who was about to marry the three time divorcee. She believed what he told her without any supporting evidence that it was true, and acted accordingly. She married him. Or consider many of *Parade Magazine’s* readers. They believed what it wrote about Colson without any supporting evidence that it was true, and acted accordingly. Some sent him hate mail and others withdrew their financial support from his ministry. That woman and those readers were naïve or gullible. They **“believed everything.”**

And they played the fool in doing so because what they believed was true wasn’t. The man’s three ex-wives weren’t to blame for the divorces. He was. That woman, as a result, eventually became his fourth. And Colson hadn’t gotten drunk. Those readers, as a result, persecuted an innocent and godly man.

The moral of the stories is clear. Let’s not play the fool by being naïve and believing everything. Let’s be **“sensible”** and **“consider our steps”** instead, to quote the second line of verse 15.

This line isn’t calling us to be cynics. Certainly, most people aren’t out to purposely deceive us. But many do mistakenly deceive us. They’ve either perceived things incorrectly or perceived them correctly but misinterpreted what they perceived. Whichever it is, they tell us something as a result that isn’t true. Someone told a Christian that his brother, a teetotaler, drank beer at a party. But he didn’t. It was root beer in one of those brown bottles that look like beer bottles.

Mistakes like that compel us to be sensible. Unless it doesn’t matter or with exceptions here and there if it does, we shouldn’t believe and act on information we’ve received until we have enough evidence to confirm it. We should disbelieve it until we’ve verified it – even if it’s written. People tend to think that what is written is more authoritative than what

is spoken. But that isn't so. Whether it's written or spoken, verify it before we believe it.

I suggested just that to the woman who was about to marry the three-time divorcee. I advised her to find out as much as she could from other sources before doing so. She replied that he'd be upset if she did. I answered that he wouldn't if he were realistic and had nothing to hide. It was the prudent thing to do and she should have done it.

Don't play the fool and believe everything people write or say. We should be sensible and verify it before we believe it. I'd quickly note the urgency of that when what is written or said is something bad about someone else. With rare exceptions, we should give him or her the benefit of the doubt and disbelieve it until we verify it. Love demands it.

Be Realistic not Brash

Verse 16 in our text reveals a second course of action that a wise guy pursues. Be realistic not brash.

This verse observes that some people are **"arrogant and careless"** about **"evil."** The word **"evil"** is a broad one. It connotes things that are too much for us – that are beyond our competence and capability. Sometimes, people are brash and overestimate themselves. They give themselves too much credit. They're overly confident and think they're capable of more than they are. Judah's king, Amaziah, challenging Israel's king, Joash, to do battle and losing is a classic Biblical example of this (2 Chronicles 24). Peter's rash declaration before Gethsemane that he'd never betray Jesus but doing so is another (Matthew 26).

Verse 16 debunks a piece of conventional wisdom that we constantly hear. If you can dream it, you can do it. Or as it's also said, you can do anything you set your mind to. That's an inspiring idea that sounds good, but it doesn't work in real life. It's an **"arrogant and careless"** approach that leads to failure, frustration, and despair.

Sociologist Tony Campolo points out how destructive it is to poor young people in the inner cities where he ministers. Well-intentioned

workers tell them they can do anything they set their minds to. So, they set them to doing what they aren't gifted to do – be professional athletes, musicians, rappers, actors, and so on. Pursuing what they aren't gifted to do, they end up not doing what they are gifted to do.

Let's not make that same mistake. Let's not play the fool by being brash. Let's be "**cautious**" instead to quote verse 16. "**Cautious**" here connotes realistic. We need to be realistic about our weaknesses and strengths and pursue doing the things of which we're capable.

Gallup Inc. conducted a leadership study that investigated over one million work teams and interviewed more than 20,000 leaders. It found that the most successful leaders, the "**best of the best,**" shape their lives around their strengths. They do three things. First, identify their strengths. Second, develop or grow them. And third, find ways of applying them to the most worthwhile pursuits.

We should do the same. We need to discover the areas where we're strong (gifted) and then stretch ourselves in those areas. We're often told that we need to get out of our comfort zones and we should. But we shouldn't get out of our gift zones. Don't waste time, effort, and money trying to develop and use talents and gifts we don't have. Identify, develop, and use the talents and gifts we do have instead.

Someone asked Robert Butera, former president of the New Jersey Devils hockey team, "**What makes a winner.**" He replied: "**What distinguishes winners from losers is that winners concentrate at all times on what they can do, not what they can't do. If a guy is a great shooter but not a great skater, we tell him to think only about the shot, the shot, the shot – never about the other guy outskating him. The idea is to remember your successes.**"

That's sound advice. Let's be a wise guy, realistic not brash. Identify our strengths. Then develop and use them.

Be Reasoned not Reactionary

Verse 17 reveals a third course of action that a wise guy pursues.

Be reasoned not reactionary.

This verse pictures a **“quick-tempered man.”** Something has been said or done that sets him off as we say it. He’s impassioned, enflamed by anger, and **“acts foolishly,”** detrimentally, because he is. That’s routine for him and people **“hate”** him for it. They can’t stand his **“evil devices,”** his incivility, and exclude him from their inner circles as a result. He’s a pariah with whom they’ll have nothing to do.

Verse 17 verse illustrates something about destructive feelings. They can, when they’re strong enough, overcome our minds and will and become the basis of action. We get carried away by our feelings so that they, not our thoughts and will, direct what we say and do. It’s a dangerous condition that almost always causes bad outcomes.

Examples abound. A Christian verbally abused a department store manager because he was mad. A Christian told a lie about a competitor of hers because she was jealous. A Christian gave her brother the cold shoulder because she resented something he did. A newly widowed Christian sold her family home because she was too grieved to live in it. A Christian didn’t witness to his neighbor because he feared he’d be rejected. Each of those Christians was carried away by a feeling. What they felt, not what they thought and willed, was the basis of their actions. They were reactionary in other words.

But we should never be. That’s the implied call of verse 17. Be reasoned not reactionary. Make reality, not feelings, the basis of our actions. The first step in doing so is not to accord to feelings greater significance than they deserve. They aren’t any more important than our thoughts and will are and we need to grasp that. It’s no insult to us if we don’t indulge them. The second step is to reason with our feelings. Please grasp that feeling can be successfully **“reasoned with.”** So, we do just that. When we’re in the grip of a destructive feeling like anger, grief, jealousy, envy, fear, or despair, we correct it by bringing reality to bear on it. Dallas Willard explains it well: **“Those who are wise will, accordingly, never allow themselves, if they can help it, to get in a**

position where they feel too deeply about any human matter. They will never willingly choose to allow feelings to govern them. They will carefully keep the pathway open to the house of reason and go there regularly to listen.” The metaphor he uses there is instructive. Keep the pathway open to the house of reason and go there regularly to listen.

I got into a discussion with two family members of mine about policemen abusing their powers generally and the Ferguson case particularly. I disagreed with them about that and began feeling contentious with them as we talked. So, I reasoned with my feeling and brought several realities to bear on it. They have as much right to their opinion as I do to mine. I’m not fully informed about the subject and can benefit by hearing an opposing point of view. I’m annoyed because I’m proud. And listening is one of the first services of love. I reasoned with my feeling and soon was no longer annoyed as a result.

I don’t know about you, but I refuse to be reactionary, to let my feelings be the basis of action. I choose to be reasoned, to make reality the basis of action instead.

Conclusion

Those then are three courses of action that a wise guy pursues in the circumstances and settings of everyday life. Be sensible not naïve. Be realistic not brash. And be reasonable not reactionary.

But those are only samplings. Proverbs reveals many others and what we desperately need to grasp about them is this. They comprise a large part of our discipleship to Jesus. More specifically, they put our discipleship to Jesus in everyday clothes. It’s in them, in other words, that we most commonly cast our allegiance either for or against Him. So let’s devote ourselves to learning and living out all the courses of action that Proverbs teaches us. We’ll be a fool, unfaithful to Jesus, if we don’t. We’ll be a wise guy, faithful to Jesus, if we do.