

Ecclesiastes 7:15-18

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-7/ecclesiastes-715-18/>

Seeking balance and humility helps us to reduce our sin frequency and steward our days with wisdom.

Solomon has seen during his vaporous *lifetime of futility* two things that seem to be contradictions. A *righteous man who perishes in his righteousness* alongside a *wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness*. Although Solomon acknowledged that God will ultimately judge all things ([Ecclesiastes 3:14-17](#)), Solomon has seen that justice does not always seem to be served during this life under the sun. Sometimes the *wicked man* seems to get away with it, while the *righteous man* perishes, perhaps because of his *righteousness*.

Solomon's advice stemming from this observation is to *not be excessively righteous* or *overly wise*. Solomon says this can lead us to *ruin* ourselves. Solomon seems to be advising somewhat of a two-tier understanding of *righteousness* and wisdom. One is what we understand, and the other is what the world around us is ready to see or hear. Perhaps we see a need for wisdom but people are not ready to hear that wisdom. If they are not ready to hear, doing the *righteous* thing of trying to help them avoid the pain of foolishness will do them no good, while inviting harm to ourselves.

Jesus said something similar to this in the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps He had this passage in mind. When correcting others, Jesus first advised that when we see a fault in someone else (Jesus called it a speck in someone else's eye) then it is good to point it out to them. But Jesus advised us to take two steps before offering correction.

1. Jesus asks us to look in our own eye for a speck. Examine ourselves for the same fault. Usually we don't see faults in others unless we have it ourselves. And the more the fault bothers us, the more likely that is due to being convicted that we have the same fault. So step 1 is to deal with our own fault. Then we are in a proper frame of mind to actually offer aid rather than condemnation.
2. The second thing Jesus advises is to make an evaluation if the other person is ready to hear. Jesus uses a poetic device called a "chiasm" to explain, saying:

“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.”

(Matthew 7:6)

The chiasm is:

A. Dog

B. Pig

B'. Pig

A'. Dog

In a chiasm, the main point is in the center, in this case “Pig.” Both pigs and dogs were unholy animals in Jewish life, and Jesus was speaking to a Jewish audience. With respect to giving the “holy” advice to help someone get better, Jesus advises not to give such a benefit to a “dog” lest the dog “tear you to pieces”. Why get hurt trying to do something that is futile?

Similarly, Jesus says not to “throw pearls” of wisdom before “swine.” The swine will just “trample them under their feet.” So, again, don’t give advice to attempt to benefit someone who is disinterested in improving and belligerent against changing. Such an attempt will only bring you *ruin*, while bringing no benefit to others. The *ruin* would likely be a result where the corrected person takes the correction as an insult and retaliates in revenge.

This recognizes the reality that each person decides for themselves. No one can control the decisions of another. Part of wisdom is recognizing when someone is in a frame of mind or station of life where they are likely to listen to advice or correction. This admonition is rooted in the reality that we only control three things—who we trust, what we do, and the perspective we choose. We do not control the decisions of others. We can, however, recognize the patterns of others and avoid giving advice to people who reject advice. Or worse, people who punish those who offer advice.

Then Solomon says something else that seems curious: *Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool*. The part that says *do not be a fool* is consistent with many passages we have already seen in Ecclesiastes. But here Solomon says not to be *excessively wicked*, which would indicate that a little wickedness is okay. Perhaps Solomon is simply advancing a reality that is throughout the Bible—that humans are prone to wickedness. Everyone

sins. Solomon will say this overtly in verse 20, stating: *Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins.*

This observation is echoed throughout the Bible.

Jeremiah says:

“The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”
([Jer 17:9](#)).

The Apostle John says:

“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.”
([1 John 1:8](#))

And the Apostle Paul says, speaking of everyone:

“...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
([Rom 3:23](#))

The Apostle Paul also says of himself:

“For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate”
([Romans 7:14-15](#)).

In each case the Bible recognizes that all humans are prone to sin. [Romans 3:23](#) makes clear that everyone is in the same boat, we all sin. 1 John 1:8 is written to John’s disciples, believers. It makes clear that even when we are unaware of any sin, we still have sin, and are likely sinning without even knowing it. The next verse exhorts believers to confess sin when they become aware, promising that God will cleanse this kind of sin when we confess. When we confess, God promises His blood will restore us to fellowship and intimacy, both with Him as well as with others. The Apostle Paul was a righteous man, but he acknowledges sin in his own life.

Solomon seems to be reflecting on the reality that we are all prone to sin, to some wickedness, much of which might be unaware. But while the Bible is realistic about the fallibility of humans, it makes a clear distinction about deliberate sin. Deliberate sin is when we know better and choose to do wrong anyway. That sin results in escalated consequences.

An example would be the believers Ananias and his wife Sapphira in the Book of Acts. They deliberately lied to the church, telling them they were giving all the money from the sale of a piece of property, when in truth they were giving only part. The Apostle Peter made clear that they were not obligated to give any, so were free to give only a part. But Peter said that by lying, apparently to impress people in the church, they had lied to the Holy Spirit too (Acts 5:1-11). Ananias and Sapphira were disciplined by losing their lives. Solomon's words would apply to their intentional wickedness, "*Why should you die before your time?*" Perhaps Solomon is reflecting the biblical principle that willful disobedience carries escalated consequences, and a much more severe judgment.

Solomon ends this section by saying *It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them*. While recognizing we as humans are prone to sin and are often sinning, we can still endeavor to seek wisdom and righteousness. Recognizing the limitation that we cannot control others. Every person makes their own decisions.

Solomon states that the *one who fears God comes forth* from this reality armed with *both of them*. What does *both of them* refer to? Since Solomon begins this phrase with *grasp one thing and also not let go of the other*, Solomon seems to be speaking of understanding the reality that humans have sin, are prone to sin, but still have a choice to act wisely. At some point, on some level, each human decides whether to act foolishly and sin—or act wisely and choose God's way.

There are several principles we can derive from Solomon's teachings that relate to the subjects in this passage:

1. We do not control the decisions of others. They will decide for themselves. God has granted each person the power to decide for themselves three things: who or what to trust, what actions to take, and what perspective to choose.
2. Humans are exceedingly limited in understanding. Solomon has made it clear that our reason and experience are so limited as to not be capable of making sense of life. We can only make sense of life if we begin with trust in God.
3. Humans are prone to sin and often sin unaware. One person's wisdom and insight to see sin might seem like foolishness to another person based on ignorance.

4. When humans do have clarity of knowledge, they have a choice, to either walk in faith and wisdom, or wickedness.

We can walk in wisdom when we *grasp* the full spectrum of possibilities about others, and about ourselves. This will help us avoid a number of pitfalls. It helps us avoid reacting in anger by assuming that others are offending us deliberately. It also helps us exercise wisdom about how to advise and exhort others. When to take a stand, when to accommodate, and when to avoid.

Biblical Text:

¹⁵ I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness. ¹⁶ Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself? ¹⁷ Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time? ¹⁸ It is good that you grasp one thing and also not let go of the other; for the one who fears God comes forth with both of them.