

The young junior executive was a little nervous and very excited, or was it very nervous and a little excited? Today was his first day in his new job; how could he do well? How could he avoid failure and achieve success?

He had so many questions and so few answers, so he knocked on the door of the CEO. “Ma’am, do you have a moment?”

“Certainly. What’s on your mind?”

“I’m new and just starting out; tell me, what is the secret to success?”

“Good decisions!” She replied.

“Oh, thank you,” he said, “and how do you learn to make good decisions?”

“Bad decisions,” she answered.

*Proverbs 1:20–23 (NRSV) Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you.*

This Fall, we’re going to give heed to wisdom’s reproof; we’re going to walk in her way. We meet her in Proverbs, but the Wisdom literature of the Bible is quite extensive – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, certain Psalms, parts of the gospels, and the Epistle of James, all challenge us to rise above a mindless, mocking, foolish way of life; a way that ultimately says in deed if not in word, “There is no God,” to a way that is humble enough to be taught; a path of piety that is “the fear of the Lord.”

Open Mouth. Insert Foot

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When I was 14 years old, my pastor pulled me aside after youth group and asked me, “Have you ever thought about being a minister?”

I was stunned and a verse from James came immediately to mind: *James 3:1–2 (NRSV)* *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.*

I didn't want to be “judged with greater strictness!” Judge me on a curve! Judgment-lite – that's for me, especially when I make a mistake – open mouth; insert foot!

Sometimes our mistakes in speaking don't matter. We put our foot in our mouth, realize what we've done, and have a good laugh. But sometimes our mistakes do matter, because words have power; power to create and power to destroy.

Wisdom knows that; we're playing with fire every time we open our mouth, every time we send an email or post to a blog or Facebook or Tweet. God save us from the power of “reply all!”

What we say (however we “say” it) matters. Words have power, great power, and as Uncle Ben taught his nephew, Peter Parker, “With great power comes great responsibility.”

Wisdom wields that power well. We learn to wield that power well by wielding it not-so-well. Perhaps it was his mistakes that inspired Abraham Lincoln to observe: “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.” *Proverbs 17:28 (NRSV)* *Even fools who keep silent are considered wise; when they close their lips, they are deemed intelligent.*

Honest Abe and Solomon sound like two men who know what their feet taste like. They said the wrong thing at the wrong time the wrong way, but (and this is where wisdom drives out foolishness) they learned from their mistakes.

Words have great power. Wield that power well. Every time we speak, however we speak, we are playing with fire, so take care and learn when we open mouth and insert foot.

--- Wisdom and the Fear of the Lord

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My wise wife and I were out to dinner recently. We were having a great time; it was a really, really good day. We were with friends and family, and I was talking. Hard to believe, I know, but I was in high spirits (not those “spirits” mind you – I don’t have that excuse). I said something. I said the wrong thing. I opened my mouth and inserted my foot. When I said it, I did not realize the mistake I’d made, until, under the table, oh so discreetly, I felt a hand on my leg, and the dim bulb blazed with light and insight.

She gave me the chance to take the foot out of my mouth, and I did. Hopefully, I did so gracefully and in a way that did not draw more attention to what I’d said, but the main thing was to quickly find a way to close my mouth and listen. “When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.”

Life is full of second chances. The difference between wisdom and folly is what we do with those second chances. Do we make the same mistake, or are we humble enough, teachable enough, to admit our fault, own our ignorance, and make the most of our second chance?

“But, it’s not my fault. I’m not the one who needs to change, pastor! She does! She’s the reason my third marriage is falling apart.”

“But, it’s not my fault. I’m not the one who needs to change, pastor. He does. If my boss weren’t so difficult to work with, I wouldn’t be looking for another job.”

And so we go, from job to job, from relationship to relationship, from disaster to disaster. We make the same mistake over and over again, but it’s never our fault. We never accept responsibility, and, therefore, we never learn.

No wonder Wisdom cries out in the midst of our lives, *Proverbs 1:22–23 (NRSV)* “*How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? Give heed to my reproof*” .... “*Choose the fear of the Lord.*”

Proverbs has a lot to say about “the fear of the Lord.” It’s the Bible’s way of saying “a way of life, public and private, personal and professional, in which God is the center.” It’s not about using holy words and being oh so spiritual. It’s applied Christianity; faith in

action – in our marriage, with our children, at home and at the office, at work and at play. It’s living by faith where it matters when it counts.

Living this way bears fruit: *Proverbs 9:10 (NRSV) The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. Proverbs 14:26–27 (NRSV) In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence, and one’s children will have a refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, so that one may avoid the snares of death. Proverbs 15:33 (NRSV) The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor. Proverbs 19:23 (NRSV) The fear of the LORD is life indeed; filled with it one rests secure and suffers no harm.*

“The “fear of the Lord,” which is the beginning of wisdom, is the experience of contact with a power greater than our own, before whom we give up control.... A wise person knows he or she is not all-knowing and therefore is in need of guidance; such a person possesses what John Calvin described as a “teachable spirit.” This “fear of the Lord” is a form of humility or reverence.”<sup>1</sup>

To choose the fear of the Lord is to confess – I can’t do it all. I don’t know it all. I am not in control. It’s not all about me. It is about God. And, this God is present in my life. This God is with me in this world. This God has a purpose and my life has a part to play in God’s purpose. Therefore, even though I do not understand, even when I feel like my life is out of control, I choose to trust this “immortal, invisible, God only wise.” I choose the fear of the Lord.

Words have great power. Wield that power well. Life is full of second chances. Make the most of them. Choose the fear of the Lord, and learn from your mistakes, even when, especially when you open mouth, insert foot. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth H. Carter, Jr, “Proverbs 1:20-33: Pastoral Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. 54