

## **“A Way that Seems Right to a Man” (An Exposition of Proverbs 14:10)<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Introduction***

Our sermon text this morning was part of our Scripture reading last Sunday, and this brief verse from the book of Proverbs has been stuck in my mind all week, so I thought it might be good to spend some more time looking at it together in a full-length sermon.

As we have noted before the book of Proverbs is not just a collection of sanctified worldly wisdom, loosely connected and constructed. Far from it. It certainly contains a wealth of practical insight and wisdom for daily life, but this insight and wisdom are far from neutral or non-theological.

Rightly understood, God is at the very center of the book of Proverbs – He is ever-present throughout its pages. As we saw in a previous study, Proverbs 9:10 in some ways presents us with the central message of the book:

**“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”**

This being the case, without **“the fear of the LORD,”** not even **“the beginning of wisdom”** is possible. And without **“the knowledge of the Holy One,”** insight is forever out of our reach.

And so the Proverbs give us a treasure trove of counsel for our lives, if we are willing to listen and take it to heart. But all of the wisdom offered here begins with the fear of God. And that is perhaps nowhere more true than it is in our text.

For here in Proverbs 14:12 we see that the wisdom that God offers us here is not just about living a more fulfilling life, even if that is often one of the results of following the counsel given in this book. No, the message of Proverbs, and especially of our text, is a matter of life and death – *even eternal life or everlasting death!*

Our text is as serious as it is brief. Here under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Solomon says to us:

**“There is a way that seems right to a man,  
but its end is the way to death.”**

Regarding this verse the great Bible commentator Matthew Henry writes:

“We have here an account of the way and end of a great many self-deluded souls. Their way is exceedingly fair: It seems right to themselves; they please themselves with a fancy that they are as they should be, that their opinions and practices are good, and such as will bear them out. The way of ignorance and carelessness, the way of worldliness and earthly-mindedness, the way of sensuality and flesh-pleasing, seem right to those that walk in them, much more the way of hypocrisy in religion, external performances, partial reformations, and blind zeal; this they imagine will bring them to heaven; they flatter themselves in their own eyes that all will be well at last.”<sup>2</sup>

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1 All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

2 *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. III, p.869

He ends and sums up his comments on this verse simply by saying: “Self-deceivers will prove in the end self-destroyers.”<sup>3</sup> If that is the case (and it no doubt is), there are a great many self-deceivers, both inside and outside the visible church.

Is this not much the same as what our Lord Jesus Himself says in the Sermon on the Mount? In Matthew 7:13–14 He tells us:

**“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”**

“**Many**” enter by the *wide* gate and travel the *easy* way. They go with the flow and follow both their hearts and the crowds, but where does that easy way lead them? He says it “**leads to destruction**” (v.13). In contrast to this, the gate is “**narrow**” and the “**way is hard**” or difficult that “**leads to life**” or the end of which is life – and “**those who find it**” [i.e. *life*] are said to be “**few**.”

That being the case, it is fitting that as this is a *Communion Sunday*, a Sunday in which we who believe in Christ are admonished to *examine ourselves* before we partake of the Lord's Supper together, that we should look at a text such as this one, which certainly exhorts us to that very same thing. As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 13:5,

**“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”**

Certainly that is one of the blessings of the regular observance of the Lord's Supper, that it provides the professing Christian with ongoing opportunity for *self-examination*, renewed repentance and assurance.

### *A Way that Seems Right to a Man*

Let us briefly examine some of the ways that seem right to a man, but which end in death. The *first* is *open ungodliness, unbelief, and atheism*. Such a person sees no need for God or for faith in Christ, no need for repentance. Such a person lives in open sin and rebellion against God, as if there were no day of judgment immanent. The Word of God calls such a person a “**fool**.” Psalm 14:1 says:

**“The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”  
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;  
there is none who does good.”**

Such a person is a *fool* because they *know* that God is there, but they suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). And their unbelief shows itself in their corruption, in their doing “**abominable deeds**” and in *not* doing good. The one leads to the other.

And Proverbs 15:3 tells us that “**The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.**” And Proverbs 15:9 says “**The way of the wicked is an *abomination* to the LORD.**” And will God not judge? He certainly will.

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3 Ibid

But there are many other ways that seem right, but which lead to death. Charles Bridges writes:

“No one can doubt the end of open ungodliness. (1 Cor. vi. 9. 1 Tim. v.24.) But other paths in the broad road, *seemingly right*, are not less certainly in their *end the ways of death*.”<sup>4</sup>

*False religion and idolatry* is another way that often seems right to a man, but which leads to death. People think that somehow as long as they are religious in some way, that all is well, as if all roads lead to heaven at long last.

But in John 14:6 our Lord Jesus says, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** Jesus is *not* just one way among many. He is *not* one truth among other equally true truths, and *not* just one way to life eternal. Jesus tells us that He is **“the way”** - the *only* way! He tells us that *no one* comes to the Father except through Him!

Or did our Lord suffer the wrath of God in our place just so that we could follow some *other way* to God on our own devising, which is nothing but *trying to save ourselves by our works*? God forbid!

Another false way that leads to death is *salvation by works*. Such a person thinks that if their good deeds outweigh their bad, they will attain heaven at last. But what does the Bible say? Romans 3:20 says:

**“For by works of the law no human being [or “flesh”] will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”**

And Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:8-9 that we are *saved by grace through faith* in Christ (v.8), **“not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** Our best good works outside of Christ are nothing but **“filthy rags”** in God's sight that cannot cover our sin. Isaiah 64:6 says,

**“But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses [i.e. *righteous deeds*] are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.**

Another false way that leads to death is *the empty outward observance of Christianity*! This is the way of mere formalism and hypocrisy. The Apostle Paul has some very strong words to say about such a person. In 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 he writes:

**“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”**

He was writing this to the church! And while these things are certainly just as true of those who make no profession of faith in Christ, they are no less true of those who do! There are many who *profess faith* in Christ, and yet *never repent* of their sins. Such as of yet are no true Christians. Not yet.

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4 *Proverbs* (Geneva Series of Commentaries), p.177

Paul warns Timothy of those who **“will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions”** (2 Timothy 4:3). In other words, *they are professing believers. They go to church regularly. They seek out teaching that purports to be from the Bible, but which 'suits their own passions' (or lusts) and allows them to go on living in sin.*

Another way that seems right to a man, but which leads to death is *the unrepentant and unbelieving serving in ministry!* In Matthew 7:21–23 our Lord Jesus says:

**“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”**

*Such people make an outward profession of faith, calling Jesus “Lord, Lord.” And they think that all is well with their souls because they outwardly seem to serve Christ by prophesying, casting out demons, and doing “many mighty works” in the name of Christ. But they don't know Christ, and He says He never knew them!*

They rest upon their own religious actions to justify them before God, rather than faith in Christ. And they never truly repent, but are **“workers of lawlessness”**! That too is a way that leads to death!

### ***Do Not Be Deceived***

And so Paul warns us, doesn't he? He says, **“Do not be deceived”** (v.9). What does this imply but that we are so easily deceived, and even that we often deceive ourselves! And why is that? Jeremiah 17:9 says:

**“The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick;  
who can understand it?”**

Not only is the devil a deceiver and **“the father of lies”** (John 8:44), but we carry around within our own chests so to speak, a deceiver that is **“desperately sick”** - our own hearts!

People often tell you to *“follow your heart.”* That is surely some of the *worst* advice in the history of humanity. How often is gross sin and immorality rationalized by saying things like “the heart wants what the heart wants”? How often is such sin rationalized as *just being true to yourself*?

If your heart and even your conscience is not informed by, transformed by, and conformed to the Scriptures, then it is not a trustworthy guide, especially when it comes to the matter of the way to eternal life and peace with God.

At the end of the book of Judges we see a summary of mankind in sin and blind unbelief. Judges 21:25 says, **“Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”** This was not a good thing. This is self-deception. They were all doing whatever seemed good or right to themselves. But all through the book we are told things like this: **“the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD”** (Judges 2:11).

We can so deceive ourselves that we can be doing “**evil**” in God's holy sight, while we are doing what is “**right**” in our own eyes! As the poet once said, “Oh what a tangled web we weave, when at first we practice to deceive” – ourselves!

### ***Jesus Is the Way, the Truth, and the Life***

All of those ways (and more) are false ways. They seem right to many multitudes, but what does the writer of Proverbs say about *their end*? In the end, those ways are “**the ways of death**” (KJV). They seem right at first, but they lead to death in the end.

What is the way to eternal life then? Again, in John 14:6 Jesus tells us good news. There He says:

**“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”**

Jesus Himself is “**the way.**” He is *the only way* to the Father, and to eternal life.

Have *you* been following along a false way that seemed right to you? Is the Holy Spirit even now convicting you of your sin, and convincing you of the truth of God and His gospel? Then repent of your sins, and repent of seeking to find some other way to peace with God.

All of the *shortcuts* that the world and even your own heart promises will get you to eternal life are nothing but *dead ends* that lead to death.

Turn to Christ by faith and be saved! He trod *the way that led to His death* – **the cross** – so that by His death we might have eternal life in Him.

Nothing else will do. Nothing else will give you true peace with God and the assurance of eternal life. You can never do enough, and you know it. But Jesus paid it all. He and He alone can say that through His death on the cross for our sins, “**It is finished**” (John 19:30). - Amen