

Birds of a Feather

The Quest for Hidden Treasure – Part IV

Proverbs 1:8-19

Introduction

Every year Beloit College in Wisconsin publishes a list known as the Beloit College Mindset List. This reveals the cultural mindset of the incoming freshmen and what it might mean to the administration.

Over the years this list has become widely used as an indicator of the way young people view their world. Educators and leaders around the country wait for this list with anticipation because it also reveals how easy it could be to disconnect from these new students.

I went online to the college website and copied a number of interesting entries that have created, in part, the mindset of those born in and around 1990 – those who are next year’s college freshmen. For these students:

- stadiums have always had corporate names;
- FOX has always been a major network;
- HD TV’s have always been available;
- the World Wide Web has always existed;
- they have always been able to watch war live on television;
- the Soviet Union never existed;
- they have known two presidents;
- they learned about JFK and Malcolm X from movies;
- “outing” has never referred to taking a trip with their family;
- brides have normally worn white for a first, second, or third wedding;
- Disneyland has always been in Europe and Asia;
- beach volleyball has always been a recognized sport;
- General Motors has always been working on electric cars;
- Wal-Mart has always been bigger than Sears;
- the space program never caught their attention except in some disaster;
- they do not know that the expression “off the hook” refers to telephones;
- they have never heard anyone actually ring anything up on a cash register;

- smoking has never been allowed in many public spaces;
- the purchase of ivory has always been banned;
- food packaging has always included nutritional labeling;
- they have grown up drinking water from plastic bottles;
- they have never eaten liver and beans (now that is something to envy);
- they have never rolled down a car window;
- while their older brothers and sisters never used a typewriter, they have never seen one;
- at the mall or store, a coffee has always taken longer to make than a milkshake;
- Dilbert has always been ridiculing the work place;
- Michael Moore has always been angry;
- Al Gore has always been running for office.¹

Without a doubt, the influence of culture is profound.

However, it is not our culture that is the problem – it is whatever from culture we allow to influence our thinking and condition our lives that becomes the problem.

This is the reason the scriptures never ask the believer to abandon his culture and go live in the woods somewhere. He has been challenged to reach his culture with the gospel, while at the same time to resist the gravitational pull of his culture; to avoid certain aspects of his culture; to be careful who he runs with – because who he runs with, ultimately, runs him.

Who we give an ear to, has us by the ear.

You have probably heard the expression, “Birds of a feather flock together.” This is not only a fact of nature; it is a fact of human nature.

Who we choose to follow; who we choose to flock together with will influence us one way or another. This is the reason friendship and fellowship with the right people is so important.

C. S. Lewis called friendship “a school of virtue or a school of vice.” He wrote, “Friendship makes good men better and bad men worse.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The question to ask, then, is, “Who are they who will make me bad? Who are they who will make me better?”

This is exactly what God has in mind through the Proverbs of Solomon. It should not take any of us by surprise that one of the first things Solomon will teach is how to avoid certain people.

You might think this sounds strange, or harsh. However, it is actually biblical and wise.

If birds of a feather do flock together, it is no surprise that the Proverbs would talk a lot about the flock of birds from which we should flee and the flock of birds in which we should fly.

This is Solomon’s first fatherly piece of advice in Proverbs chapter 1.

Stay Alert! Stay Away!

Notice Solomon’s words in Proverbs 1:8.

Hear, my son, your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching;

In other words, “Listen to Mom and Dad.”

Notice Proverbs 1:10-14.

My son if sinners entice you, do not consent.

If they say, “Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood, let us ambush the innocent without cause;

“Let us swallow them alive like Sheol, even whole, as those who go down to the pit;

“We will find all kinds of precious wealth, we will fill our houses with spoil;

“Throw in your lot with us, we shall all have one purse.”

You could write in the margin of your Bible at verse 10, the summary words, “Stay alert!”

The word used in verse 10 for “sinners” or “sinful men” is “hattaim,” which refers in general, to those who are missing the mark; those who have fallen short of God’s standard. The nominal pattern in the Hebrew text indicates that this is the occupation or repeated action of these people.ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, these are people who are not sinning and stopping; sinning and repenting – they are making this their occupation; the way they live. They are practitioners of sin. They are experienced veterans of sinful lifestyles.

Note, in verse 11, that the sinners begin with an invitation,

... *“Come with us . . .”*

“Just come with us.”

In other words, “You don’t have to be like us; you don’t have to change your beliefs or even your morals. What else are you doing this weekend? C’mon with us!”

Two responses to an invitation from sinners

In this text, Solomon advises two responses to an invitation from sinners.

1. The believer is to respond to the invitation to accompany sinners, first, with something verbal.

Proverbs 1:10 says,

... *do not consent.*

This is another way of saying, “Son, say ‘no’.”

One of the best ways to avoid sin is to say “no” as early as possible.

The time to say “no” to a guy’s advances, young ladies, is not at 11 o’clock at night parked by the lake; it is at 2 o’clock in the afternoon when he asks you out. If you say “no” then, you will never have to say “no” out there.

Guys, some of you are convinced you will say “no” to things like adultery and embezzlement. You are thinking, “I can say ‘no’ to that!” But right now you are cheating on the internet and on your expense account.

The best time to say “no” is at the first invitation to sin.

Daniel provides an incredible example for the believer. He is introduced into a new and corrupt culture. He is inducted into the educational system of Babylon; the leadership training program of Babylon. The names of Daniel and his friends were even changed to Babylonian names.

- Daniel, which meant “God is my judge,” was changed to Belteshazzar, which meant “the prince of Baal” – imagine this change – what a revolting thing it would be to an Israelite believer;
- Hananiah, which meant “God is gracious,” was changed to Shadrach, which meant “illuminated by the sun-god”;

- Mishael, which meant “who is as great as God,” was changed to Meshach, which meant, “who is as great as Venus”;
- Azariah, which meant “the Lord is my help,” was changed to Abed-nego, which meant “the servant of Nego, the god of fire”.

This was all part of the psychological mind game the Babylonians were using in attempting to change the mindset of Daniel and his friends from Judaism to paganism.

It is fascinating that Daniel did not resist the educational system of Babylon – in fact, he excelled in it. He did not resist the name change – he would never consider himself Baal’s prince. He did not change his lodging or complain about his professors.

What he did refuse to go along with was the one thing in all these cultural changes that would have caused him to commit sin. Daniel refused to eat the king’s meat and drink his wine.

Why? The text informs us in Daniel 1:8 that,

. . . Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself . . .

Literally, Daniel made up his mind that he would not sin.

Israelites were not vegetarians and they drank wine. The only way this meat would cause Daniel to sin was if the meat were not kosher; that is, if it was from an unclean animal according to the Law of Moses. The wine would cause Daniel to sin if it had been offered as a libation to a pagan god, which was the custom of Babylonian kings, causing it to be a sinful thing for Daniel to participate in drinking.

Daniel went along with everything except this one thing which would have been sin.

Daniel’s words also made it very clear, “No! This will cause me to become defiled – to sin against my God.”

His verbal response was firm, but gracious.

Solomon writes, “Son, if sinners entice you to sin, make up your mind to say ‘no’.”

Ladies and gentlemen, this one little word will save us all from a life of regret. Imagine – one of the first words of wisdom offered through Solomon to us is how and when and why to say “no”.

This little word makes a world of difference.

The first response of the believer to sinners, in verse 10, is verbal.

2. The second response of the believer when asked to accompany sinners is physical.

If you wrote the words, “Stay Alert!” beside Proverbs 1:10, you could write in the margin of your Bible beside verse 15, the words, “Stay away!”

These are things to tell yourself, “Stay alert! Stay away!”

Notice Proverbs 1:15-18.

My son, do not walk in the way with them. Keep your feet from their path,

for their feet run to evil and they hasten to shed blood.

Indeed, it is useless to spread the baited net in the sight of any bird;

but they lie in wait for their own blood; they ambush their own lives.

These people ruin themselves. They mess up their own lives. Sinners ruin themselves.

Notice, in these verses, that the father is advising the son to consider the end of the sinner’s path.

Yes, they have friends. Yes, they are never alone. Yes, they seem to live exciting lives. Yes, they seem to have plenty of money and good times on the weekends. But in the end, they share calamity and futility and emptiness and loss.

Stay alert. Stay away.

Someone is sure to say, “But didn’t Jesus Christ make friends with sinners? Wasn’t He condemned for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?”

Yes, He was, as we read in Matthew 11:19.

However, Christ had a purpose. He was not eating with tax collectors because He was lonely. He was not eating with wayward men and women so He could have some friends and have something to do on the weekend. He was not mingling with them so they could influence Him, but so that He could influence them. He was not with them because He needed them, but because they needed Him.

Jesus had come,

. . . to seek and to save [those who were] lost. (Luke 19:10)

Christ was not there to entertain sinners, but to redeem them.

Circles of friendship to consider for invitation-participation-cooperation

Think of friendships or influences in your life in three different ways; in fact, think of three circles surrounding you right now. The first circle is closest to you, the second is further out, and the third is even further out.

- **The furthest circle out represents passive acquaintances.**

These acquaintances are kids that sit in your science class or ride the bus home with you.

These are the people who work in cubicles next to you and share the same water fountain and elevator. You know the name of the receptionist or bank manager, and they know yours, but that is as far as it goes – unless they call you in to their office to give you a bonus because you are doing such an incredible job, which I am sure happens for you as often as it should.

You know these people, but you really do not know anything about them – or they about you.

- **The next circle, closer to you, is casual friendships.**

These are the guys you play on the soccer team with. They not only sit on the same bus as you, but they share a seat with you and you enjoy talking to them as you ride to the game.

These are the people who serve in the same board room, as you hammer out plans.

These are your neighbors that you chat with or maybe even invite over for hamburgers on Saturday afternoon.

These are the people you talk with in the hallway and pile into a car with to grab lunch out.

These are guys or girls in your dorm room or on your task force.

They are people who are much more than acquaintances; in fact, they are, for the most part, locked into your sphere of living. You get to know these people fairly well and they get to know you.

These are the people you invite to church and strike up meaningful conversations with about Christ. These are the people on your prayer list.

You are not with them so they can influence you, you intend to influence them. You do not invite them to your home because you want something to do for the weekend. You, like Christ, are taking opportunities to seek and to save – to lead to Christ – those who are lost.

These are not passive acquaintances; these are casual friendships. They are people that God has placed in your world to influence them – not the other way around. That is reserved for the inner circle.

- **The third circle, closest to you, is close companions.**

These are the people you allow into your life to share life. They are your counselors and confidants. You are fortunate to have one or two that you can call close. You normally choose these with care.

To these people you have given the right of influence and direction. These are the people you ask, “What do you think I ought to do?” “Which decision do you think I ought to make?”

Influences in your life progress:

- from passive acquaintance – no personal connection;
- to casual friendship – personal connection, but you intend to influence them for Christ;
- to close companionship – you have given them the right of persuasion and influence.

These are the ones who impact your heart and life. These are they who develop in you a mindset.

This is your flock of birds.

For the believer, no one who is without Christ should gain access to the inner circle. This is what you guard. You are to,

Watch over your heart . . . for from it flow the springs [issues] of life. (Proverbs 4:23)

Thorns and snares are in the way of the perverse; he who guards himself will be far from them. (Proverbs 22:5)

This is the area in which you make sure that,

Discretion . . . guards you, [and] understanding . . . watches over you, (Proverbs 2:11)

For what close companionship,

. . . what fellowship has light with darkness? (II Corinthians 6:14)

This relates to who you date; who you IAM for an hour a day; who you seek out for counsel. If you are dating an unbeliever or a believer who really does not care about the things of God – there is no such thing as evangelistic dating – you have granted access to the wrong influence.

If your counselor or psychologist or confidant at work does not know Jesus Christ, they have no right

to get inside the inner circle to influence your mindset. They may very well lead you astray.

I cannot tell you how many people I have counseled who have been told by some unbelieving counselor that what they needed to do was divorce their spouse so they could be happy; what they needed to do was let their teenage children experiment with sin so they could learn for themselves.

What ungodly advice; what utter devastation in life brought by ungodly influence within the inner circle of mind and heart that should have been guarded and preserved for wisdom and discretion and purifying counsel.

Perhaps the best thing you could do for your spiritual walk, my friend, is start avoiding certain people. Graciously move someone from the inner circle to an outer circle.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 13:20,

He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

Remember, the word fool has nothing to do with IQ. This is not a reference to someone's SAT scores.

A fool throughout scripture is someone who has said in his heart, "There is no God." They live as if there is no spiritual authority in heaven, or biblical authority on earth – they deny both.

Solomon says in this verse, "Someone who allows a fool to infiltrate their inner circle; who has a close and intimate friendship with a person who denies the existence of God in heaven and the authority of God's word on earth will suffer harm."

Do not be fooled by a fool.

There are a lot of fools who come to church. They say they believe in God. I believe there were fools in church earlier today – hundreds of them in church today. They sang and testified of their belief in God, but in their hearts, they are, as one author called them, "practical atheists". In other words, they say there is a God, but in all practicality, they live as if He does not exist. In their heart, there is no God.

This is the reason David did not say, "The fool has said with his lips, 'There is no God.'" No, he said, "The fool has said in his heart . . ."
(Psalm 14:1).

Solomon writes,

. . . the companion of fools will suffer harm.

Bruce Waltke defined the Hebrew words for "the companion of fools" as someone who allows a fool

to, and I quote, "excite their interests; fix their habits . . . form their resolutions."^{iv}

Let me ask the question, "Who, in your life, is exciting your interests; determining your habits; helping to form your resolutions?"

If it is a wise person, you are in the right flock. If it is a fool, you are already flying into disaster.

Solomon said it this way, in Proverbs 12:26,

The righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads him astray.

Note the progression in Proverbs chapter 1.

- There is an invitation, in verse 10;
- which leads to participation, in verse 11;
- which eventually leads to cooperation, in verse 14.

You are now fully invested with one purse – one bank account somewhere in the Caribbean islands.

Invitation – participation – cooperation.

At what point in this progression is it hardest to flee the birds?

- When you are fully invested?
- When money is on the line?
- When your heart has already been given away?

When is it easiest to protect the inner circle?

At the beginning, with the invitation, you can say a simple, "No thanks."

So, how do you avoid flying in the wrong flock of birds?

Proverbs chapter 1 tells us to give these two responses:

- The first is verbal – stay alert and ready to say "no".
- The second is physical – stay away.

With your verbal response you resist enticement.

With your physical response you refuse entanglement.

Be prepared to do both.

Two characteristics of wise friends

The question remains, "How do you spot the wise flock of birds?"

There are two key characteristics about wise birds of a feather.

1. First, the wise believe in the crucified and resurrected Christ.

Paul wrote in I Corinthians 1:23-24,

but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and the Gentiles foolishness,

but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The person who believes that Christ is the epitome of wisdom is a wise person. The person who seeks Christ for counsel and guidance; the person who believes Christ is living – not as a baby or on a cross, but as the living, ascended Lord – is a wise person.

Fly with birds like this!

2. Secondly, they not only believe in the living Christ, the wise base their lifestyle on the words of Christ.

In Matthew 7:24, Jesus Christ said,

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock.

The person who says, “Hey, don’t take the Bible so seriously,” is not wise.

However, the person who says, “Hey, I’ve got to know what Christ and His word have to say about that,” will help you stand against the undertow of sin.

Solomon says to his son, at the outset of godly wisdom (Proverbs 1:18), “Son, look all the way down the path and note how the sinners end up. They are heading for ruin and destruction. But you will be kept safe if you avoid them. It might not feel very good, but you will be delivered from the tragic consequences of sin.”

It is interesting, is it not, that the first piece of advice is how to avoid the wrong people?

Conclusion

In 1942, Boston College’s football team had the best record in their division. The year was coming to a close and they had planned their homecoming game. It was planned against Holy Cross, which had only won four games that year. All the celebrations were planned and presentations were ready to be made.

Holy Cross is the kind of team a college wants to play for their homecoming, right? They want to celebrate after a victory, not a loss, so they find some

poor scapegoat they can smear and everyone feels good at the homecoming party.

So Boston College scheduled their homecoming game against Holy Cross. However, this particular night, everything they did went wrong and everything Holy Cross did went right. At the end of the game, the score was an embarrassing 55 to 12.

The Boston College team was so embarrassed, along with everyone else, that they canceled their big homecoming celebration. They fully expected to wake up the next morning to the headlines, “Boston College Creamed by Holy Cross.”

However, the next morning, the local newspaper did not even cover the game. Instead, the front page story was about a fire that had broken out in the Coconut Grove Country Club.

By the way, this remains, in American history, one of the top ten fires in terms of fatalities. Over 400 people died that night in the fire.

To us this might not be that significant, but to every player, coach, and friend of the Boston College football team, it meant everything. In fact, their homecoming celebration had been planned to take place at the Coconut Grove Country Club.

Their humiliation; their embarrassment; their emotional pain had saved their lives.

Solomon will later write, in Proverbs 4:14-15,

Do not enter the path of the wicked and do not proceed in the way of evil men.

Avoid [them], do not pass by [them]; turn away from [them] and pass on.

May I add that even if it is embarrassing; even when it hurts, do not fly in the wrong flock of birds.

It may mean you spend weekends alone. It may mean you are the odd man out at the office. It may mean you are the least likely to get asked out on a date.

Perhaps the greatest proof that you are walking with Christ is that you are standing alone.

Stand and resist enticement; refuse entanglement. Keep your heart; guard it. It will make all the difference, not only in this world, but in the world to come.

ⁱ <http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset/2010.php>;

<http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset/2011.php>.

ⁱⁱ Leon Morris, Testaments of Love (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 118.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce K. Waltke, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Proverbs, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), p. 190.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 571.