

## **The Wise and The Fool** - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Esther 5:1-14** (#476)

**Introduction:** How do you know if somebody is acting foolishly? Setting aside our supposedly “nonjudgmental” world, isn’t too hard is it? Whether somebody is making a choice that will almost certainly lead to their ruin or embracing something that anybody can see as a problem from a mile off, foolish actions aren’t normally too hard to pick out and identify. The book of **Proverbs** gives us numerous examples of the foolish: these are folks who look to ambush the innocent (**1:11**), who are intoxicated with the forbidden woman (**5:20**), who refuse to learn prudence or sense (**8:5**), and many other such examples. The Scriptures sum up foolishness as despising wisdom and instruction and – therefore – not fearing the Lord (**1:7**).

But what about if we turn the question around: how would you know if somebody is acting wisely? Sometimes, I think wisdom is obvious: when a few choice words, given in the right tone at the right time change an argument, a relationship, or a problem. Other times, however, wisdom is harder to recognize, precisely because it doesn’t put itself out front for all to see and evaluate. The fool often speaks their mind without thinking, which lets everyone see them for what they are. Yet the wise, according to **Proverbs 17**, restrain their words. Similarly, **Proverbs 18** continues on by saying that the “wise seeks knowledge.” Sometimes that might be a visible, identifiable search. Other times, though, such a dedication in life can only be seen in glimpses and moments, rather than loud and proud.

This morning, the book of **Esther** will hold two pictures before our eyes: one of humility and wisdom that is prudent and subtle. The other, a picture of loud foolishness that will only lead to a hard fall later in the book. Which picture most accurately reflects you? And more importantly, how will Christ’s own wisdom – His own character and actions – be seen or not in the words and actions of the characters in this chapter? Let us dig in and find out in **Esther 5**...

**5:1-4** We re-enter our story at the end of Esther’s fast. It has been three days since she delivered her response to Mordecai – three days of fasting in

preparation for approaching the king, trusting that somehow she will not perish in the very act of trying to save God's people.

True to her word, Esther doesn't develop cold feet when the day comes. Instead, she changes from her clothes of mourning and fasting into the royal robes that are appropriate for meeting the king. Then, she goes to the inner court of the king's palace – the place of danger, the place where nobody is allowed to come unless they have been summoned by the king. We would call this an anteroom just outside the throne room because the king sitting on his royal throne can see whoever is waiting for him. And so it is here: the king looks up, sees Esther and – just as was hoped and fasted for – he extends his favor to her, symbolized by the golden scepter that is held out.

You can sense the drama and the tension, can't you? Esther approaches. The guards don't have her on the calendar, and perhaps begin to reach for swords and spears, but halt as they see their king's reaction. Esther, for her part, approaches the throne and touches the tip of the scepter. A display of loyalty, perhaps? Or of thankfulness? And in the midst of this scene, the king asks for his queen's request.

Note Ahasuerus' generosity here – the language seems likely to be overly formal, as if what the king is offering is his generosity in general rather than actually being willing to give up half of his kingdom. However you take it, notice that Esther has indeed won his heart. Think of that: Persia is certainly the most powerful empire in the region during that era. To have such influence over the king would raise Esther far beyond the simple queen that she is. It would turn her into someone not only beautiful, but terrible with power as well.

Yet here, precisely here, we see how the Lord has worked in Esther. Whereas many would jump at the chance for this kind of influence of power, perhaps using it for their own ends, Esther does not. In J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, we find Frodo and the main characters on a quest to destroy the ring of power – an object of evil that brings nothing good to whoever possesses it, yet it does so by granting them immense power. At one point, Frodo and those with him are

captured by a band of elves and led before their queen, Galadriel. She knows that Frodo carries this ring, and she knows it could make her into the greatest power on the planet. Yet she refuses to take it. She refuses the quick path of gaining power only to lose her own soul. I think we see something of the same with Esther here. Her response is not for wealth or power, not for human influence over the masses. Instead, all that Esther requests at this point is that the king and Haman join her for a feast later that day.

I can't imagine the king expected that! Being invited to a banquet? A dinner party? Yet, friends, if we know the Bible well, we should know that important things often happen around the dinner table. And they still do, don't they? Before this time of Coronavirus, eating a meal together was a place where business leaders could connect, seal deals; where government servants could have working lunches, sharing food together and bringing minds together. Even in our own homes, often the dinner table is where we share life together. Our author doesn't make a whole theology of table hospitality here, but I do think that Esther specifically chooses a banquet for a reason: when folks eat together, they tend to be more open to one another. And that's what we'll soon see...

**5:5-8** So eager is the king to grant Esther's request – so much does she have his favor – that we find him wanting to respond quickly. That might appear to be a minor detail, but remember that kings rarely do anything on the timeline of other people.

The king and Haman arrive to this exclusive feast and no doubt enjoy all kinds of wonderful food and drink. Finally, afterwards, we read of the king once more asking Esther for her request. He recognizes that the feast itself wasn't the end goal, but that does nothing to diminish his favor for Esther. She has honored him.

Yet, once more, Esther refuses personal gain. Instead, she delays again: the king and Haman are invited to join her for another feast the next day. Only then will she give her request.

Can you sense the honor and humility here? What a hard thing for us Americans to grasp. We value being immediate and forthright. Certainly, there are times for that. Yet, it can also become an idol to us. In the Persian culture of the time, making such an important request simply wasn't proper right out of the gate. You see this still in some cultures today, where you are expected to share a meal and talk about family before getting down to business. Far from being a mere formality, this is part of how people relate to one another in other cultures – and it is something that we Americans really struggle with. We act like the deal, the contract, the money is what is most important. But it isn't – the people involved are what matters. And because we miss that, we don't learn how to honorably influence others.

So what do we learn from Esther? Earlier, we saw her trust. Though it isn't explicitly stated that she trusts the Lord, I do believe that is the underlying theme of the book. Esther fasts and then does as she promised. She is, quite literally, walking by faith. So it is for us: more often than not in life you won't be able to guarantee the outcome or see the end from the beginning. To follow Christ is to truly walk by faith.

That's the same truth here: she is trusting that her actions will honor the king and open his ears to her request when the time is right. Yet she doesn't rush him, she doesn't force a decision. She waits for the right time. Might that be something for you and I to learn from also? People are more important than deals, relationships matter more than saving time.

Now, why is all of this brought up? Our final scene in this chapter provides the answer: look for how Haman's words and actions differ from Esther's...

**5:9-14** At first, we find Haman filled with joy. He believes that Esther has honored him greatly, which only serves to build up his ego. Yet, as happens to egotistical people often, Haman's joy is immediately crushed when he passes Mordecai at the gate and – once more – Mordecai refuses to bow down to him. Haman then goes home to recount the day's happenings to his wife and friends. At first, the

story starts off well: he tells of his own riches and power and how he has been honored by Esther alongside the king. But rapidly, the story changes: Haman's obsession with getting Mordecai to bow to him means that all these things that Haman should be celebrating are worth nothing. This, friends, is the very definition of obsession and idolatry. Haman's wife – apparently just as foolish as he – gives horrible advice: she calls for a gallows to be built upon which Mordecai can be hanged. With Mordecai dead, Haman could then enjoy the second feast.

Could there be a greater difference between Esther and Haman? Esther is using her power to show respect to the king and – eventually – to win the lives of her people. Haman uses his power only to try and destroy his enemies. Esther acts and speaks with wisdom. Haman's words are full only of his own glory and of foolishness. The wise or the fool: which pattern describes your actions?

And one final point: did you catch the tension at the end of this chapter? Esther seems to have the king right where she wants him. At this point, she is likely hopeful that her request will be granted by the king who favors her. Yet, she doesn't know of Haman's plot to kill Mordecai before the second feast can even be held. I think this illustrates nicely what it means to trust God and act wisely. Esther, indeed, has planned carefully and we are seeing that this is a good thing. At the same time, none of her planning could have foreseen what Haman would do. We need God to be sovereign. We absolutely must hope that He is in control. Our own plans will never be enough. But praise God that He works in ways that are beyond our understanding.

Take God's plan to redeem us for example: Jesus ends up dying for sinners, not for the righteous or the powerful or the influential. Jesus is committed so much to the Lord's plan that He actually stops His disciples from trying to prevent His arrest in the garden. He knows more of the plan than they can understand, and so He says: "But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" He lived – and died – to do the Father's will, perfectly embodying the wisdom of trusting all that the Father has said and planned. Humility, wisdom: these things display our fear of the Lord. Let's pray that we would example Christ well!