

The Book of Ecclesiastes, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 6: Wisdom Better Than Folly in a Crooked World

Ecclesiastes 7:1-8:17

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Help the class see that true wisdom begins with the fear of God and is found more often in the house of mourning and the rebuke of the wise than in the house of feasting and the song of fools, so that they stop running from sorrow and correction and start letting God use them.

Lead the class to rest in God's sovereignty over both prosperity and adversity (7:13-14), to read "be not overly righteous" (7:15-18) rightly as a warning against self-righteous presumption rather than against true holiness, and to trust that God's judgment is certain even when it is slow (8:11-13).

Acknowledge honestly the limits of human wisdom (8:17) and point the class to the fuller revelation God has given in Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, so that what Ecclesiastes leaves unresolved finds its anchor in the gospel.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Ecclesiastes 7:1-6 the Preacher says a good name is better than precious ointment, the house of mourning better than the house of feasting, and the rebuke of the wise better than the song of fools. What does this cluster of "better than" sayings teach us about where real wisdom is found, and how does the rest of Scripture confirm that sorrow and correction can do us more good than ease and flattery (Psalm 90:12; Proverbs 27:6; Hebrews 12:11)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter opens with a string of "better than" proverbs that overturn our instincts. "A good name is better than precious ointment" sets a lasting reputation above costly luxury. Then comes the jolt: "the day of death than the day of birth." The Preacher is not morbid; he is pointing to the moment when a life is finished and its true worth can finally be weighed. A name well kept all the way to the end is worth more than the most fragrant oil money can buy.

From there he leads us into the house of mourning and tells us it is better than the house of feasting, "for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart" (7:2). Funerals teach what parties cannot. Standing beside a grave, we remember that we too will die, and that remembrance, far from crushing us, can make us wise. As Moses prayed, "teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

“Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of face the heart is made glad” (7:3). This is not a love of gloom; it is the recognition that grief does honest work in the soul that frivolity never touches. The laughter of fools, by contrast, crackles and is gone like “the crackling of thorns under a pot” (7:6), loud, bright, and useless.

He then prizes correction over flattery: “It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools” (7:5). A faithful wound from a friend is worth more than a chorus of empty praise (Proverbs 27:6). And the New Testament agrees that hard discipline bears good fruit: “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:11).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Real wisdom is found more in the sobering house of mourning than in the house of feasting (7:2; Psalm 90:12).
- Sorrow and the rebuke of the wise do honest work in us that ease and flattery cannot (7:3–5; Proverbs 27:6).
- A good name kept to the end outweighs luxury and applause (7:1).
- God uses correction and discipline to grow the fruit of righteousness (Hebrews 12:11).
- This is OT wisdom written before Christ, yet its lessons stand for us today (Romans 15:4).

Discussion Prompts

- Read 7:1–4 and ask: why would a funeral make us wiser than a feast?
- Discuss: when has a hard but honest rebuke done you more good than easy praise?
- Ask: what does it mean to “lay to heart” the truth that we will all die (7:2)?

Question 2

Student Question:

When was the last time a season of sorrow or a hard word of correction taught you something that comfort and applause never could, and are you currently running toward the house of feasting or letting the house of mourning lay something to heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves the “better than” proverbs from the page into the person. Most of us instinctively flee sorrow and chase comfort, yet the Preacher insists the house of mourning teaches what the house of feasting never can. The leader can invite honest reflection on a season that, looking back, became a teacher.

Correction is the harder cousin of sorrow. A rebuke from a wise friend stings, and our first reaction is usually defensiveness. But the one who can receive a faithful wound and learn from it is on the road to wisdom, while the one who only wants the song of fools stays a fool.

The question also asks which direction a person is currently leaning. Some are numbing real grief with noise and entertainment, refusing to let loss lay anything to heart. Others have stopped running and are letting sorrow do its quiet, clarifying work.

As a self-question, the aim is honest self-knowledge, not a tidy answer. Let the silence work, and encourage specific memories rather than vague generalities.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Each believer should examine whether they flee sorrow or let it teach them (7:2–4).
- Receiving correction with humility is a mark of growing wisdom (7:5).
- Numbing grief with distraction keeps us from the wisdom it offers.
- Personal accountability: we choose, day by day, the house of mourning or the song of fools.

Discussion Prompts

- Invite a moment of reflection: what did a past sorrow teach you that comfort never could?
- Ask gently: how do you usually react when someone offers you honest correction?
- Discuss: are you running toward the feast or letting the house of mourning speak right now?

Question 3

Student Question:

Ecclesiastes 7:7–12 warns that a bribe corrupts the heart, that the patient in spirit is better than the proud, and that wisdom is a shelter just as money is a shelter, but wisdom “preserves the life of him who has it.” What does this passage teach about the superiority of wisdom over wealth and about the danger of impatience and corruption, and how does that compare with the New Testament call to seek wisdom from above (James 3:13–18; 1 Corinthians 1:30)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verses 7–12 weigh wisdom against the things people usually chase. First the warning: “Surely oppression drives the wise into madness, and a bribe corrupts the heart” (7:7). Even a wise man can be ruined when he lets his palm be greased; corruption rots the integrity that wisdom depends on.

Then a lesson in patience: “Better is the end of a thing than its beginning, and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit” (7:8). Impatience wants the harvest without the waiting and the prize without the process, and it grows angry when delayed, but “anger lodges in the heart of fools” (7:9). The Preacher also forbids the nostalgic complaint, “Why were the former days better than these?” (7:10), because that question is not wisdom but a romanticizing of a past that was never as golden as memory paints it.

Then the heart of the passage: “Wisdom is good with an inheritance,” and “wisdom is a protection, even as money is a protection, but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom

preserves the life of him who has it" (7:11–12). Money can shelter you from some troubles, but wisdom shelters the soul and preserves the life. It outlasts and outranks wealth.

The New Testament lifts this to its fullest height. The wisdom we most need is "the wisdom from above," which "is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits" (James 3:17). And supremely, Christ Himself "became to us wisdom from God" (1 Corinthians 1:30). The shelter the Preacher praises finds its true and lasting form in Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A bribe corrupts even a wise heart; integrity is the soil wisdom grows in (7:7).
- Patience is better than pride, and anger lodges in the heart of fools (7:8–9).
- Romanticizing the past is not wisdom but a refusal to trust God with the present (7:10).
- Wisdom shelters the soul and preserves life as money never can (7:11–12).
- True wisdom is the wisdom from above, and Christ is our wisdom from God (James 3:17; 1 Corinthians 1:30).

Discussion Prompts

- Read 7:11–12 and ask: how is wisdom a better shelter than money?
- Discuss: why does the Preacher forbid the question, "Why were the former days better?" (7:10)?
- Ask: what does the wisdom from above look like in practice (James 3:17)?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where are you most tempted to take a shortcut that compromises your integrity, whether a small "bribe" to your conscience or an impatience that wants the end before the proper means, and what would patience and clean hands cost you right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question brings the warnings of 7:7–10 into the reader's own choices. The bribe that corrupts is rarely a briefcase of cash; it is more often the small compromise, the favor that quietly buys our silence, the shading of the truth that smooths a path we want. The Preacher says even the wise are ruined this way, so none of us should assume we are above it.

Impatience is the other ditch. Many of our integrity failures come not from wanting the wrong thing but from wanting a good thing too soon, and reaching for it by a shortcut. The patient in spirit waits for the proper means; the proud in spirit grabs and justifies.

The leader can press the cost question gently. Patience and clean hands are not free; they may cost a promotion, a sale, a quicker resolution, the approval of someone we want to please. Naming that cost honestly is part of counting it.

As a self-question, the goal is for each person to locate one specific area of pressure and to resolve, before God, to keep clean hands even when it is costly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Compromises to the conscience are the everyday form of the corrupting bribe (7:7).
- Many integrity failures come from impatience, wanting a good end by a wrong means (7:8–9).
- Patience and integrity often carry a real, countable cost.
- Personal accountability before God for keeping clean hands under pressure.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask: where are you most tempted to let a small compromise buy your silence or your advantage?
- Discuss: how does impatience push otherwise good people into shortcuts?
- Invite each person to name one place to choose patience and clean hands this week, cost and all.

Question 5

Student Question:

In Ecclesiastes 7:13–14 the Preacher tells us to consider the work of God, who has made crooked what we cannot straighten, and that God has appointed the day of adversity as well as the day of prosperity. What does this teach us about God's sovereignty over both our good days and our hard days, and how does this protect us from the proud assumption that we can control our own future (Job 2:10; Romans 8:28; James 4:13–15)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is one of the pivotal passages in the book. “Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?” (7:13). There are bends in life that God Himself has placed there, and no human effort can straighten them. The first response of wisdom is not to fight the bend but to consider the God who made it.

Verse 14 gives the balance: “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.” The same sovereign hand gives both the bright morning and the dark afternoon. God appoints adversity, not only prosperity, and He does it so that we will not coast in self-sufficient pride, thinking we hold our own future.

This is a high and humbling view of God's sovereignty, and it is echoed throughout Scripture. Job, stripped of everything, says, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive

evil?” (Job 2:10). This is not fatalism; it is trust that the One who bends the road has a purpose, “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28).

The passage also rebukes the arrogance of presuming on tomorrow. James warns those who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such a town,” when they cannot know what a day will bring; rather, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that” (James 4:13–15). We cannot straighten what God has bent, and we cannot script the days He alone appoints.

The pastoral point is crucial: God is not the author of moral evil, but He is sovereign over the circumstances of our lives, prosperity and adversity alike. The wise person does not first try to fix or explain the hard day; the wise person first considers the God who sent it and trusts Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God is sovereign over both prosperity and adversity; He appoints them both (7:14; Job 2:10).
- Some things in life are bent by God’s own hand and cannot be straightened by us (7:13).
- Adversity is meant to keep us humble and dependent, not self-sufficient (7:14).
- This is trust, not fatalism: God works all things for good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28).
- We must not presume on tomorrow, for God alone holds our future (James 4:13–15).

Discussion Prompts

- Read 7:13–14 and ask: what does it mean that God makes the day of adversity as well as the day of prosperity?
- Discuss: how is trusting God’s sovereignty different from a hopeless fatalism?
- Ask: how does this passage humble our assumption that we control our own future?

Question 6

Student Question:

Think of a “crooked” thing in your own life that you have been straining to straighten by your own effort. What would it look like this week to stop wrestling it into shape and instead bring it to the God who bent it, trusting that He has a purpose you cannot yet see?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes the truth of 7:13–14 and makes it personal. Each of us has some crooked thing we have been straining to straighten by sheer effort: a relationship, a diagnosis, a closed door, a child who has wandered, a circumstance that will not bend to our wishes. The Preacher’s counsel is to consider the God who made it crooked before exhausting ourselves trying to fix it.

There is a real difference between faithful action and anxious wrestling. God calls us to do what is ours to do, but He does not call us to play God over outcomes He has reserved for Himself. Much of our exhaustion comes from trying to straighten what He has bent on purpose.

Bringing the crooked thing to God does not mean passivity or pretending it does not hurt. It means surrender: laying it in His hands, trusting that the bend has a purpose we cannot yet see, and asking Him for the grace to walk through it rather than around it.

As a self-question, the aim is one concrete handoff, a specific situation a person resolves to stop wrestling and instead entrust to the God who appoints both prosperity and adversity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We exhaust ourselves trying to straighten what God has bent on purpose (7:13).
- Faithful action is different from anxious wrestling over outcomes God holds.
- Surrender is active trust, not passive resignation or denial of pain.
- Spiritual growth is concrete: one situation handed over, not a vague feeling.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each person to name privately one crooked thing they have been straining to straighten.
- Discuss: what is the difference between faithful effort and trying to play God over outcomes?
- Invite one specific situation to entrust to God this week rather than wrestle alone.

Question 7

Student Question:

Ecclesiastes 7:15–22 warns, “Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise,” yet also, “Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool.” Since Scripture clearly commands true holiness, what is the Preacher actually warning against here, and how do we distinguish godly righteousness from a self-righteous, presumptuous pretense (Luke 18:9–14; Romans 10:1–3; 1 John 1:8–10)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a passage that demands careful handling, because read carelessly it seems to caution us against being too holy. “Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?” (7:16–17). Scripture everywhere commands true holiness, so the Preacher cannot be warning against real righteousness.

What he warns against is a self-righteous, self-made “righteousness”: the proud pretense that imagines it has earned standing with God, that parades its wisdom, that presumes to fully understand and judge God’s ways. This is the very thing Jesus exposed in the Pharisee who

“trusted in himself that he was righteous and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:9–14). It is the error Paul names in those who, “seeking to establish their own,” “did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Romans 10:1–3).

The other side, “be not overly wicked, neither be a fool,” warns against the opposite presumption: deciding that since grace abounds or judgment is delayed, one may live loosely. Both ditches are forms of pride; both destroy. “He who fears God shall come out from both of them” (7:18). The fear of God is the thread that keeps us from both self-righteous pretense and reckless folly.

The line that grounds it all is 7:20: “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” This is not the doctrine of inherited guilt or total depravity; Scripture is clear that “the soul who sins shall die” and that a son does not bear the guilt of his father (Ezekiel 18:20). The Preacher is stating the plain fact of universal actual sin: every accountable person has in fact sinned. That is exactly why no one can stand on self-made righteousness. As John writes, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,” but “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:8–9).

So the godly path is neither smug self-righteousness nor careless wickedness, but the humble fear of God that knows it has sinned, refuses to presume, and clings to His mercy. True holiness is never the target of this warning; pretended holiness is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The warning is against self-righteous pretense and presumption, not against true holiness (7:16; Luke 18:9–14).
- Establishing our own righteousness instead of submitting to God’s is the error condemned (Romans 10:1–3).
- “Be not overly wicked” warns against presuming on grace or delayed judgment (7:17).
- The fear of God keeps us from both ditches (7:18).
- 7:20 teaches universal actual sin, not inherited Adamic guilt or total depravity (Ezekiel 18:20).
- We confess our sin and find cleansing in God’s mercy, never in a righteousness of our own (1 John 1:8–10).

Discussion Prompts

- Ask: why can “be not overly righteous” not mean “do not be too holy” (compare Luke 18:9–14)?
- Discuss: how is self-righteous pretense just as deadly as careless wickedness?
- Read 7:20 and ask: how does admitting our own sin keep us humble and dependent on God’s mercy?

Question 8

Student Question:

The Preacher says, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" (7:20), and warns us not to take to heart every word people say, "lest you hear your servant cursing you," for your own heart has cursed others too (7:21-22). How does honestly facing your own sinfulness reshape the way you judge and respond to the faults of others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Right after declaring that no one on earth is sinless (7:20), the Preacher gives a strikingly practical application: "Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others" (7:21-22). The honest awareness of our own sin should make us slower to be wounded by, and quicker to forgive, the sins of others.

We tend to hold others to a standard we ourselves have never met. We bristle at a harsh word spoken about us, forgetting how many harsh words we have spoken about others. The Preacher gently holds up a mirror: your own heart knows you have done the very thing.

This is the seed of what Jesus would later teach about the speck and the log (Matthew 7:1-5). A person honest about their own failings becomes patient, merciful, and hard to offend, because they are no longer surprised that people sin, themselves included.

As a self-question, the aim is to let the universal fact of sin, including our own, soften our judgments and reshape how we respond to the faults and careless words of others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest awareness of our own sin should make us slower to take offense (7:21-22).
- We often judge others by a standard we have never kept ourselves.
- Mercy toward others flows from honesty about our own failings (Matthew 7:1-5).
- Personal accountability: my own heart knows I have done the very thing I resent.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask: how does remembering your own sharp words change how you hear others' words about you?
- Discuss: why are we so quick to take offense and so slow to recall our own faults?
- Invite one relationship where honesty about your own sin could soften your judgment this week.

Question 9**Student Question:**

In Ecclesiastes 8:11–13 the Preacher observes that because the sentence against evil is not carried out speedily, people grow bold in sin, yet he insists, “It will be well with those who fear God,” and “it will not be well with the wicked.” How do we hold on to the certainty of God’s judgment when justice seems delayed, and how does the New Testament both confirm this certainty and explain the delay (2 Peter 3:8–10; Romans 2:4–8; Galatians 6:7–9)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 8 turns to life in a world where justice seems slow. “Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil” (8:11). When wrongdoing is not punished quickly, people grow bold; they mistake God’s patience for God’s absence and decide they will get away with it.

But the Preacher refuses to draw the cynic’s conclusion. Though a sinner “does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life,” yet “it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God” (8:12–13). The delay is not denial. God’s verdict is certain even when His timing is slow.

The New Testament both confirms this certainty and explains the delay. The judgment is sure: “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). And the delay is mercy, not weakness: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). What looks like slowness is God giving room to repent (Romans 2:4).

So the patient endurance of believers rests on this confidence. “Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9). The day of reckoning will come, the day of reward as well, and in the meantime the fear of God steadies us when the wicked seem to prosper.

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson. We must affirm clearly that God’s judgment is real and certain, that the delay is His mercy rather than His indifference, and that it will, in the end, be well with those who fear Him. Ecclesiastes glimpses this under the sun; the gospel makes it blazingly clear.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Delayed judgment tempts people to grow bold in sin, mistaking patience for absence (8:11).
- God’s verdict is certain even when His timing is slow; it will be well with those who fear Him (8:12–13).
- Whatever a person sows, that he will also reap; God is not mocked (Galatians 6:7).
- The delay is mercy, room for repentance, not weakness (2 Peter 3:9; Romans 2:4).

- Believers endure by trusting the certain reckoning rather than envying the prosperous wicked (Galatians 6:9).
- This is OT wisdom that finds its full clarity in the New Testament revelation of judgment (Romans 15:4).

Discussion Prompts

- Read 8:11–13 and ask: why does delayed judgment make people bolder in sin?
- Discuss: how does 2 Peter 3:9 explain the delay without denying the certainty of judgment?
- Ask: how does “it will be well with those who fear God” steady us when the wicked seem to prosper?

Question 10

Student Question:

Ecclesiastes 8:17 confesses that man “cannot find out the work that is done under the sun,” for even the wise cannot fully grasp it. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is teaching you to trust Him with what you cannot understand, surrendering a worry or a “why” you have been demanding an answer to, and resting instead in the fuller light He has brought (Deuteronomy 29:29; Colossians 2:2–3; 1 Corinthians 13:12)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter ends with a humble confession that becomes a doorway to faith. After observing how the righteous sometimes get what the wicked deserve and the wicked what the righteous deserve (8:14), and after commending the simple joy of eating, drinking, and gladness in one’s work (8:15), the Preacher admits the limit of all human wisdom: “then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out” (8:17).

This is not despair; it is the humility that wisdom finally produces. There are works of God we simply cannot trace, reasons we cannot reach, “whys” we will not have answered this side of glory. “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us” (Deuteronomy 29:29). Wisdom learns to rest in what God has revealed and to trust Him with what He has not.

But the believer is not left where Ecclesiastes leaves us. The fuller light has come in Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:2–3). What the Preacher could only glimpse under the sun, we now see in the face of the risen Lord. We still do not know everything, but we know Him, and that is enough.

As a self-and-capstone question, the aim is one concrete surrender: a worry or a demanded answer that a person resolves to lay down, trusting the Lord Jesus with the part of the picture

they cannot yet see. “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The leader can close by drawing the whole lesson together: wisdom begins in the fear of God, rests in His sovereignty over good days and hard, refuses both self-righteous pretense and reckless folly, trusts His certain justice, and finally bows before the limits of human understanding to find its rest in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Human wisdom has real limits; we cannot fully trace the work of God (8:17).
- The secret things belong to God; the revealed things belong to us (Deuteronomy 29:29).
- This humility is not despair but the rest of faith in a trustworthy God.
- Christ is the fuller revelation; in Him are hidden all treasures of wisdom (Colossians 2:2–3).
- Spiritual maturity surrenders the demanded “why” and trusts the Lord we do know (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Discussion Prompts

- Read 8:17 and ask: what is the difference between despairing of answers and humbly trusting God with them?
- Discuss: how does Christ, in whom all wisdom is hidden, change how we face what we cannot understand (Colossians 2:2–3)?
- Invite each person to name one worry or “why” to surrender to the Lord this week.