

“Wisdom for One-Anothering, Part 4: Poise”

James 1:19-25

Proverbs (see below)

Selections from Proverbs on Poise

Fools show their annoyance at once,
but the prudent overlook an insult. (12:16)

Whoever is patient has great understanding,
but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.

A heart at peace gives life to the body,
but envy rots the bones. (14:29-30)

Better a patient person than a warrior,
one with self-control than one who takes a city. (16:32)

The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint,
and whoever has understanding is even-tempered. (17:27)

A person's wisdom yields patience;
it is to one's glory to overlook an offense. (19:11)

Like a city whose walls are broken through
is a person who lacks self-control. (25:28)

Fools give full vent to their rage,
but the wise bring calm in the end. (29:11)

Introduction

You might not guess it by looking at us, but in the past few years, Sam and I have been doing the same two athletic things: basketball and running.

I hate running, but I love how I feel after I run. Also, I love playing basketball, but I hate how I feel after I play basketball. Why?

Because running is simple. Right, left, right left.

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Basketball requires you to move in all kinds of different directions. You don't *plan* the way your body will move at a certain time like a figure skater. You just move. And that makes you *sore*.

One evening in Korea, after I played basketball, I came home and I watched a video of LeBron James.

He's balancing on his knees on a big exercise ball, filled with air. And someone is throwing a heavy medicine ball to him. High, low, to the right, to the left. He catches it, and throws it back. Over and over. That was the day when I realized that even though LeBron James and I are both just kids from Akron, Ohio—LeBron has more muscle here [midsection] than I have in my whole body, and I have more fat here [midsection] than LeBron has in his whole body. And *that's* why I'm sore!

This is exactly the picture of poise. Physically.

We need to learn *spiritual* poise.

If we're going to love one another and fulfill the other 59 one-anothering commandments in the NT, what kind of people will we need to become?

People with poise.

Let's look at

1. The Demand of Poise
2. The Difficulty of Poise
3. The Deliverer's Poise

1 The Demand of Poise

In Proverbs, English Bibles only use the word “poise” once—in 16:11. That proverb is talking about how the LORD is pleased with honest measuring scales. When scales are rightly weighted, they are balanced. They're *poised* scales.

But the *idea* of “poise” is everywhere.

Sort of like LeBron's coach, the wise counselor in the book of Proverbs wants us to be able to have spiritual poise, so that when people throw their annoying attitudes, words, and actions at us, we don't fall down and ruin our chance to love and serve one another.

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I need to say that these proverbs are not teaching us to let abusive and violent people keep abusing us. We are talking about irritating and annoying experiences with people. If you, or someone you know, is being *abused*, “have poise!”—“learn not to react!”—is not the wisdom you need. You need the courage and wisdom to get out of the situation. I just want to make that clear before we go back to *irritations* and annoyances.

Our first proverb (12:16) says, look: people are going to say things to you that aren't fair. Church people, who should know better, who ought to be more mature, are going to insult you. What's the demand of poise?

People can be annoying! But if you don't want to be a fool, the proverb says, you've got to avoid becoming annoyed. You've got to be able to catch that heavy ball being thrown at you and stay balanced on the other ball.

This includes our body language. To have spiritual poise means that we don't just control our words of response; we also learn self-control when it comes to what we're doing with our bodies. Are our arms crossed over our chests? Do we have a nasty frown on our faces? Are we breathing sighs of irritation? Then it doesn't matter if we never say anything. The picture of our bodies paints a thousand words!

And so in 14:29, our visible, hot temper *shows* itself. And it also shows that we are fools. Some translations say that a hot temper *promotes* or even *exalts* foolishness. It's like we're taking foolishness and raising it up to the position of a king or god, when we are hot-tempered.

17:27 says that our words need to be held back, but so do our tempers. We need to put a fence between our feelings and our mouths so that foolish words don't come out. And we need to have a cooling tower for the red-hot nuclear emotions we feel when someone is irritating us.

25:28 says that if we don't have this kind of self-control, we might as well be a city without walls. In the ancient and even the medieval world, *everything depended* on the integrity of a city's walls. The wall kept thieves and armies out so that the city could engage in commerce and develop wealth—so that its people and culture could prosper. Without a good wall, the whole city and its economy and culture are vulnerable to destruction.

That's what I'm like if I lack spiritual poise. An army of annoyances can come through the gaps in my wall and steal not just my joy, but my reputation and my effectiveness and my love, just by ticking me off and getting me to *react* right away, in a foolish way.

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Speaking of armies and cities: 16:32 says that it's better to have poise— patience— than to be a warrior who can take someone else's city. One scholar says: “Conquest of self is better than conquest of others” (Clifford). Don't conquer other people. Conquer *you!* Don't control others. Learn *self-control*. And to do this, you have to submit yourself to the Spirit of Jesus Christ, because self-control is a fruit of the Spirit.

There's the demand of poise. The Proverbs say: don't be a fool. Instead, have poise.

Now we need to be honest about ...

2 The Difficulty of Poise

This is not easy.

In the physical world, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In the chemical world, if you add a reactant to unstable molecules, you get a *reaction*.

And in our psychology, because humans are physical and chemical things, we will also tend to *react* when someone acts upon us.

These proverbs challenge us, though, not to be NOTHING BUT a big lump of mass and chemistry. They challenge us to be more fully *human*. They are difficult proverbs because they are asking us not to simply react, but to *act*.

Steven Covey says that every stimulus will have a response. Want to see a fool? StimulusResponse. Want to see wisdom?

Stimulus.

Response.

Poise is hard. These proverbs want us to make sure that our response is not a *reaction*, based completely on the irritating stimulus. Instead, these proverbs want us to make a fresh, new *action*.

Poise means that we stand and speak wisely, not in reaction to what was said or done, but because of who we *are*.

In Alan Jacobs's book *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*, he says that in our hyper-connected world, where we have more face-to-face relationships than ever before, where we also have thousands of electronic relationships through email and social media and text messaging, the most important thing we can learn is to “give it five minutes.”

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Whether you're standing face-to-face with someone who is obviously wrong and annoying, or whether you've quickly typed up your response and you're about to click “send” — *give it FIVE MINUTES*. Lengthen the time between stimulus and response.

Sounds easy, right? But this is very, very difficult. Because we feel like wrongs need to be made right. We sense that irritating people need to be told just how irritating they are. All the chemistry and physicality in our brains and bodies seem to be telling us “fight!” or “run” or “freeze”. But aggressive, or cowardly, or cold attitudes, words, and actions are not the way to love one another.

Putting a gap between the stimulus and your response *is wisdom. It is poise*. Putting your body in a loving position and forming your words in a loving way is our calling. Even when, especially when, we are annoyed and irritated.

Poise.

It's extremely difficult. But it's exactly the wisdom and grace we need if we are going to fulfill Jesus' commandment that we love one another.

3 The Deliverer's Poise

Because there is a demand for poise, and because having poise is so difficult, we're in trouble. Because our lack of poise is not just foolish, it's a moral problem. Wisdom is more than ethics, but it's not less than ethics. And that means that foolishness is more than just sin, but it's not less than sin. We are fools, and therefore we are sinful fools.

Keller has said that the paradox of the book of proverbs is this: If you think you are wise, you're a fool. But if you read them, and you stop, and say, “Oh Lord, I have been a fool! Help me!” — then you are actually running down the road toward wisdom.

But what makes it possible to say “Lord, I've been a fool?” What invites us to run down the road of faithful, humble discipleship toward Jesus?

It's the Deliverer's poise. Jesus Christ has not just *demonstrated* poise. He has not just shown us a great example of a poised person. He's *saved* us by his poise.

No one has heard more false accusations than Jesus.

No one experienced the red-hot fury of scared religious leaders like Jesus.

No one experienced the ice-cold indifference of secular authorities like Jesus.

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When LeBron James was balancing on his knees on his exercise ball, his coach was tossing a weighted ball to him. His coach was not firing bullets out of a gun at him.

Jesus was poised for all those years. For 33 years people tossed weighted balls of irritation and annoyance at him. He perfectly handled these, for us.

But then in his arrest and trial and torture and crucifixion, the weighted balls turned to bullets. You can't just catch bullets. And Jesus was no longer dealing with annoying people. He faced killers. And as a real human, he died.

But the King of Grace, Jesus was able to say, while he hung on the cross, “Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing.”

This is poise for Jesus. But for you and me, it's *salvation and hope!*

And how about this? Jesus just put a gap between stimulus and response, didn't he? They crucified him. He laid down his life. And then we have a “pause,” don't we? A long Saturday with Jesus in the tomb of Joseph of Aramathea. And then we have his response. God's response. Jesus' *Resurrection!*

The reason we celebrate Harvest Festival, the reason we send long-term and short-term missionaries to the ends of the earth, the reason that we go together into Zurich to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, is because he has won our salvation, and gives hope to the whole world, by being perfectly wise, perfectly poised, perfectly loving—and then by giving his perfect life for us, that we might have life in him.

We don't give our lives for someone who was just a good example. We give our lives for the one who gave his life for us, who is Lord of Poise and Lord of Resurrection. He delivers us from our foolishness by his poise. And he is still poised. Slow to anger. Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Patient with you. With me.

We said that putting our bodies in a loving position, and forming our words in a loving way, is the poise we need to love one another. Thanks be to God that our Lord Jesus put his body in a loving position, and formed his words in a loving way. It is our salvation. And he still does. And that's our hope. And it's our only hope to become poised people who love one another with our bodies and words.

May we follow our Lord and Savior's love and wisdom, and love one another like he has first loved us.