

The Bible Truth Library Presents
An Electronic Version Of

John Gill's

A BODY OF PRACTICAL DIVINITY

Book 1—Chapter 20

OF WISDOM OR PRUDENCE

Zeal without wisdom or prudence, and unless tempered with it, will be either ignorant, and not according to knowledge, or be rash and precipitant. I say wisdom or prudence, because they are much the same thing, and go together; "I wisdom dwell with prudence;" hence wisdom and prudence, and the characters of wise and prudent, are often mentioned together. Prudence lies in wisely fixing upon a right end of all actions, and in wisely choosing the best means conducive to that end, and in using them at the best time and in the proper manner; "The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way" (Prov. 14:8), in divine and spiritual things, to understand the way of salvation, and the way of his duty, and how to glorify God. Concerning which may be inquired,

1. What spiritual wisdom is, as it is an internal grace, or inward disposition of the mind, respecting divine things; a man's duty, the salvation of his soul, and the glory of God. And,

1a. First, it is in general, grace in the heart; which is called "wisdom in the hidden part" (Ps. 51:6), in the hidden man of the heart, where it lies hid, and is only seen in an hearty and sincere profession of religion; and in outward actions becoming such a profession; hence those who are truly wise, are said to be "wise in heart;" and these are the prudent ones; "The wise in heart shall be called prudent" (Prov. 16:21), and such is a man, "when wisdom entereth into his heart;" for it is not originally there; it is not of himself, it comes elsewhere, from without, from above, from God, who gives it entrance, and puts it there. The heart of man is naturally foolish; as it is desperately wicked, it is extremely foolish; "Their foolish heart was darkened;" and yet this is said of some thought to be very wise; and man is such by nature, by birth; "Vain man would be wise," would be thought to be so, "though man be born like a wild ass's colt," as stupid as that creature is; "foolishness is

bound in the heart of a child," in the heart of every child of Adam, and it is only the power of divine grace that can drive it far from him: this is the case of every man; "There is none that understandeth" divine and spiritual things, or things pertaining to salvation; not even so as to know God, and to glorify him as God, and to be thankful for mercies received from him: and this is not only true of a few illiterate men, or of such who have not the advantage of a good education; but even of the wisest philosophers that ever were in this world; for of them these things are said, who, "professing themselves to be wise, became fools" (Rom. 1:21,22), yea, this is the case, and this the character of God's elect, while unregenerate, and until the grace of God takes place in their hearts; "We ourselves also were sometimes foolish," &c. There is enough of carnal wisdom, of that which is earthly, sensual, and devilish, of wicked subtlety, and too much, "men are wise to do evil; but to do good they have no knowledge;" but in that respect are foolish, sottish, and without understanding (Jer 4:22), they have a quick and fruitful invention as to evil things, and get the character of "inventors of evil things;" but cannot think a good thought: men have no true spiritual wisdom but what God gives them, and puts into them; it is he that makes them to know wisdom in the heart experimentally; it is a gift of his; "For the Lord giveth wisdom" (Prov. 2:6).

1b. Secondly, spiritual wisdom in particular, is a right knowledge of a man's self; "nosce teipsum," know thyself, was a maxim much talked of among the philosophers, but attained unto by none of them; witness the pride, the vanity, the self-conceit, they were swelled with; no man that is wise in his own eyes, and prudent in his own sight, knows himself; for one that was wiser than any of them says, there is "more hope of a fool" than of such; whoever in his own conceit is wise and good, holy and righteous in himself, does not know himself; or who fancies that "touching the righteousness of the law he is blameless," as said the apostle before he knew himself: a man that rightly knows himself, and is possessed of true wisdom, has knowledge of the sinfulness of his nature; of internal lust, as sinful; of indwelling sin, and the exceeding sinfulness of it; of the plague of his own heart, and therefore will not "trust" in it, or to the goodness of it, which he that does "is a fool;" he knows his own inability to perform that which is good, and that without Christ and his grace he can do nothing, and therefore will not presume upon nor attempt any thing in his own strength; he knows the imperfection of his own righteousness, and therefore will not depend upon it, nor plead it as his justifying righteousness before God; he knows his soul sickness, his spiritual maladies and diseases, incurable by himself and others, excepting the great physician Christ, to whom he only applies for healing; he knows his own poverty, and therefore seeks for true riches in Christ; gold to make him rich, white raiment to be clothed with, and Christ himself, the Pearl of great price; for which he is willing to part with all, with sinful and righteous self; and, in a word, he knows his own folly, and is ready to acknowledge what a foolish and ignorant creature he is; and until a man has learned this lesson he does not know himself (1 Cor. 3:18).

1c. Thirdly, true spiritual wisdom is no other than "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," which God commands to shine in the

hearts of men; while men are destitute of grace, or true spiritual wisdom, they are "without God," without the knowledge of him, his nature and perfections; they conceive of him as altogether like themselves, and fancy that he is pleased with what they are pleased with, and that he judges of things as they do; they are unacquainted with the purity and holiness of his nature, who cannot take pleasure in sin; they are ignorant of his righteousness, and therefore go about to establish their own; and are even stranger's to the grace and mercy of God, as channeled in Christ, and conveyed through him; and therefore depend upon the absolute mercy of God, without any consideration of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ; whereas the true light of the saving knowledge of God is in Christ, and as he has displayed his mercy and grace in him, and proclaimed his name in him (Ex. 34:6,7), all the divine perfections shine most illustriously in Christ, the brightness of his Father's glory, and the express image of his person; and in the great work of redemption and salvation by him; and true wisdom lies in the knowledge of this.

1d. Fourthly, true spiritual wisdom is no other than the fear of the Lord; both David and Solomon say, that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10), there is no wisdom in a man before the fear of the Lord is put into him, and then he begins to be wise, and not before: but Job earlier than them both, says, "The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding" (Job 28:28), this includes the whole worship of God, internal and external, flowing from a principle of grace; it takes in the whole duty of man, which it is his wisdom to practice, internally and externally.

1e. Fifthly, it is being wise unto salvation, or in things respecting that. The scriptures are said to be able to make a man wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15), and he is a wise man indeed who is thus made wise; and he is one who sees himself lost and undone, and inquires the way of salvation, and says, as the jailor did, "What shall I do to be saved?" and being made acquainted that the way of salvation is by Christ, that there is salvation in him and in no other, applies unto him, says, as the disciples did, "Lord save us, we perish!" and, as ready to perish, such come to Christ, and venture upon him, and commit themselves to him, and say, as the leper did, "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean," or save me! such build their souls, and the faith and hope of the salvation of them, on Christ, the good, the sure, and only foundation; and as he is a wise master builder who lays this foundation, such are wise unto salvation who build upon this Rock, where their house stands safe against every storm, and against which the gates of hell can never prevail; they give up themselves to him, to be saved alone by him; they prize and value him, and love him above all others; they rejoice in him as God their Saviour, and give him the glory of their salvation! I proceed to observe,

2. Wherein this wisdom practically shows itself.

2a. In doing good things in general; such who are wickedly wise, are wise to do evil; but such who are spiritually wise, are "wise unto that which is good," and "simple concerning evil" (Rom. 16:19), and these are capable of doing things both for their

own good and for the good of others. They may do good for themselves; "He that is wise may be profitable to himself" (Job 22:2; see Prov. 9:12), he may be profitable, though not to God, yet to himself; for his present good, and the present peace and tranquillity of his mind; for though not "for," yet "in" keeping the commands of God there is great reward; and great peace of mind such have who love and observe the law of God, without trust in and dependence on the observation of it for eternal life: and such wise persons may, by what they do, be useful to others; and therefore believers in God are exhorted to maintain good works; because they are "good and profitable to men;" both because of example and because of real benefit to them. Besides, what a wise man does, and in doing which he shows his wisdom, may be for the honour of religion, to stop the mouths of gainsayers, and put such to the blush who speak ill of religion, and of the professors of it falsely; they may and do adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour, and recommend it to others, and by their works shining before men, be the means of glorifying God, and even of winning souls to God by their good conversation; and then do they show their spiritual wisdom, when what they do, they do from right principles, and to a right end; when what they do is from love to God, in the faith and strength of Christ, and with a view to the glory of God. And being thus done they are to be shown in "meekness of wisdom," without trusting to them, or boasting of them; acknowledging, that when they have done all they can they are but unprofitable servants; and that it is by the grace of God they are what they are, and do what they do.

2b. This spiritual wisdom shows itself in particular in a profession of religion. The kingdom of heaven, or the outward gospel church state, is compared to ten virgins; "Five of them were wise, and five were foolish;" the foolish virgins, or professors of religion, took the lamp of an outward profession, as the rest did, and were careful to trim it, and keep it bright and shining; but were not concerned for the oil of grace, that it might be a burning lamp; but the wise virgins not only took the lamp of profession, but they were concerned to have the oil of grace in the vessels of their hearts, with their lamps, and so continued burning till the bridegroom's coming; and in this they showed their wisdom: as also in holding fast their profession without wavering. Such are wise professors, who, as they take up their profession on principles of grace, and upon a mature consideration of the cost and charges, difficulties and discouragements, trials and tribulations, they must expect to meet with, so continue steadfast in it; having put their hand to the plough, neither turn back nor look back, but go on believing to the saving of their souls; and yet do not depend upon their profession, do not make it an house to lean upon, nor a plea for eternal life; as some at the last day will plead, that they have professed the name of Christ, embraced his gospel, and subjected themselves to his ordinances; to whom he will say, "Depart from me; I know you not!" (Matthew 7:22,23; Luke 13:25,26).

2c. This spiritual wisdom shows itself in a becoming walk and conversation; in a conversation that is ordered aright, according to the rule of the word of God, and is becoming and ornamental to the gospel of Christ; it appears when a man walks "circumspectly," with his eyes about him, with his eyes in his head, as the wise man's are, looking well to his going, to his steps, as the prudent man does; his eyes

looking right on, and his eyelids right before him, pondering the path of his feet, and neither turning to the right hand nor to the left; when he walks in wisdom towards them that are without, as well as in peace and love towards them that are within; and is careful to give no offence to Jew nor Gentile, nor to the church of God. This wisdom is seen when professors walk not "as fools," in a vain, careless, and sinful manner, but "as wise:" and this they do when they walk as the word of God directs them, and when they walk uprightly, according to the gospel; when they walk as they have Christ for an example, and when they walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit; and one special and particular instance of their walking wisely is, "redeeming the time, because the days are evil;" and which is done when they lose no opportunity of doing good to others, nor of receiving good for themselves. Considering the days they live in are evil, and subject them to many temptations; and the days of old age, called evil, are hastening on, when they will be incapable of doing or receiving good (Eph. 5:15,16).

2d. This wisdom shows itself in observing the providence of God in the world, and the dispensations of it; in making useful remarks upon it, and in learning useful lessons from it; "Whoso is wise, and will observe these things," things in providence, before related, "even they shall understand the lovingkindness of the Lord" (Ps. 107:43), and it shows wisdom to understand both the ways of God in his providence, and the ways and methods of God in his grace, and the ways he has prescribed his people to walk in (Hosea 14:9).

2e. This spiritual wisdom shows itself in a man's concern about his last end and future state,[\[1\]](#) how it will be with him at last, and how it will go with him in another world (Deut. 32:29), how near it is—what that may issue in;—that they be ready for death come when it will, and for an eternal world! The thing to be inquired into is,

3. From whence this spiritual wisdom comes. It is a question put by Job; "Whence cometh wisdom? and where is the place of understanding?" the answer to it is, "God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof" (Job 28:20,23), for it is with him originally, and in full perfection, yea, it is in him infinite and unsearchable; it is in his gift to bestow, and is to be asked of him, "that giveth to all men liberally," freely, richly, and bountifully, as they need, "and upbraideth not" with former folly, ingratitude, and mis-improvement of what they have received (Jam. 1:5).

3a. God is the efficient cause of it; God, Father, Son, and Spirit; it is a good and perfect gift, which is from above, and comes from the Father of lights, from the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, the fountain of all wisdom, who makes men in common wiser than the fowls of the heaven, and his saints wiser in spiritual things than the rest of mankind. It comes from Christ, who is the only wise God and our Saviour; the wisdom of God, whose is counsel and sound wisdom, and who is made to us wisdom, on whom the spirit of wisdom rests, and in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; and it is by the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Christ.

3b. The means of this wisdom, and of promoting and increasing it, are, the word of God, the ministers of it, and good men conversed with; the scriptures read and explained, when under a divine influence, and accompanied with a divine power, are "able to make wise unto salvation;" they are written for our learning; and the ministers of the gospel, who show unto men the way of salvation, and "win" souls to Christ, are "wise," and make wise; and conversation with wise and good men, is a means of increasing wisdom; "He that walketh with wise men, shall be wise" (Prov. 11:30; 13:20).

4. The nature and properties of this wisdom; a full account of which is given (Jam. 3:17).

4a. It is "from above;" from God, Father, Son, and Spirit, as before observed; it is conversant about heavenly things; it is celestial wisdom, and stands opposed to earthly wisdom in a preceding verse, wisdom about earthly things, the wisdom of this world, and the princes of it, that come to nought.

4b. It is pure in itself, and in its effects; it is productive of purity of heart, life, and conversation; the effect of it is pure and undefiled religion, and the observance of it; those who have it, hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience, and are obedient to the divine precepts, out of a pure heart and faith unfeigned; it is opposed to that wisdom which is sensual, and employed in sensual gratifications, and to carnal wisdom, the "wisdom of the flesh," or carnal mind, said to be enmity against God (Rom. 8:7).

4c. It is "peaceable;" it influences the professors of it to be at peace among themselves, and with one another; and to live peaceably, as much as possible, with all men; to cultivate peace in families, among neighbours, and even with enemies.

4d. It is said to be "gentle;" it makes those who have it to be gentle towards all men, moderate, and humane, to bear and forbear, to bear the infirmities of the weak, to forbear and forgive one another injuries done; and for the sake of peace and love to recede from their just right, and not bear hard on others for their failings, but cover them with the mantle of love.

4e. It is "easy to be entreated," or persuaded, to put up with affronts, to condescend to men of low estate, and not mind high things; for "with the lowly is wisdom;" to yield easily to the superior judgment and stronger reasonings of others; to be readily inclined and induced to hope and believe the best of all men; and to entertain a good opinion of good men and their conduct.

4f. It is "full of mercy and good fruits;" it fills men with compassion on those in distress, and puts them upon acts of beneficence to the poor, according to their ability; to feed and clothe them, to visit the widow and fatherless in their affliction, and comfort them; and to do other duties and good works, as fruits of righteousness, of the grace of God, and of the Spirit.

4g. It is "without partiality;" without partiality to themselves, esteeming each other better than themselves; and to others, showing no respect of persons, making no difference in Christian fellowship between rich and poor, and giving to the poor and needy without distinction, favour, or affection.

4h. It is "without hypocrisy," to God and man; not making a show of what they have not, and intend not to do; as it is a grace, it has a close connection with faith unfeigned, with hope which is without hypocrisy, and with love which is without dissimulation. All which shows how useful and desirable such wisdom is, and how necessary throughout the conduct of a Christian life to do his duty, to avoid the snares and temptations he is liable to, to seek his own good, and the good of others; and, above all the glory of God.