

Wisdom & Character

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[0 : 00] Turn with me to Proverbs chapter 6. My son, if you have put up security for your neighbour, have given your pledge for a stranger, if you have snared in the words of your mouth, caught in the words of your mouth, then do this, my son, and save yourself, for you have come into the hand of your neighbour.

Go, hasten, and plead urgently with your neighbour. Give your eyes no sleep and your eyelids no slumber.

Save yourself like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the hand of the fowler. Go to the ant, O sluggard.

Consider her ways and be wise, without having any chief, officer, or ruler. She prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.

How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber and want like an armed man.

[1 : 20] A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked speech, winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, points with his fingers, with perverted heart desires evil, continually sowing discord.

Therefore, calamity will come upon him suddenly. In a moment he'll be broken beyond healing.

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him.

Forty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood. A heart that devises wicked plans. Feet that make haste to run to evil.

A false witness who breathes out lies. And one who sows discord among brothers. We're going to jump back into Proverbs this morning.

For those who are visiting, we tend to have a sort of series that we do during the school holiday periods. At the moment we've been working through Proverbs. Proverbs is something that resonates with us really easily, I think, because it's all about wisdom.

[2 : 38] It's about seeking wisdom on the one hand, and by contrast, then avoiding foolishness. That's essentially the breakdown of the book of Proverbs. And as I say, that resonates with us because I think every single one of us here this morning, in some sense, is a philosopher.

The word philosophy simply is two words in Greek. Philo, which means love, and Sophia, which means wisdom. So, I think we're all lovers of wisdom in our own form.

That is, every one of us here is committed to some form of living which you would consider to be the good life. Some form of what it is to be a good human being in relation to other human beings and in relation to our world and our society.

So, in that sense, we're all philosophers. Now, we love wisdom, but at the same time, in our hearts, we know that people can be incredibly stupid.

We know that we ourselves can be incredibly stupid. I know I can be incredibly stupid. So, again, that resonates, that divide between desiring to be wise and yet sometimes find ourselves and yet sometimes find ourselves to be dopey beyond belief.

[4 : 01] And we can see that all around us because all around us in our society, there's codes of conduct, professional, personal standards of behavior.

and we find them now in just about every area of our society. So, you have them in industry, you have them in business, you have them in sport, you have them in agriculture even, you have them in advertising, social media, government, families, and so on and so forth.

Professional standards, codes of conduct. But then the question arises, who sets these standards in these codes of conduct?

And once we dig down into them a little bit, we find that often those codes of conduct simply reflect the mood of society at that particular time. The mood of the interest group or the culture or the interest group writing the standards.

And mostly, and I was looking through a few of them this week, mostly, those codes of conduct limit themselves at trying to legislate behavior. So, it's, you shouldn't do this in this environment.

[5 : 14] They just don't even go down the track of trying to address character. They don't talk about how you should be as a person. They're just talking about what you should or shouldn't do as a person.

And that allows people wiggle room to get around these codes of conduct because I think we'd know there's a lot of high publicity situations where it's clear that people have only given lip service to the code of conduct that exists in their particular area of society.

And I think the reason why that happens is that because people individually are committed to a form of wisdom driven by autonomy, driven by self-interest.

So, they might be part of a group or a culture or an industry or an organization that has an overall code of conduct, but individuals might be committed to autonomy.

And that expresses itself and saying, well, look, I know how to do life. I don't have somebody else telling me. I won't have somebody else telling me how to do it, how to behave.

[6 : 24] I know better than everyone else. And I will express myself as I see fit. And we see the evidence of that all around us, don't we?

We only have to listen to the news. So, on the one hand, this whole topic of wisdom and becoming wise resonates with us.

But we see a lot of problems in there as well. What is it to be wise? What is it to be foolish? Wisdom in the Bible is very clear.

Wisdom in the Bible is a reflection of God's character. It's a reflection it's God's standard because it's a reflection of God's character.

Wisdom in the Bible is primarily about being something. And the connection in the Bible then is if we be something, if we are something in essence, then that will overflow into what we do in myriad situations in life.

[7 : 32] The back story of Proverbs is in 1 Kings chapter 3 and chapter 4 where King Solomon prayed that he might reflect God's character.

Why? Because he was God's representative ruler over God's people and he said, I want to rule over these people as if you yourself were here ruling, Lord. How do I do that?

I need to have a character like you, Lord. So he prays for that. And what does the Lord give him? 1 Kings 3 and 4 The Lord gives him the gift of wisdom.

He longed for discernment, a truly understanding heart, so he might lead God's people into the good life that God intended for them to have.

and God gives him the gift of wisdom to be able to do that. So therefore, the good life according to Proverbs, according to the Bible, the good life, the wise life is the life that's lived under God's rules, the life that reflects God's character.

[8 : 48] The life that's lived in the light of God's reality and it's expressed in love, fairness, compassion, because that's God's character.

Love, compassion, and fairness to others. Now, in stark contrast to that, the Bible also clearly sets out what it is to be a fool. And the foolish life is, by contrast, that life that's lived in determined rebellion against God, lived in autonomy, from God.

And therefore, the Bible would say that the foolish life is a contrived reality. It's something that we imagine in our minds or we try and formulate in our minds and then try and make work in practice. It's a contrived reality. It's not God's reality. And it reflects foolishness and reflects what the Bible would call a sin distorted, a sort of grotesque sense of self which is expressed in the character of self-interest, injustice, and carelessness.

And there you've got the contrast. God's character, God's reality, contrived reality, our own basic essential sinful character coming to the surface.

[10 : 17] And so then Proverbs takes one more step and says, pushes us to the fact that true wisdom is the desperate need of our world. Now there's no doubt, I think, that every single person in this room would agree that we need wisdom in our leaders if we're going to survive as a country, if we're going to thrive as a nation.

Nobody would argue with that. The question then, the big step to take is, what do you think true wisdom is? The Bible says true wisdom is God's wisdom, God's reality, God's character. That's what is the desperate need of our world, the desperate need of our nation. Because God's wisdom, therefore, is the healer of our old, distorted, self-interested world. God's wisdom is the restorer of a true sense of self. And it's expressed in the life lived under God. So Proverbs, my friends, is ultimately about character. Character and the challenge for God's people to reflect God's character in all of life. So the formula is really quite simple here this morning. We're going to look at more details from chapter 6. [11:39] But if you want to be a wise person, then you ought to be seeking with all your energy to reflect God's character in whatever situation you find yourself in. In chapter 6, verses 1 to 19, the passage we report this morning, is just another sort of contrast.

The sections before that is chapter 5 and then from the second half of chapter 6 onwards, the section before and after this, but they use the picture of adultery. So this is poetic language, picture language. Passages before and after very, very heavily focused on the idea of adultery, which Proverbs says is the ultimate expression of foolishness. Now in the same way as Jesus uses the parables in the New Testament, that is, he uses a picture that people can easily and commonly understand to teach a point that's a much bigger picture, a much bigger spiritual reality point. Then I think that's what's been used here in Proverbs when they use the idea of adultery. Adultery is something we all know about. There's a physical reality to it in our society and in our own lives, at least mentally.

[12:54] But it's a picture of a prior unfaithfulness to God's word. It's a picture of a prior turning away from a desire to have God's character to another lover, if you want to use that word.

Another delight of life. The adulterer lives in a distorted reality. The adulterer chases false intimacy, convinced that they're enjoying the good life when in fact they're actually bringing themselves to ruin.

And how does Proverbs 6, 1 to 19 fit in that bigger picture? Well, I think it's just really just saying that foolishness comes in many different forms. And we shouldn't limit it to that sort of picture of sexual unfaithfulness, although even that has got a bigger connotation.

Because here in these 19 verses, we get three characteristics, three attitudes of heart, three pictures of foolishness, as it were, which overflow into a lifestyle totally at odds with God's character.

A lifestyle which ultimately will be destructive to the individual and to the community in which these individuals operate. So let's jump into the three things.

[14:20] If you've got your bulletin on your device there, you'll see my three headings. The first characteristic is, verses 1 to 5, reckless self-seeking. So, Simon read it very well, brought it to life really well.

The scenario is that of the son. And he's become surety or guarantor, that's the modern term some of you might recognize. He's put up a pledge to guarantee somebody else's debt.

And it would seem like he's done that without first considering the huge risk involved in taking ownership of that debt, in making that commitment, and whether they could afford to pay what they had promised should the debtor, the person who has the loan, default on his loan.

I don't think there's anything illegal or unbiblical in what the guy has done. The issue here is that he did it without thinking. He did it without considering the cost and the risk and whether he could actually deliver on the promise he was making.

I promised to take responsibility for this debt should this person default, but it would appear he hasn't considered exactly what that might involve. And he's got himself into a whole heap of trouble.

[15:49] The promise, I suspect, may well have been well-intentioned. Perhaps this son genuinely wanted to help somebody that was in a tough spot.

Oh yeah, I can help him out. Perhaps they wanted to appear wealthy. Perhaps they wanted to make themselves feel important to others by making others indebted to their generosity.

Oh yes, I've got plenty of money, I can afford to do this. And the transaction then makes, perhaps was designed to make themselves feel important and make others indebted to them. Perhaps one suggestion is that the guy who's taken out the loan wasn't an Israelite.

So you weren't allowed to charge interest if you had a loan with an Israelite. But if it was not an Israelite, you were allowed to charge interest. And perhaps this guy saw an opportunity to make a fastback.

whatever the reason, we're told here that such a reckless promise is like walking into a trap.

[16:58] Why? Because it's taking responsibility for another which ultimately you can't control. Taking responsibility for something that you can't control.

Another person's debt and their commitment to paying it. And so sort of the trap springs and in spite of the intention of the son going guarantor, he is in fact the one who becomes indebted.

He's the one who puts himself at the mercy of the person who had taken out the loan originally. And verse 5, his indebtedness is pictured as a ferocious wild animal hunting him down relentlessly to destruction.

That's the picture language. This guy's gotten himself into a real mess. Why? Because he didn't stop and think and count the cost. And the potential costs you only have to scratch below the surface are huge and they're all destructive.

there's the danger of actually going bankrupt if the guarantor was acted upon, if the other person defaulted on the loan. There's the stupidity of helping someone secure a loan that ultimately they couldn't afford to pay.

[18:25] There's the danger to existing relationship with the person as a result of indebtedness or default. I've seen so many relationships over the years crash because of financial collapse.

Relationships just can't bear that sort of stuff. A proper assessment of the true cost of his reckless promises shows that urgent desperate action is required.

Verses 2 and 3 there. And essentially what the father said to him is listen boy swallow your pride and as quickly as you can make every effort you can to get yourself out of this dangerous situation. Now bringing it a little bit more personally to us I suspect that most of us I certainly understand this idea of reckless impulse promise.

We do it so easily don't we? We promise all sorts of things that when push comes to shove we actually can't deliver on.

[19:40] And to promise them without thinking through carefully the Bible tells us is characteristic of foolishness. Maybe well intentioned but it's a picture of foolishness.

And moving on to verses 6 to 11 we've got a second characteristic which I'm calling thoughtless self-excusing character.

Now a sluggard is pretty much the opposite of the previous characteristic self-seeking, and we only really get a sense of what the sluggard is by contrast with the industrious ant the illustration that's used in these verses.

So let's have a look at this industrious ant possibly a harvester ant. The ant we're told is motivated from within by a strong sense of what is right and what is good both for itself and the community in which it lives.

We're told that it's always thinking and preparing ahead for the future. It's highly relational in that it's doing what needs to be done for the good of the whole community even at the cost of expending itself.

[21:06] That's the picture that we're given here. And the sluggard of course is the opposite of all of that. So the characteristics on show here that's described as foolishness is the characteristic expressed in someone who is careless and self excusing.

Sometimes they might present as lazy but it's not actually laziness it's an attitude of not really caring too much about anyone or anything. Teenagers might use this, understand this idea, it's the sort of whatever type of person.

Don't get excited about anything particularly. Don't get overly committed about anything particularly. Not a self-starter. Yes, if you harass them they might do some things but even then they'll be minimalist.

Minimum effort, minimum time, minimum commitment, minimum thought. they need someone to get them moving. They need someone to give them focus.

They might even suggest that others around them are perfectionists and say well the problem really is that you guys are all overly committed. You're trying too hard but in reality oftentimes they're just covering for their own lack of motivation, their own carelessness.

[22 : 31] business. They're not servant-minded. They're not community-minded. They won't easily pitch in and help others. They won't put the shoulder to the wheel for the good of everyone. They're not dependable at the end of the day.

They're individualists and we're told here that the verse 11 that poverty will come upon them. Now I don't think that necessarily means they'll actually run out of money physically.

I think what the word there means is they'll be impoverished as people and there's quite a difference. They'll be diminished. This sort of approach to life actually has a cost, a big cost individually and personally and that cost is that you become diminished as a person.

You become impoverished. You live for yourself and you'll die alone. It's a drain on personhood and you can see therefore why it becomes an issue of foolishness.

that is something that's contrary to the character of God. It's not how we were made as image bearers. They may feel good about themselves because they live with minimum effort and social cost but they fail to understand the incredible danger they're in and how even as they're in that danger moment by moment, day by day, they're actually being diminished as people even though they might think they're preserving themselves nicely as a person.

[24 : 06] And verse 11, their characteristic again ends up very much like the previous one. Verse 5 is a very, very strong picture of things being out of control.

The same with verse 11. this characteristic or attitude of heart will overpower them just like a villain comes and overpowers you. And ultimately it will destroy them.

It's impossible to be wise and at the same time be a whatever type of person. And the third characteristic, verses 12 through to 19, is what I'm calling ruthless self-interest.

This is the sort of person who again presents differently. This person is so utterly pragmatic that quite literally anything goes where that person's perceived some personal gain to lie.

The word worthless in verse 12 is actually the word belial, which in the New Testament has come to mean the word devil. But Wolke uses the term insurrectionist because it's the person who's so constantly and aggressively against God's rules and against God's workings that he's like an insurrectionist.

[25 : 35] He's like a terrorist. and this is the person, as you see through these verses, there's lots of picture language in here again, but let me just try and surface run over it.

This is the person who just loves to play people off against each other because in doing that he can see personal advantage. He's the sort of person who will happily consume and destroy people and relationships for his own advantage and where he sees advantage.

That's why I say it's ruthless. Now, it's not that this person I think is particularly evil per se.

There's nothing in the text that would suggest that. In other words, he's not out there in a category by himself as evil. It's not that. It's not even perhaps that they set out to cause division, but that their ruthless self interest inevitably results in them using and abusing people for their own advantage. In other words, they just can't help themselves. Two separate almost identical descriptions add weight to this whole description 12 to 15 and then 16 to 19.

[27 : 03] It's almost a repeat, but in inverse order. Two separate almost identical descriptions emphasize the awfulness of this character by suggesting that every key part of the body is utilized for this scheming, conniving, manipulating passage to their own end.

Look at verse 12 through to 15. It's as if the poet here is saying, look, from top to bottom, from their eyes, from their mouth, their hands, their fingers, right down to their feet and including their heart, every single faculty of the body is brought together in this beautiful harmony of self-interest and self-advantage.

And in combination, it's pretty brutal and ruthless. You get the idea there, I'm not quite sure what to do with the idea of pointing the finger and winking the eye, but it's just that notion of a wheeler-dealer, a player.

A couple of nods and winks and punches there. Yep, so I'm resonating with some anyway, regardless of the rest of your sleep. So we know the idea of a player, don't we? A schemer, a manipulator.

And they're sort of perfectly and seamlessly in sync with themselves to manipulate for their own ends, regardless of the cost to others. And their heart attitude is included in here.

[28 : 33] It overflows into the habit of making trouble, into the habit of causing division. and lying as easily as breathing. Verse 18.

No, verse 19. It becomes so habitual because lies are necessary to manipulate that you just lie like you breathe.

It's an essential of life. But ultimately, as with the other two characteristics, there's a huge cost to pay.

And I think the play on the words is this, that just as they use or misuse their body, so the Lord's judgment will destroy their body. God will break their body.

And here we catch, again, like the sluggard, we catch a glimpse of what God loves by listening carefully to what God hates.

[29 : 44] God hates troublemakers. that loves grace makers or peacemakers. Again, why?

Because those, the grace maker and the peacemaker, reflect God's character. Being other person centered at heart, refusing to manipulate, use, and abuse.

speaking healing and loving words of truth. Doing compassion and mercy and rightness. All the things that you would not recognize, and this person here would not recognize.

Wisdom and foolishness. So, my friends, as I wrap up, ultimately foolishness is clearly exposed by God's character.

Because God's character is wisdom. And wisdom inevitably will expose foolishness. And most clearly, we see that in God's wisdom in Jesus.

[30 : 50] When we tie these three characteristics back, we can see a common link to Jesus. Jesus, at the end of the day, is our true surety or guarantor.

In Hebrews 7, verse 22, the word's actually used. Jesus is the guarantor of a new and better covenant. And in the picture of the gospel and God's wisdom seen in Jesus, God does commit to paying a huge debt that we have run up.

And that we couldn't possibly pay for ourselves. And God takes that debt on knowing that we have no alternative but to default on it. And God promises in Jesus to take that debt upon himself.

Was it a reckless promise? No. Far from it. Never reckless. It was outrageous. Absolutely outrageous. But never reckless. Why? Because Jesus had the means to pay.

And he considered the cost and was willing to pay the cost. The cost of death on the cross. And he did it to reverse our spiritual and moral bankruptcy.

[32 : 08] He did it because our foolish rebellion and rejection of his character left us unable and unwilling to pay what is owed to the Lord for our rebellion.

And so the foolishness of us people, sinful people reveals the wisdom of God. And then tying in with the second characteristic that Jesus is our relentless pursuer.

this is one of the aspects of the gospel I've really come to appreciate over the last five or six years.

That Jesus acts in our best interest like the industrious and preparing ahead and doing what needed to be done to rescue and renew us and make us wise.

And not only that, not only does he expend himself completely for the good of me and other believers, but he pursues me.

He pursues me into life and won't let me sluggishly drift into destruction. And at the times of life when things seem to overwhelm me, where I'm at my worst in a sense, I've learned over the last six years that the Lord pursues me into those areas.

[33 : 28] taking me out the other side with new confidence and dependence upon him.

Nothing careless about the way the Lord treats us. Jesus is the wise and faithful son, totally focused on delivering his father's promise of salvation and the good life.

Jesus pursues us into life. And finally, Jesus is our selfless, healing, unifying word. Instead of stirring up evil and trouble, Jesus confronts it and deals with it.

And he sows unity and good. Jesus' words are always true words, healing words spoken in love and compassion. Jesus always expresses God's character, planning for our good, identifying our greatest need and acting to deal with our rebellion and bring us into righteousness and life.

Interestingly here, in line with verse 17, God's hand does shed innocent blood. But not ours. He willingly or makes haste to kill his son as part of his heart-driven plan to redeem his people.

[34 : 58] And in doing so, he sows new unity. Picture of wisdom against foolishness.

And my final appeal, friends, this morning is, why would we continue to chase after a form of wisdom which is our own, of our own making? A contrived reality, driven by our own autonomy, when we know from our own experience that that will fail us.

We can pretend and act wise, but foolishness will just push up through. Why would you continue to be wise in your own eyes?

Even when that so-called wisdom so often and so easily leads us into trouble or self-seeking or carelessness or just heartbreak and despair.

Why would we not want to move towards true wisdom? Why would we not move towards Jesus who is the wisdom and righteousness of God?

[36 : 10] Because he says, come to me, fools, and I will make you wise. I will give you wisdom, which is a combination, a rich combination of renewal, unity, new hearts, new desires, new attitudes, and the good life that we crave so deeply.

My final word is, remember this, the good life that every single person here craves so deeply. But if you've been wise in your own eyes, then that's a wisdom and a good life that's eluded you thus far because you've been acting in your own strength.

Blessing, wisdom, and maturity, frustration, despair. Let me pray. Lord, help us to see your word in its truth, but more than that, Lord, give us hearts to act on it.

We can understand, but then hold back from acting. Lord, help us to be so aware of our own failings in terms of what we would consider to be our own wisdom, or even, Lord, that we would consider to be the common wisdom of our society.

Help us to see that as being a wretched failure and help us to move to consider the true wisdom that would be ours in the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name I pray.

[37 : 42] Amen. Thank you very much for listening.