

The Problem with Wisdom

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[0 : 0 0] I don't know, I think many of you who have lived in Melbourne for a while in Australia might know this. Are you familiar with this discount store called NQR? Yes? Not many around nowadays.

Anyone know what NQR stands for? That's right, not quite right, yes. And that's because they sell products that are not quite right. They're still saleable, nothing dangerous, but of course, you know, it might be some misprinting in the packaging or something, or the goods are close to expiring.

Not a total disaster, but it's not quite right either. And I wonder whether, I wonder when in life you first realise that things were NQR.

As a young person, discovering perhaps that things that you were taught about right or wrong didn't always work out, that following conventional wisdom was no guarantee of success.

For me, it happened in primary school. Imagine my disappointment when I realised that the teacher didn't always choose the best person.

[1 : 0 9] That sometimes if someone cheated blatantly, not me of course, they could still get away with it. That life just wasn't fair. Of course, the older I got, the more I saw this happening.

And I'm sure you've seen that as well. You just need to turn on the TV and you see the success of some people and you go, oh my, how can they get away with that? Those dodgy politicians.

They get a second chance. Or conversely, innocent people that suffer when they don't deserve it. Which creates a bit of a dilemma, doesn't it, into how we live?

Because should we pursue wisdom or not? Do we live wisely when it doesn't always pay? Well, this is what the teacher turns to in our passage today.

And he describes this conundrum in verse 15. He says on the slide, I think, In this meaningless life of mine, I have seen both of these, the righteous perishing in their wickedness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness.

[2 : 1 6] Doing what's right and wise doesn't always work. And as I've said already, you no doubt have experienced it. And it's frustrating, isn't it? Why bother then is what we wonder.

And we're tempted then to go to verse 16 in the attitude of the teacher. He says, Do not be over-righteous, neither be over-wise. Why destroy yourself?

In other words, don't kill yourself trying so hard to be perfect. There's no guarantee of success. But at the same time, he says, verse 17, Do not be over-wicked and do not be a fool.

Why die before your time? Because the converse, the other extreme, doesn't work either, does it? We've seen the dangers of folly. Take drugs and think you can not be impacted by it?

No way. Don't bother studying, as some young people do. Think and still pass your exams? Think again. Be lazy in your work and still keep your job.

- [3 : 19] We know that stupidity and folly will catch us out eventually, wouldn't it? Now, when we read this, verse 16 and 7, it's hard to work out if the teacher really believes in this or not. Or, if so, whether he or the Bible is teaching us to do this. We think, surely God is not telling us to go easy on sin. Surely.
- Just be a little wicked? Is that what he's saying? Well, no. But I think whichever way you read it, the teacher is grappling, isn't he, with this dilemma.
- This is yet another meaningless aspect of life. The vanity of it. The vapor-like of it. So, perverse though it seems, this sort of conundrum really pushes us to this logical conclusion, doesn't it?
- If pursuing wisdom doesn't always work, then why try so hard? And I think that even us as Christians, we default to this to some degree, don't we?
- [4 : 24] It's not like we're callous. We sin all the time. But we do let ourselves off, don't we? We do excuse ourselves when perhaps that failing doesn't seem so bad, even though others might think otherwise.
- The most recent example for me is this whole QR code thing. I know we've been told this is mandatory to check in so that contact tracers can do their job in an outbreak, and that's right, isn't it?
- But I think, do I really need to do this all the time at every location? I mean, sometimes I'm only in there for a few minutes, like at a bakery.
- I mean, there I'm out. And, you know, my hands are full half the time anyway, you know, and I've got a broken wrist. Do I really?
- You know, it's hard for me to pull out that phone, you know. We have a habit of rationalizing, don't we? Perhaps more seriously, we think, for example, that, you know, we shouldn't really be passing on that gossip, or we shouldn't be muttering under our breath against someone.
- [5 : 27] And yet, when we stuff up, and we realize it, do we own up, or do we just say, let's just let it slide. I don't want to make an even bigger fuss of it, you know, by owning up.
- So I'm saying it's not okay to be a little wicked, but the reality is we can't sustain perfect righteousness all the time, can we? I find it exhausting.
- And not to mention demoralizing, because it doesn't always pay. You do the right thing, and you get more heat put on you, you know. You own up for doing something wrong, and then instead of people saying, oh, yeah, that's okay, you get people hounding you even more.
- Instead, the teacher resigns himself, doesn't he, to saying in verse 18, that it boils down to, you know, just fearing God. It's the attitude and the motivation that counts.
- It is good to grasp the one, that is, not be over-righteous, not let go of the other, that is, not be overly wicked. Don't let go of that. But whoever fears God will avoid all extremes.
- [6 : 33] As long as our actions are a response to fearing God, then we avoid being overly righteous or overly wicked. It's not entirely satisfying, but given the way the world is, that's the best we can hope for.
- And yet, the teacher realizes that notwithstanding this limitation that he's found, this problem that he's found with wisdom, he sees great value in it. It's certainly better than folly.
- And in fact, now in verse 19, he says it's way better than power. Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city. If you had to choose, choose wisdom over power.

Because the problem with wisdom is not that it's flawed, but as he owes on now to say, it's because of sin. So verse 20, indeed, or actually some translation says, It's a bit like these MasterChef contestants that we're now seeing on TV.

They're all amazing cooks, aren't they? They understand flavors. They have the right cooking techniques, using liquid nitrogen and things like that. They might even practice it many times at home.

[8 : 03] But when the crunch comes, sometimes they serve up a disaster, don't they? And the judges would say, It's the execution. Execution let you down this time.

And so it's a bit like wisdom. We may know what the right thing to do, but because of our sinfulness, execution lets us down. We revert to selfish behavior, even when we know it's not right.

We're biased without knowing it, even when we try to be fair. And so in verse 20 and 21, the teacher gives us an example of how universal sin is.

And then he uses it to launch into the third point, which I have. And so because everyone is sinful to some degree, he says, Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you.

For you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others. This is similar to what James say in the New Testament, that the tongue is a world of evil. So that even if you can control everything, it's very hard to control your tongue.

[9 : 07] And so here the teacher says that everyone sins with their tongue, whether it's the lowly servant or you, the master. And those curses which come out of your mouth are not accidental slips of the tongue.

They're intentional, and they actually show that you are sinful in your heart. And so that proves his next point, which is that even though there is such a thing as perfect wisdom, which reflects the mind of God, through the lips of sinful people, through their imperfect insights and observations, through their reflection on experiences which is tainted by sin.

And so even though wisdom is valuable, he now says that perfect wisdom is elusive. Try as you can to seek out every pearl of wisdom in this world, you can't quite get at it.

Not everything that everyone says is worth taking heed of. In fact, some of them may turn out to be for your harm. And so he goes on to say in verse 23, that even though this desire to seek out wisdom is great, and we despair in not finding it, that's how he concludes.

All this I tested by wisdom, and I said I'm determined to be wise, but this was beyond me. Whatever exists is far off and most profound. Who can discover it?

[10 : 37] So I turned my mind to understand, to investigate, to search out wisdom, and the scheme of things, to understand the stupidity of weakness and the manners of folly. I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap, and whose hands are chains.

The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare. Now I think the woman here is not a literal person, but she's a metaphor for folly, like in Proverbs.

Something to be avoided at all costs. Worse than death, a deadly trap with chains. And initially the teacher thinks that the way to avoid her is through his determination to be perfectly wise.

But as he searches out wisdom, as he tries to distill wisdom down to some system or grand scheme or unified theory of wisdom, which he can then use to apply to every situation, he realizes that it's beyond him.

In fact, it's beyond anyone, for he asks, who can discover it? And so he resigns himself to this conclusion in verse 27 and says, Look, this is what I've discovered.

[11 : 45] Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things. While I was still searching but not finding, I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all.

This only have I found. God created mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes. Now there was an audible gasp at the reading just then.

So let me just pause to say something about this. I don't think the main point of it here is to say that there is one upright man in a thousand, but no upright women.

Okay? This is not a statistical survey here that the teacher has done. But rather the point is, whether there's one in a thousand or none, the reality is difficult to find anyone upright at all.

That's the point. It's the same point as verse 20, which is there is no one righteous, no one at all. Nevertheless, he may have expressed it like that because, and here it's just a conjecture, but perhaps he was looking through scriptures, let's say, and there are certainly more accounts of men than women in there, and he may have come across the likes of Moses and Samuel, and therefore had to concede that there are perhaps, not sinless, but certainly upright men, even though rare.

[13 : 05] But then he goes through and he found like, you know, there were not any women. But that doesn't mean that he implies that they don't exist. It's like saying, for example, that no Asian man has run fast enough to win the 100 meters at the Olympics, right?

Does that mean Asian men can't run fast? Now, as an Asian man, I probably think that's true. But that's not necessarily the case, is it? It's not necessarily the case that no Asian man will win it in the future.

It's just that it hasn't been done yet. And so I'm pretty sure that if, you know, the teacher came among us at HTD, he would probably not write this verse and would say that there are upright women, particularly among us.

But the overall point is really just the point that he's making in verse 20, that no one is righteous, not one. Instead, his conclusion is this, verse 27, God made humans upright.

That's just a quote from Genesis chapter 1. God made men and women perfect, sinless. God isn't the author of sin. His will is for them to live according to his wisdom, to fear him, verse 18, to please him, verse 26.

[14 : 21] But instead, what humans have done is gone in search of many schemes. And I think here, at the very end, there's a play on the words here. The word scheming, or scheme of things, has a double meaning.

I think it's about recognizing that, yes, humans scheme to do evil, but it's also a recognition that humans scheme in the sense of trying to search out grand schemes for wisdom.

that is, they try to work out a scheme of things or a method to be able to conquer and tame sin and sinfulness in this world.

Because, just as the teacher tried, if they can conquer sin, then they manage to conquer the thing that causes wisdom problem. And that would then guarantee that wisdom will work.

And so we see it, don't we, in civilizations, that we turn to laws, we turn to education to try and eradicate sin. And many in the West today think they can even do it without the help of God.

[15 : 30] But time and time again, we see it doesn't work. We haven't managed, have we, to eradicate evil in this world. Once sin has entered the world as it did through Adam, it has a way of replicating and mutating almost to the point that it perverts the good things that we try and do to stop it.

That's why we have the whole fact of self-righteousness and pride. We think they're good things, right? Righteousness. But actually, no, Jesus says that's self-righteousness, that's pride.

You're trying to be good, but that's actually pride, isn't it? And Jesus says of the Pharisees, that's the most insidious sin of all. What we think is good turns out to be the worst thing in our lives.

So therefore, there is no grand scheme that can tame sin, not a humanly devised one anyway. And I think as we're going through the whole pandemic, there's lots of parallels I see between the sin and the coronavirus.

Once this virus has entered into the world, it's so impossible to tame it, isn't it? To eradicate it. So we say, oh no, the vaccine will get us out of this. But we've now discovered no vaccine is 100% effective, is it?

[16 : 46] Particularly when we take account of the variants. So we're beginning to think even with the vaccine, people will still suffer and will have to learn to live with it. And yet, we see this whole debate, isn't it, that rages on about how we can conquer this virus.

What's the right thing to do? But we've seen, you know, whether it's New South Wales gold standard or Victoria, I don't know what the bronze standard or whatever, it doesn't work, does it?

Not fully. Lock down and destroy people's mental health and livelihood or open up and, you know, the most vulnerable get infected and suffer. There's no win, isn't it?

Someone down at St. John says, it's all or nothing. It's a zero, 100% thing. You can't live with a happy medium, is it? And so in the same way, trying to tame sin is impossible.

And yet, we still keep trying, don't we? Why? Because God has made us upright. There is a moral compass within all of us that just grates when we see evil go unpunished.

[17 : 52] We expect others, including the government, to get it right. Even though, ironically, we excuse it when it's our own failures. So I don't know about how you feel about Ecclesiastes as you've been going through it, but it's frustrating, isn't it?

In fact, I was trying to structure and write the sermon for this passage, and I kept asking, where's the neat three-point sermon that I want? Why is this logic of the passage so meandering, so circular?

Ah! So hard to package the wisdom of Ecclesiastes. But that's the whole point, isn't it? Ecclesiastes describes life, as Andrew calls it on the slide, outside the garden.

It's messy, it's frustrating, it's despairing. That's the way it is. And yet, thankfully, that's not where God leaves it.

And I'm sure you've heard it over the last few weeks, but God solved the problem with wisdom by sending Jesus. If I could push the analogy further, when God sent his son, he sent a piece of Eden back into our lives.

[19 : 09] We're not taken out of this world back to Eden, not yet anyway, but God has given us a glimpse of Eden or the new creation in the person of his son.

So in him, we see the perfect embodiment of wisdom. Right? There's no contradiction, no tainting of wisdom by sin in everything that Jesus said and did.

He was perfect wisdom personified. But more than that, God didn't just send Jesus to be an example to us. No, he actually sent Jesus to tame and conquer sin on our behalf.

He had to do it. It's not like he showed us and then we have to overcome sin. No, he had to do it for us by dying on the cross for us. And so God uses the very dilemma that sin causes to achieve this.

So he's saying in one sense to the teacher, you know, you've got a problem with the righteous dying in their righteousness? Well, God says, let me send the righteous one in my son to die in his righteousness so that all the wicked, that's us, you and me, can live long despite our sin and wickedness.

[20 : 30] You see how that works? By having them forgiven on account of Jesus' death. And then we say, is this fair and is this just? And God can say, yes, it's fair and it's just because whatever price had to be paid for justice to be served, Jesus paid it for us.

So it's fair, it's just, there is no injustice even though dying on the cross for Jesus was the most unjust thing that happened in this world. And so we've actually got the answer, don't we, that eluded the teacher.

we found a unified theory for wisdom. We found this scheme that works to solve the problem of sin and the problem that it has with wisdom.

And this scheme is not a scheme but a person and his name is Jesus. Actually, it's more like Jesus found us than we found him, of course.

But regardless, the answer is found in Jesus, isn't it? life can make sense outside the garden now provided we see it through the prism of the person and work of Jesus.

[21 : 40] And so even though life is frustrating for me at times, when I look at Jesus, I go, that's good enough for me. It calms my restless mind.

It brings peace to my soul. And I wonder whether that does the same for you as well. That when you look on Jesus, imperfect as the world is, struggling as you are with life, you can say, that's good enough for me for now.

You see, the Apostle Paul did a lot of the searching of this himself, right? And he tried to pursue wisdom like the teacher as well. Initially, he did it as a teacher, didn't he? As a Pharisee, sorry.

But he eventually came to the same conclusion as the teacher. And that's why he quotes in Romans chapter 3, that other reading that we had, from this exact verse in verse 20. He says, no one is righteous, not one, including him, the self-righteous Pharisee.

But then he goes on to say in verse 21 of Romans, just a few verses later, that's why the good news of Jesus is so wonderful. For he says, but now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the law and the prophets testify, this righteousness, this wisdom, is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

[23 : 03] So righteousness now is attainable through faith in Jesus. And the pursuit of wisdom for us is not futile, it's not meaningless, even though it's not perfect, because of Jesus.

Jesus. And so we encourage not to give up on wisdom, to live righteously, even though it may not pay off in this life outside the garden, because ultimately, just as it did for Jesus, God will reward us for our righteousness.

Not in what we've done, but in what Jesus has done. And so we can practice forgiveness and graciousness. We can be patient with other people's failings, because that's what God has done for us.

And I find that, you know, we're in a society now that's so, what do you call it, so passionate about justice, isn't it? But I find that only with the Christian faith can you have justice with mercy.

That actually, we're concerned for sin, and we're concerned for the impact of sin on the victims of sin, but as Christians, we also long for the repentance of the sinner, the one who's done the injustice in the first place.

[24 : 23] Because that's exactly what God has done for us. He was not just concerned for the victims of sin, he also sent Jesus to die for those who perpetrated sin.

And so that's what we need to do as well, as Christians, to model that in all manner of injustice in this world. And so, when life is still imperfect, we don't have to despair.

Yes, we lament the sin that's in this world, but we know that God has found a solution for us. We can live with a certain assurance of salvation in Jesus, and we can live with a certain hope of reward in the new creation.

Let's pray. Father, if we're honest with you, we have to say that life is often messy and unfair.

We have to admit that sometimes we try to live wisely and righteously, and still things go wrong. Father, thank you for understanding us. But Father, we also want to admit that we are often part of that problem.

[25 : 33] And so, we thank you that you forgive us in Jesus. Make us wise for salvation through faith in your Son. Teach us to live patiently and graciously with life outside Eden until the coming of your Son in glory.

In his name we pray. Amen.