

We Need this Book

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[0 : 0 0] to add my welcome to Dan's at the beginning of this fall term as we start the book of Proverbs and as you turn to Proverbs 20 on page 542 I just I want to encourage you all to read the book of Proverbs. If we manage to act according to our schedule we should be out of Proverbs in December so if you read a chapter or two a day that means you'll get through it three or four times and you'll know a lot more about it than you did when you started and chapter 20 I'm most interested to know how I'm going to do this today chapter 20 thing about Proverbs is it comes to us at a completely different angle from every other book in the Bible it's not a letter you know but it is written from a father to a son it's not commandments but there are commands in it it's not narrative but there are stories in your story and my story is in there and the thing about the difference of Proverbs is that it is very different from the current

Christian pieties that are so wearying to us you know the overly rational Christian who says look I know my doctrine God's given me enough let me figure out the rest I just going to get on with it or the overly spiritual Christian who says the Holy Spirit wanted me to shop at Nordstrom's because he gave me a parking spot right outside or the post-modern Christian who has trouble trusting words and wants to be authentic and I'm not going to believe anything until I've experienced it I must be true to myself the thing about Proverbs is it deals with the invisibility of God where is God on Monday Tuesday in my leisure at work in the ambiguity of the decisions I make and Proverbs shows God at work not just in the big trumpet blasting ways but deeply embedded in the ordinary circumstances of daily life one commentator says in the Old Testament life of faith was not three miracles a day and a holy war but the ongoing life of learning that we don't just trust God for the big things but in the ordinary circumstances and you know every culture has Proverbs every family has my family had Proverbs my mother used to make up Proverbs and I can tell some of you to them tell them to you later they're short memorable sayings and I think it's part of being made in the image of God naming things and understanding the world here is a Chinese proverb a bird does not sing because it has an answer it sings because it has a song isn't that lovely here is an Ethiopian proverb if you pick up one end of the stick you pick up the other also and lots of English Proverbs are contradictory you know too many cooks spoil the broth many hands make light work the early bird gets the worm haste makes waste the thing here the thing that's different here is that these Proverbs come as the flower of God's revelation in the Old Testament if you keep your hand in chapter 20 and turn back to chapter 1 to the first verse of Proverbs you can see what I mean

Proverbs 1 1 the book begins like this the Proverbs of Solomon son of David king of Israel which means this is no ordinary king this is not just some other ancient near eastern potentate this is God's king who has been anointed with the Holy Spirit and is the Messiah of God and this particular king prayed to God for the gift of wisdom and God gave it to him so the book of Proverbs is not you know it's not Solomon strolling around the temple compound or the palace compound and saying there's an anthill hmm I think I'll write a proverb ultimately it's the wisdom of God and although the Proverbs look like wise a collection of wise observations ultimately they come to us from God himself so if you turn over to chapter 2 verse 6

Solomon tells us for the Lord gives wisdom from his mouth come knowledge and understanding and therefore 4 and 5 if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God which means that if they're doing their work as we read Proverbs we ought to come to know God better and to love him and to live a life of fear and faith but the Proverbs proper don't start until chapter 10 so if you turn over to chapter 10 verse 1 the Proverbs of Solomon and away we go and then after chapter 10 we have 375 Proverbs I did not count them I got that from a book chapters 1 to 9 are how to read this book and

they say two things to us one what we need to read this book is hunger and humility it is not a quick fix

[5 : 57] Proverbs is about the slow long-term character development it's not about mastering facts or knowledge and if you're not humble and if you're not hungry for the wisdom of God the book will just be a frustration to you and the second thing the early chapters teach us is that there is a particular shape to the Proverbs the 375 Proverbs are not just 375 diamonds thrown out on a black piece of velvet they are set very carefully in a jewelry setting and they relate to each other so you know as we read through the first half of chapter 20 as you followed along you can think well that makes sense at one level but when you ask the question why are these put together here in this way I want to confess to you I'm not always sure and I know the commentaries are not always sure but the real value is thinking and meditating on them as they occur together not just taking one out of context and the best thing we can do is to read it leisurely and prayerfully and the promise is if we do that the Lord will give us wisdom and I've suggested today that we dive straight into chapter 20 which makes two main points and shows us ultimately why we need this book and the first point chapter 20 makes is about our single most staggering human ability we as humans it is our greatest skill and talent and it's the most widespread and pervasive and universal but least understood ability that we have and it is our amazing capacity for self-deception and there are four summary verses that I want to point you to verse 5 the purpose in a man's heart is like deep water but a man of understanding will draw it out in the book of Proverbs deep is never good deep is dangerous deep water you drown inaccessible unfathomable life threatening the simple statement is that we do not and we cannot know the depths of our own hearts this is what the Bible teaches we skim along the surface sometimes we look a bit deeper and we see what's below the surface but there are dark and murky depths that are beyond our knowing when we come to the book of Jeremiah a couple of books later

Jeremiah says the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick who can understand it and the answer is the next verse I the Lord search the heart and test the mind this is the Bible view of us that we do not understand ourselves we are unsearchable to ourselves because our hearts deceive us this is a pillar of Christian self-understanding and why we need this book or look at verse 9 who can say I have made my heart pure I am clean from my sin because we don't know our hearts we do not have the ability to really clean ourselves if I'm deceived if I've got this deceiving thing at the centre of my being I don't see where I need God and I cannot hope to make myself spiritually pure or right to him we'll look at verse 24 a man and this is a man and woman it's inclusive steps are from the Lord how then can one understand their way they can't verse 27 the spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord searching his innermost parts

God alone searches our hearts to their depths God alone knows us and he is engaged in every step of our lives our hearts are so slippery and so crafty that apart from God's word we will all live lives of self-deception and hypocrisy there is a recent study that gives a new name to this it comes from economists of all people from Princeton and from Toulouse economic schools they call it motivated reasoning and they've released a study that says the more educated you are the more you avoid and deny facts that disagree with your world view the way we collect facts today through digital devices which makes everything more accessible and indelible means that we have developed strategies for ignoring anything that contradicts our beliefs when we search for news we consume what we find and filter out everything that we don't agree with it's called strategic ignorance actually it's self-deception but that's a better name for it strategic ignorance you cannot see reality we cannot see reality about ourselves and about God now okay how does that help us read the chapter well look at verse 1 for example wine is a mocker strong drink or beer a brawler and whoever is led astray by it is not wise this is not a sudden one verse condemnation of drinking too much alcohol this is in the context of the chapter that shows us how foolish we are and as the drunk reels around and holds forward you know speaks about how clever they are this is a picture of us that we think we understand ourselves and have wisdom but the more we speak about ourselves the less wisdom the more foolish we show ourselves to be in fact we are we lack self-consciousness and self-control we are restless and noisy and inebriated with our own wisdom or look at verse 4 the slugger does not plough in the autumn he will seek at harvest and have nothing it's not a sudden piece of advice that you should all work very hard it's a picture of how out of touch with reality we are we live for the now and we expect with great entitlement that we'll be supplied with in the future and when we don't we cry about it or look at verse 6 many a man many a woman proclaims their

own steadfast love but a faithful person who can find see here is our staggering ability for self-deception

I am a good person we're all good people right don't you find it amazing when someone in a family murders some other people that the family on the news say that they were a good person or they're a good boy it's just it's just self-deception and then from verse 20 to verse 23 we have an extended example from the marketplace and if you don't see yourself in this example it just shows how good you are at self-deception verse 10 and verse 20 say the same thing that unequal weights and unequal measures are an abomination to the Lord right there in the marketplace okay the place you don't dare talk about God God is there not as a spectator but as an active participant and every kind of fraud and every kind of cheating and every time we try to gain a personal advantage and disadvantage others it turns God's stomach all that hurts and harms other people no matter how much it's standard business practice involves God every decision either moves his blessing forward or moves the curse forward and have a look at how it works in verses 14 to 17 bad bad says the buyer when he goes away then he boasts there is gold and abundance of costly stones but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel take a man's garment when he's put up security for a stranger and hold it in pledge when he puts up security for foreigners bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel it's wonderful it's so realistic you know deceit is the normal standard operating procedure it's absolutely normal it's absolutely expected in the marketplace it's how we gain financial advantage by our clever dealing and our clever words I mean look at verse 14 the buyer has just assumed that the seller is greedy and has upped the price that's normal isn't it the seller wants to cheat me right so the buyer says look look it's got a ding in the door the tyres aren't what you said and this model had trouble with airbags bad bad we do it we do it all the time but it's a lie we don't really think it's bad we just want it at a lower price and when we get the deal we go away and we brag about how clever we are verse 15 is true there is value in gold and abundance of money proverbs never sneers at money but you can never get what's truly valuable by lying or deceiving and cheating others what has true value in itself is the knowledge of God and walking in his way but that doesn't mean we ought to be naive as Christians verse 16 don't put up don't put up security for a stranger because you'll lose your shirt we ought to do due diligence and verse 17 the point is that deceit of any form undoes the blessing of God you can make a lot of bread by deceit but we don't live by bread alone and what getting bread by deceit does is it damages our capacity to enjoy the blessing of God it's like breaking your teeth on gravel you lose the ability to enjoy what you've gathered by selfishness it's the same dynamic in verse 21 an inheritance gained hastily in the beginning will not be blessed in the end it's God alone he gives the ability to enjoy things now the parable of the prodigal son the son who rushes to get his inheritance he loses the capacity to enjoy

[16 : 21] God's blessing he's deceived by thinking that his meaning and happiness is in the inheritance and not in God this is the big point big first point of the chapter and I know it takes some digesting because what happens in the marketplace happens in every area of our life because we do not know ourselves because of our staggering capacity for self-deception but before we look at the second great truth and you'll be glad to know it's a positive one just notice the tone of the passage how compassionately this passage runs there's no cynicism or despair we don't have time to look at it carefully but did you notice the proverbs are paired together so if you look at verse 6 many a man proclaims his own steadfast love but a faithful man who can find it's paired with verse 7 the righteous who walks in his integrity blessed are his children after him there is a life of blessing it is possible to live under the righteousness of God even though we're deceived and at verse 9 even the way this is expressed has longing in it who can say

I've made my heart pure I am clean from my sin we long for purity and this brings us to the second great point not just the great power of our self-deception but there is a power which is greater than our self-deception and the second point is the great power of humility the proverbs doesn't hold out false hope it opens the door for us to walk the way of life and hope so look at verses 12 and 13 the hearing ear the seeing eye the Lord has made them both love not sleep lest you come to poverty open your eyes and you will have plenty of bread God has taken the initiative he's given us every sense that we have we owe it to him and we owe it to ourselves to exercise our senses toward him and again when he says love not sleep he's not talking about general all-round laziness you should never lie in after nine o'clock on a Sunday morning he's talking about what we love see proverbs is God preaching to us and as we read it and as we meditate on it it has the capacity to change our

loves what we desire it's not going to happen if we have our eyes closed and our ears closed which means brothers and sisters that we have a decision to make every time we come to the book of proverbs am I going to trust what my heart says or am

I going to trust what the book says we'll look down to verse 30 blows that wound cleanse away evil strokes make clean the innermost parts now I know it's not nice hearing the fact that we can't understand ourselves it's especially not nice that we have this ability of self deception and that we're contaminated by I know it's not nice to hear that and that's why we need this book who else is going to tell us the truth about ourselves I mean if it was just my opinion you'd be really right to ignore it but if it's God's word then it may have the power to change you know what it's like to have friends in your life who love to tell you the truth and love you enough to tell the truth I seem to have had an inordinate number of friends and what they tell you don't always want to hear it but faithful are the wounds of a friend and

Proverbs is written to people who are open to correction who are teachable whose hearts are soft and the obvious question under this second point is where does humility come from and the answer in chapter 20 is that humility comes from knowing the king the power of humility is in the fear of the Lord knowing the one who is wisdom in himself you see our humility and the king are not two separate things we don't go off here and practice our humility and try and get as humble as we can and then come back to the king no no no we gain our humility as we come to know the king and grow in our knowledge of the king four times in the chapter Solomon refers to the king and sometimes in proverbs the king is just the king an ordinary king but in this chapter he is speaking about God's anointed king because this king stands between God and his people and God has given to this king in chapter 20 his eternal throne and this king sees through human deception and gets to the bottom of human hearts and with the power of life and death in his hands he is above all says this chapter kind kind he uses his power for our good this doesn't come across so well but look at verse 8 the king who sits on the throne of judgment winnows all evil with his eyes now the winnow means separating out the wheat from the bad stuff the chaff this is not vindictive or spiteful power it is the power of cleansing of separating out what's bad and good in other words to really cleanse us spiritually God has to separate us from our evil and he has to go into the depths of our corruption and winnow away and God stands behind this king because of his throne this king who's not taken in by evil who sees us and separates and destroys and deals with the evil we'll look at verses 26 to a wise king winnows the wicked and drives the wheel over them that is he separates slices the evil the spirit of man is the lamp of the

[22 : 39] Lord searching out all his inmost parts steadfast love and faithfulness preserve the king and by steadfast love his throne is upheld it is God's honor alone to search our hearts I can't see what's in your heart you can't see what's in mine God has delegated this work to his king and the thing about this king that Solomon wants us to grasp above all else is that his name is steadfast love that everything this king does is established on and rooted on and grows out of steadfast love this is a great Old testament bible word it is the heartbreaking kindness of God who as his people turn away and turn away and turn away he reaches out and saves and rescues in kindness and mercy and compassion over and over and over again giving what we don't deserve sharing his love bringing us back to the tree of life and

I'm glad you can't see into my heart you'd never listen to me anyway but to have one who is just and righteous who seized the depths whose name is love that makes me want to be humble that he should come and ascend his throne by dying in my place that his love took him to the cross makes me want to follow him through the grave and to that throne I finish I just point out how very very much the opposite this is of the current secular self salvation project we're all immersed in this we think that the answer is inside me self understanding is the way to a good life be true to yourself if only I could understand myself more deeply I'd be more confident and free and unafraid don't get me wrong it's very helpful to have as much self understanding as we can the

Lord deliver us from those who have no self understanding particularly those in authority it's very good to do every personality profile you can and to listen and learn and part of the purpose of proverbs is to give us more self understanding and to show that we can never get to the bottom of our hearts that we're full of contradictions and twists and deceit we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us which is why we need the king and why we need his words and we need the power of humility to live well in God's world that comes from knowing that God has an appointed king whose kindness and steadfast love alone has the power to cleanse and renew and restore us who gave us

his life and gave us his words that we might walk the path of wisdom knowing the fear of the Lord
Jesus
Amen