

We Need this Book (Evening Service)

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[0 : 0 0] All right, let's pray. Heavenly Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name, amen. All right, here we are. So we're beginning a series looking at the book of Proverbs. And because it's brand new, we have to do a little bit of groundwork before we get to chapter 20 here, just to introduce Proverbs in general. And you just heard it read, right? It's tough. Because it feels so random, doesn't it? So I went on this beach holiday recently with my family and my daughter Sadie and I, who's seven, we'd go along and she loves finding, there's a word for it when you find precious rocks, can't remember what it is, but rock hounding or something, right? We go sort of rock hounding and so you're looking along, it's mostly kind of like uninteresting and every now and then you'd spot a really nice rock and pick it up and put it in your pocket and we'd collect those. That's what Proverbs feels like. It's just this blur of information, this blur of rocks on the ground and every now and then you find one that kind of strikes your attention and you think, oh that's quite interesting, I'm going to write that down or something. It feels like that, so random, this random collection of sayings that are only occasionally interesting. So the first thing I'll say about Proverbs is this, that's all a bad way of thinking, what I just said, okay? This is not a series of just one-off thoughts and it's not actually as random as it appears and that means this, that means you can't just kind of like jump into the middle of it and point to any part of it and go, oh look at that, it says that, oh well that's all I need to know about anger or that's all I need to know about parenting. You can't do that because not one proverb gives you the whole picture. See one proverb might say the morally good have a really good life, they're going to have a great life and somewhere else it might say the morally good suffer and it's not a contradiction, they're just, they're kind of building on each other, they're modifying one another, they are nuancing one another.

Another example, in Proverbs 28 it says this, answer a fool according to his folly lest you be like him yourself, answer not a fool, that's what it says, Proverbs 26, answer not a fool, don't talk to stupid people, you'll become like them, answer not a fool. The very next line, answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. The very next line says that. It's like you should talk to stupid people because otherwise they'll just stay stupid and they're not contradicting each other, they're building on each other, they're nuancing one another. So it would appear, so if you read, so you can't just pick one of them out of the blue and say oh this says everything there is, no you've got to build this big picture about it, what it's trying to say across the book. So in this situation it's sort of going okay, how you respond to foolish people greatly depends on the particular fool who's standing in front of you at the time. This takes wisdom to know this. So we interpret these individual proverbs that feel random within the whole book of proverbs within the rest of the Bible.

So it's not this random selection of completely self-contained little ideas. Another sort of mistake I think we make when dealing with proverbs is this, is we read it like it's a list of moral lessons. Kind of like biblical fortune cookies. You kind of like crack one of these things open. It's like oh here's a little, here's today's hot tip on being nice. Proverbs is actually less concerned with being good and nice and far more concerned, in fact primarily concerned with being wise. It's primarily concerned with wisdom and it demonstrates, and what it does is it does this, is it demonstrates the wise life incredibly practically.

I mean you read the whole thing in one go. It covers just an extraordinary variety of topics. It covers the tongue, the eyes, the ears, pride and humility and justice and vengeance and parenting and laziness and work and poverty and wealth and friends and neighbors and love and lust and anger and strife and masters and slaves and life and death. And why does it do this? I mean it was, initially it was speaking to the people back in, way way back in the days, right? Two and a half thousand years ago. And life back then? For your average Israelite, you know, life in Israel, it's not three miracles a day and a couple of holy wars, right? It's just normal life. Like it's people trying to stay married and it's people dealing with idiots and it's facing the temptation to cheat new business and stuff, right?

So this is the kind of stuff that Proverbs deals with. And like I said, it covers this extraordinary variety of real life topics because, and this is an important line I'm about to say, because it wants to put on display what a redeemed life looks like. And it also does this, it gives us a glimpse into the damage and destruction we bring into our lives when we reject God's wisdom, when we choose our own way.

[5 : 41] So all that to say, Proverbs is not as random as it first appears. There is actually structure and there is a very, very clear purpose that goes beyond, you know, let's be sort of, you know, let's be nice and let's be good. Okay, now let's spend just a couple of minutes on genre and author and structure because that's probably helpful to know. So Proverbs, the book occupies a really unusual space in the Bible because it's not law and it's not narrative, but it does contain some of that stuff. Technically it's called wisdom literature. So Job and Ecclesiastes are other books of the Old Testament that are wisdom literature. Some people say James and the New Testament's sort of wisdom literature, don't know, but Job and Ecclesiastes. Proverbs is unusual as well. It's an anthology, so it's a collection of writings and sayings by multiple authors. Solomon is listed right at the start. Right at the start of Proverbs it says Solomon's the author. He's not the only author, but they list him right at the start because he's like the most famous guy that, you know, contributed to it. He did write a good chunk of it. Put together sometime between 1,000 and 600 years before Christ. Structurally it's really simple. Our first nine chapters are not Proverbs. The first nine chapters are like speeches, kind of selling wisdom. It's kind of like a mum, you know, talking to her daughter or son and saying, son, like here's, you know, here's why you need to read Proverbs and, you know, gives them a bit of a speech, a bit of a blurb on it. And so that's first nine chapters, sort of an introduction of a nine chapters. And then there's 375 actual Proverbs after that, broken up by author, then a couple of chapters right at the end, concluding the whole thing, and it's got that famous chapter on woman wisdom. Now, a million more things to say, but we won't, we won't say. You'll hear it on Saturday if you come to the parish teaching day or over the next few months. So we'll be in Proverbs up until Advent. Okay. That's probably enough, I think, on that.

Okay, Proverbs 20. Let's get into it. Proverbs 20. You will need your Bibles open or an app open or something because this is going to be like a machine gun of information because you heard, there's a lot of little things to talk about. Okay, here we go. Probably a good question is, why, if there is a structure, why are we ignoring it and starting right in chapter 20? Because chapter 20, it does something really helpful to us. It gives us, it contains one of the key insights of the whole book. It's really important. And here it is. We don't understand ourselves as much as we think. That's one of the key insights of the book. We don't understand ourselves as much as we think.

And there's not a whole lot we can do about it in of ourselves. We can't just reach into some divine spark or some inner goodness and kind of make ourselves better. We need help from the outside.

That's what chapter 20 tells us. And how does it do that? How does it make that point? Well, you heard it read. It sounds so random, chapter 20, I know. But if you read it like, you know, 30 times, you'd sort of go, okay, I can actually break this up a little bit. And you'd see that there are three sort of things going on. You'll see that there are rebukes in it. There's a number of times, a lot of sort of things where it says, this is what foolish people do. This is what foolish people do. This is what foolish people do. You'd also see there's blessings in it. This is what wise people do. This is what wise people do. This is what wise people do. They're all kind of scattered about in the chapter, but they're in there. And then third, you'll see there's this person, the king. What's he doing? He's actually the key. The king is the key to moving from doing the foolish things to doing the wise things. So what we're going to do is that's basically the sermon right there, okay? Those three sections. Rebukes, blessings, king. We'll spend a lot of time on rebukes because we're Anglicans and we like just talking about that stuff. So let's talk about rebukes.

Rebukes, actually, if you just sort of got a highlighter out and highlighted all the kind of rebukes, here's what unwise foolish people do, right? You'd actually see, you could actually group those into two different categories. There are foolish people who are foolish because they lack self-control. And there are foolish people who are foolish because they're dishonest, okay? So here's what we're doing. We're talking about the rebuke part and these two types of rebukes, the lack of self-control rebuke and the dishonesty rebuke. Let's look at the lack of self-control proverbs here first. Right. Here's a sampler of them. Verse one. This one's about the drinking one, right? You can go there in front of you. Now this is not saying don't drink because in other places in proverbs it talks about wine and liquor and stuff as a sign of prosperity. So it can't be saying don't drink. What it is saying is it says wine's a mocker. It says don't drink too much because when you do, you do stupid things. That makes sense, right? I mean, that just makes sense, right? Verse three says fools are always quick to get into a fight. They lack self-control. And as I've been, like, as I read through this proverb, the foolish ones, I kept going, yep. Oh yeah, done that one. Yep, done that one.

[11:17] Done that one. I should tell them a story about that one. No, actually I won't tell them a story about that one. This one I'll tell you a story about though. So I remember I was going to this church event. This is a couple of years ago. I don't think I've told you the story, but anyway, so I'm driving. I'm by myself going to this church event, this church, and driving my little car. And there's a guy behind me who was, what's it called over here when somebody drives right up behind you? Tailgating or something? Is it tailgating? Tailgating me. Just residential roads.

And when we go around corners, they always try and cut me off. Did it like three or four times. I am furious. It's such a silly thing to be furious about. Like just pull over, let him pass. That's what a wise person would do, right? But I just start getting really, really angry.

And so we stop at a light and I get out of the car and I start walking towards him. And I'm just going to, I'm going to yell at this man. I'm going to tell him exactly what I think of him and his family and his dog and his car. And I am so angry. And so it's like me to you, right? The car away. So I'm walking towards him. About halfway, halfway there, I realize what I'm wearing. So I'm on my way to church to preach at a, at quite a high church event. It's like Monday, Thursday. I'm in my collar.

Like I'm wearing my dog collar. I'm in full and black with my collar on. And so I get about halfway through there and I'm like, what are you doing, man? It's like, and so I can't just stop. So I just walk up to the window. I'm like, oh, is everything okay? Okay, good. Righto. Let me, just on my way now.

No self-control, right? Complete lack of self-control. That was a, that was a foolish thing to do. This is what fools do. They can't stop themselves. They just, they just run into fights. Verse four.

[13 : 11] What's verse four about? It's a slugger. It's a guy who's lazy. It's a, it's the person who doesn't sow their seeds in autumn. And then it's in springtime next year. They're like, oh, where's all my plants? Where's all my plants gone? They feel like they should get a reward. They've done no work.

They have this sense of entitlement because it says they're, they're kind of looking for this stuff. Come on, man. No self-control. You needed to buckle down and sow the seeds. Verse 13 is quite similar.

You sleep your life away. You're going to end up poor. Verse 16. You've, you've loaned money to someone. You don't know these people. You don't know who they are. You're loaning money to them. That's foolish. You didn't think that through. Verse 19. You're the person that can't control their lips.

You go around, you're whining, you're babbling, complaining, and gossiping. And in a community, that kind of stuff, that damages the community, doesn't it? And it represents just a lack of self-control over your life. Now, let's move on to the proverbs that fall under the heading of dishonesty. Let's look at those ones. There's sort of quite an extended example in the middle of the marketplace. Verse 10 and 23 say the same things. Really interesting, I think. It says, unequal weights are an abomination to the Lord. When you think of abominations of the Lord, what do you think? You think of someone sort of like, you know, oh, just doing awful, horrible, horrible things.

You don't think of unequal weights. And what are they talking about anyway? It's, it's, it's way, way, way, way, way, way back in the days. I don't know how much coinage there was around in these days, but people, when they're buying and selling, would use weights. Like here's a little one pound weight, right? And dishonest vendors would have fake weights that were lighter. It wasn't actually a pound. It was like three quarters of a pound, for example. And so when they're selling something, they would use their fake one pound thing to make it look like you're getting more. Proverbs says, this is an abomination to God. Verse 14, bad, bad, says the buyer. What's that about? It's a buyer who's driving down the price of something by saying it's worthless. This is a worthless lectern. I'll give you a five bucks for it. That's actually a great lectern. This is not a savvy business person. This is a dishonest person. Verse 17 is just straight out theft. A bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterward his mouth will be full of gravel. It's a dire warning, isn't it? Sin is nice for a season, but it's death in the end. So those are the rebukes to fools.

[15 : 52] Foolish people lack self-control. Foolish people are dishonest, or dishonest people are fools, and people who lack self-control are foolish people. So remember what I said at the start. These examples, what are they there for? They're there to expose what is in the fool's heart, because the fool thinks that everything they do is sunshine. I have a right to defend myself on the road. I have a right to get the very, very, very best deal, even if it's a bit dishonest, it's fine.

They're completely out of touch with what's going on in here in their hearts. And to drive home the point, the passage makes these summary statements. So these little examples, like tiny little stories, and then it makes these sweeping statements. Verse 5, the purpose of a man's heart is like deep water.

Now, as an aside, I mean, I don't think I need to say this. I'll tell you this anyway. Throughout Proverbs, it talks about men and sons, and sometimes it talks about mothers and fathers. You know that when it talks about a man here, it's talking about men and women, right? I think you already know that. There are only a couple of cases, very specific examples, where it's obviously speaking about a specific gender, but otherwise, think of it very inclusively here. So back to the verse. We're talking about these summary statements that summarize these little, short little stories here. The purpose of a man's heart is like deep water. It sounds like a nice thing that it's saying, isn't it? Our heart's like deep waters. I just want to swim in my heart. I want to swim in your heart.

It's just so deep, and it's really beautiful and thoughtful. No. No. Deep waters in the Bible are bad places.

They're places of danger. They're places of drowning. This person in verse 5, they're drowning. They're drowning in their own self-deception. It's just a kind of a really colorful way of saying they don't know what's going on inside. It's because our brokenness is so often hidden from us.

[17 : 52] Most of these folks here, these fools, think they're doing pretty good, and they're deceiving themselves. A passage goes on to say that it comes out in all of us, and it gives this example of children. It says, like children, it comes out in children.

Children, you see it in their actions. Verse 11, even a child makes himself known by his acts, by whether his conduct is pure and upright. I talked a few months ago about my son, who's two and a half, called Ollie, and he was a very enthusiastic confessor. I talked about this like two months ago. I could say to him, Ollie, did you hit your sister? Yeah. Oh, yeah.

I hit her in the head. You know, about three weeks ago, I saw him do something. I can't remember what it was. I think he wrote on the wall or something. And I said, Ollie, did you just write on the wall? And there was a pause for about a good 15 seconds, and you could see his mind ticking over. And there was this moment where he realized, I don't have to tell them the truth.

And he goes, B did it. I swear to you, every time I ask him if he's done something bad, he says, B's done it. He doesn't say sister. Like, it's quite deceptive, right? He doesn't say Sadie's done it. He says B's, because B can't defend herself. She can't talk very well, right?

So he picks on her because he knows that he might be able to get away with it. So, I don't mean to malign my son, but it's just like, it's just, it's a great example. Even a child makes his heart known to us, right? If it's a child, it's just saying, even little kids, that we all do it.

[19 : 35] We all do this stuff. There's deception in the fool's heart. And they're probably not even aware of it. I don't think he's even too aware of what's going on. And the news gets worse here. Verse 9 says this, Who can say, I have made my heart pure? So the answer's no one, right?

We don't know what's going on really down here a lot of time. And we can't do anything to make it beautiful or pure on our own. The solution must come from the outside. So even though, but that's just not an excuse, right?

Because even though we don't know what's going on, the passage says that the Lord does in verse 27. The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost paths. So God knows.

We might be clueless to all this, but God sees it. And the great news of the passage is this, is he doesn't want us to continue on the foolish path. He wants to be us on the path of wisdom.

And how does he do that? Well, a couple of ways. Here's one way, and I'll get to the second way later on. One way is he gives us eyes and ears. Verse 12, The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made them both. Okay, it feels a bit random, right? In the middle of the chapter there, why is he sort of saying this? It's to deal with our hearts. God has given us ears and eyes to deal with our hearts, to correct our hearts. So the ear in Proverbs is always to do with being teachable, and the eye is always to do with moral discernment. Okay? So it's saying, listen and observe and do what the wise are telling us and follow the example of the wise. And verse 29 gives us an example of this. It says, you've got these young guys, so they might be strong, but they're fools. You've got these older guys who might be weak, but they have gray hair. And the gray hair means they've lived a life and they kind of know some stuff. And you need to invest in a relationship with them and you need to listen to them and you need those relationships to go deep. And you need people speaking into your life who have lived more life than you. But that, folks, is a difficult thing because sometimes they'll say things you don't like. Verse 30, Blows that wound, though, cleanse away evil. Strokes may clean the innermost part. So this is one of God's plans to heal the foolish heart, is with these blows, with these strokes, with these things that we don't want to hear, but we have to hear them.

[22 : 10] Because, you know, human heart, there's no quick fix here. Changing our heart, that's a painful thing. Okay, so where are we in the sermon? Proverbs tells us that we are self-deceived. It's one of our greatest skills, self-deception. We need a heart change, and that's got to come from the outside.

And one of the ways we move from foolishness to wisdom is we humble ourselves and we observe wise living. But as I said at the start, the chapter doesn't just contain rebukes.

It's not just the whole list of don't do that, don't do that, don't do that. That's stupid if you do that, stupid if you do that. It's not just that. There's also do's, and it's full of examples for us to follow. Let's look at just two examples, I think, for time's sake. Just two examples here.

Verse three, it is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife. So the cultural narrative says this, defend your honor through confrontation, stand up for yourself. And verse three says, actually, you know, the way to honor is to abstain from defending honor. It says that the wise person is more concerned with peace than they are with kind of defending themselves in the eyes of other people. But the fool can't help himself. Fool gets out of the car. The fool starts marching towards the other driver, right? That's what the fool does. Verse 15 says this. It says that there are a lot of precious things in the world, but one of the most precious things are lips of knowledge. It's saying to us that it is such a precious thing. It is such a wonderful, it is such a rich thing. Thoughtful talk. Speaking wisdom into the lives of other people. So we don't want to be verse 14 people. We don't want to be the babblers and the complainers and the whiners and the gossipers.

We want people that have thoughtful talk, that speak wisdom into the lives of other people. Okay, those are just a few examples of how the wise live. Now we're going to have 12 weeks in Proverbs. We're going to have plenty of time to talk about that. But there's one more thing I want to get to that's really, really important. At the start I said, the passage is full of rebukes. It's full of blessings. Do this. And there's this king. What's the king about? So just two minutes on the king here.

[24 : 28] How do we move from foolishness to wisdom? I've talked about observing. I've talked about hearing and being humble. But really the big way to do it is by submitting to the Lord's king.

Okay, let me explain how that comes out in the passage. In the passage, obviously the Lord and God is mentioned here. The Lord blesses and he abominates things, right? But the key place the Lord seems to move in the passage is through the king. And the king in the passage, really interestingly, is doing things that only God normally does. And that's he's judging. Verses 2 and 8 and 26. The king, the king, the king is always judging. The king is always judging here. He is making things right. And when the king judges, that's one of the ways that we move, that moves us from being foolish people to wise people, knowing that the king judges.

That's one of the ways we move from here to here. How does it work? Let me give you an example. And we'll talk a lot more about this over the next few weeks. So my family, we had this little tent trailer. You know what a tent trailer is like a pop-up trailer? We bought it three months ago. We thought, you know what? We need a cheap way to have holidays and we want to see beautiful British Columbia. And we went on one holiday with it. We bought it off an enormous Russian man. And so we call it Vlad. And we loved this trailer. It got stolen the night last night, not for last. Friday night, right? It got stolen. We don't know how they stole it. We had these big locks on it. It was parked right up against our car, but somebody stole it two nights ago.

And so it's been very tempting to me to have these kind of fantasies about police dogs getting them and them getting caught and having a fight with them and beating them up and stuff. It's very tempting, right? If you've ever had any kind of intrusion in your life like that, you may...

I'm just assuming you do that horrible thing. What does verse 22 say? It says this. It says, don't say, I will repay evil. Wait for the Lord.

[26 : 46] So the foolish person fantasizes about revenge. And the wise person says, okay, I'm not going to say I'm going to repay evil. I'm going to wait for the Lord. And how can I wait for the Lord? How do I know that's a good thing? Because the passage says that the Lord will judge. The Lord's King will judge.

No one gets away with anything. I am... This is what might sound weird to some of you who's sensitive, but I'm greatly comforted by the fact that these men or women will face God one day and make an account for their lives. That means that I can actually be released from anger. I can be released from seeking revenge because justice actually will be done. No one gets away with anything.

So the king in the passage that it's talking about here, as you probably know, isn't just any old king. In the Old Testament, there were these kings who were like God's messiahs for time, but they're always failures. They never lived it up to sort of what they should have done. And you know, the kings of the Old Testament were only shadows pointing to the future Christ, who would judge righteously, who would bring everlasting peace. So the king that they're talking about here, looking through the lens of the New Testament, this is talking about Jesus.

So I can trust that Jesus will judge well, and I can be released from anger. So let me kind of summarize here. So two and a half thousand years ago, this book was put together. And it says, you don't know your own heart. But it also is filled with such wonderful news. It says that God doesn't want to leave you self-deceived. He doesn't want to leave you in that state. And so he speaks to us through this incredible anthology of wisdom. And he says this, he goes, here's what a foolish life looks like, and here's what a life submitted to me. Here's what that looks like. And the journey from here to here is through King Jesus. It's through the King who judges.

But as you know, King Jesus is not just judging. The wonderful news of the New Testament is this, is that King Jesus comes to be judged for us. And why that's so beautiful, as we look at Proverbs, as it means that Proverbs does not become this kind of crushing layer of demands, you know, as that we can trust Jesus as we move from here to here. But if that movement is slow or stalled, or we stick around here longer than we should, we also know that we are forgiven people, don't we? That's the great news of chapter 20. So that's it. Amen.