

# Unbelief

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[ 0 : 00 ] Each week of the summer and the mornings, we're working our way through the biggest challenges to the human heart that Proverbs talks about. So we've looked at pride, envy, anger, and lust last week.

This week we do the same thing, but today is also different. I hope maybe you've had a chance, regular attenders, to read through the book of Proverbs while we've been going through it this summer.

It's always a great thing to do while we're working through a sermon series to read through that book once or twice. And one of the reasons, one of the things you might have noticed if you've done that is that there are two groups of terms that appear most frequently above all else across the book of Proverbs, and we haven't talked about them yet.

And there's even a formula for how they appear, and it's a contrast every time. And here's how it works. There's always a beatitude and then a negative statement.

And if you've read through, you've seen this, it's all over the place. And here's an example, chapter 28, verse 14. Here's the beatitude, blessed is the one who fears the Lord always, but then it goes negative.

[ 1 : 14 ] But whoever hardens his heart falls into calamity. And there's the formula, the positive side, the negative side. Sometimes it's the negative than the positive, but it shows up all across most of the texts in Proverbs appear under that formula, under that contrast.

Here's another example, chapter 11, verse five, that we read, the righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight. The righteous, the blameless, but then the negative.

But the wicked falls by his own wickedness. So you've got the positive and the negative. Now, these are very general terms that get used over and over again. Righteousness and wickedness, for example.

It doesn't use specifics most often. It doesn't say lust, it doesn't say envy, it doesn't say pride. It's just general. It's talking about categorical righteousness, categorical wickedness is the way Proverbs shows up over and over again.

Here's some of the couplets that you'll see. The wicked and the righteous, the foolish and the wise, the straight and the crooked, the blameless and the devious, the upright and the hard heart.

[ 2 : 19 ] These are the most common ones. Now, according to Proverbs, it's not hard to see that you want to be one and not the other. You want to walk in the beatitude, not the negative side.

And so maybe the most important question that we haven't asked yet about the book of Proverbs is how can I be one and not the other? How can I have the positive side of that and not the negative side?

And so let's do that together this morning. We're gonna see three things to unpack this, to make this clear. First, the sin underneath and then the diagnosis that we all share.

And then lastly, the way of wisdom. Okay, so let's do that first, the sin underneath. The sin that lurks underneath this contrast between the righteous and the wicked.

All right, we read chapter 11, verse five twice now. And it says that there is quote, the righteousness of the blameless, the righteous deeds of the blameless, over against the wicked, whose way is calamity.

[ 3 : 27 ] And there are so many texts that followed that formula, as we just mentioned. Now, when you look at that at first glance, it looks like there are two exclusive groups.

There are righteous people and there are wicked people. And the blameless people are known as blameless and are blameless by their deeds, by who they are. Their deeds, in other words, are the revelation of what's underneath.

And so you could, especially as a modern person in the culture we live in, you could come to Proverbs and you could say, most of the verses do this contrast, that there's righteous people over here, there's wicked people over here.

And it's tempting to come and look at that and say, the Bible seems to be saying that there's good people and there's bad people. And I know that all of you love church history illustrations, that is your favorite category of illustrations.

So I've got one for you today. In about the year 250 AD, there was a man by the name of Manny, M-A-N-I. And he started a movement.

[ 4 : 36 ] This is 220 years after Jesus lived and died and rose again and 220 years later, Manny comes and he says, he looks at the Bible and he says, there is an absolute good and there's an absolute evil.

And these two forces are battling against one another. And we don't yet know who's gonna win out. They're basically equal, they're fighting. And that means that because there's absolute evil and there's absolute good, that what's happened is that that's gotten into people.

And so people are born either good or bad. They're one or the other. And then that manifests in life. There's Gandhi and there's Hitler. And all of us appear on either side of the threshold.

Either we're on Gandhi's side or we're the other way. We're righteous or we're wicked. And that was Manny's way of seeing the world. And he thought he was getting that from the Bible.

And then all the theologians got together and all the pastors got together and they said, that's actually, they called it heresy. That's not at all what the Bible's doing. That's not at all what Proverbs is doing.

[ 5 : 41 ] And actually, even though you could read it that way, you could say, well, doesn't it kind of seem like that? Let me say that this approach, that there are good people out there and there are bad people.

And everybody's one of the two. This is, it's something you can't get out from underneath. This is actually the way that the contemporary world approaches what we call anthropology, the study of what a human is, and ethics.

The modern world says that that's true. Manichaeism, Manny, he was right. That there are good people and there are bad people. And you can only be one or the other. And the judge, the place where we determine who's good and who's bad is where.

It's social media. Social media is the courtroom. It's where the populace gets to decide who are the good ones and who are the bad ones. And if you're determined to be a bad one, you have to be canceled.

You have to be pushed away. There's no forgiveness in the courtroom of social media. There's only good and bad. And that's it. That's what we call a manichaeian way of understanding humanity, anthropology, reality.

[ 6 : 43 ] And Proverbs does not do that. The Bible doesn't do that. That's not the ethics of how the Bible works. Yes, there is a way of righteousness and a way of the wicked.

We read a bunch of verses. We sang Psalm 14 and it says, the full says in his heart, there is no God. His deeds are vile. But there's actually something underneath.

There's a layer that's gotta be peeled back to see what's really going on with texts like that. And let me give you, there's two keys in Proverbs that tell us, two keys to unlock this door, to understand what it's really saying about human beings.

And here they are. We read very famously, chapter one, verse seven, the key that unlocks all the Proverbs. The wise life, how does it begin?

It begins with the fear of the Lord. In other words, the fear of the Lord. It's not timidity. It's not shaking in your boots before God.

[ 7 : 44 ] It's not being scared of God. That's not what fear of the Lord is instead. It's reverence. It's all, it's bowing the knee. In other words, did you hear it says, 11, five says, the way of the blameless is a straight road, a straight path.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It's the beginning. In other words, how do you unlock the key to being on the way of the righteous, the way of the blameless? What does it mean? It doesn't mean to be sinless. It doesn't mean that you're a good person. Proverbs says very clearly, it begins only with this. Fear the Lord, reverence God, bow the knee, honor and revere the Lord.

That's the beginning point of the hope of the way of wisdom that there's no other way. That's what's underneath. That's what separates righteousness and wickedness. It's not fundamentally deeds. In other words, it's fundamentally a condition of the heart. Let me give you the second key because it makes it even clearer. Chapter three, verse six, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths.

[ 8 : 46 ] Now, the Bible is of course translated from Hebrew and Greek to English. And there are different ways to do that that are all meaningful and helpful.

Here's a way to translate that verse that would be literally word for word, exactly as it appears. And this is what it says, in all your travels, know God and he will straighten your road. In all your travels, know God. And so Proverbs is saying life is like a journey. It's your own path. And every day on the path, know the living God, fear God, honor God and he straightens your path. And so when you go to chapter 11, verse five, and it says the blameless have a straight road ahead of them, they do not have a straight road because of their deeds. They have a straight road because they fear the Lord and know God on the midst of their travels and he straightens the path. And that means, that means at the heart of Proverbs, this is what it is saying, that the difference in the way of wisdom and the way of folly, the difference in the righteous life, in the wicked life, yes, deeds are visible, yes, deeds matter, but fundamentally it's not an issue of deed.

[ 10 : 04 ] Fundamentally, when you uncover the surface, what's going on is the difference, simply this, it's the difference in belief and unbelief. The difference in faith and not faith.

In other words, Proverbs is saying exactly what the New Testament says. The life of wisdom is the life of faith. And you can't live the life of wisdom at all until you start with faith.

The beginning of all wisdom is the fear of the Lord. It's the starting point, faith, belief is the very starting point. All right, secondly then, the diagnosis that we share.

All right, we've shown so far that in the book of Proverbs, the issue is actually unbelief and belief. It's the question, do you wanna be wise? Do you wanna live in the way Proverbs talks?

Then faith is the key, faith is fundamental. A couple, let me show you a couple more ways that this is true. Chapter 28, verse 14, whoever hardens his heart against God will fall into calamity.

[ 11 : 10 ] Did you hear that? Whoever hardens his heart, that's an Old Testament phrase for unbelief. And the most prime example we see of that in the whole Bible is in Exodus, when Pharaoh hardens his heart against the Lord.

And it's not atheism, it's not saying I intellectually deny God. It's saying I wanna shake my fist at God. It's saying I refuse to live for God.

That's what Proverbs calls unbelief. Chapter 30, verse eight and nine, very famous. We looked at this week one, give me neither poverty nor riches.

Feed me with only what I need, Lord, why? Why is the prayer, Lord, don't give me more than I can handle financially, materially. And then this is what it says, lest I be full, I have a full belly and I deny you.

And I say, who's the Lord? You see, it's saying that the temptation underneath all temptations with a full belly is unbelief.

[ 12 : 12 ] It's Lord protect me from getting to a place in my life where I say, who's the Lord? I'm comfortable. I don't need, I don't know that I need God. It's not atheism.

It's just indifference. It's just not caring. You see, the issue in Proverbs is unbelief. Lastly, chapter 14, verse two, whoever is devious in his ways despises God.

He says, it's talking about deeds there. Whoever lives a life of devious things, as God says, are devious. There's something going on underneath that. Life is not simply determined by deeds. It's an issue of the heart. It says they, in their heart, they've rejected God. They've despised God. In other words, the problem is unbelief. And the Bible says that it's universal, that it's everybody's problem, that it's all of our problem, unbelief, that we have to choose today the way of wisdom. We have to say today, I fear the Lord. I choose the way of wisdom. Now, let me put a few details on this. There are many ways to struggle with unbelief. You know, when you say, when a pastor, when we say in the church, the problem of unbelief today, probably the first thing that you think about is atheism.

[ 13 : 29 ] You know, you think about Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins about the God delusion, about God is not great, about the intellectual denial of God. Getting to a place in life where you say, look, if there is no God, then I have nothing to feel guilty about.

If there is no God, then the word wickedness is really meaningless because I have no ultimate judge to stand before. That's an intellectual denial of God's existence. But again, level two, that's not what Proverbs is really talking about, mostly.

Proverbs is talking about a different type of unbelief, and this is it. In other words, atheism is not where most people are today. Do you know that in the modern world, atheism is still really rare, even in Edinburgh, that most people in Edinburgh aren't atheists?

Instead, most people in Edinburgh would say something like this, look, I don't know if there's a God, I don't know if there's a higher power. I think there probably is, but I know that I'm okay with my life, and that's religion and all that is good for you, but it's not really something for me.

That's where most people in the modern world are. The secularization thesis was a thesis in the 19th century. It started with Karl Marx, and Karl Marx and others said that, when you have flushable toilets and iPhones, Karl didn't talk about iPhones, but when you have flushable toilets and iPhones, you don't really need God, because you're comfortable.

[14:55] And that was the secularization thesis that eventually religion will die away, belief in God will die away, as we get more and more comfortable, as hospitals get better and better, and that never happened.

And now the sociologists are scrambling to try to understand why is it that people won't stop being religious? Most people believe in the supernatural. The issue is that they're just simply indifferent to it in their daily lives.

They won't let the objectivity of the claim actually override their desires and take hold of them. And that's exactly the issue Proverbs is addressing, that we believe in God, but we either despise Him in our heart because life has been hard, or we just don't care.

We don't let the claim really soak in. We don't let the claim do what it's meant to do. Look, here's the way of being religious and indifferent at the same time. Last week, last week we read Proverbs 7, and we talked about lust.

Do you remember what Lady Folly said to the young man in Proverbs 7? She said, I've offered my sacrifices. Now let us go to my house because my husband is not home.

[16:04] You know, you see, she said, I've already gone and done my religious bit. I went to the temple, but now I'm free. I can do whatever I want. Sunday's fine, Monday to Saturday, that's my time.

That's religious and indifferent at the same time. That's where so many people are in the contemporary world. The objectivity of the claim of God's reality has not really struck, but there's a third level.

And let me say before I mention it that it's qualitatively different from the other two. Qualitatively different. And here it is, you're a Christian. God's changed your heart. He saved you.

You know today that you've repented of your sins. You've come to belief in Jesus Christ maybe long ago. You are walking in the faith. But at the same time, James chapter four says, believer, you go into Monday and you forget.

You start making your plans and you forget about God. And then all of a sudden it's Friday and you realize, you know, I haven't been conscious of the living God one time this week.

[17:07] I've just been living. I've just been living my life. And the New Testament says that's unbelief. That unbelief is a Christian problem. Now it's qualitatively different because it's in Christ.

It's our problem. It's our sin struggle, but we're in Christ. But it is our problem. And so the Christian has the resources to say, Lord, I do believe, help my unbelief.

Now wherever you are today, and I have no doubt that there are all three represented with all sorts of variations here today. Wherever you are, we all have something to do and something to see here according to the book of Proverbs.

Every one of us has something we can do. And let me say this, without defending any of these claims, because we're in church, you came to church, you expect the people at church to believe in God boldly, without defending any of these claims.

Let me say that we come to church every single week as a Christian to be reoriented to the claims that the Bible makes once again in the midst of our struggle with unbelief.

[18:15] And if you come to church, you step in curious as a non-Christian, don't you come to be confronted a little bit by the claims of the Bible? That's what you expect when you come here. And so let me assert these claims.

Here's what the Bible says. It says there is a God, Christian today, there is a God. Non-Christian, the claim is that there is a God and he created the world and he makes sense of why we exist and everything else.

And secondly, he made you for himself and that the only place that you can find ultimate fulfillment and resurrection hope, life beyond death is in him.

That's claim number two. And claim number three, there is a moral order. There is real objective morality and we can live into that or against it.

And that's the difference in righteous deeds and wicked deeds. And there's a solution and it's the way of wisdom. And this is what it is. It's a life that turns from the twisted crooked view of reality, which says I live for myself, I'm self-centered.

[ 19 : 17 ] I just, I'm chasing after my own pleasures and turns to be objective and says, God made me and he tells me how to live. I can't just do what I want with my life.

And only that can fulfill, only that can forgive. That's the fear of the Lord. Now these are the claims. And this is what the church for centuries has called faith seeking understanding.

It says, I don't have all the answers, but I'm also not gonna subject God to every single. It's where faith eventually comes and says, I believe, help my unbelief.

It's faith that seeks understanding. Now the last word before we move on to the close of this point, I think that it's very difficult to believe this today.

More than the previous centuries, more than the previous generations. And let me give you one reason why, before we move on. Here's the reason why unbelief is more prominent, even if most people remain religious.

[ 20 : 20 ] And the reason is this, we live in a culture that's more individualistic than any culture ever has been in human history. And for that reason, the culture promotes to each of our hearts to see the world through our own personal desires exclusively.

That we live in our own personal worldview. We think about life and the things that we want, we want to achieve, we wanna accomplish about reaching our personal happinesses at every stage of life.

You know, who needs, Marx at least was right about, he said, who needs, do people need God intellectually and existentially when you have iPhones, Netflix and flushing toilets.

You know, comfort, comfort and individualism is one of the biggest struggles we have in belief. Comfort and individualism. And when you rest in comfort and you rest in individualism and say, you know, I don't know that I need this.

I don't know that it's really for me. I don't know, even if I'm here every week that I'm going to allow it to really bathe over my life. And change who I am Monday to Saturday.

[ 21 : 32 ] Then let me just say that I think that it's gonna leave you empty. Over time, you're gonna find that it's not fulfilling, that Netflix eventually gets boring and the comforts eventually fall away and the iPhone eventually causes an addiction that actually makes you sad, makes you struggle.

And in other words, the modern culture we live in creates for us a technocratic illusory life. One where we think that life is all about us.

And let me read to you, C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia series. One of the books, The Silver Chair. Lewis captures so well what the individualistic culture does to us in causing us to be people who struggle with faith, with belief.

Here's what happens, the children are trapped in an underground cave with the evil witch, the principal evil of character of the Narnia series.

And the witch tries to convince them that the world above, the sunshine, the flowers, the grass, everything above the ground, that it doesn't exist, that all of their memories of it are just illusions.

[ 22 : 48 ] And in other words, Jill says, I miss the sunshine. And the witch says, there's no such thing as the sun. He said, do you see, do you look around, do you see the sun?

Instead, what you're doing Jill, is you're taking this lamp post that's in the cave and you're thinking about it in much grander terms. You see, you're taking a little bitty lamp and you're thinking, well, there's light, but I can imagine a much bigger light, a much greater light.

And then you're fabricating, you're thinking about something called the sun, but it's not real. All you really see is the lamp post. And this is what Jill says. I suppose that the other world must all be a dream.

Yes, it is all a dream, said the witch. Yes, all a dream, said Jill. There never was such a world, said the witch. No, said Jill. Never such a world.

There never was any world, but mine, said the witch. Never any world, Jill, but yours. You see what Lewis is doing? He's saying, look, it's the problem of divine absence.

[ 23 : 54 ] You can't, you haven't seen God, have you? There's only one world, Jill, and it's yours. And so live your life and be all about yourself. And Lewis is saying that that's the cave.

That's living in a cave. It's not actually wrestling with objectivity and reality. And Proverbs says the way of wisdom is stepping out of the cave.

In other words, getting out of your own head and heart. And saying that I don't get to just be who I wanna be. I don't get to just choose who I am. I don't get to live life the way I determined because I'm created.

I come underneath something much bigger than that. That's the fear of the Lord. It's the way of wisdom. Now lastly, a few practical things. How do you get this?

The way of wisdom. How do you step into this faith more and more and more in your life? Whether you're a Christian today or something else you're struggling, you're curious.

[ 24 : 54 ] How do you get this? Chapter one, verse seven. Put away the heart, heart, the self-centered heart and say, I don't have all the answers but I want to fear the Lord.

I want to, in other words, I want to honor, revere, esteem, acknowledge, trust, give myself to God. That's the way that Proverbs tells us to do it.

Maybe you're here today and you don't believe in God. And maybe you're here because you don't believe in God but you're also curious and you're also intellectually open.

Or maybe you're here today and you are okay intellectually with God but practically and existentially, God means very little to you when it comes to Monday morning.

And for both situations, let me say that we sang Psalm 14. It says the fool says in his heart, there is no God. It's not the Bible trying to be unnecessarily harsh. It's saying the reason it's foolishness is because it's actually twisting reality.

[ 25 : 58 ] It's a losery. When the Bible uses the word crooked, it means twisted. It means that God is saying, look, you've taken what's real and you've twisted it to fit your own comforts perhaps.

Is that the case? Or are you willing today to say, maybe I can step out of the cave and look at the sunshine? Maybe there is something beyond what I can see. Maybe the problem of divine absence isn't as big.

Maybe the problem is that I live in a technocratic age where I'm governed by my mastery over creation, by my iPhone, by my comforts, by all of these things.

And I've just been unwilling to look beyond myself. Could it be the case? Could it be the case that there is objectivity like that? Now I want to close the last thing is this.

For all of us, whether you're a Christian struggling with unbelief on Monday or not, either way, the New Testament comes to us and gives us a great, helpful story about unbelief.

[ 26 : 59 ] And it's in John chapter 20. We read it at the beginning of our New Testament reading. It's the story of doubting Thomas. And I just want to say one or two things about it. Remember doubting Thomas, if you've read through John's gospel, Thomas was one of the disciples.

And a week before, Jesus had risen, died and rose again from the dead. And Jesus had shown up to all the other disciples, the apostles themselves and also many other people that followed him.

But Thomas was not there. And so in this scene in John chapter 20 verse 24, Thomas is with the disciples and they're telling him, Thomas, Jesus Christ, he's alive.

He rose from the dead. And what does Thomas say? He says, guys, if I don't see the wounds in his hands, if I don't touch him, I can't believe it.

I won't believe it. And you see, Thomas was struggling with the problem. He was struggling with unbelief. And it's even more acute because for every single one of us, we struggle.

[ 28 : 08 ] But Thomas, Thomas had seen the miracles. Thomas had walked with Jesus Christ and seen the things that Jesus Christ had done. And he was struggling with unbelief.

And even more, he was struggling with the problem of divine absence. If I can't physically see, you know, he was like a modern science, he had succumbed to the problem of modern scientism.

If I can't believe it, it must not be real. If I can't see it, excuse me. If I can't see it, it must not be real. If I can't see it, then there's no way that I can believe it. And look, this is what Jesus does.

This is what Jesus does. He does two things. He says, Thomas, he shows up, he says, Thomas, touch me. Touch my wounds. And Thomas needed that. And the reason he needed that is for more than you might think on the surface. It's because Thomas is an apostle. And an apostle is a person who has officially and really seen the resurrected physical Christ.

[ 29 : 12 ] And has been sent by God to send that message forward into history. All the other apostles had seen him, now Thomas had to see him. In other words, he wouldn't be an apostle.

He wouldn't be one of the 12. So he had to see him. But what else does Jesus do? Jesus says this, blessed is the one who has not seen God and believes.

Blessed is the person who has not seen Jesus Christ in the flesh yet and still believes. And that is the way of wisdom.

In other words, you could put it like this. One commentator says this, what did Thomas really need? To be an apostle, Thomas needed to see Jesus in the flesh.

But to be a Christian, to have faith, he did not. Jesus saying, you do not need to see me in the flesh in order to believe. That's what he said.

[ 30 : 10 ] He said, that's real. You don't need to see in order to believe, not yet. But that means what did Thomas need? Whenever the other 11 apostles said to Thomas, look, Thomas, we saw him last week and we touched his hands.

All Thomas needed to do was to believe the apostolic witness. In other words, he needed to hear, there are 11 other people here that are objectively saying, I saw him and they're not lying.

He needed to believe them. And listen, whether you're a Christian or not today, almost every single bit of your life is completely based on testimony.

On things that you've never seen before. Does Australia exist right now? You can't tell me that it does. You can't prove it.

None of us can. Because even if somebody shows us a video, it could be fabricated. Look, that's a silly example, but almost everything in your life is believed on testimony, not on experience.

[ 31 : 18 ] Jesus says that you need this, we all need the same thing that Thomas needed. We need to listen to the apostolic witness. It's objective.

More than 500 people saw Jesus Christ die and rise from the dead. More than 500 people touched his wound. They saw him in the flesh. It's objective.

What the world needs more than anything today in the individualistic culture we live in is to get out of ourselves and to say that there is an objective claim in front of me. And that a man in the middle of history died and rose from the dead and people touched his wounds.

And it's an enormous claim. It'll take over your life if you approach it with faith, seeking understanding. And it'll give you hope and it'll fulfill you. And it's the offer of forgiveness for all the unbelief of the past.

And so today, do what Thomas did at the very end. At the very end, Thomas, Thomas never touched Jesus in the episode. Jesus said, you can touch me, but Thomas didn't.

[ 32 : 22 ] He simply said, my God, my Lord. And in doing that, what was he doing? He was saying, I will not put conditions on God.

I will not put barriers. I will not say to God, look, you have to do this if I'm ever gonna believe. Because if God is real, then he gets to determine the condition.

He's bigger than you. He's bigger than me. We can't put the barrier in place. We can't be like Bertrand Russell, the atheist at the early 20th century, the great philosopher. He said, if I die and I get to heaven and there really is a God I have to stand before, I'm gonna say to him, you didn't do enough to show me that you were real.

Don't put conditions before God. God is God. He gets to determine the condition. Instead, do what Thomas did and say, my God, my Lord.

In other words, you're the creator, my God. And now because of that, you're my Lord. You're my Redeemer, I bow the knee. It's faith, seeking, understanding. So for all of us today, here's the prayer.

[ 33 : 30 ] Lord, I believe, help my unbelief. Let's pray that now. Father, I asked that you would move in our hearts and help us to say, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

And so wherever we are, Lord, meet us. Whether we're atheists right now and we're maybe thinking about these things, whether we're indifferent religious people, help us.

Whether we're Christians, God, who truly bowed the knee, but we struggle, Lord, with unbelief. So for each of us, make our prayer, Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.  
Move upon us now, we ask, Lord, and show us yourself. Help us to see Jesus in the gospels when we read and to see the claims and that they're so different than maybe what we presume.  
So we just ask, Father, for a movement of the Holy Spirit now to help us. And we ask this in Jesus' name, amen.