

Folly

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] So this morning I want to turn back to Proverbs chapter 20. We're going to take a look as I said at this chapter, taking a break from Romans. I think sometimes we maybe get tired at this time of year, so I want to keep the sermons the next few weeks simple, but I hope profound and challenging.

Okay, and you don't get much simpler than Proverbs because it's God's book of common sense. That's what it is, and it's just a fun of beautiful, wise sayings for us to live. I want to just introduce it by speaking a little bit in a more broad sense about wisdom, because wisdom is all about love in the first place. In Proverbs chapter 9 and verse 10, we have the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. And we should all memorize that verse. It's a great verse to memorize. And the foundation in of wisdom is worshiping, reverencing, fearing the Lord, and knowing Him. That is not knowing a... It's not a fact count about God.

It's not how many things you know for a trivial pursuit question. It's knowing Him in a personal and real way, and we know that's the core of the gospel. So the key to wisdom then for us is not raw intelligence or even education, although these things can be significant and important.

It's foundation. The foundation of wisdom, biblical wisdom is having been touched by grace. Okay? That's the most important thing. That introduces humility into our lives because we recognize we need a redeemer. And it also introduces reverence into our lives because we understand who God is and their relationship with Him, and we see Him as glorious and prodigal, and we understand His rescue and the wonder of the atonement. So wisdom is... The beginning of wisdom is this recognition of a loving relationship with Him. And it's also not just about love, but it's about learning, because as true love wants to know more, doesn't it? If you love something, you want to know more about that thing or about that person. And therefore true wisdom is a pursuit of seeking to know God better through His Word, through prayer, and through acts of obedience, which is wisdom and practice. And that therefore is both mystical. There's a mystical element to knowing God, a spiritual element that is difficult to define, knowing an unseen person, that is difficult to define. It is an act of faith. But it's also very practical. So wisdom is not only mystical at some levels, but it's also very practical. In other words, it can be described. It's tangible. It's not just mystical. It's something that's very easy to understand. So we can... In other words, to just distill that a little bit, we can know lots about God and still be foolish, still be fools.

We can be Christians for a long time and still lack wisdom. We can be young and very wise.

[3 : 51] We can be uneducated and of low intelligence and also be very wise, biblically. And you can be highly intelligent and educated, but be a fool. You see? It's not necessarily what we ordinarily expect of wisdom and foolishness in conventional terms. It's recognizing, therefore, God's relationship with God, but also that wisdom is a gift from God in James 1.5. That's the other way, wisdom verse that you know. You all know this. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproaching, that will be given to him. So wisdom is given as a gift in a revelatory relationship. We're in a relationship with God and He reveals things to us more and more. And we can ask for wisdom. And He can show us, therefore, what wisdom is.

And wisdom, as given as a gift from God, is also given in the context of dependence. So it's a gift that we can ask for and is given to us in the context of being dependent on Him for that gift.

A great example of that is Nehemiah chapter 2 and verse 4, where Nehemiah goes, he has asked to do something very quickly, and he has to go into the presence of the King, and the King says to him, what are you requesting? And he says, so I pray to the God of heaven. It's this kind of quick dynamic on the move, dependent prayer for wisdom to know what to say to the King as he is asking him. So it's about love and it's about learning, but it's also about living.

In other words, wisdom is something very, very tangible and very real. It's faith in action for us in the way we relate to God and in the way we relate to one another. In other words, there's vertical and there's horizontal aspects to God's wisdom. You know, when God says, the whole of the command, my whole command for you is to love me and to love your neighbor, then He shows us how to do that. He doesn't just leave us with that and it's not just a warm fuzzy feeling inside, it's how we do that. He shows us how to do that, but it's not moralism. Please don't think that proverbs is moralistic teaching and saying, if this is what we do, if we tick all these boxes and do all the proverbs, we'll be really pleasing to God. It's not like that. Rather, it is when we come to Christ and when we follow Christ and His Spirit lives in us, this is the kind of people the Spirit moves us and is moving us to become. So there is a commonality about who we are in

Christ, also great obviously, individuality as well. So therefore wisdom is, his wisdom in our lives is the greatest apologetic for the gospel. Are you afraid of sharing your faith? That's fine.

[7 : 05] I have no problem with that. We all are afraid to share our faith, but as we live out our faith in wisdom, it will begin to be so obvious that people will ask us about our faith, and that makes things a lot easier. So wisdom is not some kind of esoteric, obscure council of some fat bloke that's sitting on a kind of pedestal with his legs crossed, some mystic sage, some secret formula.

Nor is it the conventional wisdom of the age in which we live. So it's not that you can just take the wisdom of the world in which we live. And that is a great danger, isn't it, for us in our Christian lives that we, it's too easy just to accept the conventional wisdom of the day and be thoughtless, accept all the standards, just fall in line, be indistinguishable.

Somehow reckon that that must be God's wisdom, just because it's conventional wisdom in the world. So we're going to look at Proverbs 20, and we're going to look at 14 characteristics of wisdom that's given in this chapter. Grace at work, being like Jesus, God's wisdom. And we'll do three kind of things to be avoided as wise people, then we'll do three things to run after, to seek, then we're going to do four things to avoid, and then we're going to do four things to seek after, that'll take us four weeks. Okay, so it's three, four, three, four, so we're doing three today.

And the challenge is not to compare ourselves with other people or to divert our gaze, but to allow God's Spirit and God's Word to apply to our own hearts and to our own situation. So here we're looking at what some of the things that wisdom avoids, just a glimpse, just a glimpse at some of the things wisdom, that is God's grace, the character of God, the kind of things Jesus, in other words, who was the perfectly wise expression of God and God's will and God's person, the three things that he would have avoided. And so it's three things we would avoid. In other words, potholes, I am getting there, I promise, this is kind of introductory, but potholes on the path. You can call it different things. That would actually probably be a better title for this sermon, potholes on the path, rather than folly, which is a bit kind of Barton really, as a title, potholes on the path. So the first one is drunkenness. Okay, that's Styson Practill, isn't it? Drunkenness. The first verse, wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it or by them, these things is not wise. Now that's very practical, it doesn't really get more practical than that in terms of who Jesus was and who God is and who we are to be as Christians. Now alcohol is everywhere, is absolutely everywhere in the world that we live in.

They used to say that religion was the opiate of the masses, not the case now, alcohol is clearly the opiate of the masses. And in Scotland particularly, we have an unhealthy relationship with alcohol. We're not good at dealing with alcohol in a right way. We tend to imbibe it to excess a great deal of the time. Its abuse is rampant. It costs our society millions and millions of pounds to deal with the effects of alcohol abuse. It's seen as an essential part of life. Many of the people that you live among, and maybe even you or me, see it as an essential ingredient in life. We live in a culture where drinking to excess is common. It used to be a lads problem where men particularly drink to excess, still is. But I think as the genders have fused together, it's become a lads problem as well, and a culture where young women as well as young men are drinking far too much in their lives. But the challenge for us is that all of us seek to be in the world, but not of the world, and we recognize that it is the hub for the majority of social interaction of the world in which we live. It revolves around alcohol.

[11 : 58] So what does wisdom say about alcohol? Well, Sam 104 verse 15 says, wine gladdens the heart of man.

We know that. We recognize that every good gift comes from God. Jesus himself turned water into wine. A time of great celebration. He didn't quash that time of celebration. Wine was part of the Passover, it became part of the Lord's Supper. It is seen biblically so much in alcohol, particularly wine, it is seen as a gift of God, something connected with celebration, a gift to be acknowledged.

But the reality is also it is not to be something that leads us astray. So wine is a mock or strong drink, brother, whoever is led astray by it is not wise. There are addictive qualities to alcohol which can bring health and relationship damage, particularly of the deepest sort. If you've ever tried to counsel an alcoholic, it is extremely difficult for that habit to that addiction to be broken in their life. It becomes much more important than any other relationship, closest relationship with husband and wife, family, friendship. It can become an escape from reality.

That's what it is for many people, many people living for a Friday night because Friday night is the night when they can drink as much as they want and it is escape from the boredom and the drudgery of the life that they live. And therefore if we have the same mentality, we are escaping from what is God's reality for us and which is God's life for us. And we are not to despise that or escape from it in our lives. It is something which if we take too much of it, distorts our thinking and lowers our guard so that many, many will be conscious of doing stupid things when they have drunk too much alcohol. Act foolishly, wine is a mocker, beer is a brawler. It can lead us to violence and incite loose or regrettable behaviour. It can make us incapacitated. We can loosen our tongues in unhelpful ways. It's a depressant. It's a quick-fix pleasure. We can misuse the resources God gives us and not recognise the need for wisdom in our lives. So wisdom speaks to us in these things and reminds us that it's not Christlike, and this could be much broader of course than just drunkenness, it's not Christlike to be led astray, you know, whoever's led astray, right, it's not wise. We're to be under the influence of a different spirit, the Holy Spirit of God. And one of the aspects of that spirit is self-control of the spirit of God. And God provides that self-control for all of us who ask, as we're conscious and aware of the dangers, and of the... We are living in the world, we will be faced with alcohol. We will probably be drinking alcohol quite a lot, a greater or lesser degree, but we must be conscious of taking that to the living God and saying, tell me where it's wise, tell me where it's foolish, help me to guard my steps. If I'm weakened by it in such a degree, let me stay away from it altogether. It's a wisdom issue for us. And we misunderstand true joy and deep-seated thankfulness and Christ governing our lives if we don't recognize that we take this issue as well as many other issues before him and pray to him. Wisdom is something in this area that we are to ask for and to pray for, to be thoughtful about, to be moderate, to be prepared to say no. You may have to consider your habits and your lifestyle. Beware, can I say, just as an aside of drinking alone, drinking alcohol alone, there's great danger in that, great isolation, great loneliness, and it's a dangerous thing to do.

And beware of making it the norm for your life and maybe particularly the norm for our lives as Christians in Christian company. So drunkenness, that's the first of three. The second is quarreling.

[16 : 43] Verse 3 says, it's an honour for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.

When it talks about men in Proverbs here, because as we saw before Proverbs probably written to a young prince, it doesn't just mean men, it means everyone when it's speaking in this way, but it's written in that context. So quarreling, every fool will be quarreling. There's lots of references to quarreling in Proverbs. Great, it's just so practical. So Jesus avoided quarreling when He could. He avoided quarreling. And it's wise for us to avoid unnecessary friction in our lives.

There will be times when we need to stand up, there will be times when we need to be strong, there will be times when we need to state our case. But this is being quarrelsome, which we all know is something different. And we are not to be like that as Christians. It's an honour for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling. We take time to stand aloof from quarreling. We think about the situations within, again it points us towards self-control and to thinking. In the company that we keep, in the relationships we have, you need to, and I need to resist the temptation to argue the toss, just to argue for the sake of it, to argue to win an argument, to argue to show that you're clever, to argue someone maybe who's not a Christian into humiliation by your wise and significant Christian arguments. If it's done in a way that humiliates or in a way that makes someone look very small and insignificant, then that is not a right motive for us with which to state our case as Christians. We are to avoid quarreling and being quarrelsome in our lives because it is not honouring to God. We are to rise above strife and not love quarreling. Proverbs 7, sometimes I'll just dip into one or two other Proverbs because it's a thematic book and so we'll find there's, themes are repeated in different places.

Proverbs 17 verse 14 says, the beginning, these are great pictures about quarreling. The beginning of strife is like letting out water so quit before the quarrel breaks out. It's like taking your foot, your finger out of the dam. When you take your finger out of the dam, the whole thing explodes.

And so from very small beginnings, you can find great flood of division and hatred and difficulties in life. So it's about being, learning like Christ, like to be like Christ and to know when not to speak and when not to quarrel. This next Proverb, I love this Proverb. Has anyone ever said that God doesn't have a sense of humour? Then look and know this Proverb. Proverbs 26 verse 17, whoever meddles in a quarrel, not his own, is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.

[20 : 15] So that's a great picture. Have you ever walked past a rottweiler and decided to just wiggle its ears for the sake of it? Well, you'll know that you enter a quarrel that's not your own, as you may get a hefty chunk out of your thigh from an irritated animal. And we simply, we don't meddle in business that's not our own. We're not to be people who stick our noses into other people's business and quarrel with them and pick a fight. Christians in the past sometimes and even in the present are good at picking fights. We're not to look to pick fights in our Christian lives.

There's enough battles. There's enough struggles. And we're not to be quick to quarrel. It is something that takes time and also something that's honourable in our lives. Does someone like to get that door? I think there's someone buzzing a door there. Thanks, Ross. It's honourable as well as something that is a sign of maturity. It's an honour for a man to keep a loop from strife. See, we don't, as Christians, you know, was that the door? We don't always need to be right as Christians. You know, we've learned to be humble. But we wake up every morning and we recognise what Jesus Christ has done for us. We know our own hearts. We know the pride that's in our own hearts. And we know we don't need always to win the argument. We don't always need to quarrel.

We don't always need to be first. How hard must it have been for Jesus Christ, the Son of God, not always to want to put people right when he had every right to do that and he knew what was right and wrong. But he often chose not to answer, not to argue, but to show grace and to show patience. And I think through wisdom and prayer for concern, we should seek to do the same.

You think how much of the world's and your own life experiences or the wisdom of the world which will have revolves around divide and conquer. Just think of that. How much time is spent in divide and conquering? President Trump does come to mind. But many leaders do. It's divide and conquer. It's the same kind of thing. It's cause division, cause mistrust, cause separation, whereas the way of Christ is always different. And it's very easy for us in a Christian context to argue the same way, divide and conquer. Get people on your side. Get people thinking the same way as you. And so there's others who don't think the same. And it leads to quarreling and division and separation. We are as much as is possible with us, we are to be peacemakers in our Christian lives. And that will often involve us being willing to be wronged. It all, I think, comes under this umbrella of quarreling. So that's the second thing. There's drunkenness and there's quarreling. And the third thing that I'm going to look at that wisdom avoids, that Jesus avoided in his perfect wisdom. The third thing is laziness. Proverbs also has a great deal to say about the sluggard. It's a great word, isn't it? The sluggard does not plow verse four. In the autumn, he will seek at harvest and have nothing. Or verse 13, where it says,

Love not sleep lest you come to poverty, open your eyes and you will have plenty of bread. So it's a big theme in Proverbs is laziness. Laziness matters to God. Isn't that good?

[24 : 07] That laziness matters to God. Now, I can see you and me applying many of these negatives to our own situations and maybe some of the positives. We can think of alcohol and alcohol abuse.

We can think of quarreling and we can think of times when we're quarreling. But actually, I very rarely heard anyone confess to being lazy. It's one of these kind of untouchable subjects, isn't it? You can confess to have drunk too much or quarreled too much, but being lazy, do you know anyone that actually, that would look at them and say, oh, yep, yep, that's me. I'm really lazy. I don't really know. I don't think many people look at laziness and would apply it to themselves and certainly would not confess it. But it's a classic sin that we see in others, isn't it? It's a classic sin that we would see in other people. We might not apply it to ourselves, but we often, oh man, they're really lazy. We would apply it to other people rather than ourselves. And there's two things, just as we close, there's two things about laziness that may make you and I apply it more likely to ourselves, because when we think of laziness, we think of the slugger, don't we? The picture here, the kind of slothful person. You'll have your own image of what a slugger looks like, and you think that's the kind of, I'm not like that.

I'm not that kind of person. But there's two things here that Prover speaks about what God regards as lazy. The first is a sense of entitlement in verse 4, the verse we looked at. The slugger doesn't plow in the autumn, but he seeks a harvest when the harvest comes. So there's a sense of entitlement in this lazy person. I'm not going to do any work for my harvest, but when harvest comes, that's, God gives me that. A sense of entitlement is laziness. You know, God owes that person, that slugger, a harvest. No sense of duty, no sense of work ethic. A twisted understanding of grace.

God loves me. God cares for me. I don't need to work. That's kind of justification by words. Don't want to do any of that stuff. And we're blinded to our purpose. We're blinded to redemption.

We're blinded to privilege and to our calling to be workers, to be servants, to love God and love one another by serving. We're created to work six days. We're stewards of God's creation and of all God's giving us. We're in a battle. We have responsibility. We don't have a sense of entitlement.

[26 : 48] We can't just sit down at God's feet and say, give me, give me, give me, because God recognizes that we have both privileges and responsibilities, and the Holy Spirit enables us to work, to serve, to love other people, to return thanks with grateful service, and not to have a sense of entitlement. We love God and we love others. So often we're grumpy with God because He doesn't give us what we want. And that can be an aspect of laziness that we haven't looked at who God is, and we expect Him to throw gifts. He does throw gifts to us all the time, but we can come to expect that sense of entitlement, and it is laziness. But the other thing about laziness which we might not think of as being lazy, but is spoken of here and might therefore apply to us more than we think is in verse 13, where he says, love not sleep, lest you come to poverty, open your eyes and you'll have plenty of bread. So a sense of entitlement, but also disordered love, a disordered love, that you love sleep, you love rest, you love relaxation, you love that more than anything else.

It's what comes first in your life. And God's saying that it's foolishness to love the pursuit of pleasure and idleness and mindless activity as if it's God honoring. So that might not be traditional, conventional laziness as we think of someone getting out in their boxers and their vests, sort of, and slobbering about in their bed all day and just eating pot noodles and stuff, and never doing anything. That's the kind of the image we have of laziness that's kind of sluggard, isn't it? But this is something, this is having disordered loves. It's loving a responsibility more than we love God. It's loving mindless activity, not thinking how we use our time, being lazy with how we use our gifts and how we use the time that God's given us, spending hours and hours and hours watching Netflix, spending time and time and time just on activities that are not really helping anyone, are not indicative of our love for God or are serving of one another.

So it's more about use of time than traditional laziness, it's self-centeredness. So there's how much of my life revolves around me and about my pleasure and about others serving me rather than grace at work. So you saw, you know, I'm saying it's not moralistic, it's about understanding His grace and His love. So laziness is, you know, being willing, not being lazy is recognizing that sometimes in Christ service we're going to be inconvenienced, that we'll maybe not fulfill our dreams that we think are so significant, but we'll submit to God's dreams for me, that we'll live in the light of eternity and recognize that time is short and every moment is precious and that there is a future for living the dream in His new heavens and His new earth, which are going to be way above and beyond anything that we can ask of, even imagine and will be glorious and we just simply will not be lazy there, they'll not be able to be lazy there. So disordered love is a form of laziness that's been spoken of here. And so the question as we take God's common sense for us is how are we living now in the light of His grace? Are we living for His glory and recognizing these very tangible, everyday, practical outworkings of the Holy Spirit moving in us to be self-controlled with alcohol, not to be quarreling unnecessarily and to not be lazy with a sense of entitlement or with disordered loves? And it's when we struggle with that, we recognize, well,

God gifts these things to us as we ask Him, as we look to Him, but it does involve change. And we resent that sometimes, isn't it? That's the problem is that we resent the change that He's asking us to invoke in our lives and moving from our own Lordship to His Lordship over our lives. That's why we repent all the time. We repent all the time because we're moving away, we're moving towards His Lordship, and He's exposing in His day to day the kind of things that separate us from Him because He loves us and because He wants us to live like Jesus lived with the wisdom of God and the beauty of that wisdom. I mean, let's pray briefly.

Lord God, we ask and pray that You would help us to be wise, and we know that wisdom also involves avoiding certain things. So help us if we are convicted today, as we all are and as I am, about Your wisdom and about our lack of thankfulness for Your grace and our lack of thoughtfulness of putting Your grace and wisdom into action in these very practical ways. You thank You for the book of Proverbs, just this explosion, this fountain, this waterfall, this dynamo of Your common sense, which just throws out so much wisdom for us. Help us to know it and love it, and help us to know the Christ who is behind this great wisdom of life and of love.

[32 : 57] For Jesus' sake, amen.