

Folly Revisited

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[0 : 00] Okay, so we're going to return to the theme of Proverbs 20. Well, it's not a theme as such. Well, the theme is wisdom, I guess.

And the first week we looked at, well, what we've been looking at is things to avoid and things to seek after from this book of Proverbs, from chapter 20. So we had three things we avoided in the first week, and then we had four things that we were to seek after, and it was in terms of understanding ourselves, understanding others, and understanding the world which we live.

And today we're going to look at four areas that we are to avoid again. So we're going folly, wisdom, folly, and next week we'll be wisdom again, and we'll be 334 and four.

And that will cover most of the chapter, Proverbs, not all of it, but certainly most of it. And can I remind you, if you've been here and if you haven't been here, this is not moralism that I'm preaching.

I'm not preaching, do this and God will like you. It's easy to take the Proverbs in that way, but we must see them in the context of grace, in the context of being unable to please God in our own selves and our sinful natures.

[1 : 15] But by grace, being transformed and being changed and being born again by His Spirit. And so what we find in Proverbs is really the character of God for us, the kind of people we should be turning into as Christians.

It's that ongoing journey, isn't it, the kind of people we should be turning into. It's a transformative passage, really. And if we can say it's like the Holy Spirit soundbites for every day.

It should encourage us in our spiritual disciplines, this is the kind of people we should be becoming if we are Christians, because God is at work in us. Rather than this is the kind of person I have to become because this is what God wants and I need to do it in my own strength.

It doesn't work like that. That's moralism, and it becomes legalism. So we think we're better than others because we can tick some of the Proverbs that we've done. It's not like that.

The gospel is about our incapacity to do anything right, but our capacity when we come to Christ and depend on Him and His Holy Spirit.

[2 : 26] One of the devotions I was reading this week, there's a really good verse from St. Corinthians 10, which says, we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

That's really what the Proverbs are about, about taking captive every thought and every direction of our lives, making it captive to Jesus Christ. It's Proverbs is God's common sense for us as we live our lives.

So we look for our conscience every time we come to worship, every time we read Scripture, every time we're under the word that we want our conscience to be taught and moulded and changed by the Holy Spirit.

And what we're looking for is maybe things that didn't, becoming aware of things that maybe didn't used to bother us, but when we find what God wants for us, they do begin to bother us and challenge us and rustle up at feeling of discontent, pushing us towards Christ to become more like Him.

Things maybe that are acceptable in the world in which we live and in the context in which we live, and that's even more challenging, isn't it? We know there are certain things that everybody thinks are wrong, but increasingly in the society in which we live, the standards of a world without absolute truth and without the truth of God's word as a foundation, we will find ourselves in conflict.

[3 : 51] So there's four things very quickly here that we're going to look at, and they're very simple, remember I said at the beginning, it's the time of year when we need simple, clear, easy sermons just to take with us as we go on our way.

The first thing that we're to avoid as Christians from a God's book of common sense is dishonesty. And there's four verses that look at that. Verse 10, unequal weights and unequal measures are both alike and abomination to the Lord.

Bad, bad, verse 14 says the buyer, but when he goes away, then he boasts. Verse 17, bread gained by deceit is sweet to a man, but afterwards his mouth will be full of gravel.

And in verse 23 is repeated, the first verse, unequal weights are an abomination to the Lord and false scales are not good. So dishonesty is what we are to avoid.

Proverbs at this level was written, or these Proverbs anyway about dishonesty are written very much in the context of commerce with traders using different weights in a bartering system, you know, before holes in the wall and cards and all these things.

[4 : 57] So they had a bartering system and they had stones that they would use to weigh the goods that they were buying or selling. And they would use light ones to sell and heavy ones to buy.

So it was dishonest weights they were using. So they would get more if they were buying and they would need to give away less if they were selling. And it was deception in order to get a bargain.

They were cheating really. And then there was the bartering where you would say certain things, oh, this is a rubbish deal, you can't possibly be selling me that. And they cut down the price way down low and then you go away and say, yeah, look at the great thing I got, what a bargain.

I cheated that guy out of what was rightfully his by saying false things about it. Acquiring goods or services by getting one over another person, modern parlance, ripping someone off, benefiting at their expense, not dealing honestly with them.

And God is saying God sees, God knows and God's standard for us is honesty as Christians. And that is much broader than the kind of buying and selling of goods, isn't it?

[6 : 07] But as a general principle in life, honesty should mark our lives as you should be known and actually be known as honest people as Christians in our day to day affairs of life.

However dishonesty reveals itself here in the passage, it's in the context of greed, benefiting at someone else's expense, trying to be too smart for our own boots and not getting caught.

But it may be in lots of areas, it might be in taxes, it might be in poor business or work ethics, it might be complicit as an employee in immoral practices and just saying, well, I'm forced to do it, my boss has told me to do it.

It's not a justifiable reason before God, being untrustworthy, not dealing in the truth. Now, there are ethical and difficult issues that you and I will need to deal with that.

But we need to recognize God's baseline for us is honesty. Because often the sin behind dishonesty is either a desire for popularity, a fear of what other people might say, might be greed or it might be pride.

[7 : 18] And so when you go from here, and when I go from here and tomorrow we mix with the world in our everyday, day to day living, it's important that we are people who are honest.

Because it gets to the root of our understanding of God's relationship with us, that God sees our hearts, God understands exactly what our motives are and requires us to be honest in confession with Him and know His forgiveness and recognize that God is truth.

And dishonesty, I think one of the things that the proverb speaks about here is reminding us that dishonesty will always have consequences. That verse that we read in 17, bread gained by the sweetest sweet to Him, but afterwards His mouth will be full of gravel.

So if we are dishonest in our Christian lives, however that reveals itself, it sours our Christian experience. It distances us from God who is truth.

It grieves His Holy Spirit who indwells us. And it may mean that we will be the recipients of dishonesty from others. Because as we treat others, others will treat us.

[8 : 31] And that will leave a bitter taste in our experience as we recognize that we are being treated the way we have treated others. So dishonesty is something that gets to the heart of our understanding of sin.

It's the ancient lie of sin, isn't it? This is sweet. This is good. You don't need to do what God asks you to do as a believer because you're forgiving it.

Just live the way you want. Speak to the taste, but once you suck the sweet and the cover of that sweet, which is lovely and tasty, there's gravel there and it's destructive and unsuitable.

It's a veneer of happiness. We have been made to live His way by grace. You know, that's what grace is about. It's recalibrating ourselves to live the way He designed us to live.

I read a good illustration about freedom, speaking about freedom and this great quest for freedom in the society in which we live. And there's no such thing, of course, as absolute freedom. But the author was speaking about genuine freedom as when we lived the way we were intended to live or anything works the way it was intended to work.

[9 : 42] So you don't put a five-year-old driving a car because the car was not intended to be driven by a five-year-old. It intends to be driven by someone who's qualified, who has passed a test and who will drive safely and is aware, can see over the steering wheel for a start.

And that's important, isn't it? Sin keeps us from seeing over the steering wheel of life and we just think we can do what we want as we accelerate away in our own strength. So there are consequences.

That's the first thing. The second one, the second characteristic to avoid is a belter, really. It's gossiping, verse 19.

Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, therefore do not associate with a simple babbler. The same is said in Proverbs 11 and verse 13.

And in the contemporary English version, which is a kind of stripped-back, simple version that we read, it says, stay away from gossips. They tell everything. So it's a great thing to avoid in our lives and to recognize someone who deliberately shares what they know not to be true or what is unverified as truth or is true but is unnecessary to share other than it's really juicy and it's a scandal.

[11 : 07] And God is saying, and all the songs we were singing today reminds us of the importance of guarding our speech and our conversation. It's such a huge area, isn't it, in all our communities.

If you lived in an island, if you lived in a complete isolate, it wouldn't really matter quite so much. But because we are drawn and brought into community as believers, and because we live as believers or not in community, then it's very important to guard how we speak so that it reflects Christlikeness and our transformation.

It's probably one of the greatest areas of weakness in our lives and especially in the church. I know personally from my own heart and my own experiences how much we love to share bad news about people.

How quick we are to share moral failure in others. How quick we are to make judgmental statements about other people's lives and pass on information that we've heard and we hope might be true but we're not sure, especially negative things sometimes.

It's because it makes us feel better about ourselves, doesn't it? It justifies our own failures when we hear and pass on the failures of others.

[12 : 31] We're all failures together. We justify it by saying. Now, we're very polite and we're very cautious and careful about how we speak today.

It wasn't always the case, and some of our great godly fathers in the past were not quite so careful about condemning these things. And John Calvin, the great John Calvin, is quoted as saying when he, dealing with this issue of gossip, I consider looseness with words no less of a defect than looseness of the bowels.

Verbal diarrhea. That's what we're guilty of so much of the time. Speaking without thinking. Being loose, not recognizing the lordship of Christ over what we speak and when we say it and how we say it.

It's so important considering what we say to other people. Or sorry, yeah, what we say about others to other people. Even if we know it to be true, can we ask the question, is it helpful to pass on?

Is it building up the kingdom or is it building up my reputation? What about the person being spoken of? What will they think of what I'm saying? Does this make me popular or does it make Christ honored?

[13 : 48] You have the privilege, and I have the privilege of being the person who stops a gossip conversation from going any further. We can be the plug. We can be the ones who stop it.

We can be the ones who don't say, don't tell anyone this, but I've been told this. You can hear it, but don't tell it to anyone else. Rather than saying that, we can be the ones who stop that piece of information by not passing it on.

And if there is something negative we have to say about somebody, can we ask the question, would we say it to their face as a brother and sister first in order to challenge them about their behavior, maybe, and make us accountable to one another in love and humility?

I suspect not many of us would say that much to anyone anymore if that were the case, because we're not necessarily willing to confront these issues face to face, but we are willing to speak behind each other's backs.

So consider what we say and also consider to whom we listen and who we speak. Do you have a go-to gossip? Do you have somebody who will always keep you informed about things that maybe are dubious in their truthfulness?

[15 : 11] Stay away from them. Even better challenge them in love about what they're doing, what they're saying. But the Bible says, stay away from people like that. That's strong language, isn't it?

We grade sins, particularly in the church, moral lapses, public sins are deemed a scandal, and they are to be repented of and they are serious in God's eyes.

But I think much more damage on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis is done by gossip, by unbridled tongues that are untaught and unchanged and not under the Lordship of the Holy Spirit.

And that's a great challenge to us all. I do love Billy Graham's quote. A real Christian is someone who can give his pet parrot to the town gossip.

Do you get that? That's a really profound statement. He's not afraid of what the repetitive parrot will pass on to the town gossip.

[16 : 12] I wonder if that could be true of us in the privacy of our homes. Third, the third thing, the last year, briefer. Third thing that this chapter tells us, encourages us to avoid challenges, commands us to avoid, is vindictiveness.

Verse 22, do not say, I will repay evil, wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you. Francis Bacon, speaking on this subject of vindictiveness or revenge, says that he that studies revenge keeps his wounds open.

It becomes a harbor for bitterness. And that is absolutely true. God never tells us not to do something just for the sake of it. It's never just to say, because I said.

There's always a valid reason, and we know that vindictiveness, taking the law into our own hands, usually builds within us a sense of bitterness and a sense of misunderstanding of our place in this world.

It's important to recognize how we respond when we will suffer wrong. Maybe you've come into this new week from a bad week. Maybe you've suffered wrong in your work or in your home or in relationships one way or another.

[17 : 30] And your natural response, our natural response is to thrash out, isn't it? It's to get even. It is to get, to pay back what has been done.

But it's a misunderstanding of our place in the scheme of justice in this world. It's not for us to repay evil, and it's not for us to repay evil with evil, particularly.

Romans 12, 17 to 21. They know an evil for evil, but give thought to what you do is honorable and the sight of all if possible. So far as it bends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. For it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. That's very clear. On the contrary, an opposite command is given if your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If he's thirsty, give him something to drink. By so doing, you'll heat burning coals in his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. When you see it like that, that makes absolute sense, doesn't it?

[18 : 29] But we can so quickly and so easily be vindictive. The law of Moses forbade it in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy chapter 32, vengeance is mine, quoted in the New Testament.

And recompense for the time when their foot will slip, for the day of their calamity is at hand and their doom will come swiftly. And the law of love reverses it. We read a bit about that.

But also in Proverbs, it's a quote from Proverbs 25 and verse 21, if your enemy is hungry, give him bread and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.

So the New Testament takes these two Old Testament Proverbs and applies them to this area of vindictiveness. The law of love dispenses with the need to be vindictive.

The law of love, it rather reverses it because we recognize and see that Christ, we were God's enemy and He died for us.

[19 : 32] Therefore, we are to love our enemies in the way that He loves us. It's all based on grace, on transformation, on understanding the cross of Jesus. So the law of Moses forbade it.

The law of love reverses it. The law of faith dispenses with it because we see and know that God can actually take what is evil and bad and turn it into our good as we learn from it and wait upon the Lord and trust Him through it.

So we see something completely radical and different. I'm going to get my own back. It is not what we seek to live like as believers because as enemies of God, we have been loved and forgiven and renewed and given hope in life.

A well-known phrase, I guess, which is popular, I think, and a lot of popular culture is revenge is a dish best served cold.

And it's lauded and appreciated as something cool and well thought through. And it sounds cool, maybe, but it speaks of a bitter heart, a calculating and a simmering hatred and a willingness to take the place of God in these issues for it is His place.

[21 : 00] He will one day be the judge of everyone. He will bring injustice to the universe, to the world, not just to our own individual situations, but He will be the judge of all mankind and of all injustice and the only safe haven for us to be is in Christ, covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, who bore the vindictiveness of humanity against Himself in order to be a redeemer.

So it reminds us of where our place is and how we live in the light of Christ's grace and goodness. We live loving our enemies rather than treating them like maybe other people expect us to treat them.

And the last thing, the fourth thing, briefly, to avoid is rash commitments, verse 25. It is a snare to say, rashly, it is holy and to reflect only after making vows.

This again is speaking into an Old Testament practice of dedicating something, separating it out to the Lord and to the Lord, setting apart as holy something to the Lord.

You could do that either voluntarily or it could be something that was compulsorily done, but it was a mark of gratitude and worship. But what Proverbs is saying is it needs to be done thoughtfully, having counted the cost and being able to fulfil the cost of making that vow because once the vow was made in the Old Testament, you couldn't break it.

[22 : 34] And so you needed to not do it rashly or quickly or thoughtlessly. It needed to be something that you could actually do and work out because you would be held account for making that vow and the encouragement is not to make a vow rashly or thoughtlessly.

Now we don't have the same vowing system under the New Covenant, but we recognise that in the New Testament we are invited to make commitments to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are part of a community where we serve Jesus Christ together and we make commitments together. And so the principle is that we are to be thoughtful about our commitment to Jesus Christ and what we promise we will do for Jesus Christ and not do it in a rash or a careless way.

That is not counting the cost or the time or the effort or the responsibility that's going to be involved. In other words, it's kind of not good enough saying, yeah, I'll serve in this way, but then never really bothering.

Not thinking what might be involved, not thinking the cost that's required. That goes to even making a profession of faith. Oh yeah, I believe in Jesus and then going our merry way without realising the cost of following Jesus is death to self and is coming under His Lordship.

[24 : 07] And so there's this huge significant recognition of the cost of following Jesus. Grace and salvation is free, but it's not cheap to use a phrase that I often use here.

There is a debt we owe to Jesus Christ and there is a cost to commitment. Now within the church we need people. We need people to be committed. We need people not just to be fly by nights, to be drifting in and out of the community.

We need people under gifts. We need what you have to serve the Lord Jesus Christ as part of this community. And it's important that you see that, that you see the commitment of yourself to the community of God and to Christ Himself as part of the debt you owe to Jesus Christ.

And then I think part of this is an encouragement therefore to give of your very best in all that you do for Jesus Christ and your commitment to Him. Whether it's in a workplace, whether it's in taking on extra duties in the workplace, whether it's doing things on a Sunday, all the different acts of service that are involved, some public, some much more private, much more unseen behind the scenes, that you do it for Christ's sake.

So when something comes up when we're asking for people to help, then find out about the task and if you can commit to that task, commit to doing it well for Jesus' sake.

[25 : 40] Humbly as a debt, not for praise, not to be seen, not to get the plaudits or the position, but for the sheer joy of serving Jesus Christ.

And it's important within that same context, so when in the church context it's easy to come up with lots of great ideas of what to do as a church, I think sometimes. It's not so easy to follow them through, to follow through the cost that might be involved, the people that would need to be involved, the reason that we're doing it and the commitment that will be needed in order to keep it going.

It's easy to start things and do things for a few weeks in church context and you may be complained sometimes, well we don't seem to do very much in St. Columba's, well that's deliberate, that's deliberate because we're primarily a church that seeks to build relationships and serve through relationships, not through programs.

You're busy enough in your lives without adding lots and lots of programs, but there is a certain amount that we need to do. Doing it to the Lord, not grudgingly.

And our great example is the Lord Jesus Christ. Another quote from that same book that I was reading this week, talking about freedom, spoke about the one who gave up his freedom.

[26 : 59] What could be less free than God the Son being nailed hands and foot to a tree? What could be less free than that?

He couldn't move physically and he did that willingly on our behalf. That's a great example of commitment to His people.

And so when we make vows, when we make commitments to serve and to do things in the church or to do things in your workplace as a Christian, to do things in the family home, whatever it might be, remember that you're doing them to Christ.

It doesn't need to be just in the church, in any context, and serve Him well. These are really practical insights from God's book of common sense.

And I do believe, and I need to practice what I preach more, that it would be a real blessing for your life if you read every single day a couple of Proverbs.

[28 : 04] I don't think you would go wrong if, along with your daily devotionals, whatever, if you're doing the Bible in a year or if you're doing other devotionals, as part of your spiritual disciplines, that you read maybe two or three Proverbs every single day, because you will learn and I will learn how the Holy Spirit wants us to be like Jesus.

It will teach us how to be like Jesus. And that's a great thing, and it will be good for our lives and for our blessing under God. Let's pray briefly. Father God, we ask that you would teach us that you are a practical God, although you're God of the universe and that you are transcendent.

You're also hugely practical for our day-to-day living, and your Proverbs reveal how much you know about humanity and about our weaknesses and our sins, our failings, our destructive tendencies, but also how we can be transformed by your grace.

And they do pray particularly for any today who might be in church who are not Christians and who are wondering what it's all about, or who think this may be just a sermon about moral behavior or being good people.

May your grace come through from what we have been saying, and may they see their need of redemption because they fall so far short, as we know.

[29 : 26] We fall so far short every day and need a Savior who has fully committed in life and in death and in resurrection to our rescue, to our salvation, and to eternal life.

So Lord, help us, we pray, bless us and guide us in all that we do. For Jesus' sake, amen.