

Grace

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 00] Okay, so this morning we're going to return for the last time to this passage, this chapter of Proverbs, Proverbs chapter 20.

And I'll stress again, maybe for those who haven't been here, but also for those who have been here, that this is not, that Proverbs of God are not moral teachings that we try and follow in order to please God.

That's not the point of them. They're really for us some of the characteristics that should mark our lives if we are already Christians.

It should be some of the characteristics of the Holy Spirit at work transforming our lives. You know, Romans 12 speaks about being living sacrifices to God, acceptable to God, and thanksgiving to Him for coming to faith.

And he says, we become living sacrifices by the transforming of our minds. So it involves thought, it involves action, it involves changing who we are, that we are renewed and our minds are changed and we become like Jesus Christ.

[1 : 08] It's what we would, you know, what we would call becoming holy. We are made holy when we come to faith, but then we become holy also as we become more like Jesus.

And I think holiness has got a kind of bad press and it's seen as sort of a bit ethereal and a bit mystical and a bit otherworldly and sometimes a bit holier than thou.

You know that, you know, we don't like that there's a bit of self-righteousness about it. It shouldn't be and it isn't like that biblically at all. Holiness is relentlessly practical in the Bible and we find that really Proverbs is a book of holiness.

It's a book of practical holiness for us to consider. And maybe you don't think God cares about some of these little things in your lives, but let me assure you He does and He cares about the practical outworking of what it means to be a Christian.

Not so much what we profess and what we think we believe, but in many ways how we live in our lives. So we've looked at things in this chapter alone, by the end of today we'll have looked at 14 things.

[2 : 15] Seven things to avoid and seven things to attain to. So and we've done all the avoidance, okay? We've done the avoiding things in our lives as people.

The Bible gives us things to avoid not to do as a mark of the Holy Spirit working and as a mark of grace, as a mark of people who rely on Jesus.

So we've looked at drunkenness and we've looked at quarreling and laziness and dishonesty and gossiping and vindictiveness and rash commitments.

They're not very otherworldly, are they? They're not very ethereal. They're very down to earth. They're very practical things. They're things that tomorrow you will go out and be challenged by at one level or another.

And we've seen these seven different things that as Christians we should look to avoid. But we've also seen three things to attain to and we're going to look at another four this morning briefly as we finish this series.

[3 : 12] We've looked at the importance of wisdom as a reflection of the opposite of folly. The wisdom is understanding others, understanding ourselves and understanding life stages.

We've seen that all in the verses that we've looked at from Proverbs. So today briefly we're going to look at faithfulness, righteousness, wise talk and good advice. These are the last four from this chapter that hopefully practically are aspects, characteristics of wisdom that you and I need to display as we go out into our day to day lives and reflect, seek to reflect the grace and the love and the commitment and the power of God transforming us.

So the first one is faithfulness. Verse 6 of this Proverb is the standalone verses, the standalone Proverbs. Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love but a faithful man who can find.

And this Proverbs reminding us of the importance of faithfulness and also the rarity of faithfulness. And there's a great word there, steadfast, or it's a great two words, that's the one word in the original, steadfast love.

It's the great Old Testament word. It's the brilliant Old Testament word. It's the Old Testament word that the NIV translators left to the very end because they didn't know how to translate it because it's such a big, wide, deep, strong word and we don't really have one word that encapsulates it.

[4 : 44] Steadfast love is a decent attempt, I guess. It's the Hesed word, the word of loyal love, steadfast love, covenant love, the great love that primarily is reflected in the love of God for His people, which is that outstanding love that we see in Jesus Christ.

And it shows itself in faithfulness, this stead-faithful love, never giving up love. And faithfulness is the theme here, is a wise thing that we should attain to.

And not many of us should self-proclaim that. We shouldn't think we are people naturally in our lives who are great at steadfast love.

We maybe have a high evaluation of the faithfulness and the friendship that we give to other people and our love towards them. But I wonder if we analyze that friendship we have with our family and the people closest to us, whether it is sacrificial and steadfast love or whether it's simply really us loving ourselves at one level because we're looking in the mirror and we love those who are like us, we love those who don't demand of us, we love those who we'd attracted to.

And even then sometimes we only love them as long as they're nice to us because that can sometimes be the level of our love and it's different from the steadfast love.

[6 : 12] Romans 12, 3 says a great thing for us, don't think of yourself too highly of yourself. Can I have that again?

For the grace given to me, I say to everyone among you not to think of more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

And that's what we find that we don't have too high an opinion of how loving we are to other people and how great we are as friends and as others because so often we fall short and we recognize that as Christians.

We don't have too high an opinion of ourselves because we understand our relationship to Jesus Christ. And we can say He's the only truly righteous, faithful person.

He's the one who's been faithful. He exemplifies steadfast, loyal love. In His atonement for us, we recognize that question, many proclaim His own steadfast love but a faithful man who can find, well we can find it in Jesus Christ.

[7 : 20] He is the faithful man. He's the faithful person, pure and selfless. And the great thing about Proverbs is it drives us to the cross.

It's not moralistic. It's not simply ticking everything and this is how I can live. It drives us to the cross and says, I can't live like this. I am unfaithful like Jesus Christ is.

Faithfulness is a rare jewel and it is something that we can develop and mature and nurture as Christians because it's a gift of God.

It is the grace of the gospel. It is a character. It's the flavor of grace's faithfulness. It's a practical outworking of love.

As Christians, it makes a huge difference if we know about and practice and recognize that faithfulness isn't just something that naturally comes from. It's something we need to work at.

[8 : 21] He's being determined and committed not to give up. Can I call it a gentle stoicism? Now we're coming into our own here in Scotland because we're quite good at stoicism.

We're used to rain and wind and cold. Any of you who are visiting today from warm parts of the world, you'll not understand this for us. We've had three weeks of unbroken sun and no rain.

We don't know what to do. We don't know which way to turn. We've never had it before. It's rare and strange. So we're stoic. We're used to the wind and the rain and the cold.

And it makes us stoic. And I often rail against stoicism here in the pulpit. But sometimes stoicism is a good thing. It's not a bad thing. And it can be good to be stoic in faithfulness and in love with a soft stoicism, shall we say.

Now, we're in the third week of the World Cup. And I haven't used it once as an analogy. How impressive is that? But I'm going to today. So we're into that stage, really great stage of the World Cup.

[9 : 26] But I want to expose the failings of somebody at the World Cup and use it as an illustration here. Neymar has had a bad week, hasn't he?

He's been the butt of all kinds of memes and all kinds of jokes about his antics when he's being injured. It's not the right word.

When someone's tapped him on the ankle and then he goes down and rolls around for many, many, many cycles looking that he's very, very seriously ill.

This last week when he was touched at the edge of the pitch and he went down and I genuinely thought he'd caught the bubonic plague. I actually thought he was going to die on the spot.

He looked so desperately ill and broken. Now there was a day in my generation, and maybe people like Ivan will remember this as well, when footballers did everything to show they hadn't been injured.

[10 : 29] They did everything to show that it wasn't painful. It wasn't so. They got up and they went on. I watched a program last night on BBC Alba, something I don't often do, about Jimmy Johnson, the great Jinky Johnson for Celtic.

He was somebody who had great skill and great ability and when he was hacked down again and again and again he simply didn't roll around. The illustration here is that I think we, Neymar reflects a lot of the kind of society thinking that we now have as people who are very fragile, who are very easily offended.

Our rights need protected all the time. Beyond that we tend to love only those who agree with us, who are nice and who let me be what I want to be.

And yet we are called to be faithful to Jesus Christ and to what I would speak of and have spoken of a lot as the spiritual disciplines. And that, however unpopular that is and also however counter-cultural it is for us, for example we are called to love our enemies, however mean they are.

We are to love our brothers and sisters beyond it being easy, beyond it just when they are nice to us. When we are wronged, when we are opposed, when we are treated unfairly, when others are unfaithful to us, our response is not to roll around before God on the floor and say, oh the pain Lord, take them away, take these people away from us, strike them down.

[12 : 02] That is not to be a response. We are to be faithful, we are to keep on loving for the long haul in family, in work and in the church.

And Proverbs points this to grace and to the impossibility of the truth of the gospel, isn't it? We can't do it without grace.

We can't be faithful without Jesus Christ in our hearts. It goes against every fiber of our self-preserving genes. The way of God, it's rare because it's entirely not what we do by nature and we need to be born again.

We need to be born afresh and we need to live life in that way with God's grace and with the help of the Holy Spirit. So you see Calvary is at the very core of Proverbs in the Old Testament and we'll see that more as we go on.

It's never just moralism, moralistic living. So faithfulness is the first thing. The second thing that is a mark of wisdom and is the opposite of folly is righteousness, which is the next verse.

[13 : 11] They're righteous who walks in his integrity, blessed are his children after him. So faithfulness is the first or the fourth quality we've looked at.

The fifth one is righteousness. And that of course is at the very core of our understanding of wisdom, isn't it? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and we recognize that as being that we come to know our need of Jesus.

So there's righteousness that's both declared when we come to faith and also that's practiced. So this verse takes us to the very core of spirituality, of religion, of worship of God because it reminds us this recognition of our need to be right before God.

That's what righteousness is, right before God. So the whole message of the Bible, isn't it? That we need, there's only one judge. There's one judge of your life and he asks you to be perfect.

We have to be right with him and we can't be right with him in our own strength by coming to church, by ticking the boxes of the Proverbs. We can't be right.

[14 : 26] We know that. We know there's only one way to be right with God, biblically and in our experience, is through Jesus Christ and His sacrificial, substitutionary atonement on our behalf.

So that we have the God who takes away the guilt of our sin and takes on Himself on the cross and who gifts us the right life, the righteous life of Jesus.

It becomes ours. There's a swap. There's a substitution. Jesus took every step on this earth on our behalf to please God, to live the Proverbs life, to live the righteous life in our place because we can't do it.

But then He dies on the cross as an unrighteous one who didn't fulfill the Proverbs life because He's dying in our place. He takes our sin, we get His righteousness and as a believer we need to know and recognize and see that on a daily basis.

God looks at you today as a believer and He sees the righteous life of Jesus and the perfection of Jesus covering you. There's lots of references in the Bible to being covered.

[15 : 48] There's one or two of them. It's going to go through Romans 13 and verse 14, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

So we put Him on, we are covered by Him and that's really in a sense what living the life of Proverbs is. Or there's Job 29, 14. I agree in the middle of the Old Testament.

I put on righteousness and it clothed me. My justice was like a robe and a turban. And there's that prophetic sense in which Job recognizes He needs someone who will be righteous in His place and He can be covered by that.

Ephesians 4, 24. And put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So there's both this being declared righteous and putting on this righteous life for God.

And that is practical holiness. And so this verse speaking about righteousness says, the righteous who walks is entirely blessed of his children after him.

[16 : 55] So we need to live it. So we need to live what has been declared unto us, what has been declared of us. God in Christ declares us righteous.

Perfect. Forgiven, redeemed, renewed. We've got to live that. And in the Lawsians 3, 12, I think this is my last reference.

Yeah. Put on then, this is a different one, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, all these things we've talked about, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

These are not otherworldly either. So we put on righteousness as well as having righteousness declared by God. So it's a life. We live it.

If we are covered in Christ, then we need to start living like Christ the way He wants us to. Christ is not some private health insurance for some future disaster, it's time when we die.

[17 : 56] It's about healthy living now. It's about new life now. It's about moving from death to life now, so that when we do die, it's simply we're falling asleep in Jesus. That's all we're doing.

The sting of death has been removed and we will rise again on the resurrection day of which Sunday is a reminder. So we live it and we remind ourselves that it's a walk.

The righteous who walks in his integrity. So that's just another word for our day to day living. What you will do when you leave here today and tomorrow, it's your walk. We talk about that, don't we?

Our walk of life. There's a great verse in Isaiah 30, 21, which is, I love this verse and it's a great verse to remember that God says, this is the way.

Walk in it. So we're listening. We're listening for God's voice to say, to guide us. Say, this is the way. We're listening for His word. We know His word. We're seeking what Him, we recognize it as a narrow path and as a straight road, but He is our sat nav.

[18 : 58] He is our guide. He's to become the voice of our conscience. He is our Lord. That's what we understand by the walk of faith. It's not saying, oh, 30 years ago I made a confession, a professed, I gave my heart to Jesus and in all of it, since then I've just been living my own life my own way.

It's a walk that we follow Him and we hear His voice and He said, this is the way. Walk in it. We're to walk in the Spirit.

We're to walk worthy. We're to walk in the light. We're to walk carefully. We're to walk in Him. We're to walk in wisdom. These are just some of the references in the New Testament to walking in faith as an illustration of the path of the Christian.

If you've got Bible Gateway and download Bible Gateway, it's a great resource and just type in walk at the top and it comes up with all the biblical references to walk.

Now, there's obviously thousands of online concordants. There's thousands and some of them just talk about ordinary walking, but particularly maybe in the Psalms or the New Testament, look up all the references to walk and you see the nature of this righteous living and we're to do it without hypocrisy.

[20 : 10] The righteous who walks in His integrity, blessed are His children after Him. So it's walking without hypocrisy, with integrity. It's a buzzword today to be someone with integrity and I'm glad it's good.

It's a great buzzword. It's an impossibly high standard. We can't do it without Jesus Christ. We're thrown back onto Jesus Christ daily. Spiritual disciplines.

Daily for there's a great power in sincerity and there's a great power in integrity and not being hypocritical.

And you know what that means? It means in community, in family first and in church and community second. That's what it has most influence.

That's why God is a covenant God who works in family and who works in community because He knows that as we live righteously, that's a great example to the people around you.

[21 : 11] Integrity without hypocrisy. Especially children, you know it says, blessed are these children after Him. Why does it say that? Because children are most powerfully influenced by their parents and they will see most clearly whether we are being hypocrites in our lives.

As covenant children, how often have we spoken to and counseled and been with adults who are broken and struggling because of their parents?

How often have people wandered away from the church because of the behaviour of their spiritual parents in church or the attitude and the behaviour of others in church?

Because of hypocrisy, a lack of integrity, a lack of righteous living, walk without hypocrisy. God honours that. We are blessed to see so many children as we have, but it's a huge responsibility for all of us.

You are all locus parentis here. All of us have that role. All of us have taken vows as we sit with the children and we have to live righteous lives together and righteous lives as parents, recognising what this is saying is that our righteous or unrighteous life affects other people.

[22 : 24] It affects the generations down the line. You know a toxic church environment affects a church environment for years down the line. A toxic family environment is the same and so righteousness is the opposite of that and brings blessing.

The third thing, the last two I'm going to deal with much more briefly, I'll be pleased to know, the third thing is wise talk in verse 15. There is gold and abundance in costly stones, but the lips of knowledge are a precious jewel.

Again, the lips of knowledge and knowledge here is reflected in the knowledge of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. So it's really talking about wise talk, how we live, how we speak, how we converse.

And we've seen that wisdom is never just simply head knowledge and it's never definitely not just intelligence, but it's about knowing God, it's about truth and practice.

It's not mystical, it's not locked away for the few, it's for the many. And why is that important? Because I guarantee you will walk out of here today, long before you walk out of here, by the time you have your coffee, you will all be talking.

[23 : 37] We will all be talking. It's not just the preserver, the preacher or the leaders. We all talk. You'll go home and talk to your husbands and wife, to your girlfriend, to your boyfriend, to your friends, to your neighbors, to your colleagues.

You will talk. And wisdom demands that we talk with the wisdom of Jesus in our lives. And I'm not going to go through all the examples, but even this chapter gives examples of wise talk.

I think last week I said I would encourage you, I think it would be the greatest thing, a great thing to do is to read two or three Proverbs every day of your life till you die.

That's a great thing to do. I don't think you'll ever get bored of reading one or two Proverbs, or two or three Proverbs every day. And it helps you understand and helps me understand wisdom as we pray from James, you know, if anyone asks of God, God gives them wisdom.

Well, this is how we get it. Can I also say that I think as well as reading Proverbs every day, I think every day you should ask for wisdom, because God promises it.

[24 : 43] He commands you to do it. And isn't it easy? You know, we feel and we act stupidly so much at the time. And do we need to? Because he says, listen, I'll give you wisdom, but ask for it.

And in asking for it, you need to be looking for it then from where it sources. So wisdom comes from God. And wise talk is a virtue that we are to seek in our lives.

Because Pro, you know, the whole old adage, sticks and stones might break your bones, but words can never hurt you. Nonsense. That's not one of God's Proverbs. It's not in the Bible. And rightly so, and I'm glad it's not there.

Because yes, sticks and stones might hurt us, but I think for most people, words hurt us more. Wise talk, something that we should seek after and something that I believe, or the Proverbs tells us, we should share.

The lips of knowledge are a precious jewel. There's a golden abundance in costly stones. It's something that's precious. And it's something that we should be careful to speak.

[25 : 49] And the whole thing about speaking is that we're sharing what we are saying with others. So wisdom is much more valuable than giving someone a tenor. Oh, a tenor might be important for someone.

But it's something we should communicate by our life and by our character, by our testimony. And can I say within the church context, within our shepherding of one another, speaking Christ into one another's lives, into our husbands, wives, children, friends, neighbors, as Christians, lives, speaking wisdom into their lives.

Not gossip, remember, that's the opposite side of things and all that stuff. How good are we or how bad are we maybe at doing that? Speaking grace and wisdom into one another's lives.

I'm not talking about the formal teaching here. I'm talking about our conversational life together. How good are we? How much do we struggle sharing Christ with one another as Christians?

And I guess the corollary, moving forward with that, if we're uncomfortable sharing Christ with one another as Christians, we're very unlikely to share Christ with those who aren't Christians.

[26 : 58] So wise talk is sharing truth, encouraging, challenging and provoking to good works. And the last one that we're looking at in this series is parallel with that, is not just wise talk, but is good advice.

And it comes down to the same thing in many ways. Verse 18 says, plans are established by counsel, by wise guidance, wage war. It's a follow on.

And for us, with the whole Bible that we have, our knowledge, we recognize that we're in a spiritual war. We know that. Ephesians 6 verse 12 reminds us of that, for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, authorities, cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual force of evil in the heavenly light.

We know that. We know that spiritual battle is one that we are in. And so Ephesians goes on to say, Paul goes on to say, then be prepared.

Where the armor of God, truth, righteousness, peace, prayer, faith, word of God, the sword of God, spirit, all these things, where that. But practically recognize the importance of seeking and giving good advice in this warfare, the spiritual warfare.

[28 : 14] And it's agitating against being lone rangers spiritually. It's, can I say something provocative?

I think it's pious nonsense to say, I'm fine. I've got this great relationship with God. I don't need other people. I think it's misguided. I think it's unbiblical.

And I think it's pious. I don't think it may be intended as pious nonsense, but it is pious nonsense. It's quite proud because God has set us in families. He's set us in communities.

He's set us in an army. And he reminds us that yes, we have spiritual responsibilities individually that are hugely important. Where are we going to work out grace and patience and forgiveness and meekness and wise words?

What, in the mirror? No. It's with one another. It's in these places where we all fail. It's difficult and when you think, ah, they're not nearly as close to Jesus.

[29 : 13] I wish they were much more like Jesus than I am. Yeah. So it's about we're in combat. And we're in combat together as people, as a people of God.

We are His body. We're the church of Christ. And we're to give good advice, give it, and receive it together. We recognize that.

Guides are established by counsel, by wise guidance, wage war. We wage war on spiritual darkness by the counsel and by the wisdom we give and we receive from others.

So unity is, you know, in a war context, isn't unity tremendously important? I've got your back. You going on the front line, you want the guys behind you to have your back.

You know, you've seen it in all the films, haven't we? Okay, you go across there, I'll cover you. We've seen that. And that's what it's like spiritually. Isolation is dangerous because we're thinking we can do it on our own.

[30 : 13] But we need people to cover us. When we're weak, we need others to be strong. When we're failed, we need others to be doing God's work on our behalf. Trust is vital, isn't it?

In this work of the kingdom, if we are going to give and receive good advice, it means working together. All of us here have different gifts and talents. We're not all the same.

We're not all university educated. We're not all doing different things in different ways. We're not all doing the same things in the same ways. We're all different with different strengths and weaknesses.

But God has fused us all together in His wonderful knowledge. And we are to learn from and sharpen one another as iron sharpens iron. And that involves trust.

If I wrote, if I asked, if I put a questionnaire to the church and said, what discourages you most in your Christian life? I think the percentage of people who say other Christians will probably be in the near 90s or the church, the church and other Christians.

[31 : 17] Because that's how often our experience is, isn't it? That's where the devil first attacks. He says, if I can cause division internally within the family, if I can break people apart, then I'm doing my work really well.

If I can get them to talk badly about one another, then it's the devil's advice of a hithful. If we can do that, that's great.

Separate, divide and separate, that's his great tactic. And yet the way of wisdom, the way of righteousness and faithfulness is to both give and to receive good advice, to take counsel, to learn from other people.

Many of the old soldiers in St. Columbus have got so much to offer the squaddies here, so much to offer those who are just new on the Christian life.

You get so much to share. Don't ever think as an older Christian that this is a young people's church. That I've got nothing to offer.

[32 : 16] You've got more to offer than anyone else. You've got life experiences. And as we seek to mentor and sit together, may it be that you look out for the young and the vulnerable, the weak and the struggling, and that the weak and the struggling and the vulnerable who might not be young by the way, look to others for strength and support.

Why? Because we're in a war, a spiritual war where we're called to love our enemies. Remarkable. So I finish with 1 Corinthians 15, 57, but thanks be to God.

He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. That's where the victory is for your life today and for mine. In all the battles and in all the struggles, He's already won it.

And we need to put our trust in Him, especially when things are bleak and dark for us. We look for that. So let's bow our heads in prayer in response to God.

Father God, we thank you for your wisdom, which is so often counter-cultural and different from what we would regard as being the declared or the decided wisdom of the society in which we live and even of ourselves as a church.

[33 : 31] Lord Grant, as that radical walk of faith and righteousness and enable us to serve you with humility and repentance, recognizing we often get things wrong, but that you persevere with us.

You're faithful. You have steadfast love. You said, you have said to us, you will never leave us or forsake us and we rejoice in that today because that is our hope. And we pray that each person here may know that as their hope today, a remarkable, powerful, life-changing hope that is not just for this life but for eternity.

So may you have the praise and the glory and may we walk from here as wiser people molded by your word and transformed by your grace a daily basis.

For Jesus' sake, Amen.