

Think, Do, Speak No Evil

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of December 2000. The preacher is Brad Lovegrove.

His sermon is entitled Think No, Do No, Speak No Evil and is from Proverbs 9.

Jesus, we thank you now that you are here. You are here with us, gathered in your name through your spirit. And we do pray, Lord, as we look to your word, that your spirit will help us to understand and to take your word to heart and to live it out in our lives.

We ask all this in the strong name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Well, Proverbs has many famous verses.

You may have heard the one that is very graphic. It says, like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who reverts to his folly. But Proverbs has lots of other advice for stages of life.

[1 : 0 5] It's a very practical book and Australians being a practical, pragmatic people with so many scientists and so many inventors, I think we've got the highest per capita number of inventors for any nation in the world.

It's a very pragmatic sort of book that I think as Australians we can relate to. It has advice about marriage guidance. It has parenting advice. It has career counselling. Let me give you a few examples.

Parenting advice. The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be pecked out by the ravens and eaten by vultures. We didn't actually use that one in the Oasis group.

You'll be glad to know. Career counselling. As a door turns on its hinges, so does a lazy person in bed. Or the lazy person buries a hand in the dish and is too tired to bring it back to the mouth.

Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so are the lazy to their employers. Or marriage guidance. Remember this was written by a Solomon who was reputed to have 400 wives, but this is what he said about marriage.

[2 : 0 9] Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense. Better is a dinner of vegetables with love than a fattened ox with hatred. A nagging wife is like a dripping tap and a contentious wife is like a continuous drizzle on a rainy Melbourne day.

Sorry, just ad-libbed there. It's better to live in the corner of the attic than in a house with a contentious wife. It's better to live in a desert land than with a contentious and fretful wife.

Remember, he had 400 wives. We might excuse his jaundiced view of marriage. Well, what I want to do with you this morning is actually do an overview of Proverbs, an introduction to the book if you like, and to encourage you to go away and read it and learn from it as we have in Oasis this term.

To begin with, Proverbs is one of the books that's a type of literature that's called a wisdom book, the wisdom literature. And wisdom in the Bible sense means simply skill in living.

It doesn't mean ivory towers or abstract thinking. It means skill in living. It's a practical application of knowledge. Now, the wisdom books are different from other books in the Old Testament.

[3 : 19] They don't tend to focus on salvation, history, or the covenant. They don't talk about the Exodus or any of the mighty, miraculous works of God. But they do have three main connections with the rest of the Old Testament.

The first one is that the wisdom books emphasise the doctrine of creation. Wisdom seeks to look at God's creation and discern the order in God's creation because man is a steward who has dominion over God's earth.

In that sense, the wisdom books almost have an environmental ring to them in some parts of them. The second way they're like the rest of the Old Testament is the wisdom books are very strong on the fear of the Lord.

And in fact, Proverbs says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And the third way the wisdom books are like the, or are different, sorry, from, or sorry, are like the rest of the Old Testament is that they emphasise the kingly rule of God.

So they see God as king over all creation and over his people and they see that people who live in obedience to God are living in a right way and in right relationship with him. The second thing that is distinctive about the wisdom books is they seem to have a bit of a secular flavour.

[4 : 29] That's to say that they focus on the natural world and on creation rather than on the supernatural acts of God. And yet there's three theological assumptions that lie behind the wisdom books.

The first assumption is this, that this is an orderly world ruled by a wise creator. The second assumption, creation's order can be discerned through experience and through wisdom.

The third assumption, if we align ourselves with God's order, we'll know good things and a good life, whereas fools who ignore God and his natural world and his natural order will suffer folly.

In that sense, Proverbs is a bit like the philosophers that look at the world and say, there's so much design in the world, there must be a designer. Creation itself points to the creator behind it.

Or a modern version of that, when God made the world, he left his fingerprints all over it. It's a pity that humans have smudged them. Proverbs is about thinking God's thoughts after him, looking at his world, looking at his creation and seeing the godly order there and the wisdom that comes from God.

[5 : 42] A third way that wisdom literature is distinctive, it focuses very heavily on experience and on everyday life. It talks about observation, observation of the created world around us rather than revelation like in the prophets where we hear that God said to Jeremiah, so and so.

Rather than that sort of sense of revelation direct from God, the wisdom literature focuses on observing God and what can be known about him from the created order around us. Knowledge is gained through observing that creation.

The second thing is they're very big on order. Proverbs and some of the other wisdom books like to group similar things together and order the world and describe it. Thirdly, they like to compare and contrast the world around them.

They like to draw comparisons and draw analogies in the world around them. And fourthly, they often try to predict the usual outcome of our actions. So once again, when you look at those aspects of wisdom literature, observation, ordering and grouping, comparing and contrasting, predicting, in one sense, Proverbs once again has a similarity perhaps to our scientific way of looking at the world, of observing and looking at the empirical world around us and making conclusions.

Well, the final thing that's distinctive about much of the wisdom literature is its teaching style. It's often written as someone who knows, a teacher, to a pupil. And often the context in Proverbs, for example, is a father teaching his son.

[7 : 11] And it may seem a little sexist, but the reality was that in those days only the sons were given an education. So often the context is a father teaching his son. And that's probably also the reason why there's so much in Proverbs about loose women and avoiding the loose woman because the women weren't getting to hear this teaching.

The other setting that's often seen there in Proverbs is the teacher teaching a pupil in a court setting or in a school setting. And it's thought that what might lie behind this is that under Solomon, who's the attributed author of Proverbs, there was a need for more scribes to run the court because the court of Israel had a worldwide influence under Solomon.

And so there was a need to train up scribes under this Solomonic enlightenment, this age of where Israel reached its height and its peak and had worldwide influence. You may remember the story of the Queen of Sheba coming to Solomon to learn of his great wisdom.

And you can imagine the size of the court and the need for these scribes. Well, to look at Proverbs itself more directly as one of the books in the wisdom literature, what can we learn about Proverbs itself?

Well, firstly, the first nine chapters are very focused on our character, on being godly and being Christ-like. The aim of Proverbs is that we might find a relationship with God or we might be saved through godly character formation, through godly training.

[8 : 32] Secondly, Proverbs is saying that if we know God, then to know him is to be like him, to be his people is to have a family likeness, a family resemblance.

So to know God is to aim to develop a godly character and to have faith in God or to be seen in faithful, obedient living. So once again, that practical edge in Proverbs.

And as Proverbs says, if we fear God, which is the beginning of wisdom, then in a sense that's the gate we pass through, the fear of God, which then shapes us to have a godly character.

So Proverbs is not just about how you live, but who you are. It's about what character you should have as one of God's people. It's about forming a godly character.

Proverbs is saying that there is a moral order to our creation. And because our creator has a moral character of being holy and being just and being righteous, therefore his people must have a moral character that reflects that godliness and that Christ-likeness.

[9 : 41] Well, we're going to look at Proverbs 9 itself a little more closely now. That's the chapter we had read out, which is on page 516, to see how some of these themes in Proverbs are developed. Proverbs 9 is focusing on two ways of living, two ways to live if you like.

There's the way where you follow lady wisdom, which is talked about in verses 1 to 6, and then there's the way where you follow dame folly, which is talked about in verses 13 to 18.

There's two ways to live. Take the godly and the wise path. Don't follow the path of folly. Shape your character through godly wisdom and living a godly life.

What Proverbs is saying here is that your character will lead to consequences. If you live in a wise way, you'll receive life. If you lead a life of folly, then the consequences of that will be death.

And we see the two invitations of lady wisdom and dame folly happening in verse 4 and 16. They say exactly the same thing. Lady wisdom says, you that are simple, turn in here to learn from my wisdom.

[10 : 51] Whereas in verse 16, dame folly says the same thing. You who are simple, turn in here and see that there is stolen water and bread eaten in secret.

In verses 1 to 2, it tells us that lady wisdom's house is a substantial house, a generous house. Whereas in verse 13, the character of dame folly is talked about and her followers.

And it says that those that follow her are loud and she is ignorant and knows nothing. So the different qualities and the different characters are talked about there. In verse 6, we see that lady wisdom, if you accept her invitation, you'll gain insight and life.

It says, lay aside immaturity and live and walk in the way of insight following lady wisdom. Whereas verse 18, if you follow dame folly, the consequences of that are that her way is a deceptive way which actually leads to death.

It might look good at the start, but it's a deceptive way that leads to death. Verse 9, it tells us that those who choose wisdom, it says their attitude to that, their response to that.

[12 : 00] Give instruction to the wise and they will become wiser still. Teach the righteous and they will gain in learning. They benefit from rebuke and they're taught and they're instructed and it results in love.

Whereas for the person who follows folly, the foolish person, verses 7 to 8, those that choose folly, it says, whoever corrects the scoffer wins abuse, whoever rebukes the wicked gets hurt.

A scoffer who is rebuked will only hate you. The wise, when rebuked, however, will love you. So those that choose folly are characterised as being abusive and hateful people. And finally, in verse 11, if you choose the way of lady wisdom, you'll receive life.

For by me, your days will be multiplied and years will be added to your life. Whereas as we've already seen in verse 18, the way of folly leads to death. Two roads to live by, two ways of life, two characters to build, following the way of lady wisdom or the way of dame folly.

And much like Moses said to the people in Deuteronomy when they stood on the two mountains, he said, choose life and follow God's way or choose to disobey God and live against him and the end result is death.

[13 : 13] Choose death. Now, verse 10 tells us the key to all of this and this is the verse that I quoted right at the start. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

The fear of the Lord is another major theme in the book of Proverbs which we see referred to here again in chapter 9. It says, if you're going to start at the start, if you're going to start at the beginning, then the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.

What it's saying is the basic perspective of biblical wisdom is a faith stance, a faith viewpoint. It's based on the fear of the Lord and like notes are to music or words are to the alphabet, wisdom is to the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the basis of wisdom and it's the goal, it's the outcome, the target of wisdom. Wisdom comes through knowing God as God and the fear of the Lord means holding him in awe and giving him respect and giving him worship, giving him his worth which is what the word worship actually means, giving God his worth.

God guards us through the wisdom he gives, he guards our hearts and it also tells us in the book of Proverbs that prudence will guard us and if we know God we'll get understanding and if we get understanding then that will guard us as well.

[14 : 33] Well, the final point this morning, what does the fear of the Lord or what does wisdom have to do with Christmas, with Advent here as we come to celebrate Christ's birth next weekend?

Well, it's interesting if you flick back one chapter to chapter 8 it actually talks at great length about wisdom and in verse 22 to verse 31 it talks about how wisdom was there at the beginning of creation.

It talks about wisdom having a divine origin, it says the Lord created me, wisdom, at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago. She existed before anything else and had a foundational role in creation.

Wisdom, it tells us, ordered creation in verse 29 and 30 and this order is discerned through wisdom and by us thinking God's thoughts after him and looking at the world around us but that order was built into creation through wisdom.

And then in verses 31 to 36 it tells us that wisdom has a mission to humans. It tells us that wisdom wants us to have life in all its fullness and to have happiness.

[15 : 40] It's not just life that we're choosing it's actually a life of fullness in relationship to God. It's a qualitative life not just a quantity of extra life and extra years. In contrast if we choose folly it leads to death whereas wisdom is life affirming and people affirming.

Now what that has to do with Christmas is that some scholars through the years have looked at this passage where wisdom is talked about and where a poetic technique called personification is used and wisdom is spoken about as a person.

And the question has often been about this chapter is wisdom being talked about just in a poetic sense as a person or is wisdom actually really a person? Well I'd encourage you to read those verses verses 22 to 31 and to compare them to the prologue of John's gospel which tells us this In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him and without Him not one thing came into being. Verse 14 The Word tabernacled amongst us or pitched His tent amongst us and we have seen His glory the glory of a Father's only Son full of grace and truth.

And verse 18 No one has ever seen God but it is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart who has made Him known. You see what the writer of Proverbs didn't know that the writer of John's gospel did know was that Jesus was actually the Word that God created the world with.

[17 : 20] God said a word in Genesis 1 and it came into being. That word we're told was Jesus Christ who like wisdom was created at the beginning of His work the first of His acts long ago or was actually there and was through Him that all of creation came to be.

So that's the connection to Christmas at this stage. This wisdom we learn about which the book of Proverbs has so much to talk about and linked so closely to the fear of the Lord we're told in John's gospel is actually Jesus Christ Himself the Logos the living word.

Let's close with a word of prayer. Lord we thank you that you loved us so much you sent your Son as a missionary to our world and we pray Lord that we can continually come to learn from your word the Logos Jesus we can sit humbly before him to learn and grow in faith and we thank you also Lord for the great practical wisdom that the book of Proverbs has to give us about how fear of you is the beginning of all knowledge and how if we want to seek wisdom it's seeking out the order that you have in creation and seeking out a relationship with you and seeking out a life in obedience where we form a godly character and come to be like you we thank you for all this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ Amen Amen