

The Problem with Wisdom

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[0 : 0 0] Now, some of you might be too young to know this, but I'll ask anyway. Is anyone familiar with a series of a chain of discount stores called NQR?

Now, what does NQR stand for? Not quite right, that's right. Now, for those of you who don't know, they actually specialize in products that are not quite right.

It's still saleable, like it's nothing dangerous about buying those. But perhaps there's misprinting on the packaging or something, or I think when the product's a bit close to expiry, that's the type of stuff that they sell.

So it's not a total disaster, but it's not quite right either. Now, I wonder when you first realized that life was NQR.

Not quite right. Perhaps as a young person, you're discovering that the things you were taught about what was right and wrong didn't always work. That following conventional wisdom was no guarantee of success.

[1 : 0 6] For me, it happened in primary school. Imagine my disappointment when I realized the teacher didn't always choose the best person.

That if someone blatantly cheated, not me, they could still get away with it. That life just wasn't fair. Now, of course, as I got older, this happened more and more.

You only need to look on TV and you go, boy, how do they get away with that? Whether it's dodgy politicians or businessmen, it's not quite right, is it?

Of course, the converse happens as well. You see innocent people suffering when they don't deserve it. Which creates a dilemma, I think, for how we live.

Do we pursue wisdom or not? Do we live wisely when it doesn't always pay? Well, it's to this that the teacher turns to in our passage today.

[2 : 1 0] And he describes this conundrum in verse 15, which is on the slide. In this meaningless life of mine, I've seen both of these. The righteous perishing in their righteousness and the wicked living long in their wickedness.

Doing what's wise and right doesn't always work. And no doubt, I'm sure you've all experienced it. And it's frustrating, isn't it?

Why bother then is what we then often wonder when we're tempted to revert then to the attitude that the teacher describes in verse 16. Which is, do not be over-righteous, neither be over-wise.

Why destroy yourself? That is, don't kill yourself trying to be so hard to be perfect. There's no guarantee of success.

But at the same time, verse 17, he says, Do not be over-wicked and do not be a fool. Why die before your time? Because the other extreme doesn't work either, does it?

[3 : 1 4] We all know and we see the dangers of folly. Do drugs and it wouldn't have an impact on you? Think again.

For some of you in year 11 and year 12, don't bother studying and still ace your exams. Go ahead, try that and see what happens. Be lazy and still keep your job.

We all know it doesn't work, does it? Sooner or later, stupidity or folly catches up on us. Now when we read this, it's a bit hard to work out whether the teacher really believes in what he's saying or not.

And if so, whether that's what the Bible is teaching. Surely God is not telling us to go easy on sin, just to be a little wicked. That's okay.

Well, no, I don't think so. But I think that whichever way you read this, the teacher here is really grappling with this dilemma, isn't he?

[4 : 16] That here is yet another aspect of life being meaningless. Being that vapor that you've been thinking about and reading over the last few weeks. And so perverse though it seems, we're almost pushed, aren't we, by the circumstances of this world to this logical conclusion.

And that is, if pursuing wisdom doesn't always work, then we shouldn't try so hard. And I think that even as Christians, we sometimes default to this, don't we?

It's not that we're careless with sin, but we do let ourselves off, don't we? We excuse ourselves, particularly when the failing's not too big, you know?

Even when others might think otherwise? The most recent example for me is this whole QR code thing. Now, we've all been told it's mandatory to check in because that enables the contact tracers to do their job in the outbreak, right?

If there's an outbreak. And I agree with that. And I do check in. But do I really need to do it all the time at every location? I mean, sometimes I'm only there for a few minutes, you know?

[5 : 26] At the bakery, I'm there, I'm out. And, you know, my hands are full. And my wrist is sort of broken. Really? Do I? Now, just so you know, I do check in most of the time.

Nearly all the time. Even today. But we have a habit of rationalizing it, don't we? Perhaps it's not, you know, as trivial as the QR code thing. But, you know, things like we know we shouldn't pass on that gossip, let's say, or mutter something against someone under our breath.

And yet when we stuff up and we realize it, do we own up or do we just let it slide, you know? Let's not cause more trouble or fuss than is necessary. So I'm not saying it's okay to be a little wicked.

But the reality is we can't sustain perfect righteousness all the time, can we? I find it exhausting. Not to mention demoralizing because it doesn't always pay, does it?

Sometimes I own up and instead of being, you know, yeah, that's okay. I get more heat for it when I own up. It's not worth it, is it? Even sometimes to do what's right.

[6 : 41] And so I think the teacher resigns himself by saying in verse 18 that it really then comes down to just fearing God. It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other, he says.

That is good to not be overrighteous and not let go of not being overwicked. But whoever fears God will avoid the extremes.

What counts, he thinks, is our attitude and motivation. As long as our actions are a response to fearing God, then, you know, we'll avoid these extremes of being overrighteous and overwicked. It's not entirely satisfying.

But given the way the world is, that's as best as we can hope for. And yet, even though the teacher realizes this limitation of wisdom, this problem he sees, he still finds great value in it.

He says it's better than folly. In fact, it's better even than power, which is verse 19. He notes, wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city.

[7 : 47] So, if you had a choice, pick wisdom over power all the time. The problem with wisdom is not that it's flawed, but as he goes on now to say, it's being thwarted by sin.

Sin is what trips up the wisest person. It ruins the success of conventional wisdom. And so, verse 20, indeed, or some versions have it as, but, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.

Even the wisest person is sinful. He or she may have the know-how of wisdom, but because of sin, execution is what lets them down.

Not unlike the MasterChef contestants, I don't know whether you're watching nearly the finale now, they're all amazing cooks, aren't they? They understand flavors, you know, they have all the right cooking techniques.

They know how to use liquid nitrogen, you know, safely. They've even probably practiced it lots of times at home. But when the crunch comes, they still sometimes serve up a disaster, don't they?

[8 : 55] And then the judges will look at them and they go, what's let you down today is your execution. And so, it's a bit like us, don't we? A lot of times we know what the wise thing is to do, but it's execution that lets us down.

We revert to selfish behavior when we know we shouldn't. We are biased without knowing it, even when we try to be fair. And so, in verses 21 and 22, he gives us an example of what universal sin is.

And he uses it to launch into what I have picked as my third point. And so, because everyone is sinful to some degree, he says, verse 21, do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you.

For you know in your heart that many times you yourselves have cursed others. Here, I think he's making a similar point to what James does in the New Testament, that the tongue is a world of evil.

So much so that a lot of us can control many other parts of our lives, but it's our tongue that we still have trouble with. And here the teacher says that everyone sins with their tongue, whether the lowly servant or the master.

[10 : 08] Those curses which come out of our mouth are not just slips of the tongue, inadvertent, but actually they're intentional, they're not, they show that our hearts are sinful.

In other words, they are intentional. And so, it proves his next point, which is that even though there is such a thing as perfect wisdom, which reflects the mind of God, so much of the wisdom that we get in the world is a result or comes from the lips of sinful people.

Through the insights and observations of imperfect humans, it arrives through reflecting on experience which is tainted by sin.

And so, even though wisdom is valuable, he says, perfect wisdom is elusive. Try as we might to seek out every pearl of wisdom, we're not to take heed of everything that everyone says, because some of it actually does us more harm than good.

This desire to seek wisdom out and then despairing and not finding it is what is now then captured in verse 23. All this I tested by wisdom, and I said I'm determined to be wise, but this was beyond me.

[11 : 30] Whatever exists is far off and most profound. Who can discover it? So, I turned my mind to understand, to investigate, to search out wisdom and the scheme of things, and to understand the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly.

I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap, and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare. Now, I think the woman here is not a literal person, but a metaphor for folly, just like in Proverbs.

Someone or something to be avoided at all costs. She's worse than death, a deadly trap with chains. And initially, the teacher thinks that the way to avoid her is through his determination to be perfectly wise.

But as he searches wisdom out and tries to distill it into some system or scheme, you know, come up with a unified theory or grand scheme of wisdom, something that he can use to then apply to every situation, he realizes it's beyond him.

In fact, it's beyond anyone, for he asks, who can discover it? And so he resigns himself to this conclusion in verse 27. He says, Look, this is what I've discovered, adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things.

[12 : 47] While I was still searching but not finding, I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all. This only have I found.

God created mankind upright, but they have gone in search of many schemes. Now, before I go on, there was a snigger, wasn't there?

There was more than a snigger, maybe, in that very verse over there. And I just need to perhaps just deal with that first, because people might think at first that this is a sexist comment in the Bible.

And perhaps it is. But I don't think the main point of it here is that there is, you know, one in a thousand upright men and no upright women.

All right? This is not a statistical survey that's being done here. Rather, I think the point is, whether there's one in a thousand or none, it's actually difficult to find anyone upright at all.

[13 : 45] So the point here is really similar to that in verse 20, that no one is righteous. He may nevertheless have expressed it like that because, and here it's just conjecture, he might be, for example, looking through scriptures, let's say, and, you know, the scripture has more accounts of men than women, and he might have come across one person like Moses or whatever, or Samuel, and so he concedes that there's some upright men in the Bible, even though rare.

But then he goes through the Bible, and he, you know, he doesn't see any women in there. Now, someone just, I think Eric just mentioned that was Ruth and Esther, but go with me on this. It's sort of like, and besides, Ruth and Esther were written a slight later, so maybe he didn't have that.

Anyway, but this is conjecture, but what I think he's done is that he's looked, and he hasn't found, but the point is, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist. He just hasn't found them.

It's like saying that, you know, no Asian man has run fast enough to win the 100 meters Olympics so far. But does it mean that Asian men can't run fast? Now, as an Asian man, I think that's probably true.

But that's not, one doesn't follow the other, is it? It doesn't mean no other Asian man will win it in the future. And perhaps if he had come, the teacher had come to HTD, and walked among the women here, he wouldn't probably have written these verses.

[15 : 10] But regardless, the overall point is, he's making the point of verse 20, isn't it? No one is righteous, not one. One out of a thousand is not good enough, really.

And it's only just a concession. He's not saying that there is no, there is a one in a thousand righteous man, but upright, slightly different. And so the conclusion he comes to is this, that God had made humans upright.

That's in verse 27. It's similar to what we find in Genesis 1. God is not the author of sin. His will is for them to live according to his wisdom, to fear him, as he says in verse 18, to please him in verse 26.

But instead, humankind go in search of many schemes. And here there's a play on words, the whole thing about scheme and scheming.

I think there are two meanings to this. One, yes, humans go scheming to do evil, but also he's saying humans go in search for grand schemes of wisdom.

[16 : 18] That is, schemes to try and overcome sin and sinfulness in this world. Because they think that if they can overcome sin, then they've overcome the problem with wisdom, which is sin.

And therefore, that guarantees that wisdom will work. And so we look at civilization. That's what we've tried to do. And we put in laws. We educate people. We do all we can to try and eradicate sin.

And some in the West think that they can do it even without God's help. But as we've seen, and our society is proof of it, it hasn't worked, has it?

Once sin has entered the world, it has this way of replicating and mutating. And so we think we've tackled one form of sin only for something else to pop up.

If you think about it, that's why self-righteousness and pride is a sin. Think about it. We were trying so hard to be righteous, and then Jesus comes along and says to the Pharisees, we're trying to be good, but actually all you're doing is being self-righteous.

[17 : 25] And that is actually the most insidious sin of all. Because you're doing right thinking you're good, when actually all you've done is be proud and rebellious against God.

So therefore, there's no grand scheme, is there, that can tame sin. Not one that is humanly devised anyway. And I think, again, looking at the whole pandemic, sin is a bit like the coronavirus, isn't it?

Once it's entered into the world, it's very hard to tame it, to control it. I mean, we say of the coronavirus that the vaccine is going to get us out of it. But again, it's not 100% effective, is it?

And now we say it's not as effective against the variants as well. So even with the vaccine, we're going to have to live with it, and people will suffer from it. And yet we see this huge debate, isn't it?

It's so emotive, about how what we, this is what we need to do to get it under control. But again, none of the solutions are perfect, are they? Lock down and destroy people's mental health and livelihood?

[18 : 29] Or open up, and then the most vulnerable get infected. That's, you know, someone at St. John said there's a zero or a hundred, there's an all or nothing kind of thing.

There's no happy medium, is there? And so that's the same way, I think, with sin. It's impossible to tame. And yet we feel compelled to keep trying, don't we?

Why? Because as he says, God has made us upright. There's a moral compass within us that says we can't let evil go unpunished.

And so it grates against us, and we expect others, like the government, to get it right. Even when we excuse ourselves when we fail, we're not very consistent, are we?

So I don't know about you, and I've only spent one week in Ecclesiastes, but I find all this so frustrating. In fact, I was trying to structure and write the sermon for this passage, and I go, where's the neat three-point sermon that I need?

[19 : 34] Why is the logic of this passage so meandering and circular? Ah, so hard to package Ecclesiastes, isn't it? But that's the whole point, isn't it?

That's the whole point, I think, with Ecclesiastes. It describes life, as Andrew calls it, outside the garden. It's messy. It's frustrating.

It's despairing. Because that's what life is. And yet, thankfully, that's not where God leaves us.

You see, God solved the problem with wisdom by sending Jesus. And if I can push the analogy a bit further, when God sent his son, he sent a piece of Eden back into our lives.

So he hasn't taken out of this world into Eden, not yet anyway, but God has given us a glimpse of Eden in the person of his son. And so in Jesus, we see the perfect embodiment of wisdom.

[20 : 36] There is no contradiction with him, no tainting of wisdom by sin. Instead, all that he says and does is perfect wisdom. But more than that, God didn't just send Jesus to model perfect wisdom.

Rather, he sent Jesus to tame and conquer sin for us. So it's not as if, here we have an example of Jesus and we need to follow Jesus in order to tame and conquer sin.

No, Jesus comes so that he conquers sin for us. And God uses the very dilemma that the teacher has to achieve this. So the teacher, you know, he says, I've got a problem with the righteous dying in righteousness.

But what does God say? He says, let me send the righteous one to die in his righteousness so that the wicked, that's all of us, you and me, can live long in our wickedness despite our sin.

And how does he do that? By having our sins forgiven on account of Jesus. And so we say, is this fair and just? Yes, it is.

[21 : 48] Because whatever the price was required for justice to be served, Jesus paid it for us. And so the very, the most unjust thing in this world that has happened, Jesus dying on the cross, has become for us the means of justice and mercy because of God.

And so we found the answer, haven't we, that eluded the teacher. We found a unified theory of wisdom, a grand scheme to solve the problem of sin. And his name is Jesus.

In fact, I have to say, it's not like we found Jesus so much as Jesus has found us. But regardless, the answer is found in Jesus. Life can make sense outside the garden, provided we see it through the prism of Jesus and his work.

And so for me, I don't know about you, but for me, that's more than good enough. That calms my restless mind and it gives peace to my soul.

I can look at this world and it's not perfect and yes, it's still frustrating. But when I see it through the lens of Jesus, that's okay. It's good enough for now.

[23 : 01] You see, the Apostle Paul did a lot of searching himself and, you know, initially he tried to find wisdom by being a Pharisee. But he came to the same conclusion as the teacher. That's why he quotes from Ecclesiastes chapter 7, verse 20, that very thing that we've read in the other reading in Romans chapter 3.

He concludes, no one is righteous, not one, including himself, the self-righteous Pharisee. But then he goes on to say a few verses on in Romans chapter 3 and verse 21, that's why the good news of Jesus is wonderful.

But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God, the wisdom of God, has been made known to which the law and the prophets testify, this righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

So righteousness is attainable, but through Jesus and through faith in him. And so for us, the pursuit of wisdom isn't futile.

Even though it's not perfect, it's still worth pursuing and living according to outside the garden. And so the encouragement for us is to keep pursuing wisdom and living righteously, even when it doesn't always pay off in our life.

[24 : 20] Why? Because our reward will come, just as it did for Jesus, ultimately from God, if not in this life, then certainly when Jesus comes back again.

And that prompts us then to be forgiving, doesn't it? When others wrong us, to be gracious, to be patient with others' failings. Because God has done the same thing for us in our own failing.

There is such a passion right now for justice. We hear it all the time. But I think it's only if you understand the Christian faith, or it's only the Christian faith when we understand the gospel, that we can practice justice with mercy.

That is, for us, the concern is not just for sin, not just for the victims of sin, but like God, we have a concern for the repentance of the sinner as well, the ones who perpetrate evil, just like us.

And so when life is still imperfect, we don't need to despair. We lament, yes, of course, but we know that God has found a solution. We can live with a certain assurance of salvation in Jesus, for us.

[25 : 34] We can live with a certain hope of reward in the new creation. Let's pray. Father, if we are honest with you, we have to say that life is often messy and unfair.

We have to admit that sometimes we try to live wisely and righteously, and still things go wrong. Thank you for understanding us in our frustrations. But we also want to admit that we are often part of the problem.

Thank you that you forgive us because of Jesus. Make us wise for salvation through faith in him. Teach us to live patiently and graciously with life outside Eden until the coming of your Son in glory.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.