

Who are we listening to?

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Preacher: Ali Sewell

[0 : 00] We mentioned last week how the book of Proverbs, it's this kind of wisdom literature is the kind of the genre that it fits in within the Bible. You'll have noticed as we're reading it there, it sounds different to a lot of the stuff that we're used to.

It's different from reading through Mark's gospel as we have been doing and hearing what Jesus did next and next and next. It's different from reading one of Paul's letters where he kind of lays out his argument. But it's equally valuable, it's equally God's word.

And our goal really this morning is to get to grips with what is it saying in this language that might seem unfamiliar, but which I'm convinced is intensely relevant to us in our day and age.

I mentioned last week, I think, the one occasion that my dad tried to teach me how to drive and how that was not a great success. It tended to be my mom who would take me out in the car when I was learning.

Although we also had our kind of moments, which makes me think perhaps that the problem didn't lie with my parents. But one thing I always remember when learning to drive was I would go out with my mom and she would say, you're very close to the curb, move over, move towards the middle, you're very close to the curb.

[1 : 05] And it would get kind of faster and faster and louder and louder. And yet when I went out with my driving instructor, he would always say, why are you driving in the middle of the road? Move over, get towards the edge, there's cars coming.

And I had these two voices telling me completely opposite things. I had to choose who to listen to. One was a qualified driving instructor, but the other was my mother.

So it wasn't the easiest decision to make. And we get that in all sorts of areas of life, don't we? Some people saying this and other people saying that. Who are we going to listen to in these situations?

How do we know who to follow in these different things? Really, that is the idea behind these verses we're looking at this week, still in this first chapter of Proverbs. Who are we going to listen to?

And what are the different consequences of that? A little book I found really helpful while looking at Proverbs is by a guy called Andy Prime. He's a minister in Gracemount in Edinburgh.

[2 : 06] His book on Proverbs is called this, Voices. Who am I listening to? And the book of Proverbs is all about helping us hear the right voice, that voice of wisdom that we spoke about last week.

But also helping us avoid following the wrong voices that surround us, that call out to us in all sorts of different ways and from all sorts of different places, but actually aren't offering true wisdom.

And so these verses that we're going to look at this morning really center around three voices or groups of voices. Some that we're called to listen to, some that we're warned to be wary of.

And we're going to look through each of these voices in turn and see what it is that they teach us. And the first voices that are introduced, aren't they? You'll see it there in verses 8 and 9, are the voices of a father and a mother.

The voices of concerned and loving parents. Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck.

[3 : 09] We mentioned last week, I mentioned just before, that the book of Proverbs is a book for all of us. It's from the simple to the wise, from the young to the old.

And yet there is a way in which the youth are kind of particularly highlighted in this book. 13 or 14 times in the first seven chapters we get this repeated introduction to a paragraph.

Hear, my son, or my son, receive my words. My son, do not forget my teaching. Hear, O son, a father's instruction. O sons, listen to me. You could substitute daughter in there just as well.

The dominant image through this opening section of Proverbs is really kind of a parent sitting their child on their knee or sitting their child across a table and explaining to them how the world works.

And it is an image. In some ways it is just a figure of speech. We've said how this wisdom is for all of us. In some ways it's an image that's supposed to encourage us all to come and sit at our heavenly father's feet and that repeated call to listen to him.

[4 : 17] And yet I think it is an image that is chosen deliberately as it has a lot to say to children and parents. To the young guys that are here this morning, it's really tempting, isn't it?

Throughout our childhood, particularly as we get into our teenage years, to think that you know everything. You know, you're at secondary school or even beyond. You know what is what.

And I remember having that feeling myself. What could any adult teach me? And they are so out of date and behind the times. What would they know? You know, they use Facebook instead of Instagram or TikTok or whatever else it is.

How could I learn anything from these people? Or perhaps if you're a young person, you can be tempted to go the other way. Of course there are big questions to ask.

Perhaps these questions about God, these questions about life. What's the point? And yet it's so easy to think, well, I'll think about those later. You know, these are kind of adult things. These are not familiar.

[5 : 12] I'm busy. I've got exams. I'll think about those when I've grown up and life is just kind of easy and nothing happens. You know, we think as young people, I've got other stuff on my mind. And yet the Bible kind of cuts away both of those ideas.

It says to young people, it says to young people here this morning, there are lots more things to learn. And yet it also says, and now is the time to do it. Hear my son, this Proverbs begins.

The Proverbs, the Bible, church is for you, for young guys. From this earliest stage, we have that chance to be wise, that deliberate challenge for young people to think about these things.

And yet also it's a challenge for those who are parents as well, isn't it? Because the picture is wise parents passing on this wisdom to their children. And the Bible puts a really high value on the family.

The Bible puts a really high responsibility on parents. I think we can include kind of grandparents, the wider family as well there. This responsibility to be instructing and teaching our children in wisdom.

- [6 : 22] As I was looking at this passage this week, I found it incredibly challenging for me. What will I spend more time doing over the next 16 years or so? Will it be helping with maths homework?
- Will it be trying to convince people to practice the piano or the tuba or something like that? Will it be ferrying people around from one place to the next so they get to do everything and be at every club? I mean, all of those are good things, can be good parts of parenting.
- But over and above all of those things, will my priority be to teach my children wisdom? And not a wisdom that comes from me, as if I have all the answers and if I'm the kind of standard they need to measure up to.
- But that biblical wisdom from God. Will I invest and prioritize my girls growing up with a grasp and an understanding of the God who made them and his incredible love for them?
- Will I be seeking to pass on this fear of the Lord, which is the beginning, which is the foundation of wisdom? And before we even get really in some ways into the meat of these verses, the very fact that we hear the voice of loving parents speaking this wisdom to their children is a great reminder for us, whatever role we have in the family.
- [7 : 40] As a church, one of the great kind of blessings we have is the number of children who are here each week. They add kind of certain challenges. They require people to give up their time and energy to look after them and care for them and teach them.
- But we wouldn't change that for the world. I can say that as someone who never has to do creche or kids' church. But I know that those who help would not change that for the world. It's one of the first things that often visitors mention.
- Isn't it great how many young folk there are in the church? And it is great. We're delighted they're part of the church. But what they hear in the church, what we do with them for an hour a week, will never replace what their parents are able to do.
- And so we want to help parents by teaching children. But a much bigger thing we can be doing as parents ourselves is learning together from the Bible. Being able to do that, thankfully, on a Sunday morning with a degree of peace, thanks to those who do look after our children and teach them.
- But learning together both for our own growth, but also so we can pass on that biblical wisdom to our families, to our children. We spoke a couple of weeks ago about speaking the gospel truth in love to one another, looking for opportunities to do that throughout the week.
- [8 : 53] And that coming together as a church on a Sunday morning, hearing from the Bible together is so important, it's vital as we grow. But it's not the only place that we grow in our faith. We need to look for more opportunities to speak about these things.
- And the family is the greatest chance we have to do that day by day. And that incredible chance, that incredible challenge to be modeling that the fear of the Lord, that it is not a negative thing, but that it is a positive thing.
- That it is knowing God and putting him first in everything. That it's an attractive thing. That it's passing on the wonder of God's wisdom. That it's something our children, those who see it, would want to be part of.
- And that is what verse 9 is all about. This instruction, this teaching, this wisdom that's passed on. It's described as a graceful garland for your head, as pendants for your neck.
- It's attractive, it's appealing. God's wisdom is not like a kind of a ball and chain around your neck. The kind of thing no one would willingly submit to if they had the choice.
- [9 : 54] Instead it's described as a pendant, a necklace. It's something beautiful. It's something we delight in. It's something we want to see more of. And that's for all of us.

We've spoken specifically about young people, about parents. But all of us continue to be these learners in wisdom. All of us are encouraged to seek out this beautiful wisdom that comes from our heavenly father.

Who speaks to us through his word. And all of us to a degree are then called in turn to teach, to pass on that wisdom. How do we do that? And we do that most of all by showing how beautiful it is.

That living God's way is the way that life works best. That as parents, as friends, as a church together, we seek to learn and grow in and pass on that wisdom. To live it out, to model it.

Because it is the greatest treasure that there is. So there we go, voice one. We hear the voice of these loving parents that call to listen. That call to teach and model.

[10 : 58] Because this wisdom is not a chore. This wisdom is attractive. This wisdom is life as it's designed to be lived by our maker. So then let's move on. What is this wisdom?

And that is what these next few verses, the rest of the chapter really starts to unpack. And the whole of the rest of the book of Proverbs is all about. Now the next voice that we hear here gives us the opposite of wisdom.

Verse, voice two is the voice of sinners. Verse 10, my son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. If they say, come with us. And then these sinners here have this invitation to join in their schemes.

I think it's really important whenever we come across that word sinners in the Bible that we remember we're all sinners. The Bible doesn't split people into kind of the goodies and the baddies.

The Bible says we're all people who sin. But the idea of the word sinners here are those who are actively desiring what is sinful. Actively desiring and pursuing what is wrong.

[12 : 04] This is not a kind of struggles that they are battling against. This is a settled way of life. And these people that the Bible says, these voices, are trying to draw us in.

Why is it so important that parents are passing on wisdom to their children? Why is it so important we're all listening time and time again to biblical wisdom coming back to the Bible? It's because there will always be people trying to lead our children and trying to lead us in other directions.

And to think that's not the case is to be really naive. To think, well, that could never happen to me or my family is to be incredibly naive. The book of Proverbs instead gives a proactive warning against that.

It says don't wait until bad things have happened. Don't wait until you or those you know and those you love are in a crisis. Wisdom is there to help people avoid that in the first place.

Prevention is better than cure, as they say. Wisdom is there to help us recognize and reject the negative voices that speak to us day by day. And we hear these voices in verses 11 down to 14.

[13 : 11] Let me read that again. They say, come with us. Let us lie in wait for blood. Let us ambush the innocent without reason. Like Sheol, that kind of means the grave, the afterlife almost.

Like Sheol, let us swallow them alive and whole. Like those who go down to the pit, we shall find all precious goods. We shall fill our houses with plunder. Throw in your lot among us.

We will all have one purse. If you're anything like me, straight away you're probably thinking, well, this all sounds a bit extreme. Maybe I have led a very sheltered life.

That's true to an extent. No one has ever invited me to lie in wait for blood. To swallow someone alive and whole. So actually, what are these verses talking about?

How are they in any way relevant to us? I think the key really here is to see what is the big picture? What is the kind of overall idea that is being described here?

[14 : 08] And we see that exposed down in verse 19. Verse 19 says, These are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain. The ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain.

The language of an outworking of verse 11 to 14. It might seem extreme to us. And it is intentionally kind of attention grabbing. It's arresting.

But actually, the principle that's at work, the attitude behind it, is incredibly day-to-day. This passage is speaking about those who want to get ahead themselves and don't mind hurting others to do it.

Who want that, but don't mind about the cost to other people. And like in this passage, that could be money. It might not be that we ambush people who are innocent, but it might well be that we'd happily rip someone off a bit.

People who steal, people who tell, get so-and-so to pay. You'll never need to give it back to them. You know, those who kind of encourage us and say, Oh, here's a sort of sneaky way around the system.

[15 : 12] Here's a scam that no one ever checks. Or, oh, that person has got loads of stuff. They will not miss a little bit. You know, we're often invited to take part in this kind of thing.

It's unjust gain. Gaining for ourselves at the expense of others. And yet it can be much more than money, can't it? Perhaps it's wanting respect that so many of us are desperate to be well thought of.

And so often that happens more easily if we do that at the expense of others. Oh, you will not believe what so-and-so has done now. Or do you know what I heard about that person this week?

That eagerness to share where others are struggling. Not to help, not so that we can bring them up, but so that we can feel better about ourselves. Those are things that we don't do.

We're better than them there. We can have a bit of a laugh. And so when we first read through these verses in Psalms, that idea of waiting for blood, of murder, it seems so extreme.

[16 : 09] And yet actually, if we think into the New Testament, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that speaking badly about someone, insulting them, is the equivalent of murder. It is tearing down someone made in God's image.

All of this is that kind of idea of unjust gain, seeking to build ourselves up at the expense of others. It could be in the workplace, looking to highlight the flaws of other people to make ourselves look better, trying to impress the boss one moment, and then slagging them off to be kind of part of the gang, the next.

This attitude of devouring others for our own benefit is very much part of everyday experience. For a lot of people, this is a settled way of life.

This is how the world works. And for those who live this way, they'll be looking to recruit almost more people into that. They'll always be seeking to encourage us to join in so they can justify themselves.

Look, everyone is doing it. Especially if they can say, well, that person goes to church, and they're joining in. This must be fine. This is okay. But what's wisdom's response to the voice of sinners?

[17 : 20] Well, in some ways, it's very obvious. It's very simple, isn't it? Verse 15, don't do it. And my son, do not walk in the way with them. Hold back your foot from their paths. To have wisdom, to fear God, means not getting involved in that kind of thing.

It means loving others as God has loved us. Not using others. Seeing people as God sees them. That is what part of the fear of the Lord is, this foundation of wisdom.

And yet we've also given it a further motivation behind that. Not just that we should be loving people rather than using them, but also this reminder, this warning, verse 18, that it will all end in tears.

Verse 18, these men lie in wait for their own blood. They set an ambush for their own lives. Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain.

It takes away the life of its possessors. It takes away the life of its possessors. And the Bible says ultimately this path, it is a path to destruction.

[18 : 25] That if we're willing to sacrifice others for unfair, selfish gain, we'll actually end up losing ourselves. If we're willing to trample on other people, to get money, to cut any corners we can, to scam people, the Bible says we'll never have enough.

We'll be consumed by this desire for more and more. If our reputation is so important to us that we will drag other people down in order to build ourselves up, we will be devastated when it turns out that actually people are speaking about us behind our back.

People are telling one another, watch out for that person. They're not trustworthy. They're not a loyal person. If our reputation is based on dragging others down, we'll be terrified of the fact that other people might also be doing that to us.

If we're desperate to get ahead at work at any cost, we'll find that actually people don't want to work alongside or under the person who always needs to be top of the pack at the expense of others.

And this truth that it takes away the life of its possessors, it works itself out in all sorts of practical everyday ways. And even this, even if we get all of these things, even if we had all the money, the reputation, the career, whatever else we might seek to gain at the expense of others, whatever other voices we might listen to, whatever other directions these voices might call us to, even if we manage to get all that that is on offer, we will find that it does not satisfy.

[19 : 53] It was not worth the people we sacrificed. There's a great quote from Jim Carrey who says at one point, I wish everybody could be famous and rich, and then they would know it is not the answer they're looking for.

The fact is, whatever we get, it does not make up for the damage and cynicism we've done to our own soul if we've trampled on people to get it. And most of all, it isolates us from God, that true source of wisdom and life.

And the voice of sinners might seem very attractive, they seem to offer something for nothing, they bring us into their club, into their group, into the inner circle. But we see what at first reading sounds so extreme, is this everyday temptation to gossip, to rip people off, to cheat.

And there is this invitation constantly around us, but it is an invitation not to life, but to death. And wisdom means seeing these things, what they are, that in God's world we cannot short-circuit God's way of doing things.

That in a world where the greatest commandment is to love God and love others, that this invitation, which is essentially to forget God and use others, will never bear fruit.

[21 : 07] And so we are warned away from following this voice of sinners. What offers so much delivers so little. The final voice that we hear in this chapter, voice three, is the voice then of wisdom itself.

In verse 20, wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets. She raises her voice at the head of the noisy street. She cries out at the entrance to the city gates.

She speaks. Wisdom could not be any more upfront. Wisdom could not be any more public. She is there where the people are. She is crying out. She is not hidden away.

She is not in secret. Have a look who she speaks to in verse 22. She is calling to those who are simple. We said that's those who still have a lot to learn.

She is calling to those who are scoffers, those who are skeptics, those who love to mock. She is calling to the fools. Throughout the book of Proverbs, the fool is not just a kind of a negative term.

[22 : 04] It is not just someone who is not very bright. It is a kind of a moral term. It is someone who hates knowledge. It is someone who is opposed to God and his word and his way of life. And yet wisdom cries out to all these people and says turn and listen.

If you turn, verse 23, she says I will pour out my spirit to you. I will make my words known to you. Wisdom is saying that whatever path we've gone down and however far down that path we've gone, there is still the chance to turn.

And that word turn, as it is used throughout the Old Testament, is also the word that is used for repent. Repent. And that is what to repent means. It means to stop in the path that we're going down and to turn.

What does it mean then to turn to wisdom? To accept wisdom's invitation to turn to her? Well, remember what we said, kind of the gateway to this book of Proverbs, that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

To turn means to stop where we are and instead seek to get a right understanding of God and see ourselves in light of that.

[23 : 14] That is the kind of overarching principle of Proverbs that we'll keep on coming back to. It means ultimately to turn to Jesus, to see our need of him, that only through him can unworthy people like us have a relationship with a perfect God.

And that works itself out in incredibly practical ways. It is only this fear of the Lord that means we'll be more concerned about loving those he has made than using those he has made.

It is only if we have this relationship with God that we'll find, well, that is where our identity, our worth comes from. We don't need to use other people to build ourselves up.

We can turn away from those other voices that offer us unjust gain and instead turn back time and time again to God who offers us all we need. Wisdom has that invitation that it offers.

And yet along with that invitation, there's also a warning. Wisdom says, verse 24, Verse 29, They would have none of my counsel and despised my reproof.

[24 : 32] Therefore, they shall eat the fruit of their way and have the fill of their own desires. and the warning here is that wisdom says one day it will be too late to turn and one day it will be too late to repent to reject wisdom is to reject god and one day he will bring the curtain down on his creation and that will be the last chance the bible uses really stark language from from wisdom there doesn't it kind of surprises us to read those words in the bible why does it do that well it's because it is so important these words are intended to kind of shock us into action you think of those road safety adverts to do with a drink driving or wearing your your seat belt those kind of things when you watch those those are intentionally shocking adverts aren't they they're gory they're grim they're designed to make you kind of wince and shudder you don't want to watch that why do they have them like that it's because it is serious it's because those matters of driving are matters of life and death and that is the same here in the book of proverbs the the wisdom of the book of proverbs is not kind of life hacks and tips to make your day run smoothly even though it has these incredibly practical elements above everything else the book of proverbs is life and death this wisdom is eternal life and death why is it a priority for parents to be passing on this wisdom well because nothing could be more important than our children growing up to listen to wisdom rather than being led astray by the voice of sinners why do we keep on reminding ourselves of the gospel keep coming together week by week keep encouraging one another throughout the week it's because if we stop listening to that these other voices will continue and then when we listen to these other voices they call us away from god's wisdom they call us to destruction and one day it will be too late to turn back it is life or death the warning here is stark isn't it and yet let's finish with this verse 33 that the reward is also great at the last verse wisdom says that whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread or disaster now the contrast couldn't be more clear it doesn't mean to live according to the bible to to follow jesus as a walk in the park the book of proverbs kind of deals in in generalities rather than specific promises it does say that life characterized by a positive moral approach tends to make life simpler but not always but even if things do go wrong there is this promise that living in wisdom offers peace that living in wisdom means we don't dread disaster we don't need to despair even when things go wrong even when things are not as we expect even when people let us down or we let other people down because if we listen to wisdom again we have that fear of the lord we have that relationship with god that is made possible through jesus ultimately he is the one whose innocent blood was shed he is the one who went alive to the grave and through that he offers an eternal security that nothing in the world can take away we seek to live wisely we seek to build our life on that foundation we seek to make good decisions to make biblical choices but above all that we know that even if even when we make mistakes even when situations in our life go wrong it is not the end of the world it is not a disaster because our life has that solid foundation of an unchanging god an unchanging gospel that is grounded on jesus the only one who lived a perfectly wise life and yet died so that we could be forgiven we sang earlier that that new song we will feast in the house of zion we mentioned it's a song all about looking forward to that secure dwelling that wisdom offers it's all about feasting about restoration about joy and it's those that come to

those who fear the lord it's a song about the fact that we don't need to as this verse in proverbs says fear the dread of disaster because through the gospel if we trust in jesus if we accept him our eternity is secure now how do we have that hope that security well it's through listening to the right voices the voice of wisdom from the bible that leads us to jesus that leads us away from those voices that surround us that would lead us away from him and drag us down that is the wisdom that we want to share not our wisdom but god's wisdom that is the wisdom we want to share with our children with one another with the world around us the wisdom that is a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck it is a beautiful thing the wisdom that offers security and rest without dread of disaster it is an eternal thing and the wisdom that is centered on jesus christ and on his gospel let's pray together you