

Sermon Notes 2022

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Foreword

Herein contains my summary of the sermons for 2022. These sermons notes are mostly typed out during the sermon as the pastor preaches. Sometimes I will add in some of my own clarifications/notes/thoughts to the points given by the pastors, hence one can safely assume that any theological errors found herein are to be attributed to me, not the pastors.

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23rd January 2022: A Father's invitation to wisdom

Text: Proverbs 1

[1] The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel:

[2] To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, [3] to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; [4] to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— [5] Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, [6] to understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles.

[7] The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

[8] Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, [9] for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck. [10] My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent. [11] If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood; let us ambush the innocent without reason; [12] like Sheol let us swallow them alive, and whole, like those who go down to the pit; [13] we shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with plunder; [14] throw in your lot among us; we will all have one purse"— [15] my son, do not walk in the way with them; hold back your foot from their paths, [16] for their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed blood. [17] For in vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird, [18] but these men lie in wait for their own blood; they set an ambush for their own lives. [19] Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain; it takes away the life of its possessors.

[20] Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice; [21] at the head of the noisy streets she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: [22] "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? [23] If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you. [24] Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, [25] because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, [26] I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when terror strikes you, [27] when terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. [28] Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. [29] Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, [30] would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, [31] therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. [32] For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them; [33] but whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster."

Notes

- Authorship of Proverbs: Mainly Solomon (see chapter 1:1, chapter 10:1, chapter 25:1) but also others like Agur, Lemuel, "the wise", etc. Though Solomon's wisdom is greater than all of the others' wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34).
- Apparently, Solomon was also a man of science; his study of nature helped him to see wisdom in the created order, like when he provides an analogy to the ant to explain the value of hard work and diligence. As will be seen in the later sermons, God's wisdom is baked into the whole

created order (Proverbs 8, Proverbs 3) and hence one can get wisdom by studying the created order.

- That being said, books of Wisdom like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job are revealing divine truths about the world, more than just information about the world.
- Proverbs teaches divine truth, teaching God's people what godly living in day to day life looks like. Though on this note, Proverbs teaches us general principles instead of going into specifics; for example, in Proverbs 13 when the child and the rod are mentioned, the text does not tell us how many times we should use the rod, how much force to use with the rod, etc.
- Again, we must emphasize that that wisdom is from God above (2 Chronicles 1:8-10), though it is available to all by God's common grace.
- Proverbs invites us to reflect upon God's truths rather than to promise us immediate rewards for our choices.
- Wisdom literature in its entirety (Job and Ecclesiastes also) teach God's people the entire complexity of life.
 - Proverbs gives us general principles for us to ponder and consider as we think about living righteously.
 - Job and Ecclesiastes handle the edge cases (i.e, exceptions to the general principles in Proverbs) that now occur because of sin. E.g, Proverbs say that generally the wicked will suffer for their wickedness, but Job and Ecclesiastes show the exceptions to the above general rule.
- Wisdom is more about knowledge, it is also about skillfulness (Exodus 31:1-3). More than being knowledgeable, being wise is to be skillful in applying God's truth in our life.
- True wisdom is inseparable from righteousness. Wisdom teaches us how to do righteousness, and teaches us how to see beneath the surface to make sound judgements.
 - The Law teaches us what is right and wrong, but the emphasis of the Law is not on the "how".
 - Wisdom emphasises that right living leads to life, wrong living leads to death (Proverbs 1:29-32), then goes on to give us general principles on what right living looks like.
- "Wisdom cries out in the street" God's wisdom is available to all, not hidden. It is just whether people want to hear or not.
- Wisdom is received on bended knees (Proverbs 1:7)
 - To fear God is to reverence God and to humbly submit to God's power and moral authority over all things.
 - Fools disregard God and ignore God's moral authority, e.g Adam and Eve and the Fall.
 - God's moral authority is baked into God's creation, hence people who go against God's moral authority go against God's created order and hence generally hurt themselves. E.g, addiction to drugs, addiction to pornography, sex outside of marriage etc all are scientifically proven to cause harm to a person.
 - * Though we must emphasize again that the devastating effect of going against God's wisdom in the created order is obscured because of sin, i.e sin throws the balance of the creation abit off (e.g thorns and thistles), and sin darkens our mind such that we don't really see the devastating, natural consequences of sin until it is too late.

- Wisdom from God is best exemplified in Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:30). Fear of God will lead us to be transformed through Jesus. Not our own wisdom that transforms us, but Jesus makes us wise.
- Wisdom is learnt not alone, but in the context of community and discipleship

30th January 2022: Living wisely before God

Text: Proverbs 3:1-12

[1] My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, [2] for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you.

[3] Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. [4] So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.

[5] Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. [6] In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. [7] Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. [8] It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

[9] Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; [10] then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

[11] My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, [12] for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.

Notes

- Story of the lazy grasshopper and the hardworking ant: idleness leads to hunger. This was a very famous fable in ancient Greece to teach diligence. In Proverbs, there is a similar story in Proverbs 6:6-8.
- Every culture has a wisdom tradition. This makes sense, because wisdom helps us to live a good life.
- Peace in verse 1 is "shalom" in Hebrew, i.e there is a connotation of wholeness and abundant welfare.
- God makes wisdom available to all, God created the earth by wisdom (Proverbs 3:19-20). I.e, God's wisdom is baked into His creation. The created world reflects God's wisdom, and hence it makes sense that we can learn wisdom by looking at God's created order (e.g by looking at the ant). This is regardless of whether one believes in God or not. This is nothing but the generosity of God, who freely gives his creatures common grace.
- However, the wisdom as described above is incomplete. I would add that because of sin, the wisdom as described above is fallen; now we have wicked people prospering for example. Sin has affected God's creation such that the wisdom baked into God's creation is abit disrupted, and also sin has affected us such that we are partially blind to all the wisdom in God's creation too. Hence, all human wisdom must be completed and reframed by God's revelation. To truly live the good life, we are to be like God, and we are to submit to God.
 - To be like God, we are to acquire the character of God. From v3-4, we must possess steadfast love and faithfulness, in order to find success before the eyes of God and Man. But steadfast love and faithfulness are qualities of God (Exodus 34:6). This makes sense, because we are made in the image of God, and hence reflecting God's character is what we are supposed to do anyway. Hence just as how God shows steadfast love and faithfulness to us, we should show steadfast love and faithfulness to others. Of course, showing steadfast love and faithfulness to others might lead to us sacrificing something

on our end. However, living the good life is not about maximising our self pleasure, but it is about the collective shalom of all, which is God's original plan for humanity anyway.

- To submit our lives to God, we need to submit our thinking, our possessions, and our negative life experiences.
 - * To submit our thinking, we must first note that we are finite creatures with a finite understanding. The worst thing for us is to be wise in our own eyes, because if that is the case, we can't grow intellectually. E.g Proverbs 26:12. Now, if we note that God is infinitely wise than us, then we ought not to be wise in our own sight, we must trust that God's commandments are far wiser than our own understanding of the world. As Paul said, God's "foolishness" is infinitely wiser than human wisdom. An example is the flawed human "wisdom" of "can do whatever, just don't get caught". But God's wisdom is Romans 13, submitting to lawful authority. We are to "trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding..."
 - * To submit our possessions, we see that in verses 9 and 10 of our text. This is not prosperity gospel, it is not about how when we give more, we will receive more. This wisdom has the context of Israel's old covenant, where giving is part of the Law, and obeying the Law is about love for God and faithfulness for God. And as per the OT promises, when Israel is faithful to God, God will bless Israel with material possessions in this world. For us in the NT, even though the old sacrificial system is not for us, this principle is for us too, just that it is transformed; see Luke 12:33. We should not expect God to bless us with material wealth when we submit our possessions to God, because God gives us things far better than material wealth; God gives us treasure in heaven.
 - * To submit our negative life experiences to God, we first look at Proverbs 13:24 too. Just like how parents discipline their children, God disciplines us too. However, not all suffering we experience is God's discipline/punishment of us. See Ecclesiastes 8:14 and Job. Some of the suffering we experience is a result/consequence of sin. It is wiser to regard suffering not necessarily as God's punishment for us (unless God has clearly revealed this to us), but as something that will draw us to God. Suffering itself is not good, but God can bring good out of our suffering when we bring it to God. This is what it means to submit our negative life experiences (our suffering) to God. In fact, suffering sometimes can lead to greater holiness and deeper communion with God, which is part of living the good life, and hence paradoxically, we might find greater shalom with God in our suffering.
- The ultimate portrait of wisdom for us is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was completely like God, and fully submitted Himself to God. What Jesus did seemed foolish by worldly standards, but it is infinitely wise by God's standard, and hence God has highly exalted Jesus Christ. And now we can have the mind of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Let us seek this, and hence get the ultimate shalom.

6th February 2022: A disciple's heart

Text: Proverbs 4:20-27

[20] My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. [21] Let them not escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. [22] For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh. [23] Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. [24] Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you. [25] Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. [26] Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure. [27] Do not swerve to the right or to the left; turn your foot away from evil.

Notes

- The key point of today's text is verse 23. For the ancient Israelites, faith is not separated from knowledge and not separated from one's experience of the world. Two points today: guarding the heart, and acting in wisdom. Btw, the word "heart" here refers not to the physical heart, but to the entire inner life of the person.
- Wisdom starts with inclining our ears to our parent's saying. That's how we learnt things like "don't touch the hot stove" etc.
- Guarding our hearts means to watch our inner man with all vigilance. Whatever happens to the heart will affect everything a person does. I.e, if the heart is corrupt, then the affections, motives, pursuits of a person will be corrupt. The heart is the core of the person.
- As Augustine said: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you". The restlessness is because of sin; sin causes us to try to fill our heart with worldly things, which will only make us restless, but as we all know only God can fill our heart.
- The heart is what God transforms in the New Covenant, e.g Jeremiah 31:33. And once the heart is transformed, we will have abundant life in the sense of John 10:10b. Also, from John 7:37-38, we see that believing in Jesus is the way to have a transformed heart.
- We guard our hearts practically by Psalm 119:11. Guarding our hearts keeps us from sinning, and helps us to live the abundant life that God has for us. The more we hear God's word, the more we will recognise God's voice.
- In life we watch many worldly things carefully, like our weight, our children's grades, sales, etc. But the text today says, **above all else**, guard your hearts.
- If we are parents/teachers, we help our kids guard their hearts through sound instruction in the fear of God.
- If we give our hearts to Jesus, Jesus must control everything, not just certain portions of our lives. The heart is the core of the person, and if we truly give our heart to Jesus, the entire life will be transformed, not just selected portions.
- Walking in wisdom: first of all, we note that our actions follow our beliefs. Our behavior is a good indication of what is in our heart. Actions here refer to what we say (v24), what we see (v25), and how we walk (v26).
 - By the way, actions here include what we say (v24). As per what Jesus says, what comes from the mouth first comes from the heart. To walk wisely, we must be careful with what we say with our mouths; that is a practical application of guarding our hearts.

- Our actions here also include what we see (v25). So we should keep our eyes on heavenly things, and look at all things in the world through the lens of God's word. Keeping our eyes on heavenly things mean to keep heavenly things as our primary motivation, e.g Paul and running the race, keeping his eyes on the prize.
- Our actions here also include what we do with our feet (v26). There are two paths we can choose to walk; the straight and the narrow path, or the wide path that leads to destruction. As another application of guarding our hearts, we must daily constantly walk on the straight and narrow, and turn away from the wide path that leads to destruction.
- Our perfect role model for all of the above is our Lord Jesus Christ, who perfectly obeyed the voice of His Father and who perfectly did the will of His Father. Because He is the perfect Son, He brings many sons and daughters into glory through the cross. With Christ's help, it is possible for us to guard our hearts, through the Holy Spirit that Jesus sends us to help us walk in His example.
- In conclusion, let us guard our hearts and walk in wisdom (which is the result/expression of us guarding our hearts), and we can walk in wisdom by watching the things we say, the things we see, and the things we choose to do (our feet).

13th February 2022: Do you want to be blessed?

Text: Jeremiah 17:5-10

[5] Thus says the LORD: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. [6] He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

[7] "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. [8] He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."

[9] The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

[10] "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."

Notes

- The bible has a different take on what it means to be blessed, as compared to the secular idea of blessings being in the form of health and wealth. Of course God can bless us with such health and wealth, but having health and wealth is not a necessary condition for one consider himself blessed by God (see Luke 6:17-26). Let's understand why the poor etc can consider himself blessed.
- In the Jeremiah text, there are two groups; those who trust in man vs those who trust in God. Those who trusted in man would be those, in Jeremiah's time, would be those who trust in military might, in false gods and false prophets. Those who trusted in God, in Jeremiah's time, would be those who rely on God for deliverance. There are also two analogies corresponding to these two groups: shrub in the desert vs the tree planted by the stream.
 - Those who trust in man are like the shrub who don't bear any fruit.
 - Those who trust in God are like the tree which always bears fruit, whose leaves are always green.

Both the shrub and the tree might both experience drought, but because the roots of the shrub are not deep, the shrub will wither. But for the tree, since the roots are deep, it can still bear fruit in times of drought.

- I.e, those who trust in man are cursed, and those who trust in God are blessed. What is depicted here in Jeremiah is a throwback to the Mosaic Law, in Deuteronomy 28. There will be blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Faith and obedience go hand in hand; those who trust and have faith in God will obey God naturally. When we trust God, we will obey. And when we obey, we will be blessed. Hence we can say that those who trust in God will be blessed.
- In Jeremiah's time, Judah was a nation that didn't trust in God, hence they experienced the curses of the Law, experiencing things like famine etc and even eventually exile. But for those in Judah that were going through the same difficult times, they are still blessed as long as their trust is in the LORD.
- Hence in Luke, even in adverse circumstances (e.g poverty), we can still be blessed when we obey. Blessing does not necessarily remove suffering; in the Jeremiah text, we see that even

the tree experiences drought (Jeremiah 17:8). Hence we can say that the poor who trust in God are still blessed.

- What are some of these blessings? They are:
 - Peace that transcends all understanding.
 - Communion and friendship with God.
 - Treasures in heaven.
- So how is all of these relevant for us? The starting point of a blessed life is to put our trust in God for our salvation. We must trust in Jesus' finished work on the cross rather than in our own works; our hearts are deceitful above all things, and hence our own works are rubbish. Jesus has come to seek and save the lost, only Jesus can save us, because only He has died on the cross for our sins. For His suffering on our behalf, our sins are cleansed, but if and only if we put our trust in Jesus. If we reject Jesus and put our trust in ourselves (i.e in man) instead, we are cursed. The "good works" that we do will never be enough before a holy and just God. Apart from Jesus, we are under the wrath of God for our sins; and this will manifest itself especially on judgement day. Hence, the starting point of a blessed life is to trust in Jesus' completed work for our salvation.
- We can also put our trust in man when we trust in the physical blessings that God give us rather than recognising that God is behind all of those blessings. When those physical blessings distract us from God, then those physical blessings will lead us to be cursed. E.g, some parents' lives revolve around their children so much so that they have no time to spend with God, no time to participate in church life, etc. We should work hard and study hard and take care of our kids etc, this is our testimony before the world. But we should not let these things distract us from God, because if not we will be like the shrub in the desert. Hence let us repent and seek God and His kingdom first.
- When we are going through difficult times, are we turning our hearts away from God in anger and disappointment or do we cling on to God with confidence and hope? If we turn away from the source of blessings (i.e God), how can we be blessed? There are two examples which Pastor Kien Seng talked about:
 - Example 1: Very sian because of physical sickness, don't even want to come to church.
 - Example 2: Physical sickness has led to greater trust and dependence in God.

Here we see two people in the same circumstance but one is evidently more blessed than the other, because he is closer to God. The latter person is what it means to be blessed in God's eyes.

- So do you want to be blessed? If you do,
 - Believe in Jesus, cultivate your relationship with Jesus. Cling on to Him, put your trust in Him. Put our trust in who God is and what He has done for us, especially in the finished work of the cross. Putting our trust in God also means putting our trust in His Word, because His Word reveals who He is and what He has done. We also put our trust in God's promises. And when we trust in God's promises and His Word, we are like the wise man who builds his house on the rock.

20th February 2022: Turning from anger

Text: Proverbs 15:1,18;16:32;27:3,4

[1] A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. [18] A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.

[32] Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

[3] A stone is heavy, and sand is weighty, but a fool's provocation is heavier than both.

[4] Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?

Notes

- Anger is a common emotion; even animals can get angry. It is possible to get angry without sinning; see Ephesians (Be angry and do not sin). Anger is not sin in and of itself, but our response to our anger could be sin.
- Anger is part of our body's fight or flight response, more specifically our fight response; anger can help us to protect ourselves/others, stand up against injustices of the world.
- To see that anger can be non-sinful, consider that God can be angry; however, God's anger is wholly without sin. God is also not fundamentally angry, he is fundamentally righteous; his anger is directed at the sinfulness of Man.
- But anger can of course be sinful, when it controls us and makes us mean, full of hatred and bitterness. One simple example is road rage.
- For Man, anger is usually an emotional response to a threat against our **ego**. Human experience makes this abundantly clear.
- To help manage our anger, there are 3 main points:
 - First point: restraint, not react. Instinctively, when we hear something we don't like, sometimes we just react based on the emotions we are feeling. These feelings are often based on our first impressions of the things we have heard, and contain a lot of our biases. Most of the time, people are triggered when:
 - * They feel threatened.
 - * They feel frustrated or powerless, hence angry at ourselves. Or angry at the situation.
 - * They feel invalidated or unfairly treated.
 - * They or their possessions are not respected.

For us personally, it is helpful to find out what are our triggers. However, all of the above is not an excuse for sin; just because triggers exist doesn't mean we have to be triggered. Self-control is a Christian virtue, a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Practically, we can restrain when we deliberately interrupt our 'reactive' response, by walking away, slowly counting to 5, taking a break from the situation, etc. If we must respond, we are to give a 'soft answer'. If we can't give a 'soft answer', it is better to keep quiet. If we can't give a 'soft answer' and shout back because of our anger, then the other person will get angry also, and then there'll be a relationship breakdown. The above might seem hard to do, but remember that Jesus faced the biggest injustice in the world, yet he was like a lamb led to the slaughter; he opened not his mouth.

- Second point: re-evaluate, not relish. When we re-evaluate something, we do it more objectively as compared to our instinctive response, and we widen the possible explanations or interpretations of the actions or what was said. When we relish, we take delight in going through the situation over and over again to stir up our emotions. We become more angry and our burden becomes heavier. We should also re-evaluate the consequences of our possible angry actions, especially in light of James 1:19-20. We must remember that our human anger does not produce the righteousness of God. One such consequence is that our unrestrained anger is a poor testimony to our Christian faith.
- Third point: release, not retain. Keeping our anger within us is described as a burden, as in Proverbs 27:3-4. A stone is a heavy thing, and as for sand, a lot of it is a heavy thing. Sand is a particularly good analogy; if everytime we retain our anger we store up a grain of sand, then in half a lifetime, all that sand will accumulate to be something super heavy. And also, as per the proverbs verse, one possible thing that stirs up our anger is jealousy. To release our anger to God, we should:
 - * Be truthful with God about your feelings. Lament them to God, as per in the Psalms.
 - * Be ready to forgive those who said those things that made us angry. Just as God forgiven us, we should also forgive.
 - * Ask God to turn our problems into solutions.
 - * To combat jealousy, we thank God that we are made differently and given different gifts. We affirm the good in our lives and recognise the source of goodness which is from God.
- Our angry, sinful response is merely a symptom of a greater problem, which is sin. The Bible is not just an anger management manual; when Jesus died on the cross for our sins, He removed the root of our human anger, which is sin. The ultimate remedy for anger is to kill the sin in our lives, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and of the Word. We are to emulate Jesus' example, as per Philippians 2:3-11, and when we do, anger will vanish. When we are slighted, we must remember that we forgive as God forgiven us.

27th February 2022: Fleeing from sexual immorality

Text: Proverbs 5:1-23

[1] My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding, [2] that you may keep discretion, and your lips may guard knowledge. [3] For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, [4] but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. [5] Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol; [6] she does not ponder the path of life; her ways wander, and she does not know it.

[7] And now, O sons, listen to me, and do not depart from the words of my mouth. [8] Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house, [9] lest you give your honor to others and your years to the merciless, [10] lest strangers take their fill of your strength, and your labors go to the house of a foreigner, [11] and at the end of your life you groan, when your flesh and body are consumed, [12] and you say, "How I hated discipline, and my heart despised reproof! [13] I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to my instructors. [14] I am at the brink of utter ruin in the assembled congregation."

[15] Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well. [16] Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? [17] Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. [18] Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, [19] a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. [20] Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman and embrace the bosom of an adulteress? [21] For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths. [22] The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. [23] He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.

Notes

- Sex is a very precious and powerful gift given to us by God. It is so powerful and precious that if sex is abused, it will have dire consequences. Scripture doesn't pull any punches in this topic, because the stakes are high. This is an issue that affects everyone, married/unmarried, men/women. While Proverbs 5 is addressed literally to men, we can easily apply it to women. The reason why it is addressed to men is cultural and will not be explored here.
- Three main points:
 - Attraction: the power of attraction and how it works.
 - Attrition: the wear and tear, the pain and comes our way when we fall into sexual immorality.
 - Attention: how are we to discipline our attention to avoid sexual immorality.
- Attraction: There is hardly a Christian person that wakes up thinking "today I want to fall into sexual immorality". But Christians still fall nonetheless because we are led along by sin, i.e. we are attracted to sin. Two avenues by which we are attracted is via the ear and the eye; see Proverbs 5:3. And also, by the scent, or by the touch. Different people are more susceptible to different things. So we must know what our weakness is, so we can take appropriate measures to flee. Specifically for the ear and the eye, we have pornography; there are hardly any silent pornographic films for example, they use the two-pronged approach. This is an issue that is

especially difficult in the Internet age. There are many strategies that we can take to counter this temptation; though those strategies can be inconvenient, we **must** do it, because if we don't, we will be led along.

- Attrition: What if we are led along? If we are, we can look at Proverbs 5:4-14. I.e, a large proportion of Proverbs 5 describes the great and dire consequences of being led along by sexual sin, so that when we enter into temptation, we might consider the consequences and get out of temptation. E.g, Proverbs 5:4-5. There is bitterness, loss of honor, lost of years (e.g when your whole life with your spouse come crashing down because of infidelity). Being attracted to sin is like borrowing from a loan shark; if we borrow, we might need to pay it back with a lot of interest. E.g for one moment of pleasure with an adulteress, we might need to spend many, many years rebuilding family relationships. The price of sexual immorality is real and hefty.

The long description of attrition here also tells us that God wants our life to flourish, and that our life flourishes only when we walk according to the framework of God's Law, which is the divine design for a flourishing human life. We need to daily consider the stakes, to help us flee from sexual immorality.

- Attention: So what are we to do with this frightening monster? There are external things we can do, but there are also internal things (see Proverbs 5:7) we can do, which we shall classify as disciplining our attention. What we give our attention to can be trained; we must be intentional about what we think about, what we look at, to know when to stay and dwell, to know when to flee like Joseph in Potiphar's house. One thing we can dwell in is to our allegiance to our spouse and our family, see Proverbs 5:15-20. We must daily put our attention there, so that when temptation comes, we will know that we must flee. Another idea we can dwell in is to discipline our affection; see verse 18. We must always strive to dwell on and develop our affection for our spouse. If we think that our relationship is getting 'stale', we must then take time to put our attention to appreciate the depths of beauty in our spouse. People will age, but the inner beauty is permanent (charm is deceitful, beauty is vain, but the fear of the Lord...). In fact, the word "intoxicated" here for the wife is the same as "leading astray" used for the adulteress above. Thus, the author of Proverbs is contrasting the two types of "leading astray" here.
- In conclusion, remember the three points here; the **attraction** of sexual sin, the **attrition** caused by sexual sin, and to discipline our **attention**. Especially in the NT context, remember that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Sexual sin can be forgiven by your spouse, but the real life consequences, the hurt and the pain, are real. Sexual sin can be forgiven but not forgotten. So don't fall into it, consider the consequences, and discipline your attention. And for the unmarried, we must still discipline our attention, so that we don't get led astray into destruction. And when we do so, we learn to discern what is important in a life partner.

6th March 2022: Find us faithful

Text:

[12] On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. [13] And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. [14] And he said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And his disciples heard it.

[15] And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. [16] And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. [17] And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers." [18] And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. [19] And when evening came they went out of the city.

[20] As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. [21] And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." [22] And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. [23] Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea," and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. [24] Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. [25] And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

Notes

- This cursing of the fig tree was in the week before Passover. During this time, it wasn't the fig season yet; thus obviously there wouldn't have been any figs on the fig tree. Then why did Jesus curse the fig tree for not producing food? The reason was to create a teaching opportunity with the disciples.
- People might think that it wasn't fair for Jesus to curse the tree. Yet it was also unfair for the sinless Son of Man to die on the cross. So yea lol. What was the lesson that Jesus wanted to teach? Note that the cleansing of the temple is in between the cursing and the withering of the fig tree. So the fig tree was being compared to the temple; though it looks busy, there is no fruit. And hence we find Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple in chapter 13; the withering of the fig tree was an analogy of the temple.
- By the way, interesting question; if buying and selling things made the temple unclean, then do similar things that happen in church make the church unclean? Answer is, it depends; see the below:
- Jesus overturned the market to create a teaching opportunity, see verse 17. Two verses were quoted here, Isaiah 56:7 for the house of prayer, Jeremiah 7:11 for the den of robbers. Some context: only one type of currency was accepted for temple tax, hence a genuine need for money changing. Also, only unblemished animals were allowed as sacrifices, hence people would prefer to buy animals in the city themselves. In King Herod's time, he also expanded the temple, to create an outer court for the Gentiles. This wasn't part of God's original temple

plan, but perhaps this was God's way of allowing the Gentiles to pray in the temple. The religious leaders in those days allowed the outer court to be used for trading, buying and selling. During the time of passover, there would be a lot of activity in the outer court, and hence the Gentiles wouldn't have been able to pray because of the lack of space. Hence, the Isaiah verse tells us what the temple should have been, but the Jeremiah verse tells us what the temple is really used for because of sin. The religious leaders neglected the Isaiah verse w.r.t Gentiles, and focused on the business side of things to line their own pockets.

- So according to Isaiah 56:7, the church should be a house to make disciples of all nations. Like the story of the fig tree, when we focus on making the church attractive instead of having actual discipleship, then we'll end up like the fig tree. Though we must stress; it is ok to want to beautify the church, and to have other activities in church etc. But all of those things must serve to build up the church in a real spiritual manner; if they don't and instead distract us from doing God's work, then we should scrap them instead of focusing on them at the expense of actual discipleship, lest we end up like a den of robbers. Real example: coffee in cosy corner is not a bad thing, but if considerable time is spent on deciding things like the type of coffee instead of the actual discipleship, then we have turned the house of God into a den of robbers.
- Another way that the church can be turned into a den of robbers is the prosperity gospel. Just because scripture is quoted, doesn't mean that it is used correctly; even the devil knows how to use the scripture (c.f temptation of Jesus in the wilderness). A correct use of scripture by the church leaders should lead to actual transformation of the heart, a true turning away from sin and to God. A wrong use of scripture by the church leaders leads to people doing things like asking people to give money to a hedge fund (with the details known only to a privileged few), asking people to buy books written by the senior pastor to make the book a bestseller, etc.
- Btw, this text can also be used to make statements about how faith in God can do miracles, c.f verse 22. This is how some pastors use this text. This use of the text would lead them to say stuff like "if you ask, you will receive; but if you don't receive, means you have no faith". But that's probably not the proper use of this text; we must always read this fig tree episode with the temple in mind (especially w.r.t the temple being mentioned again in chapter 13). Here, Jesus is contrasting faith in God and faith in the temple. Jesus was telling their disciples not to put their faith in the temple, but continue to have faith in God even when the temple is destroyed. This way, their continued faith in God would help them to overcome challenges to spread the gospel (even moving mountains), knowing that anything that they ask for the kingdom's sake will be given to them. So for us today, we must have faith in God, not in our church/our leaders/our parachurch organisation etc. Nothing wrong with liking our church, but it is problematic when our leaders are dodgy, and then if our faith is ultimately in our leaders, we will be wholly disillusioned and might leave our faith.

13th March 2022: At the Heart of God's Law

Text: Mark 12:23-34

[28] And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" [29] Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. [30] And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' [31] The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." [32] And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. [33] And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." [34] And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Notes

- In Jesus' time, many religious leaders confronted Jesus with questions. But they weren't interested in finding out the truth; they were hoping to use these questions to trap Jesus so that Jesus would lose his credibility. But not the scribe in this passage; this scribe was said to be not far from the kingdom of God. The scribe had a genuine question, which was to find out what the heart of godly living was. And in this passage, Jesus answered the scribe directly.
- Instead of quoting a particular law, Jesus quoted the Shema (Deuteronomy 6). There is only one God, and we are to worship God single-mindedly. God graciously revealed Himself to Abraham and His descendants, and as a response to God's loving self revelation, Israel was supposed to pledge their allegiance to God. The LORD God allows Israel (and us) to know about Himself; His gracious self revelation provides us with true knowledge about Him and His nature. God is one, this means that God is unique, and that there is only one God. And hence we are to worship God alone.
- God's law's are meant to reveal His nature. When God gave Israel His law, He has already rescued them out of Egypt. It is not that Israel has to earn God's love by following His law; God already loved Israel when He gave them the Law, and the purpose of the Law giving was to teach Israel how to maintain a relationship with Him, especially since Israel was amongst the pagan nations.
- To love God is more than a fuzzy feeling towards God; love for God is doing actions demonstrated in faithfulness. If we read on in Deuteronomy 6, there are some actions that God suggests would be an expression of loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. These actions include passing down God's truth to the next generation (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). These actions also include giving thanks for our food, because "when we eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD..."
- Running towards other idols will destroy us; God is the only source of life, and when we turn towards other idols and away from God, we are turning away from life and turning unto death.
- Apart from loving God, the next greatest commandment was loving our neighbour. What Jesus did that unique amongst the rabbis of His time; in the past, other rabbis also summarised the Law as loving our neighbour, but what Jesus did was to combine loving God and loving our neighbour. We cannot truly love God unless we love our neighbour, and we cannot truly

love our neighbour unless we love God. For example, when we look at portions like Leviticus 19:10,18 we realise that we love our neighbour because “I am the LORD your God”.

- The scribe understood what Jesus said (see Mark 12:34). Instead of merely a confession of faith, God calls also for a demonstration of love towards Him and others. E.g in Leviticus, it is said that when we gather grapes for the vineyard, we should leave some for the sojourner. To do so ungrudgingly, one must first realise that God is the one who blesses his vineyard, and one must first not be anxious about his harvest, e.g one must first trust God. And when one trusts God, he can love his neighbor easily because there is no longer any anxiety etc preventing him from loving his neighbour by leaving grapes.
- The scribe understood that it is not about outward religiosity, but it is about the attitude of the heart. See Isaiah 1:10-20, our scripture reading for today. Or see many other of the OT prophets haha... Christian living is more than just mechanically memorising scripture and turning up on Sunday because it is an obligation, true Christian living includes loving our neighbour too (which would demonstrate our love for God).
- However, when we try to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves, we'll soon realise that we can't do it with our own strength. We need a savior. And this savior is Jesus. Even in the OT, we know that even as the sincere, faithful OT people tried their best to love God, they still needed to trust in God for the forgiveness of their sins, because they realise that they fall short (e.g all the Psalms, like Psalm 51). Now that God has revealed Himself to us through the person of His Son, we put our trust in Jesus, who is the image of the invisible God and the exact imprint of God's glory. Just as the OT saints trusted in God to forgive their failures to love God perfectly, today we trust in Jesus to forgive us our failures to love God perfectly. And we also know that as we put our trust in Jesus, He will slowly transform us to help us to better love Him and our neighbours.
- Loving our neighbours means more than doing good deeds (it is not less than that), loving our neighbours also means inviting them to follow Jesus, and helping them to be disciples of Jesus, because Jesus is the source of life.

20th March 2022: False Piety or True Devotion

Text:

[38] And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces [39] and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, [40] who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

[41] And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. [42] And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. [43] And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. [44] For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Notes

- The two stories in today’s passage are deliberately arranged as so to contrast the scribes with the widow. The scribes neither loved God nor people, but the widow loved God with total devotion.
- The scribes appeared to be lovers of God, but they really are lovers of self (v38-39). They like to be viewed as pious by people, such as making long prayers in public, as compared to what Jesus said in the Sermon on the mount about private prayer. But we know that their piety is false, because their actions are unjust; they are said to “devour” widows’ houses. The scribes were hypocrites, exploiting the poor while still looking pious. This is a clear violation of the teaching of the Law and the Prophets, e.g in Isaiah 10:1-4. They did not love their neighbours, especially those who were vulnerable. And this is especially egregious because the scribes were supposed to know the Law. The widow in the story *could* have been one who’s house was devoured by the scribes.
- In the 20th century, Hitler was a master of outward religiosity with no inward piety. Reflections for us:
 - For leaders in the church, do y’all use your authority and power to exploit your sheep for the people under you?
 - For all: are we lovers of self when we should be lovers of God? Do you do things just to get the approval of others, to be seen as a ‘good Christian’? Are we pious only for people to see? We might be able to fool the people around us, but we can’t fool God. Do we live a double life? Are we well-behaved in church but for the rest of the week we’re mean to our spouse/children? The solution is to repent from this hypocrisy, to turn away from sin and to turn to God.
- The widow offered a small offering, but Jesus did not despise it. The widow offered two copper coins, where a copper coin was a hundredth of a denarius, where a denarius is a day’s wage for a labourer. In fact, Jesus commended the widow for giving more than the rich. In a sense, what Jesus looked at was not the absolute amount of money x given by a person, but the percentage of money given x/x_{Total} . There was not as much sacrifice on the part of the rich, when they gave, but for the widow, her offering was costly for her.
- The widow serves thus as a vivid model for sacrificial discipleship, complete surrender, and

total trust. Without the trust that God will care for her, she probably wouldn't have given all her money.

- “The story of the poor widow reminds us that in God's economy, the size of the gift is of no consequence, what is of consequence is the size of the giver's heart”. Even if our gift is small, God can multiply it anyway (c.f the story of the 5 loaf and 2 fishes). Reflections for us:
 - Is God speaking to you and nudging you to give more sacrificially?
 - Besides giving, in what other ways can we practice sacrificial discipleship that Jesus requires of us?
 - Is our discipleship merely based on convenience?

One example: do we plan our day/life such that we give God the remainder of our money/time only after we have spent the money/time on ourselves? Or do we give to God the firstfruits of our time/money/energy?

- Application to worship: online service is definitely more convenient than coming to church, but it is a poor substitute. Do we then do things based on our convenience, or do we sacrifice a bit of our convenience so that we can obey God's revealed will for us to come together to meet to exhort each other.
- Let us ... (conclusion to be added later)