

Proverbs 18

A stitch in time saves nine. What's the most important thing? He tangata, he Tangata, He tangata. What's the first proverb that springs to mind to you. Maybe it's one of the biblical ones. Maybe it's a Maori, maybe it's one you have got so sick of? (Feedback?) Proverbs, short pithy statements that express community wisdom.

What I love about the bible is that it's more a library than a book. It has this whole mix of different types of advice for life. It has a wisdom section that includes proverbs, very short statements intended to teach us uncommon sense, or wisdom

The Proverbs of Solomon read 1.1, Solomon was the son of King David, famous for his wisdom and ruled when Israel was at its zenith. 1 Kings 4.32 states that Solomon wrote thousands of proverbs, however Chapter 30 is headed the saying of Agur and Chapter 31 the sayings of King Lemuel, so I think it is faithful to say that Solomon wrote or gathered these proverbs. Solomon lived about 1000 years before Christ, and there are archaeological records of similar sort of proverbs being written in Egypt and Mesopotamia at the same time.

But what do we make of the Proverbs? They are for obtaining wisdom, making wise the simple. But they are more than just clever sayings, because they are in our bible Christians believe that these proverbs have a sort of divine approval. Solomon might have gathered some of them from other cultures, but he and perhaps his editors checked these and authorised these. So I want to commend these sayings to you as common sense, community tested, but also with a kind of divine quality mark on them.

Finally, before I jump in, I am unapologetically Christian, I believe that the God of Jesus Christ is the God of the Jews, and that Jewish teaching has a mana of its own, but is best understood in the light of Christ. So I suggest that we understand the proverbs on their own merits, but also be on the lookout for signs of Christ in them. In the Old Testament, the hand, the name, the glory of God are all metaphors for the action of God, and to some extent you can see Jesus or the Holy Spirit pre-figured in these metaphors.

Right we are going to jump straight into it. Today I'm going to preach on Proverbs 18, but we will come back to that verse, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. A very significant verse, but I want you to have a feel for the proverbs before we have a look at it.

These translations of the Proverbs are intended to bring out a little more of the underlying Hebrew. With thanks to the scholars Green and Murphy.

He who separates himself, seeks his own desires. He defies all sound wisdom. We live in a culture, where doing it my way, I think therefore I am, is very strong. In the biblical world view when you remove yourself from the community you become very selfish. That's why Jesus doesn't just save souls, he has created a new community, the church.

A fool finds no delight in understanding. But only in uncovering his own heart. It's foolish not to listen to others, 'to delight in learning from others'. We all know people who talk too much, and often they reveal their own shallowness. Wisdom says that the mouth reveals the heart.

Comes the wicked, comes contempt also. And with shame, comes reproach. This is interesting, I think what it means is when we encounter contempt, you know smug self-importance, there is wickedness behind it. And when you do something shameful it affects your standing in other people's eyes.

The words of a man's mouth are deep waters. The fountain of wisdom like a flowing brook. Our words, reveal deep things about us, words in the Old Testament carry a great deal of weight. We could say well that was just ancient culture, but I think as Christians we should weigh our words. Wisdom is a stream of life.

It is not good to lift the face of the wicked. Nor to turn aside the just in a judgement. So here is some Hebrew Idiom, to lift up the face is to show mercy. It's not good to let the guilty off and deny a judgement to the innocent. We can all agreed. So is God wrong to show us mercy in Christ; no this is that great tension of balancing justice and mercy. This is why Christ died for us, because God won't just overlook wickedness he is just in his judgements.

How do you like these so far? Good stuff eh?

The lips of a fool lead to strife, and his mouth invites a beating. A fool's mouth is his undoing, and his lips are a snare to his soul. Notice the strong connection between our mouths and lip and the trouble they get us into. The proverb doesn't approve the beating, but I remember warning my kids – be careful about getting smart to the wrong person, you'll get thumped. Common sense. And sometimes our words can get us into a mess where we compromise our values.

The words of a gossip are like choice morsels, they go down to ones inmost being. Here's a really important warning, Gossip is salacious and it goes deep, it will affect the way you see a person, it is corrosive to deep friendships.

Whoever is slack in his work, is a brother to one who destroys. I love this one, it's a classic proverb to me, one to quote at your workplace, and deeply true. A slack worker damages things, do that waterproofing badly it will destroy, don't check those brakes properly someone will die.

The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous run to it and are safe. The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it as an unclimbable wall. Here's our signature tune for today. A strong tower is like a fortified roundhouse, remember how I said for Christians we can substitute Jesus for the name of the Lord, Jesus is our strong tower and the righteous run to him and we are ultimately safe. The rich build big castles, and they imagine that their walls are un-breach able. There is irony there, better to trust in the name of the Lord.

Before a collapse the heart is proud. But before honour, humility. Pride comes before a fall, Hubris allows us to over-estimate our capacity – great business advice. Not here's the counter-cultural faith perspective, humility leads to honour. I remember Sandy Millar saying that the only thing the Holy Spirit can anoint is humility.

The one who answers before listening – his the folly and shame. Notice I usually try to include men and women, this is more often a blokes problem, giving advice before listening, I understand there is now a term for it, Mansplaining. I wonder whether Solomon learn this one from Experience.

The spirit of a person can sustain him when he is ill. But a crushed spirit, who can bear? This is a reflection that physical illness is often not as difficult to bear as mental illness, but perhaps even deeper than that. A crushed spirit is more than mental illness, because often Mentally ill people have the strongest spirits that I have seen, but a crushed spirit is when you have lost hope.

The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge and the ears of the wise seek knowledge out. So the idea here is that the heart, the inner part of us of a discerning person stores away knowledge, and their ears seek it out. They don't just listen for gossip, but they listen with a purpose, they listen to learn. You can learn things from a God teacher and a bad teacher. I've been reading Marion's book and she talks about learning something very early on from a stuck teacher that impacted her teaching practice, and set her on a road to teach at a different level every year.

A man's gift creates room for him, giving access to important people. Now this is an interesting one, it reads like it is commending a bribe, but it actually falls short of that. Scripture is against bribery, but here is wisdom. A carefully chosen gift opens a door, giving access to important people. You have to remember in the ancient world it was normal to paid a fee to your Lord, they didn't have taxes as we know them. So a little real politic from the proverbs here.

The first to present his case seems right! Until his neighbour comes and tests him. This is not just for Judge Hollister-Jones; we all need to be careful of forming a judgement before we hear both sides of a case. With our children, but even in the church. One of the Things I like about the Presbyterian Church is that we ministers are accountable to Presbytery and have solid discipline procedures in place.

There are some very high profile cases of churches not doing disciple well. I have always tried to be careful to respect people's personal space. But I want to take this chance to say; if I ever make you feel uncomfortable by the way I touch you or speak to you – you have my permission to tell me, or if that doesn't feel safe go to one of the elders and ask them to tell me, and ultimately there is a complaints procedure outlined beside the welcome desk.

The lot settles quarrels, and is decisive among the powerful. Now this is an interesting one, casting lots was considered a way of discerning God's will in the Old Testament, we don't still use it. But it was also a way of avoiding bias. The toss of a coin, if both agree can be a useful way of avoiding a fight between the powerful. Sometimes armies would let their champion's fight and that would decide a matter, think of David and Goliath.

A brother offended is stronger than a fortified city, and their disputes like the barred gates of a castle. Here's another one about disputes, again with that metaphor of a castle. Be careful of offending a family member, when you hurt someone close it can be very hard to put right.

By the fruit of one's mouth a person's stomach is filled; with the harvest of his lips he is satisfied. Death and life in the power of the tongue. And those who love it will eat its fruit. The proverbs make this connection between careful speech and success in business. James talks in a similar way about the power of a tongue. Sticks and stone might break my bones, but words can break a person. Those who love it will eat its fruit, there is a very good side to speech, words and rhetoric also. Words have the power of life as well as death.

He who finds a wife finds good, and obtains favour from the lord. Happy wife, happy life! No it's actually more than that Proverbs 19.14 expands this idea. Houses and wealth might come from parents, but a prudent wife is from the Lord. Our spouse if we have one, and our friends if we don't are a gift from God, and we should value them highly.

A poor man pleads for mercy. But a rich man answers harshly. Isn't that true, wealth can affect our language, if you are dealing with a person of very modest means, it's important that you factor in that they may feel at a disadvantage in your conversation, and the same a rich person can be tempted to short with people in a foolish way.

A man of many friends may be broken. But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. So lots of friends perhaps who are not that close are not a security in life, but there is a friend who is closer than a brother. It's a general statement, but also as a Christian I connect Jesus as the friend who sticks closer than any brother.

Well that's a taste of the Proverbs, we're going to look at Proverbs 19 next week.

Let me finish with a call to return to the lord. Has God spoken to you through any of those proverbs? Has he identified an area in your life that needs to change? Has he held out something new to you. Or is it time to start your journey with Jesus.

In some ways the proverbs are the best of human wisdom affirmed by God, but God's wisdom has yet another level. The level where God knows we cannot save ourselves, and that to live a truly successful life, we need him. We need to turn our lives to God and to turn our lives over to Jesus.

Let's pray.

Father thank you for the best of wisdom and for the wonder of this world. Thank you for loving us.

Jesus, we're sorry for the things that we do wrong, perhaps you have convinced us of some foolishness in our lives through these proverbs.

Holy Spirit come afresh into our lives and help us to follow Jesus.

If there is anyone here who wants to make a first time commitment to Jesus, I'm just going to pause a minute and let you whisper some words to God. Firstly, 'yes' to God. That's how to start. Yes, and then I encourage you to pray silently, 'thank you' God for loving me and making a way for me to come to you, 'thank you'. Next 'I'm sorry' I'm sorry God for the things that are wrong in my life I confess I need your help 'I'm sorry'. And lastly 'please', please come into my life by your holy spirit and take control, change my feelings and my actions so that I can follow Jesus's way. "Please."

Amen.

If you prayed that prayer today, please tell me after the service.