

Thinking, Worrying, Watching

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, we're going to turn back together for a week while. To Proverbs chapter one, we'll look at really the whole of the passage that we've read, but let me read again from verse seven. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. As you know, this is the last Sunday of the year and that definitely makes it a good time for us to think back on the year that's gone by, to think ahead to 2025.

And whenever we do that, Proverbs is a brilliant book for us to turn to because this is a book of wisdom. It's a fascinating collection of teaching and instruction intended to guide us, to challenge us, to correct us and to educate us.

And there's loads that we can look at in Proverbs today. I want to turn to the passage that we read because it highlights three things that we've all spent the whole year doing.

Thinking, worrying and watching. And I think it's true that although we've all had very different years, we've all done all three of these.

[1 : 0 7] We've been thinking. We have to make decisions. We've had to adapt to changes. We've had to plan things. We've had to review things. We've had to learn things. We've had to accept things.

All of that involves a lot of thinking. We've been worrying. Life, as everyone here knows, brings challenges and anxieties. We carry responsibilities. There's many things that we care about, many things that we want to prioritise, many things that we want to protect.

It's impossible to go through a year without worrying and maybe as you go into 2025, that might be the thing that you're doing more than anything else. And we've been watching, and I don't mean watching Netflix or YouTube, although I'm sure we've done plenty of that.

What I mean is something wider. The fact that we watch other people. We watch our communities change. We watch what other people have. We watch what we achieve. We watch what we fail to achieve.

We've spent the last year thinking, worrying, and watching. And it's definitely the case that we'll carry on doing these things in 2025.

[2 : 1 2] Proverbs, one, raises all of these issues. But it does so in quite a challenging way. And in many ways, whenever you go to Proverbs at one level, it's gonna educate you and it's gonna encourage you.

But at the same time, Proverbs is always gonna penetrate into your heart to challenge you. And that's a good thing, even though it's maybe a hard thing. And Proverbs, one, raises these issues and it's challenging us because it's getting us to do three things.

It's getting you to think about how you think, worry about what you worry about, and watch who you're watching.

And we're just gonna go through these three together as quickly as we can today. So starting, first of all, with thinking about how you think. You see this emphasized in verses two to six, but really it's the emphasis of the whole book.

Proverbs is written so that you might have wisdom and instruction in order to understand words of insight. And that echoes a theme that actually runs right through the whole of the Old Testament.

[3 : 23] A big category of the Old Testament is known as wisdom literature. And so it's important to remember that on the one hand, the Old Testament is concerned with what happened in history, particularly in relation to redemptive history, the unfolding of God's saving plan.

But at the same time, the Old Testament is not just interested in what happened then, it's also interested in what's happening in your head now.

The Bible wants you to think about how you think. And the reason why that is so important is because again and again, the Bible will emphasize that there is an inseparable connection between the way you think and the way that you behave and live out your life.

And that's brought out very clearly in verse three, when it speaks about wise dealing there. That's an interesting phrase. Some Bible translations translate it wise behavior, some prudent behavior, others a disciplined and prudent life.

It's all making that connection between thinking and living. And that's emphasized then by the three words at the end, righteousness, justice and equity.

[4 : 33] Now, when you look at those words, it's, I think it's right to think of these words, what we call epexegetically, that's a very big word, exegetically.

Basically what that means is that these three words are explaining and expanding on what's just come before it. So when you see wise dealing, you then have three words after that that are explaining more about what wise dealing, wise behavior actually involves.

So wise living involves righteousness, justice and equity. Righteousness, that's speaking about the standard that God operates at, always at the highest level, always consistent, never falling short.

Justice speaks about the fact that some things are right, some things are wrong, some things are to be praised, some things are to be punished, some things should always be allowed, some things should never be allowed.

And equity is the word behind that, is the idea of something being straight or upright. And so it's the idea of something always being fair and the opposite to that is something that's twisted or crooked or corrupt.

[5 : 44] Now, all of these are abstract concepts, righteousness, equity, justice, they exist in the world of thoughts and language, but at the same time, they must influence the actual way that we live.

There's no use saying that you're committed to righteousness, justice and equity unless it actually affects the way you live out your life. Thinking and behavior are inseparable.

And so this is what God wants for us. He wants us to grow in wisdom so that our thinking is gonna be shaped by righteousness, justice and equity, and he wants that to then shape our practice in life.

And that's brought out in other parts of the Old Testament. Let me give you an example from Jeremiah 9, 23 to 24, which is very similar language. I'll read it out and you'll see the echoes of the language. Thus says the Lord, Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, nor the mighty man boast in his might, nor the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, declares the Lord.

That verse is telling us that all the wisdom that Proverbs is pointing us towards is simply another way of saying, this is what is involved in becoming more like God. And in many ways, a keyword is their practices that this is emphasizing that what God thinks, shapes what he does.

[7 : 17] In terms like righteousness, justice and equity are really interesting today because, they're kind of technical theological language in lots of ways and not many people are particularly attracted to them if we kind of advertised, come and hear more about righteousness, justice and equity, it would not spark the imagination of the masses at all.

But what's really interesting is that still today, you will see that whilst people don't make a huge, take a huge interest in these positive terms, people are absolutely disgusted at their opposites.

And so take politics for example, if you see incompetence, injustice and inequity, people are rightly horrified. And it's all reminding us that the thinking that God wants us to have is actually the wisdom that everybody craves.

So I guess in many ways, the big point we're trying to make just now in terms of our thinking is that there's an inseparable connection between the way we think and the way that we live.

And that is gonna affect us for good or for bad. And Jesus himself made that very clear, the good person out of the treasure of his heart produces good, the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil for out of the abundance of his heart, his mouth speaks.

[8 : 40] What we are on the inside is gonna affect what we are on the outside, the way you think has a massive influence on your life. That's why Proverbs wants you to think about how you think.

Now, I just wanna pull out three brief points of application as we round up that first point. Number one, a key part of discipleship, of growing as a Christian is seeking to become more mature in the way that you think.

And that's again, I wish I had time to go through examples of this, but if you just go through any book in the New Testament, in particular, any of the epistles and ask yourself the question, how many times is this telling me to think differently?

Or how many times is this speaking about the way that I think and you'll see it comes up again and again and again. And so Christian discipleship involves growing in maturity in the way that we think.

And that sounds like a great target to aim for, and it is. But at the same time, it's a hard truth to accept because acknowledging that we need to grow in the way that we think means admitting that there are gonna be areas in our thought life where we are not very mature and where we're not very wise and often where we are actually just wrong.

[10 : 05] And that's always a hard thing to acknowledge, but part of Christian discipleship is being ready to admit that and say, Lord, help me to grow in the way that I think. That's the first application.

Number two, if you want to assess the health of your thinking life, and if you want to learn more about how you think, what should you do? You should look at the way you live.

To learn about how you think, look at the way you live. And again, this is quite hard because it can expose what our hearts are really like.

And what we can often find out is that we might, this is gonna sound a bit confusing, but we might think that we think in a particular way, but the way that we live might tell us something different.

So I think if I asked anybody in here, do you really, really, really love money? Nobody's gonna say yes, but everybody's gonna say, well, no, really, I don't really love money.

[11 : 06] And yet how many of us spend a lot of time chasing it? We might say, if I was to ask you all, do you think the way somebody is on the inside matters more than the way they are on the outside?

We would all say yes, and yet all of us, all of us, put a huge amount of effort into our appearance to make ourselves look attractive. And this is maybe challenging for those of us who are working every single one of us, you know, would say, well, I think that spending time with family is more important than anything, and yet when work calls us, we go.

And our actions can actually expose, and we are thinking that we maybe didn't realize that we had. And so it's so important for us to think about how we think, because how we think is gonna shape the way we live, or to put it the other way around, if you want to live differently in 2025, then you're going to need to think differently for that to happen.

And one of the best ways that we can make that happen is to fill our minds with the wisdom of the Bible, to go to books like Proverbs, to go to the epistles, and most importantly of all, to go to the Gospels and see the example of Jesus, and let his wisdom fill our minds and shape our minds, and transform the way that we think, and when that happens, our lives will be lived differently as well.

So we need to, application number one, acknowledge that this is an area where we're gonna have to grow. Application number two, we need, if we're gonna know how we think, we need to look at how we live.

[12 : 54] But application number three is the most important of all. If you want to know what good thinking looks like, have a look at how Jesus lived.

If you want to know what good thinking looks like, look at how Jesus lived, because what do you see in Jesus? You see righteousness, justice, and equity.

You see beautiful compassion on those who are in need and who are rejected by others. You see fearless defense of those who'd been mistreated. You see relentless commitment to always do what's right and to always do it well.

And the reason Jesus lived like that is because he thinks like that. And what's even more amazing is that everything that Jesus does for you arises from what he thinks of you.

So when he challenges you through his word, he does that because he cares about you. When he entrusts a responsibility to you, he does that because he values you.

[14 : 09] When he blesses you with good things in your life, he does that because he delights in you. When he died for you, he did it because he loves you.

And as we come to faith in Jesus, we rest in everything that he's done. But as we grow in faith, we want to align more and more and more with the way he thinks.

In fact, we want to think about how we think until we think the way he thinks. There's your takeaway for the service. Well, for this part of the service, we need to think about how we think until we think the way Jesus thinks.

Problems wants us to think about how we think. Number two, problems wants us to worry about what you worry about. Now I was a bit hesitant about that heading for a couple of reasons.

One, because it sounds like the application for this point is to worry more, which isn't really what I want to say. And two, because I don't ever want to kind of I just want to recognize that worry and anxiety is such a difficult thing.

[15 : 18] So many of us experience it, so many of us struggle with it, and everybody would say, I wish I didn't do it, and yet we feel like we can't help it. So I was a bit hesitant about the title, but I wanted to go with it because it actually, I think it has more impact if we think of it in this way.

And we wanted to have impact because this is raising a very serious topic. And we see it unpacked in verses seven to nine.

And in many ways here we have the concept that sums up the whole of biblical wisdom, the fear of the Lord. Now that's always been a slightly tricky phrase for people to understand, because when we use the term fear of the Lord, at one level we're saying we don't want you to be terrified of God, but on the other hand, that's exactly what we're saying.

Or maybe to put it more accurately, we're saying that the fear of the Lord is not saying run away from God in terror, but it is most definitely saying, tremble before Him in awe.

God is God, and He's to be treated with the highest levels of respect, honour, and seriousness.

[16 : 42] I've used this illustration many times before, but that phrase, the fear of the Lord, always makes me think back to my engineering days. One of the things that I loved when I was an engineer was when you got to work with a massive machine.

So you'd go to an engine that would start here and it would end at the wall, at the back. You'd sometimes be working with cranes that are lifting monumental weights.

And you're like, that's so cool and so amazing. But yet at the same time you're like, oh my goodness, I have to be careful. Because if I put my hand in the wrong place, then it's gonna be crushed.

If I am not careful with what I'm doing here, it could cause serious damage to me or to others. And so you had that kind of tension between like, wow, whoa. And that really should be the posture we have before God, just times a million, that we are drawn to him because he's so good and glorious and majestic, but we are also aware that this is God.

And his holiness, his power, his majesty is beyond anything. And all of that's contained in this language of the fear of the Lord. And yet the truth is we spend far more time and energy worrying about a thousand other things.

[18 : 09] So we worry about our emails, we worry about our cars, our clothes, our social media, our football team, our fitness, our looks, our phones, and maybe most of all, we worry about what other people think of us.

And we fear these things far more than we worry about the fear of the Lord. And that's why Proverbs is telling us to worry about what we worry about, or to put it a different way, to ask the question, are our priorities upside down?

Are we obsessing over things that don't really matter? Are we neglecting the things that really do? Again, I've used this quotation before, but it's one of my favorites. It came from a sermon by Eric Alexander.

And I've never forgotten that he said, are we going to wake up on the day of judgment and find that we have been serious about trivial things and trivial about serious things?

And that's a huge danger for us all. It applies in lots of different areas of life. Proverbs one mentions an example that's really interesting and actually very relevant to society today.

[19 : 20] I have got no chance of finishing at 12 today, so you're just gonna have to go with me. But we'll be finished as quickly as we possibly can, but I do wanna talk about this because this is one of the few opportunities we'll have to talk about this.

Proverbs one mentions an example here. It talks about children listening to your parents. And more widely, that's speaking about a principle whereby one generation listens to those who've come before it.

Now, the reason this is so relevant and interesting is because a massive change has taken place in our culture in the last 100 years or so, because for pretty much all of known history and nearly every culture that we have a good understanding of in the world, every generation has sought to learn from those who've come before it and to preserve the heritage that's been passed to them.

And that's how you get a culture. We have an island culture here, and that's because what generations past had has been passed on to us. We've sought to maintain it and preserve it.

That's how you get all cultures in the world. And a key component in that happening is having the posture whereby you're thinking the generation above me is wise, experienced, and trustworthy.

[20 : 33] Now, that doesn't mean that they're perfect and there's lots of things that's not perfect over the generations before us, but the general posture is that those who are older than us have insights that we can benefit from.

A massive change has taken place in Western culture, whereby the individualism of the era that we live in has meant that the generation rising up now looks at their parents and looks at their grandparents and thinks that they're stupid.

Now, that's maybe putting it a bit harshly, but it is true that the generation rising up does not look to the generations older than them as the experts, as the wise, as the reliable.

And the result is what some social analysts and philosophers have described as an anti-culture, because if you think about a culture, is you take what's been given to you and you make it even better, and you preserve it and it grows and develops and becomes richer and richer.

And anti-culture sees everything that we've inherited as a problem that needs to be abandoned or dismantled. And you see, once you realize this, you see this is actually happening all the time.

[21 : 47] Really good example would be marriage to one person for life in a healthy, faithful, loving relationship. That's been a pillar of Western society for centuries.

You would not have had to persuade somebody 200 years ago that that was a good idea. They just knew it and accepted it and valued it. Today, that heritage that's been passed to us is seen as restrictive, old-fashioned and unnecessary.

And so it gets dismantled. And it happens in many other ways. Couple to that is another new problem that's related to this whole issue regarding parents, children, is that again, for centuries, people respected their forefathers and it actually caused a massive problem in many cultures whereby people actually worshiped their ancestors.

And you see that particularly in Eastern, sometimes in African cultures, the respect to the older generation was so great that they were actually became an object of worship.

And that was actually a massive problem for other reasons. Today, that's not a problem at all because people don't worship their ancestors. People worship their children. And that's something that we see a lot.

[23 : 02] And the idol of the child has one great requirement. They must never be made to feel uncomfortable.

And you see that, that there's a huge reluctance and fear about making a child feel uncomfortable, even though very often some of the things that are most helpful and beneficial to us in life are things that are actually not very comfortable to experience.

But children don't want to feel uncomfortable. Patients don't want to make them feel uncomfortable. And one of the things that makes you feel uncomfortable is being told that you're wrong. And so people are terrified of ever telling their children that they're wrong.

And so you have this vicious cycle. Generations growing up think that their parents are stupid. Patients don't want to make their children feel uncomfortable. So they're not going to tell them that they're wrong. And many of the pillars of a healthy culture are being dismantled.

And I know that this is a very, very kind of stereotypical example and it's maybe not the most helpful, but I do think it still has a valid point. Everybody here can imagine the situation whereby you will have a teenager freaking out over the type of phone they have or don't have.

[24 : 13] You have a parent terrified about how they're going to react and what to do about it. And you will have a grandmother sitting at the fire saying, it's only a phone. Which one's the wisest?

And it's all pointing to the fact that there's a huge danger, especially today, that our priorities are all muddled up, our desires are misplaced, we're worrying about the wrong things.

We should worry about what we worry about. And this is where the gospel is amazing because it cuts right through all of that.

And the way that it cuts through all of that, all the pressure that you are under and all the different voices pulling you in a thousand different directions, the gospel cuts through all of that because it tells you that the one that you need to fear is God.

God is the one that you need to care about most and your relationship with God is the thing that matters more than anything else. But the key thing that you have to recognize is that when I say that, when the gospel cuts through that and says you need to fear God, that is not the gospel holding you hostage with a gun to your head saying, you need to be terrified of God.

[25 : 33] It is actually where the gospel liberates you because it's telling you you can stop worrying about everything else. You can stop worrying about all these things that ultimately don't matter and instead you can fix your eyes on Jesus and rest in him.

But what's even more amazing is that when it comes to our worries and concerns, Jesus doesn't say to you, stop it because if somebody's worrying, if you say to them, stop it, it never ever works and Jesus does not say, stop it.

He says, cast your worries on me. Lay them at my feet. And this is where we see a really important and a really amazing point about Jesus.

You will have heard me say, and again and again and again, we will say that we come to Jesus with empty hands. And that's true. We come to Jesus with empty hands. So we never come to Jesus presenting him our efforts, our legalistic, impressiveness, or anything they base.

We come to Jesus with empty hands seeking his forgiveness entirely based on his grace. We come to Jesus with empty hands, but at the very same time, we come to Jesus with full suitcases.

[26 : 56] Now what I mean by that is that we come to Jesus with all the baggage of our worries, our fears, our anxieties, and we can leave them all with him.

Every single day, as a Christian, you're gonna wake up with new suitcases, new worries, new fears, new anxieties. It's unavoidable.

And the Bible's not saying don't have worries. The Bible is saying, bring me your worries. Cast your concerns, throw your baggage at the feet of Jesus.

And so every day you're gonna wake up with new suitcases full of worries. Every day we want to lay them at Jesus' feet and ask for his help.

So when I say worry about what you worry about, I'm not trying to make you feel guilty or anything like that. I'm just saying, I guess I'm saying think about what you worry about, that would have spoiled the pattern of my headings.

[27 : 55] But you know what I'm trying to say, if worries are overwhelming you, or if your worries are misplaced, that needs to be realigned and become, and bring it all to Jesus. Okay, time's running out.

Right, I'll just be very quick with the last point. Proverbs wants you to think about what you think, it wants you to worry about what you're worried about, and it wants you to watch who you are watching. And this is important because we spend a whole lot of time watching other people.

So if you're trying to climb the career ladder, then you're gonna be watching your colleagues to see whether they get ahead of you. If you run your own business, you're gonna be watching your competitors. The whole advertising industry is trying to get you to look at an object and feel a need.

And if you're in school, you are gonna spend a heck of a lot of time watching what other people are saying, waiting, playing on their phone, doing so much time is spent watching others.

And verses 10 to 19, speak into this, I'm not gonna have time to go through it all, but it's all talking about the danger of negative influences in our lives.

[29 : 01] In other words, it's telling us to watch who you are watching. And it's interesting, it uses this language of being enticed. The word there speaks of being wide open. And it's the idea that you see an influence, you see somebody and you are just wide open for them to suck you in, shape you, and change you, so that you follow them.

And that can happen so often. We look at what someone else wears, we think I need that. We look at the music that someone else listens to, we think I should listen to that.

We look at other people's houses, cars, phones, and we think I've got to have what they have. It's so easy to be enticed. It happens to all of us. How many of us were waiting Christmas jumpers 20 years ago? None of us, in fact, interesting fact I discovered.

Bridget Jones's Diary, the film that many of you will have seen, there's this charming handsome chap called Mark Darcy, looks a bit like me, no, it does not look like me.

And Bridget Jones sees him in a party and she sees his back and she's like, oh, he could be a bit nice. She thinks, oh, wow, it's great. And then he turns around and there's a reindeer on his jumper.

[30 : 10] And it's like, oh, because to have a reindeer on your jumper is super embarrassing in 2001 or whenever the film was made. Now, to have a reindeer on your jumper would be like, awesome. I'm owning the room because I've got a jumper like that.

So again, that's just an example of how influences change. And that's a trivial example. And it doesn't really matter very much, but it is pointing us to the fact that we are susceptible to influence.

And sometimes that can be very damaging. We need to watch who we are watching. You've got the language here in Proverbs 10 to 19. You've got the description of a gang of robbers plundering somebody.

I don't think you should take that literally, as I was going to say, don't steal from people. I think it's presenting a broader principle whereby, it's going to say, don't get sucked in by a bad crowd.

That's what it's saying. Don't get sucked in by a bad crowd. And the key point I want to highlight is that, oh, well, I'm not going to have time to do it all. Let me choose what I'm going to say here.

[31 : 14] Okay, I'm going to say this one thing because I've run out of time. The key point that's been highlighted here is that the Bible is not against you being influenced.

There's a lot in the Bible about good example and good influence. The key point it's emphasizing is saying, be careful about bad influences.

Watch who you're watching. And there's two amazing things about being a Christian. One is that when it comes to good influences, you can have many.

You can have Jesus first and foremost, but you also have the church family. That's one of the beautiful things about the church family. You're surrounded by people who are a good, healthy influence in your life.

One of the amazing things about being a Christian is that you can have good influences in your life. The other amazing thing about being a Christian is that you can be a good influence in your life.

[32 : 13] You can be a massive blessing to your wife, your husband, your children, your wider family, your colleagues, your neighbors, the people at the football, the people in the choir, the people that you socialize with.

You can be a good positive influence and blessing in their lives. It's a wonderful privilege and in many ways, that might be the way that you can impact someone's life positively over the next year, more than anything else.

And if you want to know what that looks like, keep watching Jesus. Jesus is never, ever going to disappoint you and he is always there to be our guide.

So Proverbs is telling us to think about how you think, to worry about what you worry about, to watch who you're watching.

And instead, let the spirit of Jesus transform the way you think. That's a great prayer to pray. Holy Spirit, please transform the way I think.

[33 : 20] Come to Jesus with all your worries, all your burdens and lay them before him. And keep watching Jesus.

Keep reading about him. Keep listening to things that talk about him and keep speaking about him as a church family together. Keep watching Jesus and follow him today, this week and for the rest of your life.

Amen.