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How to Live Skillfully in a Culture of Fools

Skillful Living

Proverbs 17:1-28

Pastor Bryan Clark

Several weeks ago we reminded ourselves that the only way to really understand the Book of Proverbs is to understand it's not about my life as an individual. Proverbs is about how we live well together as a community, which is how God intended for us to live. A couple of weeks ago the proverbs used a wonderful imagery, that someone who really understands God's vision for the world and lives that out, is like a sunrise. A sunrise in the Bible would be this idea of sunrises filled with hope, with renewal, restoration, redemption—kind of this sense that everything is going to be okay.

Some people, when they walk into a room, people groan and roll their eyes but there are other people, when they walk into a room, something inside other people comes alive. You walk into a school, a team, the marketplace, into your home or your neighborhood, and when you walk into a room, something comes alive in people. There's a sense of hope; there's a sense of renewal; there's a sense of redemption. There's a feeling that maybe it's just possible that everything is going to be okay. That's just a beautiful picture of what God has called us to. I would suggest that for the overwhelming majority of people here this morning, that's the kind of person they want to be. Nobody wants to be the kind of person where everyone groans and rolls their eyes. We want to understand and live out this vision God has for the world. But we're left with this question: How do we do that?

Well that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 17. I've just pulled out a number of the proverbs in chapter 17 that seem to be very practical and helpful towards this end. Now anytime we're talking about practical kinds of advice, there are things that we need to know and very specific things that we can do. That's kind of how the discussion will go this morning.

We learned several weeks ago that Proverbs says there is a way that *seems right*. It's the path that seems like it's the path that's going to make me happy, make me joyful; it's going to fulfill my life. But the end of that path is misery. Deep within us there is something that says if I'm functioning as my own god, if I choose my own path, if I go through life kind of selfish and self-centered, that's probably the most likely way to be happy and fulfilled. That seems right, yet it ends in misery. We learned that those people kind of scoff at the idea of sin. They are determined to travel their own path and define their own morality and they're actually very defensive and very reactive when somebody actually suggests that maybe that *isn't* the best way to live. They're incredulous that you would even suggest that my path is somehow not only the wrong path but that it is also almost evil or wrong or sinful. *"How dare you say that?"* And yet there's something deep within them that knows, "But my path isn't working. I'm lost in the jungle; I can't find a path out. Life is becoming more miserable," so it makes them angry. They're frustrated and that anger just kind of spatters out on everyone around them. So we learned that a culture that drifts away from God is a culture that is an angry culture. We also learned that God refers to that as *the way of the fool*. So the question we're kind of wrestling with is: How do we live out God's vision for the world in a confused and angry culture? The first proverb is in Verse 1:

Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it
Than a house full of feasting with strife. (*NASB, Proverbs 17:1)

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that Proverbs kind of cycles these topics over and over and over again; it just keeps building and developing the conversation. This is an idea that we've actually had several times even this summer. The contrast is not either you can be rich or poor, and if you're poor somehow there's **quietness**, and if you're rich, somehow there's **strife**. That's clearly not what Proverbs teaches. You can be poor and full of strife, and you can be wealthy and full of quietness. What the proverb is saying is: what matters to you, what do you ultimately focus on? At the end of the day, if your energy, your focus, what matters most to you is about being somebody; it's about being successful, accumulating wealth, accumulating stuff, trying to somehow fulfill this emptiness within you and that's what drives you, there's no question that you will disadvantage others to advantage yourself again, again and again. And there's no question that will lead to a household of strife whether you're rich or poor. The alternative is to get in your heart and your mind God's vision for the world. What does God mean by *flourishing* and what will be necessary for that? When that is what matters most to me, that's my passion, that's what I live for, what the proverbs is saying is: even if I have nothing more than a dry morsel of bread—I don't even have oil or vinegar to dip the bread in, it's just a dry morsel, it's kind of like survival mode—that would still be better if there's quietness, if there's a sense of peace and contentment and I understand what matters in the world. That would be better than being wildly successful but not getting it, and having a house full of strife and conflict and the breakdown of flourishing.

I actually see this all of the time in people's lives—people that are driven by their job, working ridiculous hours; they're stressed to the max...anxious...pushing...pressing. Something deep within them is driving them, but they're really miserable. Sometimes people will say, "I can't help it; it's my job," and I want to say, "But it's *your life*!" You only get one shot at life. Why would you live it that way? What would happen if you actually made a change to something that you're passionate about, something that you love, something that causes you to get up every day with a smile on your face; even if you had to scale your life way down but you could be happy, you could be satisfied, you could be fulfilled; you could have this sense deep within you that you're living for the things that matter? So the first proverb is really dealing with what ultimately matters to you. What are you going to live for? If you don't get that one right, you really stand no chance of flourishing. Verse 2, I just want to comment briefly on:

A servant who acts wisely will rule over a son who acts shamefully,
And will share in the inheritance among brothers.

Again to emphasize, Proverbs nowhere teaches that it's better to be poor than to be rich. Proverbs is not saying if you're poor, you're going to be happy. As a matter of fact, many of the proverbs say if you learn to live skillfully, you will flourish; you will prosper; you will do better. So what verse 2 is saying is: if you are a slave and you learn to live skillfully, you will actually *out-prosper the son who lives shamefully*. So it's just a good reminder that skillful living is the path of life. The next one I want to highlight is Verse 4:

An evildoer listens to wicked lips;
A liar pays attention to a destructive tongue.

I would summarize verse 4 by saying you become what you listen to, and I think it's worth considering: what are you listening to all of the time? What is the intake that is going in and how is that affecting your soul? How is that affecting your ability to carry out God's vision for the world?

The first part of the proverb is ultimately saying, "Who would possibly listen to someone with **wicked lips**?" Wicked lips, again, is the idea of someone that is creating conflict, creating strife, breaking down shalom and disadvantaging people. The question is: who would possibly listen to someone like that? And the answer is: it must be someone who is **an evildoer**. Someone who understands God's vision for the world simply wouldn't entertain those conversations. The second part of the proverb is: who would possibly **pay attention to a destructive tongue?** Answer: it must be **a liar**. It's kind of the idea that birds of a feather flock together. You ultimately become what you listen to—deciding what is the intake and how does that affect my soul?

I realized years ago that I do not want this constant intake of negative messaging that is so common in our culture. I do believe it is in the media's interest to keep the fight going. They have a vested interest in creating more and more conflict. They want people to be in conflict with one another—it makes better news; it makes better ratings. But at some point you have to ask yourself, "What is that doing to me?" I do not watch the news anymore without a remote in my hand. I do want to be informed but I want to be informed only to the extent that I'm getting the news. Once the media starts on their agenda, I'm done with it. You can kind of feel it happening. You can feel yourself getting frustrated, getting agitated; you can feel your blood pressure starting to go up, getting yourself a little bit riled, and at some point you have to say, "That's not good for me!" I'm going to ultimately become what I listen to whether it's through the media, the internet or through personal conversations. At some point you say, "You know, I'm done with that. I'm done with entertaining those conversations. I don't want to dislike people I've never met. I want my soul to be in such a condition that I can actually respond properly to people who react to me with anger and frustration and things that are hurtful. I don't want to hurt them back." And to do that I have to really think seriously about what I'm allowing into my soul and how does that affect me? Look at what he says in Verse 15: **He who justifies the wicked...** (Again, the wicked are those who create conflict, who break down this idea of flourishing...)

> **He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous,** (the *tzadik*,)
> **Both of them alike are an abomination,** (they're disgusting**) to the LORD.**

If you are so embedded and loyal to your political party that you somehow justify the destructive language that's coming out of these people's mouths, that's disgusting to God. We've talked about this quite a bit this summer. God breaks the world down to the *righteous* and the *wicked*, not down to right, left or conservative, liberal, not down to Republican or Democrat, not down to black or white. Those are not categories that God uses. God uses the categories of righteous and the wicked. If we get so confused we find ourselves actually justifying wicked, destructive conversations, simply because it's in alignment with our agenda, God finds that disgusting. So a very practical proverb to think about is: What am I listening to, and how is that affecting me? The next one is in Verse 7:

> **Excellent speech is not fitting for a fool,**
> **Much less are lying lips to a prince.**

There's a lot of conversation by what the Hebrew means by **excellent speech**. Some translate it as *eloquent* or *big talk*. The Hebrew is kind of vague there, but the basic idea is: I do not expect anything of real value to come out of the mouth of a fool. It's about setting realistic expectations. A fool by definition is a fool and I expect foolish things to come out of his or her mouth. But the second part of the proverb is really the point: **...much less**, (meaning it's not fitting) *for lying lips to belong to a prince...*to a nobleman. We learned a couple weeks ago that God establishes kings in order that they may represent God to the people and carry out God's vision to the world. But God is

disgusted by kings who use their power or position in order to create chaos and strife, in order to advantage themselves. What the proverb is saying is: I should have high expectations for myself. If I'm going to claim that I've been radically changed by the power of the resurrected Christ, I am a new creation in Christ, I actually have the indwelling Holy Spirit living within me; if I'm going to make such an audacious claim than I should have high expectations for myself and what comes out of my mouth, then for my mouth to open and have hurtful, destructive words, to have a lying tongue, makes no sense, given what I'm claiming has happened to me.

We live in a culture that has so de-valued truth. There is no such thing as absolute truth, we say; therefore the truth is whatever I need it to be in order to fulfill my agenda. Everybody is pretty free and loose with the truth so we end up with leaders who don't tell the truth, politicians who don't tell the truth, business people don't tell the truth, a media that doesn't tell the truth, preachers that don't tell the truth—we have a truth crisis in our country—and I'm amazed by how many Christians just seem to go with it. Think of it this way: Take the most intimate, micro-level of flourishing, and that is the intimacy between a husband and wife. It is virtually impossible for a marriage to flourish if there are lies and deception between them. It's not just difficult; it's virtually impossible. It's one of the most devastating things you can do to sabotage your marriage. If that's true at the most micro level, it's certainly true at the macro level. If we don't tell the truth, there's virtually no chance for flourishing. So who in the culture are going to be the truth-tellers? Wouldn't they be the people who claim to have an intimate, personal relationship with the One who is Truth? So the expectation I put on a fool is very low; I expect them to act that way. The expectation I put on myself is to rise above that and respond differently—because I claim to have encountered the resurrected Christ! Verse 9:

He who conceals a transgression seeks love,
But he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends.

The first part of that proverb is talking about someone **who conceals a transgression**. A transgression would be something against me or my property. The idea is rather than react, rather than respond, rather than get even, I choose to conceal it, to veil it...in the words of Jesus, "Turn the other cheek." Why? Because I have a clear sense of the bigger picture, I understand God's vision for the world. I understand what God wants for the world, and I want to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Therefore, if I just keep reacting to those people who mistreat me, I just keep the conflict going. But God has called us as Christians to rise above it. I don't want to be angry; I don't want to react, which again brings us back to, "What do I listen to on a daily basis?" If I am constantly feeding on that which is negative, that which agitates, my soul is in such a way that I am going to react when I'm mistreated, and I only continue to contribute to the breakdown of flourishing. So I get my game face on. I am really conscious of what I take in and when someone mistreats me, I'm not going to react to them; I'm not going to get angry. I'm going to veil it; I'm going to overlook it. Why? Because I really want to move the relationship to such a place that I can have a meaningful conversation about the Jesus who so radically changed my life. If someone chooses to stand outside of our building and hold a sign that says, "Berean preaches hate," I'm not going to get angry with them. I understand that those are people who Jesus died for; those are people who Jesus loves, and Jesus has given us an assignment to move in such a way that it's possible that we can actually have a productive, loving conversation about the Jesus who so changed our lives. That one connects then with Verse 10:

A rebuke goes deeper into one who has understanding
Than a hundred blows into a fool.

Basically the proverb is this: You can beat up a fool with **a hundred blows**, but at the end of that, the fool remains a fool. A hundred blows doesn't somehow turn a fool into someone who lives skillfully. A fool remains a fool. The only way you bring about true, lasting change is if someone is radically changed from the inside out through an encounter with the resurrected Christ, and who then begins to understand God's vision for the world. And when a correction or rebuke comes that person's way, it sinks in deeply. There's a sense that this is what God wants for the world, and this is the way I want to live my life, and they're very responsive to a correction or rebuke.

This is something we just don't understand in our culture. We think somehow through laws, through regulations, through policies we can fix all of this bad behavior. There aren't enough laws in the world that will make a black man and a white man genuinely love each other and trust one another. You can't do that through a policy or laws. You can't pass enough laws that will cause greedy, selfish people to stop disadvantaging others. It will never happen through external pressure. What does happen is we drift farther and farther from God, so there's more and more anger and wickedness. There are more and more selfish, greedy people taking advantage of others, so we pass more and more laws, more and more restrictions, more and more policies. The government gets bigger and bigger and bigger and pretty soon we're all strangling and suffocated by all of these attempts to somehow control bad behavior. But after a hundred lashes, the fool is still a fool.

Therefore, we make a huge strategic error when we are more passionate about our politics than we are about the gospel. The only way something is really going to change—where there is true freedom and people flourish together in a community—is when people encounter the resurrected Christ. And that's only going to happen when I have the discipline to veil the transgressions against me, to respond properly, in order that someone might come into a relationship with Christ where true guidance and correction can take place. I would also suggest to you that this is a very helpful parenting model. It's worth noting that a hundred lashes won't change a fool. What's necessary is for something deep within to radically change. In order that your children might actually listen and respond to what you say, I always had a goal as a parent to work so hard at the relationship that my kids would genuinely respect what I say and ask them to do. That takes a lot of time; that takes a lot of effort and energy but that's the only place where true life-change takes place. A hundred lashes are quick and easy and you're on your way, but it is highly ineffective. The next one is in Verse 12:

> **Let a man meet a bear robbed of her cubs,**
> **Rather than a fool in his folly.**

It's a very interesting word-picture. Let's imagine that you were going camping for the first time in your life, and you choose to go to Yellowstone. The ranger pulls you aside and says, "By the way, we've been having trouble with bears; just so you know, they're eating the campers." *(laughter)* Here's the deal: the first thing they're going to talk about is: these are all of the ways to make sure that you don't attract a bear into your camp. Just avoid the conflict in the first place. But if you're out hiking and you run into a bear, here's what you do. But you need to understand that if you get between a she-bear and her cubs, that is a very dangerous situation. Your life is at stake; you better not make a mistake in that moment. What the writer of Proverbs is saying is: *I would rather run into a bear separated from her cubs, than a fool in his folly*. It's reminding us that this is serious business. You mess around with this stuff and you're going to end up in a place you never thought you'd be. Verse 14 is similar:

> **The beginning of strife is *like* letting out water,**
> **So abandon the quarrel before it breaks out.**

This is again a great imagery. Most of us remember when we were children and we had a rainy day or the sprinkler was on and the water was going down the driveway or the curb, we would try to build these little dams, try to puddle the water. You were only mildly successful for there would only be a short period of time and then you'd see a little stream of water breaking through, and it would be only a matter of seconds until the whole thing would wash out. That's basically the imagery of the proverb. You see the water leaking out and you're really close to the dam bursting. Therefore, abandon ship! Flee! What the proverb is saying is: someone who is skillful at living should be able to read the signs, have enough sense about them to realize this conversation is starting to go somewhere hurtful. It's starting to be unproductive; it's starting to heat up. This is going to end up in a quarrel; it's time to shut it down—to either skillfully de-escalate it, skillfully change the conversation; sometimes it's necessary to quietly walk away.

I am an introvert by nature. "Name-tag Sunday" is not my happy place, *(laughter)* nor is sixty seconds of, "Good morning, how are you?" My happy place would be like five minutes of solitude in the service next week. It's just how God made me. Many of you are extroverts. Introverts love extroverts because you talk. You take the pressure off; it ceases to be so awkward. To be honest, I marvel at what extroverts can do. I wish I had those skills but I don't. I'm the guy in the corner of the room with the cookie, wondering when this is going to be over. *(laughter)* But there are certain things about extroverts that just interest me. One of the things that I marvel at is that an extrovert can just keep talking when no one is listening. *(laughter)* I mean for an introvert, your meter goes up and you're like, "I'm shutting down." But it's like extroverts are oblivious. They're talking away and I'm looking around and it's like, "You know, no one is listening." But it's like, that's not really the point. That's amazing to me. But there is a problem that both of us have as introverts and extroverts, and that is sometimes I marvel at people's lack of discernment—that this conversation is headed into something bad. It seems fairly obvious; read the signs! It's starting to heat up; it's starting to get unproductive; this is not going to end well. It's like the water starting to leak out of my little dam. This is going to blow up and everything within you says, "Stop talking!" But there are people who seem to lack the discernment, a lack of awareness. They just keep pushing and pretty soon it explodes. What the proverb just said is: one of the most skillful things you can do is learn to read the signs and know when enough is enough. Live for another day. There's virtually no way I'm going to do that if I don't have a clear focus on what ultimately matters, what am I in it for, what is my vision and passion for the world? It's not going to happen if I'm not very aware of the intake and how that affects my soul, and how each day my soul is in the right condition to live skillfully. *I'd rather meet a she-bear separated from her cubs than a fool in his folly.* Sometimes you just have to know when the conversation is over, and walk away. Verse 19:

> **He who loves transgression loves strife;**
> **He who raises his door seeks destruction.**

Transgression, again, would be a violation of me or my property. The idea is: basically the person who is driven to be significant, the person who is driven out of selfishness and greed and wanting more and more for himself or herself is constantly going to be disadvantaging others to advantage himself or herself. So the by-product of that is there's always going to be strife and more strife and more strife. These people create conflict everywhere they go. The second part of that proverb has lots of discussion about what the Hebrew actually means, but whether it's talking about a bigger, thicker door which may carry some idea of affluence, but more than that, it's the idea of a bigger, thicker door because you have to live in the community you've created. And if you've created so much conflict and strife, you need a taller fence, you need a thicker door, you need more and more ways to separate and protect yourself, because now you have to live in the culture you've created. And so that person becomes more and more isolated and pulled away from the community that he

or she is destroying. This is a huge problem in our culture. More and more people are completely disconnected from the damage they're doing in the culture, disadvantaging people every day and yet they're so disconnected that they build bigger, fancier houses, gated communities, so they can drive in, close the door and never have to look the people in the eyes whose lives they are devastating. And, consequently, they just do it more and more and more.

Isn't this the big problem with social media? You don't have to be all that courageous to sit down in your basement all by yourself behind the computer screen and really let somebody have it. That's rather cowardly if you ask me. But you don't see the faces of the people whose lives you are destroying. You don't see the tears; you don't see the hurt; you don't see the disgust—and you don't really come to grips with the damage you're doing. More and more research is showing us that not only is that causing us to lose our empathy through social media, but when we actually are face-to-face, we're losing our empathy, our ability to have compassion. And you're starting to see this more and more and more in the news. What is the solution to this; what is the practical thing to do? The answer is to roll up your sleeves and get involved. Look into the faces of those people whose lives are hurting—get a sense of what is actually going on. And what would it mean to actually do something that breathes life into their souls? The worst thing we can do is to pull back, isolate ourselves with fellow Christians who all think the same way. We all complain about the world, such as it is, but we never roll up our sleeves and get in the mix.

I've built a relationship with a professor here in Lincoln that attends our church off and on. This is someone who has very different beliefs and values than mine. We kind of fall into camps that have historically thrown rocks at one another, and yet when we sit down and converse, one of the things we have often said is, "It's very difficult to hate someone you're drinking a cup of coffee with." You look him in the eye and realize: you're not a monster. You're not a hateful, hurtful person. As a matter of fact, you're a very loving, caring, compassionate person and it is possible to have meaningful conversations together. It's easy to hate people you've never even met, but it's very difficult to hate someone that you're sitting down and doing life with together, while having a cup of coffee. You're in the trenches, trying to figure out: how do we make this work together?

That's the basic idea and, since we're fundamentalists by our roots, I'm going to make a rule. Here's the rule: If you're not willing to roll up your sleeves and get in the trenches, stop complaining. It obviously doesn't bother you enough to do something about it, so stop complaining! The worst thing we can do is isolate ourselves from the reality of what's happening in our culture, happening in our community. Roll up your sleeves and get involved. It's one of the best things you can do to keep your soul healthy. Verse 24:

> **Wisdom is in the presence of the one who has understanding,**
> **But the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth.**

Basically, this one is saying something very similar. The fool looks at the ends of the earth and is always dreaming about what is out there. It's kind of the idea that the fool always has theories, always has ideas, always has solutions, always has a better way, but it's always way out there. At the end of the day, they never really do anything to help. The front part of that proverb is about someone who is present in the mix. Skillful living is not a bunch of ideas and philosophies and beliefs that everybody else should embrace. It's about getting in the mix, being present in the culture, in the community, in the lives of people and being a part of figuring out what would it mean to create flourishing here?

The last one is the last two verses; they're fairly obvious. I just want to make a couple comments. Verses 27 and 28:

> **He who restrains his words has knowledge,**
> **And he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.**
> **Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise;**
> **When he closes his lips, he is *considered* prudent.**

The one *who restrains his lips* is the one who **has knowledge**, meaning knowledge of God's vision for the world. The idea of a **cool spirit** is one who is even-tempered, someone that's difficult to rile, someone who just kind of responds correctly even in the most difficult of circumstances. A couple of weeks ago I made the comment that some people just need to shut their mouths, and some of you may have said, "That's really harsh; I bet the Bible doesn't say that." It does say that! *(laughter)* I'm just telling you what the proverb says. Now think about what was just said. Think about what that last verse just said. Think about all Proverbs has said about a fool. And yet, even a fool can appear to be skillful at living if the fool just shuts his or her mouth. For some of you, this is just a really practical place to start. You can feel it coming. You can feel the agitation; you can feel when you're in a foul mood; you can feel when something good is not going to come out of your mouth—so just shut your mouth! The whole world doesn't need to know your opinion on everything. You don't need to correct everything and fix everything and straighten everybody out. Actually, we're trying to get to something else. We're trying to get to a meaningful conversation about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, which reminds us that the only way you could possibly live this way, as we've described this morning, is if you've encountered the crucified, resurrected Christ. If all you're going to do is walk out the door and *try harder*, that's nothing more than cold, dead religion, and it won't work. There has to be something radical that has changed within you that is only possible through the power of Jesus. That's where the journey has to start if there's going to be change. But also understand that the gospel is not merely a ticket to heaven. The gospel is about God's vision for the world. The gospel is about the world as God intended it to be. It's about the world that one day will be again, and it's about our calling to at least give people a taste of that today in order to create platforms from which we share the good news of the gospel. The only way you will ever be effective as a messenger of the gospel is if you learn to live with skill!

> *Our Father, we are reminded that this is a difficult and challenging calling, that You have given us as Your followers. Lord, I pray that we would seriously consider our calling to rightly represent the gospel in a confused, angry, hurting culture, that You might use us to make a difference. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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