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What Culture Are You Creating?

Skillful Living
Proverbs 20
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So, ultimately we all end up living in the culture that we've helped create. I think it's common that people are dissatisfied with their culture. Now that could be the culture you create at home, at school, at work, in your neighborhood, in the marketplace, in a community, in a nation, but by and large if you listen to people, there's a high degree of dissatisfaction with the cultures in which they live. What I don't think is common is people understanding the contribution they've made to create the culture they're so dissatisfied with. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Proverbs, Chapter 20.

Over the last couple of years we've been chipping away at the Proverbs, a little here, a little there—take a chapter at a time, take certain select proverbs out of it, and between spring and summer I think we will get about nine more done. So we find ourselves in chapter 20 and I've identified proverbs that specifically have to do with this idea of creating a culture that you then have to live in, and giving some thought to what that means. So chapter 20, verse one:

> **Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,**
> **And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise. (*NASB, Proverbs 20:1)**

Wine would be what we would think of; **strong drink** would be made with something else like barley—what we would think of as a beer product. So the idea is a **mocker** is that it makes us act foolishly. **Brawler** is kind of an obnoxious, loud-mouthed troublemaker. That's kind of what the word means. So just a couple of things to think about: I don't believe there's anywhere in Scripture where there is a prohibition against the responsible use of alcohol. Now I know there are people that don't like to hear that, but as Bereans—as people that are committed to rightly dividing the word of truth—you can't make the Bible say something it doesn't say, and throughout the Old Testament, in the ancient world, the water quality was very poor and wine was a regular part of most family's diet. It actually shows up in positive ways in various feasts and festivals—so the responsible use of alcohol is not prohibited. However in both the Old and New Testaments there is a very clear message that when that line is crossed to a point of intoxication, it is always condemned because it starts to make us foolish; it makes us stupid.

The last line says ...**and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise**. We have defined the word **wise** in the Proverbs as *skillful*. You have to be sober to be skillful—that's the basic idea of the verse. Now here's something else to think about: I would kind of put the line where we put the legal limit. There's a lot of science and research that goes into why they put the legal limit where it is. That's a pretty good threshold to use when you're thinking about these things. As soon as anything about me is impaired, I'm no longer living skillfully and I have a pretty good chance of doing something stupid. So when you talk about responsible drinking—you see it on the television commercials all the time—it's often referenced as, "Then get a designated driver." So the idea is, if you're going to go to a party and get plastered, then the responsible thing to do is have a designated driver. You have to understand the biblical bar is not that low. *(laughter)* That's not the meaning of responsible use of alcohol. It is set at a pretty high level—that when you've consumed enough that it's impairing

any of your judgment, then you've crossed that line. If you're going to be skillful, you have to be sober! That's kind of the idea of verse 1.Verse 2:

The terror of a king is like the growling of a lion;
He who provokes him to anger forfeits his own life.

Verse two really has to do with the idea of respecting those in authority. Now Peter talked a lot about this in 1 Peter—that those in authority were beginning to be abusive to Christians. They were beginning a persecution, and what Peter kept saying is, "You have to learn to live skillfully, quietly, flying under the radar, and not creating more conflict than is necessary." Here the **king** but you could put anyone in authority there whether it's your boss, a parent, the government, whether it's law enforcement. If those people are in authority over you, they do have the ability to make your life miserable. The metaphor is of a **lion**. If there's a growling lion, it's common sense to not go up and poke the lion with a stick because the lion will eat you. This is like Commonsense 101, yet we live in a culture that has so many issues with people in authority and what happens is people continually poke the lion. The lion attacks and then they play the victim and, "Everybody's out to get me; woe is me!" and what the proverb is saying is, "Wait a minute! You created that culture by acting foolishly and then you don't like it when it comes back on you." If I'm traveling a path and there's a lion sleeping in the path, I don't go up and poke it with a stick. I decide I'll probably take a different path. So wherever this happens for you—at home, at work, with the government, law enforcement, school, wherever it is—you need to be skillful about how you deal with people in authority. Whether they're fair or unfair, they have the potential to make your life miserable. Skillful living is learning to work with that in a way that doesn't cause more problems than necessary, which then gets us to verse 3:

Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man,
But any fool will quarrel.

The word **quarrel** is a Hebrew word. It means *to bark like a dog*. It's pretty graphic imagery. Now I would suggest to you I don't think, generally speaking as a culture, we buy into the proverb in verse three. We don't really think it's honorable to avoid conflict. It's just not the culture we live in anymore. This is a culture full of conflict; it's full of tension. People are going off on each other all the time. It has a little bit of a feeling that the culture has been doused with gas and the slightest spark sets it off.

This week I was at a shopping center where the traffic is coming in and doesn't have to stop. Then there are multiple stop signs for traffic going out and everybody just kind of has to take their turn. You know you're driving three miles an hour, so it's not like anybody is going to get in a big wreck. But I was sitting at a stop sign; traffic was coming in and I was talking to someone in the vehicle and really not paying very good attention. When the traffic cleared, I thought the guy across from me was going to just go out but instead he was coming across, and I'm kind of chatting and so I start to make my turn and basically I pull in front of him. I pulled out, out of turn—my fault, my bad, all three miles an hour of it—so I kind of wave like saying, "Hey, sorry, my bad; I wasn't paying attention." This guy went berserk-o! He was pounding the heels of his palms on the steering wheel, just like hysterical, and he was waving and saluting me *(laughter)* and screaming! I mean he was berserk-o, and so I just kind of got out of his way and he went peeling around behind me, and I found myself thinking, "What is going on in this person's life where a five-second delay creates that

kind of a completely out-of-control response? But I think we all have this sense that that is the culture we live in. People are at this fever pitch waiting to go off.

Then there's this political rhetoric that is so destructive and so harmful. Now I personally think the media has a vested interest in keeping the conflict going; I don't mean the local media but national media. There's no question they're stirring the pot. They want that conflict—it's good for ratings—and they keep everyone at everyone else. I'm convinced if tomorrow there was perfect peace in the land, the media would figure out a way to stop that. Then what happens is people feed on that and they get more and more angry. They get more and more agitated, and they're just always right on the edge of going off. It's destroying families...communities...the workplace, and one of the saddest results is most of these issues should not be political. We're talking about human beings that are getting devastated as people play politics with these issues. Some people kind of counter-back that they have to take their stand, and they're not going to lose their country, and they kind of figure out a way to justify it. But just stop and think about this: When people go off at work, in the family, at the coffee shop, in the community, on social media, you're not changing anything. You're not taking a stand; you're not convincing anybody. You're just venting. Something in life has happened that brought this all the way up to the surface, and you're that close to going off or somebody set you off. You're not moving the ball forward in any productive way; you're just venting.

What the text is saying is there is great **honor** for people that figure out how to negotiate around that and not add to the destruction. Everybody doesn't need to know your opinion all the time. Whether you're at home, at work, in your neighborhood or wherever you find yourself, the honorable thing is to realize, "This is destroying all of us—nobody wants to live in a culture like this!" So what is honorable, what has value, is learning to avoid the fight and try to create a culture where it's peaceable and people can actually dialogue around things that matter in a productive way.

I think all of us know that there are certain people that everywhere they go there's conflict, and every time they walk into a room, the likelihood of there being conflict just puts everybody on edge. Those people don't realize that they're actually creating a culture of conflict, and the next thing you know, people go off and they don't see they caused it. But it didn't have to happen! We all know people that when they walk into a room, there's a pretty high level of assurance there's going to be peace here today. It's going to be quiet; it's going to be calm. We're all going to get along because there's just a sense about that person. So it's really helpful to think about, "What are you doing to contribute to the breakdown of a culture, and what might you do to begin to stop that and create more of a culture of peace, **keeping away from strife is honorable**. Verse 4:

> **The sluggard does not plow after the autumn,**
> **So he begs during the harvest and has nothing.**

Now the seasons seem funny for us because they don't make sense. But in the ancient Near East, there was a rainy season and immediately after that you plowed and you planted in the fall in order to then get a harvest. Proverbs talks a lot about the **sluggard**. It's the lazy person who in the fall—in the planting season when they should be working—they don't want to work. They're lazy but when it comes to harvest time, then they shift into begging mode—victim mode—"Poor me, somebody needs to help me." Basically the idea that we've seen in Proverbs is that this is someone who's willing to disadvantage everyone else in order to advantage self—to work the system as a taker rather than a giver. Now you think about what that does to a culture. You create a culture full of people that are generous, that are hardworking, that are givers, where everyone thrives. They

have a chance! But when you start to create a culture where everybody's working and manipulating the system and it's full of takers rather than givers, that culture cannot survive. It will eventually consume itself. So, again, it's this whole idea of thinking about the culture we're creating. Verse 6:

Many a man proclaims his own loyalty,
But who can find a trustworthy man?

Basically we would say, "Talk is cheap," but in the hour of need is there someone there in the culture you've created that you can count on, that you can trust? One of the very big challenges in our culture today is we've created a culture of individualists. It's about *me*. It's about what *I need.* It's about disadvantaging everybody else if I need to, to advantage myself. So we're selfish and we're self-absorbed. "I'm king of the castle;" everything's run through this worldview of me and, "How does this affect me?" So stop and think about it: You have ten people in a room with that orientation. What is the chance one of those people is going to be there for you in your hour of need? Answer: "Zero!" Everyone is so selfish and self-absorbed it's not going to happen. So if you really want relationships where people are going to be trustworthy, they're going to be there for you in your hour of need, you have to think about your own contribution to that. Am I selfish? Am I self-absorbed? Am I individualistic? Is it always all about me? Have I created a culture of generosity, a culture of giving, of disadvantage myself, of creating a culture so that the people around me are like that, where in my hour of need they will respond to me as I have responded to them?

Verse 7 is a bit of a shift then. It moves to the discussion of the **righteous**, which we've seen in the book of Proverbs is the Hebrew *Tzedek*. The Tzedek is the righteous king, the righteous person who is willing to disadvantage himself or herself in order to advantage others. The Tzedek sees the community as more important than the individual. It's about us not just about me.

A righteous man (the tzedek man) **who walks in his integrity—**
(...meaning he creates a culture in which he lives. What's the result of that?)
How blessed are his sons after him.

So in this case the Tzedek is a father but this is a father who has created a culture where his sons thrive. This idea of **blessed** has the idea of wholeness and fullness and thriving. So it's a parent who has created a culture where the parents' children can thrive. What's the chance that these boys are going to go out and create similar cultures? Very high! Now you can exchange whatever you want in there for the father—a boss...a business owner...a parent...a teacher...a principal...a neighbor...a friend. Put whatever makes sense to you, but what would it mean for you, in your position and with your influence, to create a culture where the people you influence could flourish, could thrive, that would create a culture so different than most of the cultures we experience? Verse 8:

A king who sits on the throne of justice
Disperses all evil with his eyes.

So this is the righteous king, the Tzedek, and he sits on a **throne of justice.** The king was the law. In the ancient world abuse and cheating were commonplace. The average person—much of their life; the poor—pretty much all of their lives—it was just a way of life. But a righteous king would genuinely seek to create a kingdom where people were treated fairly. The language there—**disperses**—is an "ag" term, the idea of separating the wheat from the chaff—of throwing up the

wheat and the chaff blows away and what you want to keep—the wheat—falls to the ground and you keep sorting it out until all of the chaff is gone. That's the imagery. So this king is trying to figure out how to sort this out. It's not driven by politics. It's not driven by some agenda, by self-preservation but rather it's driven by a desire to see true justice in the land. In the Book of Proverbs, justice carries the idea of fairness whether you're black or white, rich or poor, male or female—that there is true and genuine fairness—justice to everyone! In the ancient world that was unheard of. But honestly, who wouldn't want to live in a culture where there is true justice, there's true fairness, where everyone would know that no matter what happens, "I'm going to get a fair shake. I'm going to be treated fairly." That's the idea there in verse eight.

Now I think there's a tendency for people to think, "Oh yeah, I do that." You're a boss, a business owner, a teacher, a manager—whatever—"Yeah, I do that!" I would suggest to you that if you think it's that simple, you are not. It is not simple; it is very, very complicated because people are complicated and issues are complicated. It's just not simple. One of the huge problems we have in our culture is because everything's so political, everything is so *reductionistic*. What I mean by that is we reduce really complicated issues down to just little bumper sticker lines, and we have this unbelievably simplified reductionistic solution to really, really complicated problems. If you took a very warm, loving, caring person on the far right and one on the far left and sat down to talk about issues that matter, you'd see, "Man, there are a lot of issues here and a lot of perspectives, and there are really caring people that really want the right thing but we're all seeing it differently. These things are complicated." What it says in verse 9 is:

> **Who can say, "I have cleansed my heart,**
> **I am pure from my sin"?**

It has this idea that it's really hard to examine my own heart and know that I'm treating people with genuine fairness, that I'm not driven by some personal motive or I'm influenced by wealth or privilege or whatever it might be, but to examine my heart and truly be about justice. What he's saying in verse nine is, "That's really hard; you have to really work at it." Verse 10:

> **Differing weights and differing measures,**
> **Both of them are abominable to the LORD.**

So again we're talking about a culture where it was common to cheat people. **Weights** and **measures** were how commerce was done. It was very easy to cheat people, and it was always the average and especially the poor that were cheated—and they had no real recourse. So when the Tzedek is king, the Tzedek finds that abominable and is instead trying to create a culture where people are treated fairly.

Now this is an interesting one to think about: I would say anyone that is in business, anyone that's in health care, anyone that's in finance—there are probably a whole list of vocations where people would say that today they are suffocated with more and more laws, more and more regulations, more and more policies, more and more guidelines. I hear this from people all the time. They're like, "We can hardly function anymore," which raises an interesting question. Why is that necessary? And the answer is because we've created a selfish, self-absorbed culture with no moral compass. Therefore we all know that without these guidelines, these laws, these restrictions, people will cheat one another. People will take advantage of the system, and so we have to control it. All of this stuff that is suffocating our culture is a concession to the realization that we are a culture out of

control. If we actually listened to God, if our companies and our businesses and our governments were all run by the Tzedeks, it would be a handshake and we would all be in this together. We would all look out for one another. We would all work hard to do the right thing. We would all seek justice. It wouldn't be like it is. But because we've dismissed morality, we've dismissed truth, we've kicked God to the curb, it's all about the individual. It's about disadvantage others to advantage myself. Everybody's out of control and the laws and the guidelines and the regulations give clear evidence that's true. We all end up living in the culture we create, and then we don't like it but we often don't recognize our contribution. How did we get here and what would be necessary to change that? Verse 12:

The hearing ear and the seeing eye,
The LORD has made both of them.

Basically what that means is we're not animals. We're not operating on the basis of instinct. We're people made in the image of God. I do have within me the capacity to see justice. I do have within me the capacity to hear the cries and the complaints and to do something about it. So the idea is we are fully capable of creating a culture where people could thrive if we were willing to do so. The last proverb I want to look at is verse 28:

Loyalty and truth preserve the king,
And he upholds his throne by righteousness.

Basically what that proverb is saying is if a king is a good king, if this is a Tzedek, if there is justice in the land, if there is compassion in the land, if there is fairness in the land, if the people flourish in the land, it reduces the likelihood of an assassin. The words **preserve the king** mean that. It protects the king. There's not going to be a revolution; there's not going to be a coup; there's not going to be a takeover. Why? Because the people love the king, because they love the kingdom.

Now think about this again: If you're a leader, a manager, a boss, a business owner, a school teacher, or a parent—think about whatever context makes sense for you—and think what could you do to actually create a culture where people would flourish? Every human soul wants that. They're not out for your job; they're going to flourish. In that culture they say, "We really like this person as our parent...as our boss...as our leader—whatever it would be—because you've created a culture where people can thrive. So when we think about these things, when you look at the whole culture, it's just overwhelming. It's easy to think it's just way beyond fixing. When we get overwhelmed, we get paralyzed and so we do nothing. So it's really helpful to reduce it down to the cultures that you have influence in and think about what would be necessary for me to begin to create a culture where people would thrive? We're not defined by conflict and by politics and by unfair treatment and by anger and by foolish living but we're actually defined by wisdom and skill as people learn to live together and to work together and to process life together in a way where people start to flourish together. What would be your contribution to that?

What are you currently doing that's contributing to the breakdown and what *could* you do that would be the beginning of change in creating a different culture that would be just a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be—pockets of shalom that create platforms for presenting the life-changing message of Jesus? And finally we are reminded that any time the Tzedek shows up in Proverbs, it is a foreshadowing of the ultimate king that was promised to come—the King Jesus who would be the perfect King that everybody's soul longed for. The promise of human flourishing

required that this King would shed His blood on a cross in payment for sin, would be buried, would rise from the dead and then offer His salvation freely as a gift. Step one to human flourishing is to encounter new life through the crucified and resurrected Christ—which is what we gather to celebrate together this morning. As each of these people is baptized, it's a good reminder, "How do you change the culture?" "One life at a time!"

Our Father we celebrate that when we were lost in our sin You sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world, that we might experience moments of flourishing today with the promise of flourishing forever in Your presence one day. Lord, we celebrate the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus this morning. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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