

3. Warm words from the Queen Mother

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well friends, let's turn in our Bibles to Proverbs chapter 31, page 552. And we have this unusual little passage at the tail end of the book of Proverbs.

Now let me read verse 1 again. The words of King Lemuel, an oracle that his mother taught him. So the question is, whose words are these words of verses 2 to 9? I think the answer must be that they are the queen mothers. King Lemuel says that they're his words, in the sense I guess that he passed them on, or perhaps he wrote them down, or got somebody else to write them down. But they are the words of his mother. And presumably, these words made such an impression upon him, that they were burned into his memory. He never forgot them.

And that's why they're here. You know, people sometimes say, I shall never forget what my mother said to me when I was young. Well perhaps this is a passage that comes into that category.

[1 : 09] The unforgettable words of a forceful mother. I think she's a woman of some personality, a muscular personality woman, to her young son. And it seems that this young son of hers has recently become the king.

Now we don't know, just to answer Willie's question, we don't know who this Lemuel was. The name Lemuel is a Hebrew name. It's a bit like Samuel.

Samuel means heard by God. Remember Hannah, his mother prayed to God, and he heard her prayer and gave her the baby. Samuel is heard by God, and Lemuel means belonging to God, or devoted to God.

So it's possible that Lemuel is a nickname, or a pseudonym, for one of the Hebrew kings, possibly even Solomon. We don't quite know. But the name certainly has a Jewish ring to it.

But he may not have been a Jew at all. Now as you run your eye down over the passage, you'll see that there are three main topics that the Queen Mother is dealing with.

[2 : 10] The dangers of womanizing, if I can use that word, in verse 3. Then the dangers of alcohol, in verses 4 to 7. And finally, in verses 8 to 9, there is a call to administer justice with integrity.

But before we look at the details, we need to ask what part a passage like this can possibly play in the lives of Christians in the 21st century. This passage, after all, is about the responsibilities of kings.

And without doubt, there will be a pretty straightforward application to monarchs and presidents and prime ministers and other senior political figures. But how can a passage like this possibly be of any relevance to the members of a parish church in Scotland in 2011?

Well, let me suggest two reasons why this passage is important for us, for people like us today. The first reason is that government is very important to people like us today.

Our lives are shaped and limited by thousands, literally thousands of laws. And we need to be governed in our country. Any country needs government because we need law and order.

[3 : 22] Without government and law, everybody could do exactly as they pleased. So your neighbour, for example, could put graffiti all over your walls, your neighbour could tether his pit bull terrier in your front garden, and you'd have no recourse to law.

There'd be nothing you could do about it. We need law for that sort of reason. I know it can be irksome to have to do various things by law, such as, for example, to fill in your census form. Isn't that a rather irksome thing to do? I find it irksome. I've done it and signed it, but it's irksome. But we know that law and order is a good thing and necessary. And therefore, government is a necessary part of human society.

And therefore, it is very much in the interests of all of us that we should be governed well and wisely. Every nation needs high-quality leadership. And if it doesn't have it, the whole nation will suffer.

So our senior political and national leaders need to be people of honour, integrity and courage. The world needs good kings, good queens, good presidents, good prime ministers.

[4 : 32] As Proverbs 29, verse 2 puts it, just turn back a page, 29, verse 2, the second half of the verse, when the wicked rule, the people groan.

Is that not so? When the wicked rule, the people groan. So we need good government. Now, a second reason why this passage is important for people like us today.

This is related to the first, but it's slightly different. And that is that God himself is greatly concerned for good government. That's really why he includes this passage in the Bible.

He's telling us that it's very important to him that Lemuel and those like him should rule their people well. Now, I know that Christian churches and Christian preachers can sometimes give the impression that God is very much concerned for the church, as indeed he is, for its holiness, its prayer life, its evangelism, its joy, its unity, and so on.

And yet we can give the impression that God is not so really interested in the world, except insofar as the world supplies new people to come to Christ and therefore to become part of the church.

[5 : 43] But God rules the world as well as the church. And even though the world does not truly acknowledge him, the Lord God cares for it and nourishes it.

As Jesus puts it, God sends his reign upon the unjust as well as on the just. And although at the most important level everything belongs to God, Jesus acknowledges that there are some things that belong to Caesar.

Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. So of course God is interested in how the rulers of this world exercise their responsibilities.

To govern well is part of the blueprint by which men and women are made. Just think right back to the beginning in Genesis chapter 1. Before the fall, before the first promise of the Saviour to come, God said to the human race, fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over it.

So to exercise government, to impose order upon chaos, is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. Governing and ordering society is in our DNA and it's been put there by our maker.

[6 : 58] It's what he is like and therefore it's what we are like. Now when we are children or teenagers, maybe up to the age of about 20 perhaps, in that age group, most of us are not very interested in the carryings on of governments and rulers.

I certainly was not very interested. I didn't listen to the radio much until I was at least 20. The sort of things that we are interested in as young people are sport, music, looking cool and enjoying our friends and Facebook.

Now that's fine and normal. We didn't have Facebook when I was a youngster but everything else we had. So it's fine and normal. But as we grow up into adulthood, we begin to realise that the world is big and complicated and that much of it is most unhappy.

And a lot of the unhappiness is directly caused by bad government. And that's when we begin to listen to the news on the radio on the telly and we realise that it's really very important.

Now this is a big theme in the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs deals with something like 200 different themes. You might say 200 aspects of human life.

[8 : 13] But this theme of kings and their responsibility is probably amongst the top five or six of those 200 themes. It's one of the big concerns of this Bible book and therefore we're to understand that it's one of God's.

Big concerns as well. Alright, well let's get into the text itself now. I'm going to read verse 2 again and I want you to imagine that it's being said by a formidable, formidable middle-aged woman to her son who is perhaps about 21.

I'm just going to take a sip of Billy's famous brew because I need all the voice power I can get to express verse 2 in its very juiciest way. So I want you to imagine her hands are on her hips like this and she's not looking calm.

So here we go. What are you doing, my son? What are you doing, son of my womb? What are you doing, son of my vows? I think she's tearing a strip off him.

This is a right royal maternal roasting. Now just imagine her situation. She is the queen mother. Her late husband has perhaps been king for many years and is now dead and her young son, Lemuel, has recently succeeded to the throne.

[9 : 33] So this formidable lady knows a thing or two about how a king should conduct himself. And she comes to visit her son Lemuel one day and as she steps into his house she sees obvious signs

of disorder.

Empty bottles lying around. One or two young women of doubtful character slipping out through the back door. And the young king himself looking disheveled and clearly not concentrating on his work. And she says, what is going on here, son of my vows? Which probably means the vows that I made on your behalf when you were a baby and I dedicated you to God as a servant of the nation.

Has it come to this? Well let's look at the words she spoke to him on that day which have been burned into his memory. She shows him three traps here into which a king can fall.

The first is misbehaving with women. So look at verse 3. Do not give your strength to women. your ways to those who destroy kings.

[10:41] Now at first glance you might think that that verse is rather rough on women. Is it really the role of women to go about destroying kings? But that's not the point of the verse.

This verse is not against women. This verse is against foolish young kings who misbehave with the wrong kind of women. There will always be women of a certain kind who like to play around with rich and powerful men.

Most women thankfully are not like that at all. But some young women cannot resist the glamour of riches and power and they find ways of getting into the company of rulers and kings and they are willing to play with those rulers and kings not only by day but also by night.

And that is what Lemuel's mother is talking about here. I grew up in an old house just outside London and our family are still there.

I have cousins still living in this old house where I grew up. And in the garden of our old house there is a large green pot about this big sort of pot you put earth in and then grow bulbs in and other flowers.

[11:50] And this pot at once belonged to a woman called Lily Lanktree who was a well-known mistress of King Edward VII. Now the reason why this pot got into our garden many years ago is that when my father and his brothers were little boys growing up in North London they were quite naughty little boys and they used to go to the end of the garden and run along the top of the brick walls that ran along the backs of the gardens in the road where they lived.

And they used to drop off the walls and visit other people's gardens when other people were not at home. And sometimes they would return with trophies. Now it happened that this woman Lily Lanktree lived about three doors along from my grandparents and her green flower pot came back into their garden once as a trophy and then it found its way out to our house a bit further out of London.

And every time I see that old green pot I think of King Edward VII and I feel sad. I think especially of his wife and what she had to endure.

Of course rich and powerful men who behave like this will usually say it's one of the perks of power and privilege.

Kings and rich men have always done this. Now Lemuel's mother wasn't born yesterday. She knew that this would be a powerful temptation to her young son and that's why she spoke so strongly here in verse 3.

[13:16] Now let's notice the actual words that she uses there. Do not give your strength to women. To behave like this will sap a man's strength.

He ought to be tucked up in bed with his wife by 11 o'clock in the evening or thereabouts so that he can get up refreshed and ready for action by 7 o'clock the following morning.

But if he's running around with other women till 1 or 2 or 3 in the morning and drinking heavily as verse 4 suggests of course he's not going to be fit for work in the morning.

He'll get to his desk baggy eyed and groaning. His strength will leech out of his body and mind. How can a man rule the kingdom if he's not disciplining himself and being faithful to his wife?

His way of life look at the second half of verse 3 his way of life is destroying him. This is the kind of behaviour says the queen mother that destroys kings.

[14:16] Let's pray for Prince William that he will be true to his Kate. Let's pray for Mr Cameron that he'll be true to his Samantha.

Doesn't verse 3 here fundamentally counter the lie that public figures love to trot out? We hear this on the radio almost every week.

The lie that what a man does in private has no bearing upon his public performance. Of course it has a bearing. If a man is unfaithful to his marriage vows isn't his whole capacity for trustworthiness

called into question?

This sort of behaviour destroys kings says the queen mother. Where did King David come unstuck? Where did King Solomon come to grief?

Those two men were great kings in many ways and yet in both cases their misbehaviour with women had catastrophic consequences. So there's the queen mother's first warning.

[15:24] Do not give your strength to women your ways to those who destroy kings. Now second, the second trap is the trap of alcohol. Let me read just verse 4.

It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine or for rulers to take strong drink. Now I'm not sure that the queen mother is quite commanding Lemuel to be a teetotaler.

You could read verse 4 like that, but I'm inclined to think that she's simply warning him that kings are in great danger of drinking far too heavily. And it doesn't take much imagination to see how any ruler could easily become a drunkard.

Think of the kind of lifestyle that he leads. Almost every day of the week he's invited to receptions and official lunches and banquets in the evening. And wherever the king goes, people are going to entertain him in the most lavish and expensive way.

The best cutlery will come out, the best crockery, the best glasses, and the best wines and spirits to fill them. Oh, the king's coming to dinner on Thursday. We must open a case of Plonkety Plonk 1993 at £100 per bottle.

[16:37] And we must have the very best single malt whiskey that Scotland can supply to finish the evening off with. Now when the king is young and fit and still playing squash and polo, he thinks, I can take this, it's doing me no harm, look at me, I'm all right.

But a few years down the track and it becomes a necessity. He gets addicted. And the young king becomes a serious drinker. And by the time he's about 45, it really shows.

Anybody with half a blind eye can see that it's ravaging his system. The queen mother has seen it all before. It's possible that Lemuel's father drank too much. She's certainly seen it in other rulers when they've come on state visits and she's had to entertain them.

history is full of instances of rulers who drank too heavily. William Pitt the Younger, who was Prime Minister in the early years of the 19th century, he was a contemporary and great friend of William Wilberforce, he became Prime Minister at the age of 24 and he continued as Prime Minister almost without a break for the next 20 or 22 years and then died at the age of I think 46.

he was a very able man and in many ways a good Prime Minister but he drank heavily, very heavily in his later years and it was the main reason for his early death.

[18:04] Winston Churchill, great man that he was, drank heavily at times. Tony Blair in his recently published memoirs writes of periods at number 10 Downing Street when he came to rely too heavily on alcohol in the evenings.

So let's look at verse 5 and see why the Queen Mother speaks so strongly to Lemuel. The reason for what she says in verse 4 is, verse 5, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

In other words, alcohol will damage a ruler's capacity, she says, in two ways. First, it will dull his memory, he'll forget, and secondly, it will cloud his judgment.

In the Queen's words, he will forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. Now remember, in the ancient world, the king basically made the laws of the land.

He did what Parliament does today in our country. So the administration of law and the formulation of law was one of his chief duties. So if he forgot the laws that he himself had made, the country would quickly be in disarray.

[19:22] But your majesty, we passed a law to that effect only last year. Oh, did we? Did we? Well, I've quite forgotten all about it. Send the fellow away.

Anyway, it's my lunchtime now. Too much alcohol will make it impossible for a man to exercise a just and competent rule. Now let's look on to verses six and seven.

You'll have spotted that these were tricky verses, tricky at first sight. I'll read them again. Give strong drink to the one who's perishing and wine to those in bitter distress.

Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. Now Christians, and we have some in our church, Christians who lovingly work evangelistically amongst alcoholics, might look at verses six and seven and wonder if Lemuel's mother has lost her reason.

Are we really being commanded to give alcoholic drinks to people whose lives are falling apart? Should the church open up a free booze stall in Buchanan Street and be encouraging every poor broken soul in Glasgow to drown his sorrows?

[20 : 32] Well, of course not. Of course not. We've got to see these two verses six and seven in the context of the whole passage. The message of the whole passage is, Lemuel, be a responsible, self-disciplined, administrator.

Loose living with women and alcohol has no place in the life of a good king. Don't be taken in by the apparent glamour of that kind of life. Now people whose lives have fallen apart may possibly find solace in alcohol.

But Lemuel, that is not to be your lifestyle. You have better things to do than to anesthetize yourself. So the effect of verses six and seven is really to strengthen the appeal of verses four and five. Don't be like these people, like those people, Lemuel. That's what the queen mother is saying. Your life has not fallen apart. So you make sure that it never does. Well, let's go on to trap number three in verses eight and nine.

Now you might look at verses eight and nine and say, well, where's the trap? I can see there's a trap in verse three, the trap of loose women, and a trap in verse four, the trap of alcohol.

[21 : 46] But is there a trap in verses eight and nine? Well, I think there is. And I think we could call it the trap or the danger of courage failure. Courage failure.

Let me read those verses again. Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth. Judge righteously. Defend the rights of the poor and needy.

And you see how each of those two verses begins, open your mouth. In other words, Lemuel, be prepared to speak up, to speak out, and to speak clearly, to speak proactively in defense of the rights of the mute, that is, people who can't speak for themselves.

And the destitute, apparently the Hebrew phrase really means those who are insecure. And then in verse nine, for the poor and needy. Now, why should the queen mother's final instruction, and you might say it's the most important instruction amongst these because it's the last one, why should it be about this?

I mean, wouldn't a king naturally want to protect and help the poor in his country? The answer is that many kings would shrink from opening their mouths in defense of the poor, former, because to do so might be very costly for a king.

[23 : 06] Think of it like this. In the ancient world, the king would be right at the center of the machinery of decision making, just as in the modern world, parliament is right at the center of decision making.

But wherever the center of decision making is situated, the rich and powerful will be pressing their interests and lobbying to be heard. So, for example, in the ancient world, a rich and powerful man who is close to the king, let's imagine that he owns a large estate of land.

And let's say that this rich and powerful man wants to plant a new forest, or he wants to extend the amount of land which is cultivated to produce wheat and barley. But it just happens that in the middle of his estate, just where this rich man wants to plant 10 acres of trees, there are two cottages, each with five acres of land attached, and each of them owned by a poor family whose forebears have been there for generations, subsistence farmers, two cows, half a dozen sheep, and a few rows of vegetables, just enough to live on.

So the rich man goes to them and he says, look, I'd very much like to buy you out. I'll give you a good price for your property. What I want to do is to knock down these cottages, they spoil the view from my drawing room window as it happens, and then I want to plant 10 acres of mixed woodland on this area.

But the poor families say to the rich man, but our families have lived here for 200 years, we own this land, we don't want to move, this is our home, may not be much to look at, but we value it greatly.

[24 : 48] Now the rich man is used to getting his own way. He doesn't want to take no for an answer. So he presses these poor families and he bullies them and he threatens them with violence until their lives become almost unbearable.

So they say to each other, let's go to the king. Surely the king will give us justice. We have full legal rights to live here and to own this property. Surely the king will uphold our cause and stop this rich man from bullying us.

Just imagine, however, that the rich man is one of the king's chief supporters. He bankrolls part of the army. He regularly sends the king a side of well-hung beef from his farms and boxes of succulent oranges and avocados from his orchards.

Imagine that the king is on first-name terms with this rich man. It might be rather costly for the king to defend the rights of the poor in those circumstances.

If the king loses the support of that rich man, it might weaken his hold on his own position. In this crooked world, rulers need the support of powerful people.

[26 : 01] It can be very costly to administer justice impartially. But the health and happiness of a nation depends upon the impartial administration of justice.

If powerful people can hurt and bully and oppress and rob weak people and get away with it and not be brought to account, a nation's security breaks down and people become unhappy and wretched. And that's why good government requires courage and integrity. Just look back to chapter 29, verse 12. 29, 12.

If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked. In other words, if the king is not prepared to resist falsehood, but rather listens to it and lets it in at the back door, he becomes corrupt and the whole machinery of government becomes corrupt with him.

That is true of so many nations today. So to return to that example I was painting, the king says to his rich friend, it's all right, child.

[27 : 15] I'll make sure that those troublesome families are removed. I'll make sure that you can tear down those wretched cottages and beautify your estates. Leave it with me. And I'd love a box of those lovely oranges of yours.

They're the sweetest in the kingdom. Thank you, your majesty. Thank you so much. You're so kind. I thought you would see it from my point of view. And the poor families are turned off their ancestral properties and they are dismayed.

And they burn with indignation and with frustration. Chapter 29, verse 2. When the wicked rule, the people groan.

I think I said this a couple of weeks ago, but it's worth repeating, I think, that a great deal of the contents of the book of Proverbs is a teasing out of the implications of the law of Moses.

And you'll know that the law of Moses is very strong on the need for impartiality in the administration of justice. So in Exodus chapter 23, for example, God says, do not pervert the justice due to the poor.

[28 : 30] In other words, make sure that you don't favoritize the rich. But just a few verses earlier, God says, do not be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.

So do you see in the very same passage, only about four verses apart, in Exodus 23, the law courts are told to favor neither the rich nor the poor. And that principle will be incorporated into all the best systems of justice throughout the world.

It's not always kept, not always adhered to, but it's fundamental to real justice. So the queen mother, to return to Proverbs 31, verses 8 and 9, the queen mother is calling her son to be a man of courage as well as a man of integrity.

Don't keep silent, Lemuel, in the face of pressure. A king's role is to administer justice. Have the courage, my son, to speak out in defense of the rights of the mute and the destitute and the poor and the needy.

It may be very costly for you, but don't fall into the trap of keeping silent so that you can have a quiet life. Well, let me take a final minute or two just to draw out some practical help and perhaps some challenge for ourselves.

[29 : 50] I've got three very brief points to make now. First, this is a passage about kings and rulers. That's where the application is going to lie.

Just imagine that you're leading a neighborhood Bible study group, which I know quite a number of you would do, or a student Bible study group, on this very passage. You've got half a dozen neighbors or friends in your front room.

In the armchair, sitting next to you, is your dear Christian friend, Jessie McTaggart, aged 79 and a half. And you've been working through the passage and then you turn to Jessie, sitting in the chair next to you, and you say to her, Jessie, how does this passage apply to you, do you think?

And she says, well, it's teaching me to judge righteously, not to take to strong drink, and not to go to womanizing. And you, as the Bible study group leader, say, if you have any sense, no, Jessie, it's

not about you or me.

This is about the responsibility of kings and rulers. You see, it's not going to help Jessie at all, or you or me, if we simply read this straight off the page into our own lives.

[30 : 58] It's not intended for Jessie, or for you, or for me, because Jessie's never going to be the king, neither am I. But there is instruction for Jessie in this passage, because this passage is here to teach her about the priorities of her member of parliament, and her ministers, and her monarch.

There are plenty of other parts of the Bible, including passages in the book of Proverbs, that will instruct the punters, like you and me, in the dangers of alcohol and sexual misbehavior, and so on. But this passage is here to teach us about kings and rulers, and God's instructions for them. So whatever passage we're reading, let's always ask carefully what the purpose of the passage is, and we'll come to understand it much more clearly.

So this is a passage about kings, and their responsibilities. It's good for us to learn what those responsibilities are. And then secondly, let's allow this passage to stir us up to pray for our rulers and our leaders.

One of the messages of these verses is that it's very difficult to shoulder big responsibility with integrity. Senior national leaders will be especially prone to fall into these very traps that Lemuel's mother speaks about here.

[32 : 15] Aren't you sometimes amazed, I am, that anyone can survive as Prime Minister for more than five minutes when you think of the pressures there must be upon a Prime Minister?

I sometimes see our Prime Minister on the television looking so fresh-faced and apparently on top of his work, and I think to myself, how could you possibly do it? And with a young family too, and a new baby.

There's a baby there, isn't there? About six months old, I think. How does he do it? But the pressures will be upon that man. There'll be, for example, the pretty female young parliamentary secretary that he has to spend time with after hours doing extra office work.

There'll be the bottles of whiskey so kindly donated to him by the managing director of some famous distillery. And there'll be the pressures, many pressures, to turn a blind eye to the proper plea of the poor man or the small firm that is struggling for survival.

So let's pray for these leaders who are under great pressure. Let's pray that integrity and self-discipline will be the hallmarks of their lives. And then a third, final thought.

[33 : 27] There might be people here in this building tonight who will have the opportunity to become leaders in some national or local capacity. There could be some 19-year-old student sitting here tonight who could be prime minister in 30 years' time.

If you've got the brain and the energy, go for it. Serve the Lord in the House of Commons.

Somebody else here might become a member of the Scottish Parliament.

Somebody else might be a city councillor. You could have great influence. And this passage would need to be one of your chief mentors if you ever find yourself in that kind of position.

You'd need to print this passage out and frame it and hang it on the kitchen wall so that every time you sit down to your beef and Yorkshire pudding, you're reminded that a leader's life needs to be a life of self-discipline, self-control over sex and alcohol and the courage to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves.

It will take real courage to resist the pressure of bribery and corruption. To be a leader of integrity is a very demanding task, but by the grace of God it is possible.

[34 : 42] Well, let's thank the Lord very much for the Queen Mother and next week we'll read this delightful closing passage in chapter 31. Just run your eye down over that and you'll see that it's all about the woman that any man with any sense would wish to be married to.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Amen. Dear God, our Father, we are reminded by this passage what a daunting task it is to be a senior national leader or ruler and we do pray for those who lead our own country both at Westminster and in Edinburgh and the city councillors here in Glasgow and others at a more local level who exercise authority and decision making.

And our prayer, dear Father, is that you will help them, these men and women, to be people of integrity and courage and we do ask that justice may prevail more and more in our country and we pray not least that the standards of the gospel may come to be upheld more and more.

We think of the meeting this Wednesday evening here when the leaders of the Christian Institute will come and discuss some of the problems that are being faced in our country at the moment and

we ask that that meeting will be a great blessing and a clarification and means of instruction for us all.

And if there are some, dear Father, even in this building tonight who may be called to leadership of this kind, we pray that you will give them grace, courage, energy and a vision for exercising responsible, caring, loving and courageous leadership.

[36 : 45] And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.