

# Are You Listening?!

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[ 0 : 00 ] Paul Brennan is beginning a look at some of the Proverbs. And so this evening, we're going to read together Proverbs chapter 1.

The whole of chapter 1 from verse 1 to 33. So Proverbs chapter 1. Beginning verse 1. The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. To new wisdom and instruction. To understand words of insight. To receive instruction and wise dealing in righteousness, justice and equity.

To give prudence to the simple. Knowledge and discretion to the youth. Let the wise hear and increase in learning. And the one who understands obtain guidance.

To understand a proverb and a saying. The words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

[ 1 : 09 ] Hear, my son, your father's instruction. And forsake not your mother's teaching. For they are a graceful garland for your head. And pendants for your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.

If they say, come with us. Let us lie and wait for blood. Let us ambush the innocent without reason. Like shale, let us swallow them alive.

And whole. Like those who go down to the pit. We shall find all precious goods. We shall fill our houses with plunder. Throw in your lot among us. We will all have one purse.

My son, do not walk in the way with them. Hold back your foot from their paths. For their feet run to evil. And they make haste to shed blood.

For in vain is a net spread in the sight of any bird. But these men lie in wait for their own blood. They set an ambush for their own lives.

[ 2 : 13 ] Such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain. It takes away the life of its possessors. Wisdom cries aloud in the street.

In the market she raises her voice. At the head of the noisy streets she cries out. At the entrance of the city gates she speaks. How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you.

I will make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refuse to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded. Because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity.

I will mock when terror strikes you. When terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind. When distress and anguish come upon you.

[ 3 : 19 ] Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer. They will seek me diligently, but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord.

They would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof. Therefore, they shall eat the fruit of their way and have their fill of their own devices.

For the simple are killed by their turning away and the complacency of fools destroys them. But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread of disaster.

Amen. This is God's word. God's word. Well, do please have your Bibles in front of you and the book of Proverbs.

We will be dabbling around a bit. So we'll be in Proverbs 1, but also looking at other Proverbs across the book and thinking about listening. What we listen to.

[ 4 : 30 ] That's the theme we'll be looking at this evening. In the next two Sundays, we'll be looking at other themes through the book of Proverbs. But for tonight, we're focusing on listening. Now, we spend most of our days listening, absorbing information.

And much of the time, we don't even realize that we're listening. It's like the oxygen that we breathe. We don't see it. But all around us, we are absorbing information all the time.

Not just what we hear, but what we see with our eyes and what we read, what we watch. On average, globally, people spend around two and a half hours a day on social media.

On average, across the world. On average, in the UK, people spend 180 minutes a day watching TV. I don't know how they do it, but we do.

On average, three-quarters of us listen to podcasts on a weekly basis. We are listening all the time. And that's just a snapshot of formal media that can be measured.

[ 5 : 35 ] That's just a snapshot of the amount of listening that we do, the sort of formal media intake that we absorb. Think of all the other sources of information that we are exposed to all the time.

Newspapers, magazines, books, conversation, advertising. We are listening all the time. And Proverbs has a lot to say about listening.

Who and what we listen to will determine our eternal destinies and will determine how life goes for us here and now. Who and what we listen to will determine whether we live wisely or foolishly.

Some years ago now, Peter Adam, an Australian minister, was here with us for some weeks. And I remember him speaking on the topic of wisdom. And he drew our attention again and again to the repeated refrain throughout the book of Proverbs, which is simply this, get wisdom.

Get wisdom. Let me read from Proverbs chapter 3, verse 13. It says this, Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding.

[ 6 : 49 ] For the gain from her is better than the gain from silver and her profits better than gold. Chapter 4, verse 5. Get wisdom.

Get insight. Do not forget and do not turn away from the world the words of my mouth. The beginning of wisdom is this. Get wisdom. And whatever you do, get insight.

But it's not just the book of Proverbs, is it? James chapter 1 in the New Testament says this, So we're given this instruction to get wisdom.

What is wisdom? Why the insistence on getting it? Well, wisdom is living well and wisely in God's word. It is living well in the world that God has created and not living foolishly.

It is living well in accordance with God's instructions, using our minds that have been shaped by God's word to navigate the many decisions that we'll face on a day-to-day basis.

[ 7 : 59 ] It is living in such a way that will see us thrive in our work and our relationships and our family lives. But it's not just about living well in this world, is it?

It's not just about serving faithfully here and now. Wisdom is essential for salvation and for eternal life. Both of these aspects of true wisdom are captured by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Colossae.

Both wisdom for salvation, but also wisdom for here and now as we serve the Lord. Colossians 1 verse 9, And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Wisdom is about living well for eternity, but also for now. It is about walking in a way that honors and glorifies the Lord, walking in a way that pleases him, bearing fruit.

So wisdom is not just, is it? It's not just some sort of intellectual activity. It's not about being clever. It's not about having knowledge. No, it's about life and about relationships.

[ 9 : 30 ] Wise living is evident in a flourishing life, a life that will commend the God we serve, a life that will show the goodness of living in God's ways.

And wisdom, the Bible tells us, is something that we are to strive for. To get. Whatever you do, get wisdom. But it's not to say it's something we earn.

Wisdom is a gift. It's the laws to give and ours to receive. And it's this aspect of receiving wisdom I want to think about tonight. Particularly, it's the instruction to listen.

The book of Proverbs presses home to us again and again. That instruction to listen. Listening is the key to getting wisdom.

We must start there. If we're not listening, there's no chance we'll get wisdom. So what does Proverbs teach us about listening? Well, first, we need to notice that listening is something that we are instructed to do.

[ 10 : 33 ] It is an instruction. Now, we live in a world where folk don't tend to listen well. Children are born with an inbuilt aversion to listening.

And it's a key part of being a parent to teach your children to listen. But the inability to listen does persist, doesn't it? We'd much rather venture our opinions than listen to others.

We'd much rather tell others what we think than be on the receiving end of listening. There are unlimited avenues of speaking and sharing our opinions, aren't there?

YouTube, Twitter, blogs, etc. But we do need to heed the warning of Proverbs 18, verse 2. A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion.

So there's a verse to stick on top of your Twitter feed. We are a culture that is quick to speak, slow to listen, or at least willing to listen for very short periods of time before we move on to the next thing.

[ 11 : 44 ] Perhaps the instruction to listen is one that we need reminded of. It's all over the first chapter we read earlier of Proverbs. Just look at chapter 1 and notice all these instructions to listen.

So verse 3, we are to receive instruction in wise dealing. Verse 5, let the wise hear and increase in learning.

And the one who understands obtain guidance. Verse 8, hear my son, your father's instruction and forsake not your mother's teaching. Look on to verse 24 and the warning here.

Verse 24, because I have called and you refuse to listen, I've stretched out my hand and no one has heeded because you've ignored all my counsel.

Look on to verse 32. For the simple are killed by their turning away and the complacency of fools destroys them.

[ 12 : 46 ] But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread of disaster. Flick over a few pages of chapter 8 and to verse 32.

And now, O sons, listen to me. Blessed are those who keep my ways.

Hear instruction and be wise. Do not neglect it. Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my door. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord.

But he who fails to find me injures himself. All who hate me love death. Look on to chapter 15, verse 31.

Chapter 15, verse 31. The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Whoever ignores instruction despises himself.

[ 13 : 52 ] But he who listens to reproof gains intelligence. The fear of the Lord is instruction and wisdom. And humility comes before honor.

Now, there's just a few proverbs I've just read. But drawing these things together is a clear instruction to listen. And the assumption here is that this sort of listening does not come naturally to us, does it?

It is something that we need to deliberately and consciously attend to. We need this instruction to listen. And alongside the instruction to listen, the consequences of listening or not listening are set out for us.

Those who listen to God's instruction will, proverbs tell us, dwell secure, be at ease, will be blessed, will find life, will find favor with the Lord, will dwell among the wise, will gain intelligence.

Those who do not listen, proverbs tells us, injure themselves, love death, and despise themselves. So a lot hangs on listening well, doesn't it?

[ 15 : 08 ] On the one hand is life, life in all its fullness, life beyond death even, as proverbs clearly sets out in chapter 12, verse 28. In the path of righteousness is life.

And in that pathway there is no death. Life in all its fullness. But on the other hand is death. And the stakes are that high.

A lot depends on our willingness to listen, to receive, to apply what we've heard to our lives. That sort of listening is commended in proverbs.

It's a sort of listening that doesn't merely build on knowledge. It doesn't just remain here in our heads, but it works its way out in our lives. It brings change to how we live.

Fundamentally, the sort of listening that proverbs commends us will bring about real repentance and faith. It will bring about real salvation. Eternal life.

[ 16 : 03 ] Because we're listening to the words of God. And we are turning and placing our trust in Him. This sort of listening will be a listening that takes hold of our minds and our hearts so it

transforms how we do things.

For now, yes, but also for eternity. And this sort of listening assumes a certain degree of teachability and humility in the listener.

Listen again to those words from chapter 15. The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Whoever ignores instruction despises himself.

But he who listens to reproof gains intelligence. The fear of the Lord is instruction and wisdom and humility. Humility becomes before honor.

So the sort of posture that's being commended here is one of teachability rather than merely being opinionated.

[17:06] It's a readiness to be reproof because there's a recognition of what is an offer. What an offer is life-giving. It's a recognition of who is speaking.

The fear of the Lord is instruction and wisdom. And a right submission to what He says because of who He is and who we are. We are His creatures.

He is our Creator. He is the Lord and King of the universe. And so we listen to Him with humility. So we're instructed to listen.

That's the first thing. But who to listen to? Who are we to listen to? We'll consider this in two parts. First, we have to listen above all to God. But then second, we need to think carefully about what other voices we listen to.

Which human voices do we listen to? And which do we not listen to? How do we discern? So first, we listen to God.

[18:09] This is the supreme and primary voice we must listen to. Proverbs 1, verse 7. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Fools despise wisdom and instruction. Look on to chapter 2, verse 1. My son, if you receive my words and treasure my commandments with you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding.

Yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

For the Lord gives wisdom. From His mouth come understanding and knowledge. He stores up wisdom for the upright. He is a shield to those who walk in integrity.

It's the Lord, isn't it? It's the Lord who gives wisdom. It is from His mouth that knowledge and understanding come. And so He is the one to whom we must look for wisdom.

[19:18] Wisdom for salvation. Wisdom for life. His words are the only source of wisdom and truth. And we find His revelation. It's not a secret.

It's here in our Bibles. God's special revelation to His creation. This is the sum total of God's revelation. All we need for life and godliness is here.

Here is what we need to grasp hold of the gift of eternal salvation and also of living well and wisely in this world. All we have is here.

We do not need to look anywhere else for the wisdom that will bring us eternal life. And so we must grasp hold of God's word, His revelation to us.

And listening carefully to it will give us the lens through which we can see everything else. We can understand everything else in the world around us through the lens of what God has revealed in Scripture.

[20:22] That must come first, mustn't it? Surely God's word must be the first and primary place that we go. And so we must also consider what else and who else we listen to.

Primarily it's God's word. That is the fundamental thing. But who else do we listen to? There are so many voices out there. As soon as we step out this door and begin our working week, or whatever we do this week, we are surrounded all the time by voices, by words.

How do we know who to listen to? How do we discern what we're hearing? Who we listen to is the key question.

It's a matter of huge significance. Whose voice is heard and heeded is the vital question. Now I've just considered the primary, the key voice we must listen to is God's voice, revealed to us in the Scriptures.

But what about all the other voices? Family, friends, our mobile phones, which we are attached to permanently. It's constant. How do we listen well to all that's out there in the world?

[ 21 : 38 ] Well, look with me at chapter 5, verse 1, which urges for us discernment. My son, be attentive to my wisdom.

Incline your ear to my understanding, that you may keep discretion, and your lips may guard knowledge. For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil. But in the end, she is bitter as wormwoods, sharp as the two-edged sword, her feet go down to death. You see, the words of the foolish often seem attractive and enticing.

We're warned there that the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey. It's all good on the outside, it looks appealing, but in the end, she is bitter as wormwoods.

Clearly, we need to learn discernment. Clearly, we need to know what sort of words lead to death. Discernment, therefore, is required.

[ 22 : 49 ] There are only, in the end, according to Proverbs, two sorts of speech. If you boil it down, there are only two sorts. One is wise speech, and the other is foolish.

There is good speech, and there is evil speech. There is speech which leads to life, and there is speech that leads to death. And that reality explains why the New Testament speaks so much about true teachers and about false teachers.

There is a lot at stake. There's no third type of speech. It's either good and right, or it's evil and wrong. So who are you listening to?

Who are you listening to? We need to carefully evaluate all that we hear and evaluate it from a biblical perspective.

Just because someone says something does not mean that it's worth listening to. Just because something is nicely packaged and well presented does not mean that it's worth listening to.

[ 24 : 00 ] Just because something is on a Netflix documentary and brilliantly edited does not mean it's worth listening to. Just because something's on YouTube and professes to be Christian does not mean it's worth listening to.

Just because something is marketed to you as a Christian book does not mean that it's worth listening to. Just because someone is saying something that they think is worth saying does not mean that it's right.

It does not mean that it's worth listening to. Don't look to the speaker themselves to discern if they're wise or foolish.

Nobody seems wrong in their own sight, do they? Nobody stands up and says, I'm a fool. Don't listen to me. No. Everyone stands up, wants to be heard, and is right in their own eyes.

So we don't look to the speaker of those words to determine if it's right or wrong. Every speaker thinks their perspective is wise and right. Proverbs 12, verse 15.

[ 25 : 04 ] The way of a fool is right in his own eyes. But a wise man listens to advice. Remember that the next time you click onto a YouTube video.

The fool is right in his own eyes. He won't tell you he's a fool. So how do we distinguish? How do we distinguish then between a wise man and a fool?

If everyone is right in their own eyes, if everything we consume comes across as being legitimate, they're right in their own eyes, how do we discern? Well, two things.

One, we evaluate by the word of God. We can't just take someone's word for it, that they're wise. Generally, people do not profess to be fools or to be wicked.

People speak what they think is right. But it may or may not be right. It may or may not be wise. But how do we know? Well, we measure what they say by the eternal and unchanging word of God.

[ 26 : 11 ] That is our standard. That is how we weigh someone's word. Is what they are saying here, is that in line and in agreement with the Bible?

Is what they're saying, does it accord with the biblical worldview or not? Is it a view shaped by God's wisdom and his revelation?

That must be, mustn't it, our standard, the lens through which we understand everything else. So we evaluate by the word of God. Second, we look at the fruit of their lives.

Look at how the person speaking lives. Proverbs 21, verse 28, A false witness will perish, but the word of a man who hears will endure.

A false witness in the end will perish. Look at the fruit. Look at how a person lives and don't just listen to their words. It's always surprising, isn't it, the sorts of people who can gain an audience, the sort of people who gain a hearing.

[ 27 : 22 ] You can sometimes think to yourself, why are people listening to this person? Can they not see how this person lives? Can they not see with their eyes how things are going for this person?

They are evidently making poor choices. They're not living wisely, and yet, they have a hearing. Proverbs would urge us, would urge you and me, to look at the fruits of someone's life.

Is this a person who lives out God's wisdom? Is there a life that is fruitful and as determined by the Bible? Not by worldly standards, but is their life fruitful in a biblical sense?

Is this a person who lives out God's word? Has it taken hold in their hearts? Are they living by his standards and obeying his voice? Look at their lives.

Who we listen to really matters. So, we need to learn discernment. We weigh the words we hear by the word of God.

[ 28 : 30 ] We weigh the speaker's life by their fruit. And listen to all that's been said tonight with two ears. One for yourself, but maybe there's someone else who needs to hear this and you can tell them.

But here's some implications for us. We've thought about the big picture, about the instruction to listen. It seems like an obvious one, doesn't it? But we need to be told to listen and to listen well.

And we thought about the sorts of voices to listen to.

How to discern between good and bad. Here's some implications. First, as we think about church, then about the media we consume, and then about our friends. So, first, our implication in terms of church.

If we are to listen to God above all, if that's what Proverbs is telling us, then we need to ensure, don't we, that we are regularly meeting with our brothers and sisters in Christ as we gather together. It's here, as we gather together on a Sunday, that the preached word of God comes to us. It's here, primarily, that we hear God's voice. It is here that we are to make the most of sitting together under God's word.

[ 29 : 42 ] And it's here that our knowledge of the truth will be nourished and strengthened. We will be better equipped to filter out all the other voices in the world around us if we are gathering regularly, making the most of every opportunity.

So, don't be surprised if you find yourself or folk you know sucked in by false ideologies and foolishness if you or they are neglecting the fundamental means through which God is equipping you and maturing you.

If you're a parent, are you eager for your children to be exposed to solid Bible teaching? Teaching that's not watered down. Sermons that will stretch you and them.

If we expect to be able to understand everything that's said on a Sunday, then are we really coming with an attitude of teachableness? The Sunday sermon is not the equivalent of a tabloid newspaper which has the reading age of 11.

We are seeking to stretch and mature our congregations. So expect your children, expect yourself to be stretched by the word of God. If that's happening, we're growing.

[ 31 : 00 ] That's the first implication. Do not neglect the means by which God is equipping his people. Do not neglect church. Second implication is regards to media. Proverbs 20, 19 says this, whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets.

Therefore, do not associate with a simple babbler. Now that seems to me a pretty good summing up of much of what fills Twitter and Facebook.

Slandering reveals secrets. I would make the exception about the news about Cristiano Ronaldo moving to Manchester United. That's one valuable contribution Twitter has made to my life. But apart from that, almost none.

But it's not to say that Twitter's all bad. But we must be on full alert to slander and foolish speech if we're dabbling in social media a lot.

The average, according to that survey I quoted earlier, is two and a half hours a day. It's a lot of listening. So don't switch off your discernment filters when you're scrolling on social media.

[ 32 : 08 ] Perhaps it's worth just taking a moment to do a sober and realistic evaluation of your social media intake. How much time do you actually spend on Instagram and TikTok and Facebook?

How many hours on Netflix? How many hours a week? How many hours a year? It's a lot of listening. It's also worth remembering what the focus of media is all about.

What is the focus of all that we're consuming? because the media we consume is teaching us. It is instructing us all the time.

It has a perspective. It has an agenda. It has a worldview. And all that we allow to consume and draw our attention. It is teaching us things.

It is coaching us on how to think whether we realize it or not. And the world's media is focused on the here and now, isn't it? It's entirely focused on this material world.

[ 33 : 10 ] Focused on this world now and not on the new creation and eternity. And to have our gaze constantly brought down to the immediate, to have our horizon constantly being brought down, it's so unhelpful.

It's absolutely countering what the Bible does. The Bible is always lifting our eyes, isn't it? It's lifting our attention beyond the here and now to the eternal. Listen to the world and you'll become consumed by the world and its priorities.

Listen to the news today and you'll become absolutely fixated on and anxious about its priorities, which at the moment is climate and COVID. Now, it's not to say that we shut ourselves off from the world, but surely, surely we must filter the world's agenda, the new cycle, through the lens of Scripture.

Because Scripture has our horizon out there on eternity, not the here and now. It focuses on the permanent, not the temporary.

It must be that way around, wasn't it? Filter what you observe in the world around you through the lens of Scripture. Scripture. And that's hard to do, isn't it? Because we're bombarded all the time from the moment we wake up.

[ 34 : 38 ] So we filter through the lens of Scripture and what the Bible teaches us. Final implication to do with friends. And Proverbs would urge us to be discerning because we spend a lot of time listening to our friends.

Are they wise or are they foolish friends? Proverbs 12, verse 26, says this, One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor. You see, friendships are not neutral, are they?

They will not leave you unchanged. They will either pull you in the direction of wisdom and righteousness or drag you away down to wickedness and foolishness.

And that verse I've just read there, in the footnote, it has this. It can be read, The righteous chooses or searches out his friends carefully. Searching out friends carefully.

And that word chooses, it has within that idea of careful diligence, careful examination in order to find out what's concealed. Look for your friends like that.

[ 35 : 55 ] Carefully, diligently. Just think about the amount of care we exercise purchasing an inanimate object, a car or a cooker. How much time do you spend researching, looking into it, looking at the reviews?

Probably a lot of time. But I think we can be more cavalier, can't we, about our friendships. We maybe spend more time analyzing the financial package for our car than we do about our friendships.

Think about each friendship that you have. They will either help you or hinder you in your relationship with the Lord. Now, I'm not saying for a moment that you ought not to have friendships with those outside the community of faith.

Of course not. But, what we're talking about here are your closest friendships. Think about your three or four or five closest relationships. What sort of friends are they?

It's good to have a range of friendships, but our closest friendships should be those with whom we share our highest goals and they help us live up to them. Each of your friends is an influencer.

[ 37 : 10 ] We influence them and they influence us. We listen to them. And so, we need to discern what influence are my closest friends having on me?

If you're in a relationship, what influence is your boyfriend or girlfriend having on you? what is the direction of travel here? Is it towards godliness and growth and Christ-likeness, growth and generosity and service to others?

Or is it pulling me away into an ever more exclusive relationship which doesn't really care about those around? You're going to be influenced by someone.

That's a reality. And so, the question is, who are going to be your greatest influencers? Who are you going to listen to? Well, there's just three lines of implication in terms of church, media, friends,

about who we listen to.

There's a lot more we could say, but Proverbs would encourage us, instruct us to be good listeners, to be discerning listeners.

[ 38 : 25 ] And let's ask God's help to be good and discerning listeners so that we might get wisdom. Wisdom for now and wisdom for eternity.

Who we listen to matters. Well, let's pray, shall we, before we close our service. Father, we ask that you would in your goodness and in your grace give us wisdom.

Lord, how we need it. How we need your help to discern amidst all the noise, amidst all the words that we encounter every day.

Lord, would you shape our minds, mold our hearts so that we'd learn to listen well, that we'd be discerning so that we might give you all the glory and serve you with gladness.

Give us wisdom, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.