

Wisdom in Relationships

Proverbs 25:15-28

Proverbs 25:15-28 - *“By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, and a gentle tongue breaks a bone.*

Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, lest you be filled with it and vomit.

Seldom set foot in your neighbor’s house, lest he become weary of you and hate you.

A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a club, a sword, and a sharp arrow.

Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth and a foot out of joint.

Like one who takes away a garment in cold weather, and like vinegar on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you.

The north wind brings forth rain, and a backbiting tongue an angry countenance.

It is better to dwell in a corner of a housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman.

As cold water to a weary soul, so is good news from a far country.

A righteous man who falters before the wicked is like a murky spring and a polluted well.

It is not good to eat much honey; so to seek one’s own glory is not glory.

Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.”

Background Notes

For background, let’s look at verse 20: *“Like one who takes away a garment in cold weather, and like vinegar on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.”* What does that “vinegar on soda” mean? The soda here is sodium carbonate or sodium bicarbonate - the same as baking soda. Did you ever pour vinegar on baking soda? When you pour vinegar on baking soda, you get a somewhat violent reaction.

So what’s the point of the proverb? It has to do with counseling and comforting others, especially those with troubled hearts. We need to be sensitive to those who are grieving, or those who have been hurt in some way. It would not be wise to drop into their hospital room, for example, and say in a loud happy voice, “Let’s all jump up and sing and dance and praise the Lord!” That would have the same effect as taking the person’s jacket away on a cold day. It might create a negative reaction, and make the situation much worse. Or as the Living Bible puts it, it would be like *“rubbing salt in his wounds.”*

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Verse 15: *“By long forbearance a ruler is persuaded, and a gentle tongue breaks a bone.”* What do you think can more effectively and efficiently break down the resistance of a ruler or government leader who is misusing his authority? Option 1 - Lose your temper and blurt out harsh words? Or option 2 - Speak calmly, and gently, and patiently, and with self-restraint? You guessed it – of course it’s option 2. Imagine a soft tongue breaking a solid bone. Quite a vivid illustration of how powerful and how effective a gentle approach can be!

Verse 16: *“Have you found honey? Eat only as much as you need, lest you be filled with it and vomit.”* Too much of a good thing can be sickening. This proverb applies to more than just food. Here’s an example: When I received my Ph.D., as a graduation gift Margie gave me a week of skiing in Utah! I love skiing, especially in the great powder snow of Utah. For the first couple of days, I **loved** it! It snowed big time while I was there, and I gorged myself on skiing powder snow! But by the end of the week I was done with it. I couldn’t wait to get home. (But now I can’t wait to go back again!)

The point of the proverb is: Don’t **over**indulge in anything good! Let moderation in everything be your guide. This is wise advice for everyday living.

Verse 17: *“Seldom set foot in your neighbor’s house lest he become weary of you and hate you.”* In other words, don’t wear out your welcome! I think we can all appreciate this proverb, because we’ve all probably groaned when we’ve seen certain ubiquitous people at our door, or their name on our Caller ID. So let’s not overstay our welcome with good friends. Limit your visits and you’ll be invited back. Let your moderation extend to this area as well, because it’s been said, “After three days, fish and house guests smell bad”!

Verse 18: *“A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a club, a sword, and a sharp arrow.”* All the weapons mentioned in this proverb can cause death. In the same way, false testimony and slander can critically wound a person - and even lead to death, both figuratively and literally. Don’t risk the Lord’s stern discipline for bad-mouthing another believer. His discipline will be more than just a slap on the wrist.

Verse 19: *“Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth and a foot out of joint.”* Did you ever try to chew with an infected tooth, or walk on a sore foot? It’s painful and aggravating. It affects everything you do – like an unreliable person you. People who say and promise they’ll help you, but then do a no-show when you need them, are very aggravating and painful because the job never gets done.

Verses 21-22: *“If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you.”* Remember, this is a proverb, and it’s given in the context of **personal** relationships, not national defense or law enforcement.

We know it refers to personal relationships because the apostle Paul quoted these verses to believers in a personal context: *“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. Therefore “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. And do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:17-20).*

What does verse 22 mean: *“For so you will heap coals of fire on his head”*? It may mean that the person will experience the sharp pain of regret, like having burning coals. Or it may mean the good practice of giving burning coals to a neighbor whose fire has gone out. With either meaning, the offender might feel regret for his previous actions. While we can't be sure of the exact meaning, we can be sure that the Lord will reward us if we don't take personal revenge!

Verse 23: *“The north wind brings forth rain, and a backbiting tongue an angry countenance.”* The point of this proverb is that certain events have inevitable results. Just as the north wind brings rain, you can be sure that if you gossip or slander or badmouth a person, you will receive anger in return. And by the way, just because rain doesn't necessarily follow a north wind in our country doesn't mean that there's an error in the Bible! The context is the country where the proverb was written and spoken.

Verse 24: *“It is better to dwell in a corner of a housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman.”* We saw this same general truth in Proverbs 21:9: *“Better to dwell in a corner of a housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman.”* We said then that this proverb is not in any way advocating divorce. The wise advice is that it's better to take time out in different parts of the house rather than to continue verbal conflict. And more good practical advice from this proverb would be: Choose your spouse carefully!

Verse 26: *“A righteous man who falters before the wicked is like a murky spring and a polluted well.”* Think of a spring or a well that you've depended on for clear, refreshing drinking water in a dry and barren land, but it has now been muddied by tramping animals, or poisoned in some way. In a dry land, that's a tragedy! In the same way, think of an upstanding and righteous leader, to whom everyone looked up as standing for the truth and speaking out against evil – but this leader compromised his stand, or capitulated in a doctrinal area, or fell into moral sin. How sad! How tragic! Although God can pick up the pieces, his pure and strong testimony will never be the same.

Verse 27: *“It is not good to eat much honey; so to seek one's own glory is not glory.”* Honey is good, but eating too much honey is not good, as we saw back in verse 16. What about the second line? There are different interpretations, because there are various translations of this verse. For a parallel structure in the Hebrew poetry here, I think the main idea is that receiving honor from people for what we do is good, and we can even take delight in it as a reward for the good we've done. But it is not good to promote oneself, especially with the motive and bottom line of bringing glory to oneself.

Verse 28: *“Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.*

If you don't have self-control, you're vulnerable and defenseless to your emotions. You will easily capitulate and fall, like an ancient city without walls of defense. The good news for the believer here is that self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit, and it's available to us if we walk by the Spirit.

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Application

Give a cup of cold water!

Verse 25: *“As cold water to a weary soul, so is good news from a far country.”*

Remember the historical context – there were no cell phones or email! So the news of how a battle went, or the news of a person's well being usually took some time, and involved anxious waiting. And when the news was good, it was like cold refreshing water to a thirsty soul!

Let's apply this concept to the preaching of the gospel. What a blessing it is to bring the gospel to a distant land where people have never heard the **best** good news! It is like giving a cup of cold water to a thirsty soul.

Let's also think of fellow believers who have gone to distant lands to serve the Lord. They need encouragement. An expression of support and prayer by writing to them or sending them a financial gift is very encouraging. Just to know that you are thinking of them and caring about them is very helpful. It's like giving a cup of cold water to a weary soul!

In Matthew 10:42 the Lord Jesus said that giving a cup of cold water in Christian service will be rewarded. So, give a cup of cold water!