

Wisdom in Confronting Problems

Proverbs 26:17-28

Proverbs 26:17-28 - *“He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears. Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, “I was only joking!”*

Where there is no wood, the fire goes out, and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases.

As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.

The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body.

Fervent lips with a wicked heart are like earthenware covered with silver dross.

He who hates, disguises it with his lips, and lays up deceit within himself. When he speaks kindly, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart. Though his hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness will be revealed before the assembly.

Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and he who rolls a stone will have it roll back on him.

A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, and a flattering mouth works ruin.”

Background Notes

For our background notes, let's consider verse 17: *“He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears.”* Background helps us here. In the historical context, the dog was not a playful little house puppy. The dogs of Solomon's days were not domesticated. They were like wild jackals. Would you grab a jackal or a wild dog by the ears? That would be dangerous, and you could be badly mauled when the wild dog turned on you.

In the same way, it's dangerous to meddle in other people's quarrels. They could turn on you in a rage, and harm you in a variety of ways. However, it's different if both quarreling parties ask you to arbitrate. In that case, you would set up ground rules, where cooler heads would prevail. You wouldn't be interfering or meddling where you were not wanted. Rather, you would be refereeing toward a peaceful solution.

Do you remember good King Josiah? Even though he was warned not to get involved, he meddled in the strife between Egypt and Babylon. It was none of his business - and it led to his death. *“Necho king of Egypt came up to fight against Carchemish by the Euphrates, and Josiah went out against him. But he sent messengers to him, saying, ‘What have I to do with you, king of Judah? I have not come against you this day, but against the house with which I have war; for God commanded me to make haste. Refrain from meddling with God, who is with me, lest He destroy you.’*

But Josiah would not turn his face from him, but disguised himself so that he might fight with him, and did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God. So he came to fight in the Valley of Megiddo. And the archers shot King Josiah;

and the king said to his servants, 'Take me away, for I am severely wounded.' and they brought him to Jerusalem. So he died... And all Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah" (2 Chronicles 35:20-24)."

Doctrinal Point

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Verses 18-19: *"Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death, is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, 'I was only joking!'"* A careless person who tosses burning sticks around, or haphazardly shoots arrows without any precautions can cause major trouble - even death. One burning stick can start a huge wildfire that might consume a forest or numerous towns, with many fatalities. The perpetrator wouldn't be escape prosecution just because he said, "I was only joking," or "only goofing around."

Think of a man who deceives his neighbor and then tries to excuse himself by saying that he was "only kidding." Think of the slander, hurt, and damage that result from untruthful remarks by an uncontrolled tongue, even if made jokingly. Saying that you didn't mean it does not excuse your sin, any more than a person who didn't mean to burn a house down when he was only "playing" with fire.

Verse 20: *"Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases.* What's a gossip's worst nightmare? No juicy tales to spread - nothing to talk about! Like a fire with no more wood to burn, it goes out. Unfortunately, there's always some "wood" around, and some people seem to be able to find it to keep the gossip going. Don't let them put wood on the fire! The fires of contention will die out if you don't listen to the gossip.

Verse 21: *"As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.* In verse 20 we saw that when there's no wood, the fire goes out. In verse 21 we see that if there is wood or charcoal, the fire flares up and grows. In the same way, if a contentious person is in the mix, you'll have trouble. Most of the strife in a church or any fellowship group is caused by a small handful of people who are never content. They're always complaining about something. They never get with the program. They're always stirring things up and kindling strife.

Verse 22: *"The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, and they go down into the inmost body."* This is essentially the same proverb that we had back in Proverbs 18:8: *"Rumors are dainty morsels that sink deep into one's heart"*(NLV). Let me ask: Can you resist just one little square of chocolate? And if you can't resist, what's the result? You want a second piece - right? Well, gossip is hard to resist, too, and tasting just a little bit makes you want to hear more. (By the way, every time I go to Starbucks it's very hard to resist those tasty dark chocolate bars that they sell. All I needed to hear was that dark chocolate was good for you, now all resistance is gone!)

Verses 24-26: *"He who hates, disguises it with his lips, and lays up deceit within himself. When he speaks kindly, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart. Though his hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness will be*

revealed before the assembly.” How does someone who hates another person deal with the problem? They generally do exactly what this proverb says. They try to bury the hatred deep in their heart, and hide it by what they say with their lips.

So, as verse 25 says, *“When he speaks kindly, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart.”* Don’t be taken in. Just because a person says nice things and kind words, don’t imagine that they’re God’s gift of love. No! Their hearts may be full of hidden evil and malice. The prime example of this kind of person was Judas, the man who betrayed the Lord with kind words and a kiss - but the guile and wickedness in Judas’s heart became known to all.

So, as verse 26 says, *“Though his hatred is covered by deceit, his wickedness will be revealed before the assembly.”* This is true of hypocrites who try to hide their hatred with nice-sounding, but false, words. God has ways of exposing their true hearts, and ultimately they will be judged.

Verse 27: *“Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and he who rolls a stone will have it roll back on him.”* The main point of this proverb is that sin will boomerang. As Galatians 6:7 says, *“Do not be deceived. God is not mocked. For whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.”* If you dig a pit (lay a trap for someone), or if you try to roll a stone (try to crush someone), ultimately it will backfire. You will be caught in your own trap or crushed under the weight of your own evil plans. Remember Haman, in the Book of Esther, who tried to crush Mordecai? Remember Daniel’s colleagues who tried to entrap and crush Daniel? In each case their plans boomeranged, and resulted in their deaths.

Again, if anyone says they know some exceptions to this proverb, answer #1 is: “Nobody gets away with it forever. There is a final judgment!” And answer #2 is: “This is a proverb - and a proverb is a **general** truth stated in **general** terms.”

Verse 28: *“A lying tongue hates those who are crushed by it, and a flattering mouth works ruin.”* Even though we know that, in the end, the speaker of deceptive words will be judged, deceptive words about another person cause bad fallout, and great hurt, and even ruin (v27). Deceptive words can either be lying words or flattering words. Both can lead to trouble. Think of how selfish people use flattery to advance themselves and get what they want. Think of the boastful tongue of the self-promoter.

The proverbs are wise advice for everyday living.

Practical Application

Make sure the silver is on the inside!

Verse 23: *“Fervent lips with a wicked heart are like earthenware covered with silver dross.”*

Ordinary clay pottery can be made to look beautiful on the outside with colorful glazes and silver edgings. But even if there's silver on the outside, there's just an ordinary clay pot underneath. And if it's decorated with silver, it won't be long before the silver wears off. So it is with a wicked heart. You can cover it up with fervent flattery or a silver tongue - but sooner or later those exterior "decorations" will chip off.

In Bible days, people would store coins and other valuables in clay pots, so they had the earthen vessel - a clay pot or jar - but the silver was on the inside. We have an application of "clay jar outside but silver inside" in 2 Corinthians 4:7: *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us."*

We are the ordinary clay pots. And what is the precious treasure that's hidden inside us? It's the Lord and His Word: *"For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4:5-6).*

We are only clay pots, but hidden inside us is great Treasure. And the fact that we're just ordinary people - clay jars - makes it clear to everyone that our power is from God, not from ourselves.

Do you have the Great Treasure within your ordinary clay exterior? Or are you only trying to disguise yourself by attempting to decorate the exterior with "silver dross"?

Make sure the silver is on the inside!