

WISDOM: LIVING SUCCESSFULLY IN A TREACHEROUS WORLD

Building Relationships

“Many a man proclaims his own loyalty, but who can find a trustworthy man?” ~ *Proverbs 20:6*

It Is Not Good to Be Alone

Few people would disagree that the greatest miseries in life arise from broken relationships. Whether it is the damage caused by a father who abandons his children, a wife who refuses to reconcile with her husband, or the two-faced friend caught spreading gossip, relationships can be the greatest source of sorrow. Outside the garden of Eden, in a world cursed by sin and where foolishness permeates every man’s heart from birth, relationships are imperfect at best and frequently dysfunctional. As Solomon states, “Many a man proclaims his own loyalty, but who can find a trustworthy man?” (Prov 20:6).

But this is not the way it was supposed to be—nor the way it must be, even in a fallen world. Reflecting the glorious community shared between the persons of the triune Godhead, Adam and Eve were created to experience fellowship with each other as a central part of their existence. True, sin entered humanity through this first couple, corrupting their and every one of their descendant’s ability to form mutually-edifying relationships. But God has provided *redemptive wisdom*—the regenerating power known as “the fear of the LORD” (Prov 1:7). This gracious, supernatural “fear” transforms the foolish man inwardly, and then gives him the skill to work out this salvation in his relationships. By God’s grace, it is possible today to be and to find “a friend [who] loves at all times” (Prov 17:17) within the community of those who have experienced this “fear.”

Consequently, it is natural that Solomon would devote a great deal of attention in his proverbs to the topic of relationships. Since relationships play a foundational role in human existence, especially within the community of faith, wisdom must address this topic. Wisdom, after all, is skill, and relationships require the greatest skill. Toward this end, Solomon provides us with **at least ten principles** for building the kind of relationships God has intended for His people.

1. Recognize your need for relationships.

First, Solomon makes it clear that man was not created for *isolation* or *independence*:

- **18:1** – “He who separates himself seeks *his own* desire, he quarrels against all sound wisdom.”

Contrary to the “wisdom” often promoted in books and movies, Solomon insists that the wise man is not a social hermit, recluse, or solitary figure. Instead, the wise man manifests his wisdom through skill in building strong, edifying relationships. The wise man is the man *of community*. Conversely, the one who isolates himself, refuses to invest in others, and withdraws in order to protect self and avoid risk—he is the fool, the one who “bears his teeth” against wisdom. He tries to live his life contrary to how God designed him.

In fact, it is important to note Proverbs’ emphasis on the role of *the community* in the teaching of wisdom. For Solomon, learning wisdom—the skill to live successfully before God in a treacherous world—could only be done in the presence of others.

- **27:17** – “Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”
- **15:22** – “Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed.”
- Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

“Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person.” —Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 112

“The wisdom enterprise is a community effort.” —Longman, *Proverbs*, 481

2. Choose your friends carefully.

First, wisdom teaches that for good or for bad, *you become like those with whom you closely associate*. This truth expresses one of the important “laws” of godly wisdom—the “law of assimilation” (we assimilate the convictions, attitudes, and behaviors of those with whom we most closely associate).

- **12:26** – “The righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.”
- **13:20** – “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”
- 1:10-16; 3:31; 11:9; 14:7; 16:29; 20:19; 23:20-21; 22:24-25; 24:21-22; 28:7; 1 Cor 15:33; Gal 5:7

“Be often among the godly. They are the salt of the earth, and they will season you.” —Thomas Watson

“He is your friend who pushes you nearer to God.” —Abraham Kuyper

Second, wisdom teaches that in choosing friends, *balance is essential*. Being a social butterfly is no better than being a social hermit.

- **18:24** – “A man of *too many* friends *comes* to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” These “friends” are “fair weather” acquaintances who abandon ship when storms come.

The love of popularity, incessant socializing and “winning” friends, and prioritizing the quantity of friends above the quality of friendships are all marks of folly that ultimately destroy the possibility of meaningful, edifying relationships.

3. Pay attention to your words.

Solomon poignantly teaches that words are either the building blocks or the wrecking balls of relationships.

- **18:21** – “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”
- 11:9; 12:25; 16:23-24; 20:5, 15; 27:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Be especially careful of *slander and gossip*. These sins are particularly destructive to friendships and the health of the community of God’s people in general.

- 6:16-19; 16:28; 17:9; 20:19; 25:18

Be careful also of *unfiltered candor*. While many a man takes pride in his ability to speak candidly, wisdom asserts that manner matters. Truthfulness is required, but it must always be seasoned with *grace*.

- 12:18, 25; 15:1; 20:15; 27:9; Ephesians 4:29

4. Practice a give-and-take approach to counsel.

Dan Phillips (*God's Wisdom in Proverbs*, 168) helpfully describes how “give-and-take” often works in relationships, and how it should work:

Kinds of Relationships		
Description	Rightly Applied	Wrongly Applied
Give relationships	Providing encouragement and counsel; giving benefit to others from our spiritual strength; bearing the burdens of others.	Giving criticism and grief; transferring to others the problems we have created while taking no ownership.
Take relationships	Accepting counsel and correction; receiving necessary help from others when we are weak.	Consuming others' attention; focusing on what the other person must do for me.
Give and take relationships	“In a <i>give and take</i> relationship, we are peers, sharing back and forth—now giving, now receiving; now teaching, now learning” (Phillips). This kind of relationship marks true spiritual fellowship and community.	

Proverbs emphasizes that for relationships to flourish, we must have a proper *give-and-take* approach. We must humbly consider the counsel given to us, and we must courageously speak it to others when needed.

- **27:17** – “Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”
- 9:8-9; 27:5-6, 9; 28:23; Psalm 141:5a; James 5:20

5. Be quick to forgive—and to confess.

Healthy relationships are always marked by a mutual readiness *to forgive*.

- **10:12** – “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions.”
- 17:9; 19:11; 1 Corinthians 13:5

Forgiveness implies: (1) “I will not bring up the matter to you”; (2) “I will not bring the matter up to another”; and (3) “I will not bring the matter up to myself” (Adams, *From Forgiveness to Forgiving*, 82).

When forgiveness is not extended, feelings of offended-ness or a desire for revenge inevitably grow in the heart of the one against whom the sin was committed (Prov 18:19; 20:22). This lack of forgiveness only creates further obstacles for reconciliation.

“If you’ve experienced God’s forgiveness, others will experience your forgiveness.” —Burk Parsons
Love “cherishes the wrongdoer as a friend to be won, not an enemy with whom to get even.”
— Waltke, *Proverbs 1-5*, 461

Also essential to healthy relationships is the readiness *to confess*.

- **28:13** – “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes *them* will find compassion.”
- James 5:16a

6. Prioritize listening over speaking.

Relationships are built not by *quickness of speech* nor by *quantity of words*, but on the *abundance of listening*. The friends who are most cherished are always those who are content to listen.

- 10:19; 15:28; 17:27-28; 18:13, 17; 29:20; James 1:19

7. Do not be overbearing.

To be *overbearing* means to have a selfish disregard for others. It manifests itself in various ways:

- (1) Invading others' privacy and consuming their time (25:17; read esp. in light of v. 16).
- (2) Ignoring others' emotional state and imposing your own (25:20; 26:18-19; 27:14).
- (3) Exaggerating others' qualities for selfish purposes (i.e., flattery; 26:28; 29:5).

8. Show loyal love.

What is loyalty? Loyalty is the ability to stick with a person despite pressure to the contrary. A common Hebrew word for God's love is the word *hesed* (חֶסֶד), often translated as "mercy," "kindness," or "lovingkindness." It is not a spontaneous, arbitrary love that waxes and wanes, but a love which springs from commitment to a promise. It is *loyal* or *faithful love*—a kind of love which keeps on loving despite the unworthiness of the one who is loved. It is a love which endures forever (Psalm 118:1-2).

- 3:3-4; 17:17; 18:24; 19:22; 20:6; 21:21; 25:19; 27:10

9. Protect what is revealed in confidence.

Solomon recognized that closeness in community had to be protected from an associated danger—the temptation to *gossip*: 11:9, 12-13; 13:3; 17:9; 20:19; 25:8-10. Gossip is one of the most deadly foes of strong relationships, and must be earnestly resisted. At the same time, this does not mean turning a blind eye to sin or covering up scandals: 19:25; 21:11; Matt 18:15-18.

"Every word spoken about a brother's sin, that is not prompted by a Christian conscience, that does not vibrate with the love of a Christian heart, is itself a sin against the mercy and the judgment of Christ."

—James Denny

10. Share God's hatred for strife.

Strife (quarrelling, gossip, slander, etc.) is antithetical to wisdom and abominable to God. Strife is the antithesis to relationship: 6:12-14, 16-19; 17:14; 20:3; 22:10

Essential to healthy relationships is the ability to bring tranquility into relationships: 15:18; 16:14; Matthew 5:9

For Further Reflection

- Continue to read one chapter of Proverbs each day for the rest of this year.
- Review points #7-10 listed below. Make observations about the proverbs listed with each point.
- Is it difficult for you to list four men whom you consider to be close friends? If it is, what would you say is the cause of this difficulty? Is that difficulty addressed by any of Solomon's principles above?
- Which of these principles is most difficult for you to apply in your life. What will you do about that?
- Have you left behind broken relationships? If so, are you taking steps to reconcile with those against whom you have sinned? What are you doing to *confess* your own sin, and *forgive* the sins of others.
- How would you rate yourself in terms of the "give-and-take" paradigm stated above (point #4)?

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: Oct 14 – "Accepting Correction"