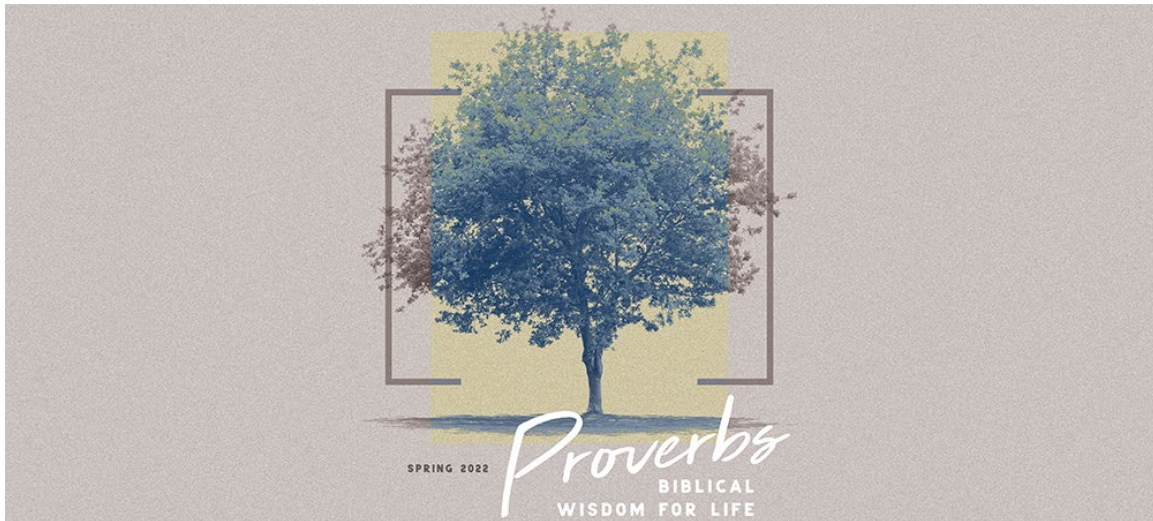


Week 24: Proverbs: Wisdom in Your Community

Hook



Main Point: Godly people love their neighbors as they love themselves.

Ask your LifeGroup the following questions:

- If you could choose anyone to be your neighbor, who would it be and why?
- What steps would you take to build a relationship with your new neighbor?
- Ideally, what would your relationship with your hypothetical neighbor look like?

Today we will discuss neighboring; defining your neighbors and what a good neighbor looks like.

Week 24: Proverbs: Wisdom in Your Community

Book

Main Point: Godly people love their neighbors as they love themselves.

Proverbs 3:27–30; 11:12–13; 14:20–21; and 27:10 [Read]

Talking Point 1: God commands us to love and serve anyone and everyone in need.

In the New Testament, Jesus tells us that the two greatest commandments are to love God with everything you have and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:34–40). This specific command to love your neighbor as yourself comes from Leviticus 19:18, but the concept of loving neighbors is all over the Old Testament. It is a key biblical truth, from beginning to end, that part of loving God is loving others.

You’ll notice that most of these Proverbs describe loving your “neighbor” rather than just generally loving other people. The word “neighbor” in Hebrew is a general term for “another” – it could be a friend, companion, husband or neighbor.ⁱ When Jesus talked about the two greatest commandments in Luke, an expert in the law asked as a follow-up, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus answered him with the parable of the Good Samaritan – a story that would have been shocking to any good Jewish person at the time, because the hated Samaritan was the “hero” of the story who was being “a good neighbor” to the man in need. The answer to his question is that *everyone* is your neighbor. Not just people from your own “tribe” – your friendship circle, community, neighborhood, family, race, or socio-economic level. As Christians, we are obligated to treat everyone on earth like a neighbor.

God’s law doesn’t just say that it’s a nice thing to help people when you can. Helping those in need is a command. In the Old Testament law, there are 613 commandments, two of which are the *g’milut chasadim* – “the giving of lovingkindness” – which can be done for any person, and *tzedakah*, which are acts of charity specifically to the poor. Both are considered moral obligations of giving to others without receiving anything in return.ⁱⁱ

Solomon also states helping others as a command, in a series of “do not” commands in Proverbs 3 (v. 27). He uses contrasting or antithetical parallelism to emphasize that love is a double-sided coin: do not plan evil against your neighbor (v. 29), but also do not withhold good from your neighbor (v. 27). The biblical ethic is that it’s not enough just to “do no harm” (which is what many people in our culture would say is their general guidance for their morality), we also must “do good” whenever we can.

Solomon tells us to treat our neighbors (i.e., everyone) with respect – not to belittle them or slander them (11:12–13) and to love our neighbors, not “despise” them (14:20–21). In Proverbs 14, “despise” (which can also mean “scorn”) is contrasted with being generous, so it’s not about just disliking your neighbors; it’s about how you treat them – either being generous to those in need or withholding help from them. Solomon is saying that not helping someone in need is treating them with contempt, discarding them as worthless. Again, helping those in need is not just a recommendation, but a command and an expectation for those who claim to follow God. He describes those who don’t as “sinners” (14:21) and unwise people who “lack sense” (11:12).ⁱⁱⁱ

Proverbs 27:10 tell us that a neighbor who is near is better than a brother who is far away. This is one of those “general principle” proverbs that shows us that sometimes, friends and neighbors can become closer to us than our own families. Though this verse *is* about a physical neighbor who lives close to you, the principle is that our love should not be limited to people who are “like us” or part of our “tribe.” Our community is made up of anyone and everyone around us, not just people who look like us or like the same things as us or people who fit a certain mold.^{iv}

Q: How can you build community with people who are different from you?

Q: Describe experiences in your life when people have become like family to you.

Proverbs 3:29–30; 12:26; 21:10; and 24:28–29 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Godly people are trustworthy and live in peace with those around them.

Q: How does Solomon describe the wicked in these verses?

We already looked at Proverbs 3:27–30 above, but we focused on the first two verses of the section (vv. 27–28) – the command to do good to your neighbor whenever you can. The second half (vv. 29–30) is a contrast – a command not to do harm to your neighbor. First, Solomon warns his sons not to plan evil against their neighbors because they live “trustingly” beside you (v. 29). They trust that they can live safely next to you without your secretly plotting against them.

The principle would apply to other relationships with those with whom you have consistent interaction. Imagine that you put your trust in a coworker and that person ended up backstabbing you to get a promotion. Or you put your trust in a friend and you found out he or she had been gossiping about you to everyone you know. Having evil

done against you is awful no matter what, but it's especially awful when it's done by someone you trusted.

Then, Solomon warns his sons not to argue with someone "for no reason" (v. 30). It's OK to take action with someone who *has* done you harm. If someone has hurt you, you should confront him or her in Christlike love and accountability, using the process Jesus describes in the Gospels – healthy conflict resolution (Matthew 18:15–20). This is a command not to be an argumentative, contentious person when people haven't done anything wrong.

Christians should be slow to anger (James 1:19; 1 Corinthians 13:5), not feeding off drama or looking for a fight. As Paul writes, "so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Romans 12:18). Because God is patient, kind and slow to anger, Christian should be known for being patient, kind and slow to anger, not being hot-headed, argumentative, or easily offended. Solomon also tells his sons, just as Paul writes in Romans 12:17, that even if someone does harm to you, you should not repay him evil for evil (24:29). Christians do not take revenge; they work through the conflict with the goal of reconciliation and come to a peaceable resolution.

Solomon tells us that the soul of the wicked desires evil – he wants to do evil to his neighbor, deep down in his heart of hearts, and he shows no mercy (21:10). The wicked leads his neighbor astray, but the righteous is a guide to his neighbor – he shows him the right way to go (12:26). The wicked only look out for themselves, but those who are righteous humble themselves and seek what is best for others.^v

Q: What role does trust play in building bridges for the Gospel?

Q: Describe a time when you found out someone you trusted wasn't really trustworthy. How did that make you feel?

Q: What practical steps can you take to become slower to anger, patient and peaceful? What kind of changes would that make in your life?

Proverbs 25:17–20; 27:14; and 29:5 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Take care to try not to *unintentionally* hurt your neighbors.

Q: What does it mean to "sing songs to a heavy heart"? Why is it hurtful?

Q: What is the harm in flattery?

The last set of verses were about people who intentionally try to hurt other people. People who devise evil against their neighbors or deceive them or slander them. These passages are about ways we can unintentionally hurt others:

- Overstaying our welcome in their homes (25:17)
- Trying to cheer them up when they're upset instead of mourning with them (25:20)
- Being loud early in the morning, even if you're being kind (27:14)
- Using flattery instead of being authentic and truthful (29:5)

Some of these examples are lighthearted and a bit funny, like overstaying your welcome or blessing someone loudly. Solomon gets a little more serious when he describes how flattery may seem like a nice thing to do for someone, but it really sets a trap for them that will only trip them up (29:5). When someone is grieving or hurting or in pain, we might think that "singing a song" (25:20) or trying to cheer them up or helping them "look for the silver lining" will help them, but what they really need is someone to just be with them in their pain. As Romans 12:15 tells us, we should rejoice with those who rejoice, but mourn with those who mourn.^{vi}

When people are hurting, they need to mourn, grieve, and lament. There are many psalms of lament in the Scriptures – almost a third of the Psalms are laments. As a culture, Americans tend to push positive thinking and avoid lament.^{vii} But other cultures, including the ancient Near Eastern culture of the Bible, embrace lament as a healthy way to deal with our emotions and experiences instead of suppressing them. This is why so many psychologists label our tendency to gloss over difficult things "toxic positivity." It's not healthy to just avoid our pain in order to try to "stay positive." Wisdom knows that and Proverbs teaches that it is better to mourn with those who mourn.^{viii}

These are some great examples, but they are just a sampling. There are many more ways we can unintentionally hurt other people if we aren't thinking about what we're doing. But how do we know what those things are so that we can prevent hurting people unintentionally? Empathy. Putting yourself in their shoes. Taking the time to think about how you would feel if you were them. That's why the Golden Rule is "treat others the way you would *want* to be treated." When we think about how people would want to be treated rather than what we think we should do or even how we think we should help them, we can avoid a lot of hurt and pain.

Q: Describe a time you unintentionally hurt someone else when you were just trying to help. What happened? How did you resolve the situation?

Q: How can we learn to have more empathy for other people? How would our lives be different if we always sought *first* to think about how our words and actions would affect other people *before* we said or did things?

Week 24: Proverbs: Wisdom in Your Community

Took

Main Point: Godly people love their neighbors as they love themselves.

Would you describe yourself as a servant? A good neighbor gives and serves those who are in need. If you are looking for a way in which you might sacrifice for others, Prestonwood offers great opportunities for you. Visit prestonwood.org/serve for a list of roles in which you can give of yourself to others.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Who is my neighbor? Have you been living a life focused only on yourself and those in your tribe? God has called us to extend the love of Christ to those around us – this includes being tangibly helpful. Consider the opportunities you have this week to demonstrate to someone that he or she is indeed your neighbor.

PRAY that God would forgive you for any transgressions against your neighbor. This might be a time of conviction for you in which the Lord is bringing up an incident in which you acted un-Christlike. Pray that the Lord would direct you as you seek to make amends.

ACT: Be helpful. Demonstrate that you are a neighbor to those with whom you come in contact. That might be extending your assistance to someone struggling at work, buying a water for another parent at the soccer field or asking the waiter how you can pray for him.

ⁱ *NAS Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible with Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries* (The Lockman Foundation, 1981).

ⁱⁱ Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Jewish Publication Society, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

^{iv} Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

^v Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

^{vi} Allen P. Ross, "Proverbs," Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Proverbs-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

^{vii} "The American Church's Absence of Lament," *Sojourners*, Oct 24, 2013 - <https://sojo.net/articles/12-years-slave/american-churchs-absence-lament>

^{viii} Elizabeth Bernstein, "Toxic Positivity is Very Real and Very Annoying" *Wall Street Journal*, Nov 2, 2021 - <https://www.wsj.com/articles/tired-of-being-told-cheer-up-the-problem-of-toxic-positivity-11635858001>