

## RELATIONSHIPS AND WISDOM

### Proverbs - Selected Verses

How many times have you thought something similar to this idea? I really enjoy my job (church, school, club, etc.) if it weren't for the people. You have probably heard or even said something like, "I could get a lot more work done, if it weren't for all these people interrupting me." Life is about relationships unless you choose to be a hermit and even then you cannot escape the issues of relationships because you are reduced to dealing with yourself which may be the most difficult relationship what we have.

Some writers have noted that the Bible is a book of relationships starting with our relationship with God, dealing with our relationship to each other and the world around us, and even addressing the "self" issue.

In the various proverbs we find that we need to have wisdom and recognize its benefits in the way we think, what we say, and how we do things so that the results in such areas as material and spiritual wealth are appropriate. If we do all these things right and then wind up without any friends or family then life will seem empty because an important part of life would be missing.

The desire for companionship and being able to interact with others is a strong driving force in most people's lives. It is so powerful that we can see evidence that many times people will settle for a bad relationship rather than no relationship at all. It is in such situations that the lessons of wisdom especially need to be learned and applied. All of us need to consider the consequences of our associations and not rush into a bad relationship but be patient in discovering the right people who could be influencing us and to apply patience as we interact with them. Finally, each of us needs to be a person who is worthy of being a friend to other people. This requires that we demonstrate the good behaviors that we would like to see in our friends.

Consider Consequences – 22:24-25; 17:14, 19; 26:21; 25:19; 13:20; 14:22

<sup>24</sup> Do not associate with a man *given* to anger; Or go with a hot-tempered man, <sup>25</sup> Or you will learn his ways And find a snare for yourself. Proverbs 22:24-25

<sup>14</sup> The beginning of strife is *like* letting out water, So abandon the quarrel before it breaks out. <sup>19</sup> He who loves transgression loves strife; He who raises his door seeks destruction. Proverbs 17:14,19

<sup>21</sup> Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife. Proverbs 26:21

<sup>19</sup> Like a bad tooth and an unsteady foot Is confidence in a faithless man in time of trouble. Proverbs 25:19

<sup>20</sup> He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will suffer harm. Proverbs 13:20

<sup>22</sup> Will they not go astray who devise evil? But kindness and truth *will be to* those who devise good. Proverbs 14:22 (NASB95)

We all realize the importance of thinking before we speak, we could also say that we need to think before we work (as in work smartly), we certainly need to think before we spend or invest our resources and we also need to think before we allow close friendships to develop. In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey suggested that we "begin with the end in mind." The idea is to project the final results you would like to achieve and then pick the actions and attitudes that will help (rather than hinder) reaching those objectives.

What would be the ideal situation in our relationships with others? Ideally, how would your close friends conduct themselves or what would be the characteristic you would like them to have? Most of us don't spend a lot of time deliberately thinking about these things, but we do make "quick evaluations" with regard to the various people we encounter and our associations develop from there. Admittedly, we don't always get to choose since some of these associations are family related and we sometimes cannot avoid the interactions.

We can think of the collection of verses that we just read as showing us some red flags

that deserve consideration before we choose our friends. The first red flag is described as someone who is hot-tempered or given over to anger. It is one thing to be zealous about various issues, but such zeal needs to be under the person's control. The concern about associating ourselves with hot-tempered people is that we are influenced by what others do. We all have a tendency to adopt and fit in rather than operating from the basis of "who we are" rather than reacting to what is happening around us.

What are the consequences of being hot-tempered? It is described as a snare or a trap. A trap is something or a situation that is difficult or impossible to get out of. Angry words or angry actions directed toward others will usually produce a similar response from them which leads to more angry words and actions from us. It builds up and usually does not end well. If we were to "begin with the end in mind," then we would not take that first step that produces such strife. In fact verse 17:14 reminds us that once something starts it will have a tendency to run its course and we will have little or no control to prevent it doing just that. The wise thing to do is to not let it ever start. How can we prevent such strife from starting? Control your temper. That is much easier to do if you are not associating with anger, hot-tempered people.

It is important to realize that some people actually enjoy being contentious, rude, and always arguing with others. These people have a personality disorder and they need help – the help is called "anger management." Another disorder is that of being ostentatious or being flashy or pretentious in an effort to impress others. That can be done by what is said, the clothes we wear, the gates to our property or any number of things. The message is "look at me, I am special." Such behavior is designed to provoke envy from others. Envy leads to a lot of actions against people that tend to be destructive. A wise person would avoid doing anything to cause others to envy him. The lesson is that we are to avoid close associations with those who are contentious (always stirring up controversy) as well as those who are prideful (always bragging on themselves) lest you learn their ways.

We see in these verses a long list of other undesirable and inappropriate characteristics that some people have. Being "contentious" is described by Don Carson (*The New Bible Commentary*) as a character defect of having a "quarrelsome disposition." I am convinced that this is learned behavior and is likely greatly influenced by what a person saw in their parents or someone else who had significant influence on the person during early formative years. If we choose friends or work with people who are contentious, then it will influence us. The other side of that coin is that we need to be gracious and demonstrate that virtue so as to influence others in a positive way.

Faithlessness is just another word for being unreliable. You know people who can be "counted on" and you can name names of those who can't be trusted. There may be various reasons for such lack of reliability. The worst reason is that a person has no sense of responsibility to do what they promised to do and perhaps had no intention of doing what they said. A very common reason and one that each of us has been guilty of is a bad memory or failure to write it down and follow through. We may have had the best of intentions but simply lost track of time or had a senior moment.

Foolishness is said to be bound up in the heart of a child and the normal course of events is that maturity will produce wisdom. That does not always happen and there are some who just never have learned to avoid doing things without considering the unintended consequences or even worse deliberately doing stupid things to cause bad consequences. While we may never actually do some of these things that a foolish person would do, we might suffer the consequences of we are too close to them.

We certainly don't want to be associated with those who are basically evil people. It seems that the writer of the proverb in 14:22 saw evil as a lack of kindness and truth. There are

people who are unkind in the way they treat others, the way they treat animals, and the way they treat the environment. We should be uncomfortable when we are around such people. The same should be the case with those who just can't seem to tell the truth.

### Cultivate Patience – 14:17, 29; 15:18; 16:32; 19:11

<sup>17</sup> A quick-tempered man acts foolishly, And a man of evil devices is hated. <sup>29</sup> He who is slow to anger has great understanding, But he who is quick-tempered exalts folly. Proverbs 14:17,29

<sup>18</sup> A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, But the slow to anger calms a dispute. Proverbs 15:18

<sup>32</sup> He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city. Proverbs 16:32

<sup>11</sup> A man's discretion makes him slow to anger, And it is his glory to overlook a transgression. Proverbs 19:11 (NASB95)

We could sum up the advice in this collection of proverbs as “Count to ten before you say anything, and then don't say anything.” Another wise saying is “don't say or do anything in anger.”

In dealing with people, where emotions can be exposed, the things to avoid are associated with “quick and hot” on one hand and “evil, foolish, anger, and strife” on the other hand. The things we should promote are associated with “slow, cool, discretion, understanding, and graciousness.” It goes without saying that the first group of characteristics and actions will likely lead to problems and failures and the second will increase our chances of success in dealing with people or any situations with which we are confronted.

Quick action is typically driven by emotions and built-in animal instincts rather than principled behavior that can interrupt a trend of escalating strife and bitterness. If you push me, then my natural reaction is to push back. A reasoned approach might be to simply step out of the way and let the one who is pushing fall on his face. That will usually cool down a potentially hot situation.

A good philosophy to adopt in such potentially strife-filled interactions is to simply resolve to only take actions that are characteristic of “who you are” and not react to what the other person has done or they way they behave. Ask yourself, who is in control of my responses? Am I allowing someone else to “push my buttons” or am I functioning from a basis of principles that I have made my own? Hopefully, those principles that we have claimed as our own are those that are characteristic of Christlike behavior.

### Communicate Loyalty and Love – 3:3-4; 16:6; 20:6; 10:12; 11:17; 15:17; 17:17; 18:24 ; 27:9

<sup>3</sup> Do not let kindness and truth leave you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart. <sup>4</sup> So you will find favor and good repute In the sight of God and man. Proverbs 3:3-4

<sup>6</sup> By lovingkindness and truth iniquity is atoned for, And by the fear of the LORD one keeps away from evil. Proverbs 16:6

<sup>6</sup> Many a man proclaims his own loyalty, But who can find a trustworthy man? Proverbs 20:6

<sup>12</sup> Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions. Proverbs 10:12

<sup>17</sup> The merciful man does himself good, But the cruel man does himself harm. Proverbs 11:17

<sup>17</sup> Better is a dish of vegetables where love is Than a fattened ox *served* with hatred. Proverbs 15:17

<sup>17</sup> A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity. Proverbs 17:17

<sup>24</sup> A man of *too many* friends *comes* to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Proverbs 18:24

<sup>9</sup> Oil and perfume make the heart glad, So a man's counsel is sweet to his friend. Proverbs 27:9 (NASB95)

While it is very important to carefully choose our friends, it is doubly important that we are becoming the kind of person that others who are wise would choose to be their friend. One of the often quoted ideas on friendship is that “if we want to have friends, then we must show ourselves to be friendly.” We usually focus in on what it means to be friendly and we all should want to develop and grow those attributes. The part of that saying that may be overlooked by many is that we need to “show” or demonstrate that we actually have those good characteristics.

This idea causes us to return to the basics of getting beyond knowing, being, and having to doing or putting what we know, who we are and what we have into practice.

Let assume that we have embraced the virtues of kindness and truth and have made these life priorities and have embedded them into our very being. If these do not emerge in the way we think, in what we say, and (most importantly) in what we do, then we could raise the question of “what difference does it make?” It is like having trophies on the mantle of your fireplace – big whoop!

If we are actually practicing these virtues as a way of life, then there are many benefits that naturally occur. We see some of these benefits in the verses listed in this section. The first thing we see in 16:6 is something that only God’s mercy and truth can accomplish. We know that through the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross that our sins were purged or covered over. What can we learn from that? A broken relationship between mankind and God was restored and made whole by mercy and truth. Jesus told us that He is the way. How do we walk in “the way?” It is obvious that we need to do what He did to restore broken relationships in our lives. We are to show unconditional love and truth as we relate to others. If someone commits a transgression against us, then we are to forgive in the same way that God has forgiven us in Christ and to demonstrate that fact by our gracious behavior toward them.

When we come to realize that God has such an unconditional loving attitude toward us, then we see Him in a role of a Father and our respect for Him influences our attitude and behavior since we want to honor God. In the same way, if we are gracious toward others, then that should produce a positive response in the other person that would cause them to behave honorably toward us in the future.

I think that most people want to be associated with others who are trustworthy. If we show ourselves to be honorable and trustworthy by doing the right thing in the right way and for the right reasons, then that behavior will go a long way to building excellent relationships that are free of strife and animosity. One simple way to help build such rapport with people is to assume the best and overlook or ignore hurtful things that they might do and later regret. All of us have had the experience that a friend will make an inappropriate comment toward us. We can choose to make a big deal out of it or to just let it pass. Which action will produce the best outcome?

We are usually quick to deny being “religious” and, instead, affirm that what is important is our “relationship” with God. In a similar way, when we come to a working realization that relationships with others are so much more important than appearances and possessions, then we can start to view success in a different light. We should value things that have been entrusted to us and we should exercise good stewardship, but having an abundance of things with animosity is not as good as barely enough in an environment of love and acceptance.

Friendships and relationships with family can help us through difficult times more than wealth can. It is in the difficulties that we experience in life that we can recognize and identify those who are friends in more than name only. The fair-weather friends can be a hindrance to concentrating on developing real and lasting relationships with people who will not “disappear” or run out when the going is rough.

We need to have friends that we can view in the same way that we view our Heavenly Father. We know that He wants what is best for us and He has no hidden selfish agendas. We should be so blessed as to have friends that behave that way toward us so that we can trust them and what they say as being intended for our best outcome. On the other hand, we must be that kind of friend to others as we become conformed into the image of Christ.