

Sunday July 4, 2021

Lesson 5: Fenced In

Scripture: Proverbs 3: 27-30; 6: 1-5; 25: 20-23

**Context:**

This week we start a new unit for this summer series titled: Respond. The unit for the month of July focuses on how we are called to live as neighbors with those around us. Today's lesson contains excerpts from the book of Proverbs, found in the Old Testament.

The book of Proverbs is known as Wisdom literature, writings to give humans guidance from God in their daily lives. Like the book of Psalms, which it follows in the Bible, the book of Proverbs is an anthology of anthologies.<sup>1</sup> The headings tell as much as there are descriptions above different chapters such as chapter ten labeled, "The proverbs of Solomon," while chapter thirty begins "The words of Agur son of Jakeh, of Massa." Although the attribution to Solomon of three of these collections is probably not accurate, taken with the fact one collection being labeled as some of the Solomon proverbs being copied by King Hezekiah's officials, it is clear royal courts played a role in the production of this type of literature.<sup>2</sup> In the courts, courtesans could gather to piece together common philosophies and reflect on the culture where they lived.

For most ancient Near Eastern cultures, there was a focus upon wisdom and how people could become wise in their everyday lives. As found in First Kings, "the people of the east" are considered among the wisest in the world and Israel sought to be included in that group.<sup>3</sup> Wisdom literature was a way the Israelites could pass onto future generations the lessons of life they learned and wanted them to consider going forth.

The proverbs we examine today follow the same pattern of the whole book. The arrangements are random and because the proverbs do not refer to specific historical events or circumstances, the individual proverbs are difficult to date with precision.<sup>4</sup> The proverbs usually fall into two general categories: insights into the human experience (think Poor Richard's Almanac) and those to have a religious dimension.<sup>5</sup> However, all tie to an understanding of true wisdom as having a spiritual tie: a total submission to the divine will.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the proverbs are prescriptive and tied to God.

All three proverbs today focus on being a good neighbor. The first proverb is about doing good for one's neighbors. The second is about keeping one's word in matters

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 463.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 464.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

of being a neighbor and being held accountable. And finally, one is called to love even the enemy among them as hard as it may be. All hold weight then and all hold weight today.

### **Application**

As we read the words of the ancient Near East today, we are reminded of how the wisdom literature still speaks today. The proverbs for today's lesson especially resonate with how we are called to be good neighbors. We are reminded of the power of love and how community can grow strong or be weakened by our actions and behaviors.

In the first line of proverbs for today's lesson, we are reminded of how withholding good is not something we should ever strive to do. Especially when it comes to good neighbors, we should strive to do good and love on those around us. We should not harm or seek to harm those sharing our living space, and we should never make baseless accusations. If we can help them with things, we should do so.

Yet the next line of proverbs takes matters to the next level when there is a loan or an agreement dealing with property or money. While this type of transaction can be a good thing, we should always strive to respect each other, giving back what we have borrowed or loaned and vice versa. There is a measure of accountability for both parties.

Finally, the last set of proverbs for today's lesson speaks to how we relate to each other in times of sorrow and anger. The first saying reminds people to be sensitive to the feelings of others, not giving pithy statements or rejoicing when someone is in pain. The final saying encourages us to feed and give water in times of need those who have enemies. This act should not be for any personal gain, but because the Lord calls us to treat kindly even those who are enemies.

As I read these, I was struck by how each built upon each other in terms of the relationship. The first proverb is important, yet can also have a superficial level to it. Doing good to others gives such joy and I find rather easy to do. I've been blessed with wonderful neighbors who watch my dog when he's gone and when I am missing an ingredient, they are happy to see what is in their cupboard. The Pecan Grove of Brantley is a place where neighbors love each other and even the dogs and cats seem to have deep bonds!

The next one though is where the relationship stakes are heightened. What happens when a neighbor needs something more than an extra egg for waffles? Perhaps it is something like a piece of equipment or money. Then, the trust level in the relationship must be gauged. How do we hold each other accountable when there is a need to help someone out and will it be repaid, if it can be repaid? The relationship must evolve and individuals must discern if this is a reciprocal relationship or a time where one party needs to do some reflection on the nature of the relationship.

The final proverb is the one to perhaps push us the most. The first line is the reminder to us of how we should always been mindful of those in pain. I recently heard of a situation from a clergy colleague in which a congregant was struggling with his wife's diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease and a relative proceeded to give them a book about heaven to help "cheer them up." While the relative may have meant well, how much more powerful would it have been for them to sit in pain and cry or offer to help the relative by sitting with his wife or doing something with him to give him the space he needed to process his emotions and grief. We are to think about our words and actions,

especially with the most vulnerable.

The last part of the proverb is perhaps the most challenging of all. We all know about the “neighbors” who are our “enemies.” It is the person you don’t like. It is the narcissist family member. It is the “fill in the blank.” There are always people who will try even the patience of the saints among us. And yet these proverbs remind us to treat others with compassion and grace, not allowing them to hurt or bully us. Instead, we are to be cloaked in doing the right thing not out of spite but because the Lord our God wants us to do no harm. As we treat those “neighbors” with good, the Lord will stand with us. For if we plot and attempt to bring their downfall, we only fuel their fire.

How can you be a good neighbor to those in your community? Why do you think it is important to do all the good you can? What is the benefit of accountability in relationships? What are practices you can cultivate to love your enemies? How can you have a spirit of peace towards those who are not being good “neighbors?”

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