

What proverb (not necessarily Biblical) do you hear or have you heard most often. Maybe, in a world of tweets proverbs have gone out of style. I remember the mother of a junior high friend always saying as we left the house, "Remember, you are known by the company you keep." We were always a little unsure why she used that one with our group! However, like all proverbs it contained some truth - not absolute but some (see the second and third guideline in the handout, How to Read Wisdom Literature).

So with this eclectic group of proverbs this morning, let's take a look at a couple of them in more detail. I will begin with one that may seem troubling at first reading, Proverbs 17:8: "*A bribe is a crown to the one who gives it, wherever he turns he will succeed.*" Wow! What are we to make of this at its first reading? Should we begin to bribe one another to get what we want? Or, can there be more than what the surface suggests. The Bible does seem to frown on bribes. As Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, gives Moses advice on judging Israel he says, "...select capable men from all the people, men who are trustworthy and who hate dishonest gain (bribes)..." (Ex. 18:21). Deuteronomy gives us this image on God, "*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes*" (10:17). And, the Psalmist speaks of those who may enter into the very presence of God in this way: "*Who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill...and does not accept a bribe against the innocent*" (Psalm 15:1& 5). So, what is Wisdom saying? Can Amos be echoing her words as he notes the sins of Israel: "*For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts*" (Amos 5:12).

I discovered there are two main thoughts on this. The first is that Lady Wisdom is simply stating the fact of the day. This is life. It is an observation of the day in which the Proverb was written. It was a bribery driven society. She is simply stating life. For example: The sun is shining. A simple statement requiring no real response.

The second is that the word translated here as "bribe" can also be translated as a "gift". Eugene Peterson in The Message translates the proverb this way, "*Receiving a gift is like getting a rare gemstone, any way you look at it, you see beauty refracted.*" This carries a whole different meaning for us than the word bribe.

I am in the process of downsizing, cleaning out my t-shirts. I made three piles. One, the ones I wear. Another, the ones I never wear and can get rid of. And, the last, the ones I seldom wear but they were given as a gift. The last pile has the one that has special meaning. They remind of people and situations. They hold precious memories. Like the one from the Thai Xtreme Team that we went with on a trip through Indian reservations in Arizona, the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas. They bought me a t-shirt from the Canyon and each of them signed it with a personal messages. As I look at it I do see "beauty refracted."

Either of these explanations is accepted.

Proverbs 17:9 speaks of the joy of forgiveness (seems to be a theme): "*He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.*" Peter wondered how long we should hold a grudge. He wanted to know in Matthew 18:22 how many times he should forgive someone. Jesus responds with what, for Peter, would be an impossible number: seventy times seven. Who would keep tabs like that? Which is more important? A grudge or a friendship? We all make mistakes. We all occasionally say things that we should not have said. We do stupid things. None of us is perfect. Why ruin the joy of friendship by constantly reminding others of their transgressions. God forgives. Let us follow the example of God. Let's not keep reliving the past.

Wisdom also focuses on blaming the poor or God for the things happen around us in Proverbs 17:5: "*He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker: whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished.*" There are some today who try to blame the ills of our society on the poor. If we would stop giving food stamps we could balance the budget. Someone has determined that the amount of

money given to food stamps is about 1/10 of 1% of the Federal budget! Getting rid of it will not come close to balancing the budget. We give far more in subsidies to major oil and other corporations. If those were stopped, there would be better chance of the federal budget being balanced. But, the poor do not contribute to election campaigns.

The news told of a major business owner in California noting that each time the state has raised the minimum wage his sales have doubled. This is not what we hear. This is not what many want to hear.

Wisdom also warns about blaming God for natural disasters. I am sure that you would not have to look hard this morning to find someone saying that the flooding in Louisiana and the fires in California are God's judgment on... Global warning is partly because of man's greed. Some parts of the island we lived on in the Philippines experienced devastating floods while we were there. The flooding was attributed to the clear timber cutting of the many of the islands mountains. The strip cutting took away the natural barriers to the rain. Foreign corporations paid huge sums of money for the permission to clear cut the land - it was man's greed not God's judgment that caused the flooding. Lady Wisdom warns us not to blame God.

Jesus has been teaching a crowd gathered on a hillside. We call this section of Matthew, The Sermon on the Mount. Jesus had taught about many things: prayer, forgiveness, anger, worry. He said we should "go the extra mile", "turn the other cheek", "love our enemies", etc. Parallels of Jesus teaching can be found in the Proverbs. Jesus knew Lady Wisdom and her teachings. He knew how they impart wisdom on how one should live. Wisdom is a good, solid foundation on which to build our lives.

Jesus calls for those who are hearing his word to continue to build on that foundation. Human wisdom is like the sand. When the storms come it cannot hold. The promises of God, our relationships with one another are the solid rock that stands when the storms come. Our hope is not in the things of this world or the ways of this world. They will always fail. Our hope is in the love, forgiveness and grace of God. Our lives are not for the building of walls but for the building of relationships. If God loves the whole world then so should we.

The news this week highlighted a Muslim family in Renton/Kent area. They invited their neighbors for a community pot-luck meal in their home. They discussed Islam and how it should be lived. They were seeking to building relationships. Some of the questions asked were hard questions - they answered them. They hugged as the evening broke up and made arrangements to do this again. Bridges were being built. Is that not what Wisdom/Jesus calls us to do? Jesus calls us to build on his example, not the example of the world. Who knows what love may do?

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NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985  
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1988