

PROVERBS 25: Selected Verses

⁸ do not hastily bring into court,
for what will you do in the end,
when your neighbor puts you to shame?
⁹ Argue your case with your neighbor directly,
and do not disclose another's secret,
¹⁰ or else someone who hears you will bring shame upon you,
and your ill repute will have no end.

¹⁵ With patience a ruler may be persuaded,
and a soft tongue can break bones.

²⁰ Like vinegar on a wound
is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.
Like a moth in clothing or a worm in wood,
sorrow gnaws at the human heart.

²¹ If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat,
and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink,
²² for you will heap coals of fire on their heads,
and the Lord will reward you.

Romans 12: 19-21:

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written,
“Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ Instead, “if your enemies are hungry, feed
them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning
coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

8-10 - The wisdom in this set of proverbs has a parallel in Jesus' sermon on the mount. We live in a highly litigious society where people settle disputes in the lawcourts. The idea that people who disagree would talk it out and come to some acceptable settlement by listening to each other and compromising rather than escalating the disagreement through a lawsuit, is sadly rare. And yet, even as we may imagine we will stick it to our disputant, we may end up the loser in multiple ways beyond any monetary penalty. What happens to our spirit when we hunger to win or to avenge a wrong? Here's where Jesus takes this wisdom further than these proverbs. Jesus is always interested in the heart of a person rather than with any shaming by

being exposed. Love seeks the best for the other person as much as oneself, not to defeat a person and take pleasure in so doing.

15 - The imagery in this proverb may suggest violence (breaking bones), but the idea is precious. How do we best persuade someone to see our point of view? Coming on strong and forceful often defeats our cause. Making our point more gently, graciously and respectfully (a soft tongue) is often far more effective. And patience with a ruler (someone who has power over you) or a system (that is bigger than you) will get far better results than impatience which in anger, frustration or hopelessness just gives up. But once again, if we think of Jesus' higher ethic, is the goal to win someone to your own point of view, or is the goal to bring someone to a higher truth and good?

20 - This proverb focuses on the experience of sorrow and a heavy heart in the face of painful loss. What a description of sorrow in the heart: the feeling of a gnawing ache eating away one's insides... But there is also the wisdom of when to try to cheer someone up and when to have the courage and sensitivity to just sit with one in their pain. To sing songs when one is not able to hear them just adds to the pain. How may we learn to be a healing presence with others in sorrow as we would want others to be with us when it's our time?

21-22 and Romans 12: 19-21. The passage in Paul's letter to the Romans is far better known than the original version we have here in Proverbs. But the original version in Proverbs where Paul learned the version he uses can also provide context and meaning to a phrase often misunderstood. Treating an enemy who has wronged you with kindness rather than revenge as your response, is God's will and worthy of reward.

But what does it mean to heap burning coals on the head of an enemy? Is it causing them to suffer the heat of shame or embarrassment because you have behaved more honourably and graciously thereby also exposing their behaviour as disgraceful? Regardless of how others may react because we do not respond in kind as they may expect, our gospel hope is that by responding graciously rather than vengefully, we may help save a neighbour who has become an enemy, and by saving them also save ourselves from behaving badly. This is certainly what Paul is aiming at as these verses are part of a larger set of exhortations for building up community in Christ.

PRAYER: Thank you, O God. Thank you for meeting us in our anger, our hurt and our despair. Help us rise up through your Spirit so that we do not respond from such places in us but are able to find our way to a higher love. And in our response from love may your Spirit also work in the other so that we find our way to a better way of treating and engaging one another. Grant us patience in all our dealings, trusting that doors will better open this way and we will be better heard. Grant us comfort in our sorrow and a capacity to sit with others in their time

of sorrow. Soothe and heal our spirits, O God, and raise us up to be worthy of all the grace you show us as we are able to open our hearts to receive it. In Jesus' name; Amen.