

# The Book of Proverbs and Relational Conflicts

How do we heal a hurting relationship? How do we prevent a disagreement or misunderstanding from turning into a painful conflict; potentially compromising a close friendship? Have you ever stepped back, evaluated a broken relationship, and asked, "How in the world did it come to this?"

The book of Proverbs gives us not only great relational insight, but also wisdom from the One who created us for vital, life-giving relationships. Proverbs 10:18, in particular, reveals how friendships can so quickly be broken. *"He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool."* This proverb assumes that someone has hurt, disappointed, or failed another person. The recipient obviously feels the sting of the offense. This proverb applies to us when someone has done something injurious to us. How should we respond to someone's offense against us?

If we are wise in love, we will confront the friend who has offended us. We will move beyond the painful incident; potentially with an even deeper friendship as a result. But, as the proverb says, quite often this is not the way we react to another's offense against us. We are offended and we remain offended. Instead of addressing our pain, we conceal it. The seed of hatred or ill-will remains present in our hearts. Instead of addressing it honestly, we choose denial, - *"He who conceals his hatred has lying lips..."* (10:18).

And yet in the end, our policy of concealment betrays us. Our negative feelings toward the one who offended us eventually seep out. We spread slander toward our offender. We do not lie about them, we simply rejoice in giving or receiving a negative report about them. At one time, we delighted in a good report about our friend. But now in our heart of hearts, we rejoice to hear negative reports.

The consequence of our ill-will, concealment, and slander is that we become foolish - *"...whoever spreads slander is a fool"* (10:18). A fool in the Bible is not an ignorant or stupid person. A Fool is a person who participates in destructive behavior. We become an instrument of destruction through our actions or apathy toward others. We may seek to destroy people *with* our words or by *our lack of* words.

Proverbs has just given us a great analysis of a broken relationship. Proverbs also gives us insight into dealing with the pain of conflict.

**First, we must resist derision.** *"A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue."* (Prov. 11:12) Derision means to look down on someone. Think about it this way: if ill-will and slander are the seeds which produce a harvest of relational destruction, derision is the soil in which the seeds grow. Derision enables us to maintain or justify our negative feelings. We begin to look at the person differently. When I was growing up, many people read the newspaper, not for the sports page, or the crossword puzzles, but for the cartoons. You could always tell whether or not a cartoonist liked his character because a cartoon was a caricature of a person. If a cartoonist did not like his character, he would magnify the character's weakness or distort his most distinguishing feature. So it is with derision. It diminishes people into their failures or their wrongs against us. I have seen long-time friendships destroyed over one failure. The reason was that the friend who was hurt or offended began to filter their feelings toward their once close friend through the grid of ill-will. Such derision serves as self justification for negative feelings. It is the soil in which the seeds of ill-will and slander grow.

**Secondly, we must reject revenge.** *"Do not say, 'I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll pay that man back for what he did.'" (Prov. 24:29)* The language of this proverb is financial, but the concept of "payback" certainly applies to relationships. We want to make someone liable. We will not rest until someone pays. Simply put; we seek revenge.

The seeds of relational destruction are ill-will and slander. The soil in which these seeds grow is derision. The water that enables the seeds of ill-will and slander to grow in the soil of derision is **mental replay**. We mentally nurse and rehearse what people have done to us. Strangely in the short-term, revengeful replay might empower us or even make us feel better. We might actually enjoy making others pay by our mental replay. It is our passive way of exacting revenge. However, in the long term it will destroy us.

**Forgiveness** often begins by choosing to turn off the replay button. Forgiveness may or may not be accompanied by the actual feelings of forgiveness. Forgiveness, at least in its inception, is an act of the will. We work at not rehearsing the offenses of others toward us. We battle in the Lord's strength with the thoughts of revenge and feelings of resentment.

As your pastor, I know that not rehearsing but instead choosing to forgive is hard. But what are our options? I suggest that there are only two. One option is revenge which will reap a harvest of destruction in our soul and in our relationships. The seeds of ill-will in the soil of derision watered by replay will produce the fruit of a relentless desire for revenge and culminate in a harvest of foolish destruction.

The second option is forgiveness. Forgiveness will produce the fruits of humility, grace, and healing. Forgiveness is not a simple matter; it is often one of our great spiritual battles. However, God can enable us to redeem the principle of *replay*, so

that instead of replaying the offenses against us, we choose to replay God's story of the Cross. *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Rom. 5:8) *"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."* (Col. 3:13)

Finally, **repay evil with good.** *"If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you."* (Prov. 25:21-22) One day, justice will come. Forgiveness frees us from the role of "judge" which we are not equipped to play. Paul quotes this proverb reminding all of us who have been hurt, offended, disappointed, injured, or failed. *"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good."* (Rom 12:19, 21) Such is the power and freedom of the gospel of the Cross at work in us.

Great Peace in the Lord

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