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Proverbs 3:27-35

Fifth Message

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# THE WISDOM OF LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR

Last week I said I was a big fan of golf. Today I confess to being a big fan of sports in general, especially our local teams. Around this time of year I become a bit disillusioned with the world of sports, however. Football stars are signing contracts for such huge amounts of money, I have a difficult time even comprehending it; and my baseball loyalties are divided as players are traded from team to team. I find myself cheering for players I once rooted against, because suddenly they are members of my team. I'm not alone in saying that sports fans put up with this because we want the best players. We want to have winning teams, and we will pay higher admission prices and cheer them on as long as they win. We love them because they make us feel good by winning.

This kind of self-serving love is not unique to sports. It is the kind of love that says, "I love you for what I can get from you," or "I love you for what you can do for me." This attitude is clearly reflected in the following classified advertisement that appeared in a rural New York newspaper: "Farmer, age 38, wishes to meet woman about 30 who owns tractor. Please enclose picture of tractor." This is the self-serving attitude toward our neighbor that God warned the nation of Israel against in Leviticus 19; and it is the same attitude the wise father is instructing his son against in the last section of Proverbs chapter 3.

In our last study we saw the father instructing his son on how to live out the first and greatest commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Today he instructs him on how to live out the second greatest commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The Apostle Paul sees this commandment as the summation of a large portion of the law, as he wrote in Romans 13: 8-10: "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law."

Unselfishly loving our neighbor is a crucial part of what it means to be God's holy people.

Now, in Proverbs 3, the father instructs his son on how to love his neighbor by first telling him how to relate to a neighbor in need. Chapter 3, verses 27-28:

**Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,  
When it is in your power to do it.  
Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come back,  
And tomorrow I will give it,"  
When you have it with you. (Prov 3:27-28 NASB)**

The father says that a wise and loving neighbor does not take advantage of his fellow neighbor's need. He does not hoard his wealth, he shares it. We are to be generous, not selfish.

The Hebrew word translated "good" is a very broad word. In this context it means "benefit." We are not to withhold anything that is beneficial from those to whom it is due. More literally translated, the entire phrase is saying: "do not withhold good from its owner." The benefit that is within our power to do is not really our own, it belongs to the one who is in need of it.

As we saw last week in the opening twelve verses of this chapter, our resources are not our own, they are gifts from our Heavenly Father, entrusted to us to honor him by helping those in physical, emotional, and spiritual need.

There are two attitudes we can adopt towards life. We can think we are entitled to things and trample on others to get or keep what we believe is rightfully ours; or we can believe that all we have is a gift from God who entrusts us with resources and opportunities to share with people in need. D. L. Moody said: "Life is simply a stewardship, not ownership." We must give account for what is entrusted to us.

We live in a very affluent place, surrounded by material things that demand our attention. But we must see these for what they are, and that is, tools to be used to express our love for God and for others. With such wealth all around us we must be careful not to allow our possessions to possess us.

The tension between focusing on the spiritual and eternal versus the physical and temporal is poignantly illustrated by Scott Wesley Brown in the song he simply titled *Things*:

Things upon the mantle  
Things on every shelf  
Things that others gave me  
Things I gave myself  
Things I've stored in boxes  
That don't mean much anymore  
Old magazines and memories  
Behind the attic door.  
  
Things on hooks and hangers  
Things on ropes and rings  
Things I guard that blind me to  
The pettiness of things  
Am I like the rich young ruler  
Ruled by all I own  
If Jesus came and asked me  
Could I leave them all alone?  
  
Oh Lord, I look to heaven  
Beyond the veil of time  
To gain eternal insight  
That nothing's really mine  
And to only ask for daily bread  
And all contentment brings  
To find freedom as Your servant  
In the midst of all these things.

For discarded in the junk-yards,  
Rusting in the rain,  
Lie things that took the finest years  
Of lifetimes to obtain  
And whistling through the tombstones  
The hollow breezes sing  
A song of dreams surrendered to  
The tyranny of things.

Material things are not to be the believer's priority. Above all, God is our first priority, and loving people in his name comes together with that. We are to use whatever we have to love others.

In verse 28, the father goes on to say that this good we have that our neighbor can benefit from is to be given to him promptly. He instructs: "do not say to your neighbor, 'Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give it,' when you have it with you." When we have the resources to help someone who has a need, we are not to stall or delay or procrastinate, but do it immediately. As the saying goes: "Help which is long on the road is no help at all." When someone asks us for help we are not to say "Maybe some other time," or "Ask me next week." We are to give quickly so as not to cause further embarrassment. Delay is inconsiderate and unjust.

Oftentimes delay is a cover for selfishness. We secretly hope that the matter will be forgotten, dropped, or taken up by someone else. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, certain of the characters ignore a man in need, but there is one who proves to be a loving neighbor:

**"On one occasion, a certain lawyer stood up and put Jesus to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered and said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"**

Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

**"And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same." (Luke 10:30-37)**

Here Jesus reminds us that our neighbor is not necessarily the person next door, he is the next person in our path who has a need we can meet. We are not to be concerned so much with discerning who is or is not our neighbor. Our task is to focus on being a loving and merciful neighbor who promptly helps anyone who has a need and

who has been placed before us. And our love should not discriminate against any race, religion, color, social status, age, sexual preference, or political ideology.

Is there ever a time when it is right to say no to someone? Obviously we can never meet all the needs presented before us, so we must be wise and discerning in deciding which needs to meet. Later, the father will give his son two guidelines to help him know when to say no. First, he must avoid going into debt; and second, he warns him not to contribute to the leech or the sluggard. It is clear that we are not to go into debt to meet the need of another, and we are not to financially help those who can work but choose to live off the generosity of others. Contributing to them only reinforces their sinful habits. But, to all others we may give, and give freely and generously as the Lord directs.

In chapter 11 we see the father instructing his son that not only should he respond to the petition of his neighbors, he is to diligently seek out opportunities to benefit them. Proverbs 11:24:

**There is one who scatters, yet increases all the more,  
And there is one who withholds what is justly due, but it results  
in want.**

**The generous man will be prosperous,  
And he who waters will himself be watered.  
He who withholds grain, the people will curse him,  
But blessing will be on the head of him who sells it.  
He who diligently seeks good will find favor,  
But he who searches after evil, it will come to him. (Prov 11:24-27)**

Are we diligently seeking ways to benefit others? I strongly believe that part of this search involves getting to know our neighbors. Loving people can be scary, of course, because that demands being involved in their lives, asking the hard questions, and going the extra mile. Love is risky.

Gary Inrig in his book *Quality Friendship* puts it well: "All true love involves risk. It makes us vulnerable to being hurt by others as we give ourselves away, and we become vulnerable to hurt with them when they hurt. But without risk, life itself withers away. Without risks, there can be no victories, no growth, no positive achievements. Consider the turtle, he only makes progress when he sticks his neck out. Not to care and not to risk is also not to mature and not to rejoice."

Risk-taking is what we were created for. We were not designed to live safe and sanitized lives. Ephesians 2:10 cries out to us: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Doing good works is not just a nice concept, it is what we are here for.

Initially we tend to think of doing good only in financial terms. But the scriptures are clear that there are many ways to care for others that require little or no money at all, like inviting social outcasts into our homes and sharing meals with them. Our loving presence can be powerful as we visit orphans and widows in their distress and prisoners and the sick in their time of need. Even our words are powerful in bringing good to others. With well chosen words we can lift a burden or soothe a sorrow, encourage, correct, instruct, and spiritually enlighten others.

A recent incident brought home to me the power of doing good. About a month ago I was in dire straits. My son's birthday was a few weeks away and I was desperate to prepare a safe playground area and build a play structure for him before his birthday. I have never

been very good at asking for help, and as a result I have often missed the joy of allowing others to minister to me.

But one day, with very little encouragement on my part, a group of High School boys came to my house and worked hard all day in the hot sun digging a ditch, using shovels and picks. They would not let me pay them; and rather than letting me treat them to lunch, they bought me lunch. Because of their help and the help of a few others from this body I was able to have the entire play area and structure ready for Evan's party. Every day as I look into my back yard and see the joy on my children's faces as they play, it is visible and tangible evidence of the overwhelming love of others for me and my family.

There are as many ways to love as there are people who love and people with needs. Instead of trying to give you a list of ways to benefit others, I am asking you to pray that God will show you who to love and how to love those in need around you. This text forces us to pray to have the Lord open our eyes to see the people who need our love, to see the good works he has prepared for us to walk in.

Many of you are already involved in ministering to those in need. I would like to encourage you by echoing the words of Paul to the Galatians: "And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all men" (Gal 6:9-10).

So here in verses 28-29 we find that loving our neighbor begins with seeing their need, and instead of taking advantage of them, we bless them and benefit them.

The father now continues his discussion with his son on how to be a loving neighbor, in verses 29-30:

**Do not devise harm against your neighbor,  
While he lives in security beside you.  
Do not contend with a man without cause,  
If he has done you no harm. (3:29-30)**

His second exhortation is that a loving neighbor does not take advantage of his fellow neighbor's trust and innocence. A loving neighbor does not victimize.

Who is easily taken advantage of because they trust us? Is it our employer who will never know we make long-distance personal phone calls from our desk at work? Is it the restaurant owner down the street who will never know if we paid for that refill at the soda machine? Is it our neighbor who loans us a roto-tiller that we never refill with gas? Is it our spouse whom we don't tell everywhere we've been? Is it our customer who does not really know that the product we sold them is at best useless, and at worst harmful to them?

The harm we can cause our neighbor may not be merely economic, but social too. Proverbs 11:9 reminds us: "With his mouth the godless man destroys his neighbor." We may not contend with others in a court of law, but what about in the court of public opinion? What kind of words do we use when we talk about others? What do we say about them when they're not around? Do we slander them or gossip about them? Do we tear them down in order to build ourselves up?

As loving neighbors we are to work at building a loving community. We should be peacemakers, not troublemakers. We should seek to help restore people, not expose them.

So in these first four verses we see that as a loving neighbor we are not only to be eager to bring benefit to others, we are also to be careful not to cause harm to them.

The first two exhortations concern how to relate to others who are passive in their relationship to us, the needy and innocent. But how are we to relate to those who actively pursue an evil way of life? The father addresses this question in verses 31-35.

**Do not envy a man of violence,  
And do not choose any of his ways.  
For the crooked man is an abomination to the Lord;  
But He is intimate with the upright.  
The curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked,  
But He blesses the dwelling of the righteous.  
Though He scoffs at the scoffers,  
Yet he gives grace to the afflicted.  
The wise will inherit honor,  
But fools display dishonor. (3:31-35)**

The father tells his son that a loving neighbor does not envy or emulate a man whose ways are contrary to the way of the Lord. Proverbs 16:29 shows that the father is aware that "a man of violence entices his neighbor, and leads him in a way that is not good." So he is giving his son ample warning not to be led unaware by his evil neighbor down a path that will cause him and his family great sorrow.

The first thing he is told is: "Do not envy a man of violence, and do not choose his ways."

Whom do we envy? People who seem to be getting ahead in life? Those who seem to have freedom, fortune, and fame? We are to be careful here, because emulation is just one small step from envy. As soon as we start to envy someone we desire to have what they have, and so we mimic their values and actions. But this is a dangerous, slippery slope.

We must choose: Will our relationship with God be intimate or adversarial? In these verses we are given four reasons not to envy or choose the way of those who do not love the Lord or their neighbor.

The first reason is this: "The crooked man is an abomination to the Lord, but He is intimate with the upright" (verse 32). Proverbs 2:12-15 describes a crooked man in these terms:

**...the man who speaks perverse things;  
From those who leave the paths of uprightness,  
To walk in the ways of darkness;  
Who delight in doing evil,  
And rejoice in the perversity of evil;  
Whose paths are crooked,  
And who are devious in their ways. (Prov 2:12b-15)**

The Lord detests perverse men; he wants their devious ways far from him. But he is intimate with the upright. The picture is that of intimate friends counseling one another. The upright have the ear of God at any time; they are near and dear to him.

This is the kind of intimate relationship spoken of in Psalm 25:14, "The Lord confides in those who fear Him, and He makes His covenant known to them." Likewise John 14:23: "And Jesus answered and said to him, 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him.'"

The second reason is because "The curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the dwelling of the righteous" (verse 33). A curse is not like a magic spell or evil voodoo hex, but

a visitation of God's judgment upon those whose chief aim is to do evil and hurt others.

Proverbs 6:12-19 further describes this kind of wicked man:

**A worthless person, a wicked man,  
Is the one who walks with a false mouth,  
Who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet,  
Who points with his fingers;  
Who with perversity in his heart devises evil continually,  
Who spreads strife.  
Therefore his calamity will come suddenly;  
Instantly he will be broken, and there will be no healing.  
There are six things which the Lord hates,  
Yes seven which are an abomination to Him:  
Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,  
And hands that shed innocent blood,  
A heart that devises wicked plans,  
Feet that run rapidly to evil,  
A false witness who utters lies,  
And one who spreads strife among brothers. (Prov 6:12-19)**

God's judgment is upon such a person, but his blessing is upon the righteous. God bestows a fruitful and abundant life on those whose thoughts, attitudes, and actions conform to his holiness.

Here is the third reason: "Though He scoffs at the scoffers, yet He gives grace to the afflicted" (verse 34). The Lord laughs at the pride of scoffers, but he helps the humble. As James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 put it: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

And fourth: "The wise will inherit honor, but fools will display dishonor" (verse 35). The wise will be given esteem and social significance, but fools will end up in public shame.

Psalms 84:11-12 has this wonderful promise for those who walk uprightly: "For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord gives grace and glory; no good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, how blessed is the man who trusts in Thee!" In the New Testament, Galatians 6:7-9 has this to say about the consequences of foolish choices: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life."

The words "curse," "abomination," and "scorn" seem harsh, especially if they are quoted as coming from God. God does not desire to hurt anyone, but a life lived contrary to him will reap woeful consequences. The point is, we are to flee God's curse and find his blessings. We are to pursue righteousness and flee from wickedness.

There is a progression here for the spiritual state of the two men who are contrasted and the resulting curse/blessing they receive. It begins with the private soul/heart ("intimacy"); moves to the family/habitation ("dwelling"); and then to the public courtyard ("honor"). We are shown that what is in the heart of a man is eventually made public by his actions; and that the consequences from the Lord are also public.

We are warned that though evil men may appear to be successful and found favor with God, they are not. They may have the perishable riches of this world, but they are not partakers of God's eternal riches. The wicked may look like they have freedom, fortune, and fame, but their ultimate end is shame and eternal death.

This would be the fate of all of us, without exception, had it not been for Jesus Christ. Left to ourselves, we could never fulfill the law completely. We could never utterly love God and our neighbor. Ephesians 2:8-9 reminds us that all the good works in the world cannot help us earn salvation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast." While I have made many references to good works this morning, we must freely acknowledge that we do not perform good works to earn our salvation, we do them *because* of our salvation.

The communion table is a great reminder that Jesus Christ is the only perfect loving neighbor. He is the only one who never withheld good or harmed another; and we are the desperate needy neighbor in need of mercy. In taking communion together we proclaim our Lord's death until he returns. We celebrate the memory of Jesus' sacrifice for sinners for desperately needy neighbors like ourselves. Let us remember that because of his love for us we are able to love others in return.

The cross is the eternal symbol of love that risks and hurts and makes itself vulnerable. It is only when we truly believe and trust in God's love for us, that we are then able, by his Spirit, to love others freely and generously.

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