

Proverbs 24-10-16b

We resume our study here in Proverbs chapter 15, such a helpful and practical section. I don't think any of us would suggest that we couldn't do better when it comes to speaking when there's a little bit of stress or the opportunity to fail. It isn't pleasantries, it's not light banter, there's something serious that we're discussing and so often those conversations can turn in a direction that strains our relationships or leaves us the opportunity to do damage with our tongue, with our lips, with our mouth.

But there's a very interesting specificity to this. We've seen the general application of verse one and verse two, but remembering that there is a symmetry here, look at what happens when we get to verse five. This is the outside bracket with verse one.

So in general, and as you lead into this section, we say there is any number of contexts, there are any number, where a soft answer is going to be better than grievous words. But there is a specific case that is now going to come into focus as we close this unit. Look at verse five.

It's very clear when you look at verse two and verse four. They just naturally go together. The tongue of the wise using knowledge rightly and the wholesome tongue that is a tree of life.

The tree of life for us is the word of God. It is the living water of the river. There are so many wonderful metaphors of the word of God, but the tree of life, the life that is in Christ Jesus comes to us through the word and through the spirit.

And so verse two and verse four are so easy to see that they connect. And you have the Lord who is watching and is intently observing evil and good. But then you have verse one, the soft answer turning away wrath.

And now look at verse five, a fool despises his father's instruction, but he who receives correction is prudent. So here is a specific case where something is being said and there is the opportunity to answer. There is an issue that is being raised.

Is it going to result in grievous words? And when a father is correcting his son, the son has an option here. Is he going to respond with humility, with acknowledgement, with an expression of a desire to do better? I appreciate you pointing this out. I will take that on board.

I will do what I can to improve in that area. Or am I going to be defensive? Am I going to deflect? Am I going to distract? Am I going to try to strike out or strike back at the father who is offering this instruction? This happens even in the large sense in progressive Christianity today. Postmodern Christianity looks at portions of the Bible that give instruction and people don't like the instruction.

And so they attack the scripture and say, well, that's not scripture. That's not God speaking. That's a poor, benighted Hebrew feeling after God and failing and giving his version of God.

And it's not inspired. It isn't for us. It doesn't apply.

And these are grievous words and they are divisive. They are deceptive. They play into the end.

This is like being a traitor and playing into the enemy's hands to be an agent of obstruction within your own ranks is a terrible thing. But put verse one and verse five together and what do you get? There is the father's instruction. If you're foolish, you're going to despise it.

And what will your reaction be? If you despise it, you're going to respond to it with grievous words and you will anger the father who is trying to help you. You will spark anger by refusing the counsel and refusing the correction. And we've seen this over and over.

The first 10 chapters of Proverbs were filled with my son exhortations. If you will receive my words in chapter two, hide my commandments with you so that you incline your ear and you apply your heart and so on. Those first several verses of chapter two, my son, you've got to receive my word and hide my commandments with you.

This is an earthly father speaking to his son. It is David speaking to Solomon. It is also our heavenly father speaking to us.

And if we push back, if we deflect, if we reject, if we say, well, that's not me, I don't need that. And we don't have the humility to acknowledge that we didn't really do the best. We're not responding with a soft answer.

And if we reject God's counsel, if we reject divine truth, as it applies to us, we will incur wrath, God's wrath. The wrath of God is revealed from heaven. Go to Romans chapter one against those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, who push back and say this whole notion that certain things are an abomination.

By the way, we are going to have abomination coming up in the very next section twice. And the notion that there's nothing that is abominable in God's sight is ludicrous. But there's people who push this idea that God is all love, no wrath.

He's all acceptance, no judgment. And this cardboard cutout, two-dimensional God made in the image of, not even in the image of man, but in the image of an ideal that man wishes he could be, but is not, is so destructive, so harmful. And to pass it on to children who imbibe this fantasy and are going to be utterly unprepared for life, much less for the opportunities and the challenges that it contains, and ultimately standing at the

judgment, uninstructed, unready, unprepared, it's just tragic.

You can't do worse than to not train up a child, to not inculcate, to not be the father saying, my son, receive my words, hide my commandments with you, incline your ear, lift up your heart, lift up your voice, seek it as silver, search for it as for hidden treasure. Again, quoting from chapter two. But here, a fool despises his father's instruction.

And that is nowhere more true than us with our heavenly father, to not take it seriously, to not reflect on it and endeavor to implement it, to plow it into the soil of our soul in a way that will produce a fruitful crop, to turn it aside, to try to forget about it and pretend it wasn't said. He who receives correction is prudent. This is one of the hardest things, to receive correction.

Someone says, you know, you've got kind of a failure going on here. There was something that needed to be done and it wasn't done. You did something that you should not have done.

You failed to take something into account. No one likes correction. Remember in the New Testament, no correction seems like a good thing, but whom the Lord loves, he chastens.

He scourges every son whom he receives. And correction afterwards yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness, righteousness that creates peace, peace in our soul, peace with others. Blessed are the peacemakers.

You want to know how to make peace? Receive correction, because correction, when it is received, yields the fruit of peace, peaceable fruit of righteousness. So this tying back to verse one is suggested to us by this beautiful symmetry that we've observed over and over again in Proverbs. And this is a wonderful five verse section centered on the Lord who is keeping track.

If you remember that the Lord is watching, he is keeping watch over what is good and what is evil in our lives, in our speech, in our consideration for others, in our reception or deflection of correction. This is motivation, looking ahead. What will God's evaluation be? What will happen at the judgment seat of Christ? How attentive were we to the instruction that has come to us from our heavenly Father? The word of God is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness.

So we want to be prudent and not a fool who despise, doesn't quite catch the meaning here. This is to treat lightly or refuse to recognize its importance. You just brush it away.

It's a light thing. It's no big deal. Well, this brings us to a new section that begins in verse six.

And looking at the previous section, what was the marker? How did we know where the center of that unit was? It was pretty easy to see that there was a focus on the Lord. And

on each side of that, there were symmetrical references to the tongue, the tongue of the wise or a wholesome tongue. And the Lord was at the center.

If you just breeze down through here, let's read this next section. In the house of the righteous, there is much treasure, but in the revenue of the wicked is trouble. Okay, I need to look at that a little more closely.

It sounds like a bit of a tautology. The lips of the wise disperse knowledge, but the heart of the fool does not do so. I had a hard time reading that because I've scratched out all of the italics, and it makes a lot more sense.

We'll come back to that. Verse eight, the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord. Abomination to the Lord.

You can go all the way back to Cain. Cain's sacrifice was not accepted, and it has never been thus. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.

He will not have respect to what I attempt to bring to him. The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight. How did we begin this evening? What is the key to preparing our hearts so that we don't have a hair-triggered tongue? What's the key? Prayer, evening and morning and at noon.

Psalms 55, 17, write it in the margin. The prayer of the upright. God delights in this.

He loves to hear us coming before him, desiring to please him, asking for grace, asking for strength, wanting to prepare our hearts so that we will have the divine power to control our tongue, to control our attitude, to have a heart that doesn't react in a destructive way. Now look at verse nine. The way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord.

Wow, two verses in a row talking about what is an abomination to the Lord. The first abomination is the sacrifice of the wicked. This is when the wicked is trying to please God in an unauthorized way, in a way that God did not specify.

Bringing strange fire, bringing a tossed salad instead of a blood offering, as Cain did. Here, the way of the wicked, it's not just when he tries to approach God in a faulty way, but his entire way, his entire life. The way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but he loves him who follows righteousness.

You can't be treading the way of sinners. You think about Psalm 1, blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly. He doesn't stand in the way of sinners.

He doesn't sit in the seat of the scornful. He delights in the law of the Lord and reflects on it, meditates on it day and night. He's going to be a tree planted by the rivers of water, bringing forth his fruit in his season, a tree of life.

The wicked are not so. They're like the chaff, the wind blows away. It will not see good when it comes and so on.

The way of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord. Robert Alter translates this in verse 9 as the Lord's loathing. What is abominable is that which is loathsome.

And so he translates these verses, the wicked's sacrifice is the Lord's loathing. He doesn't just refuse to accept it. He doesn't say close, but no cigar.

That was pretty good, but not quite good enough. God loathes something that is an abomination, is hateful. The wicked's sacrifice is the Lord's loathing, but the prayer of the upright is pleasure.

They are polar opposites. They are as far from each other as you can get. And then in verse 9, the Lord's loathing is the way of the wicked man, but he loves the pursuer of righteousness.

And you can see that by preserving the Hebrew word order here, Robert Alter is trying to show that the Lord's loathing is inside this bracket. So the wicked's sacrifice is the Lord's loathing. The Lord's loathing is the way of the wicked man, but the prayer of the upright is pleasure.

He loves the pursuer of righteousness. And there's a lot going on poetically and structurally in these two verses, but we had a unit where the Lord watching good and evil was at the center. Now we've got this double reference to the Lord that is going to be at the center.

So what does it tell us? Just looking at it without regard to structure, you could say, well, I am unsurprised that God doesn't accept a sacrifice from a wicked person. But if you stop and think about it, there are people who try to appease or to bribe their way, to try to offer a gift or to get someone on their side by offering something in many cases, they can't even deliver. Am I talking politically? I'm going to say no, but there are certainly applications in the political realm as we ramp up on this election season.

There have ever been promises made by politicians and it is a rather shameless attempt to get someone on their side, not by merit, not by character, not by the substance and the effectiveness of policy, but here's what's in it for you. Vote for me and there will be a chicken in every pot. There will be legalized this and free that.

And this is a sign that there is wickedness behind it. We saw that the heart generates what comes out of the mouth in the preceding section. Notice here that the sacrifice of the wicked, they are trying to bring a gift that will appease God, that will get God on their side, but their way is wicked.

And the way of the wicked is an abomination. Therefore, the sacrifice of the wicked is an

abomination. You can't have a wicked way and have any sacrifice be acceptable.

Your way is wicked, your sacrifice is an abomination because your way is an abomination. And there's no gift you can give. I've used this illustration a few times over the years, but if you get angry because your neighbor's dog is barking and you managed to find a way to run over that dog in the street, and your neighbor is understandably upset and angry that you've killed his dog, and you go over there and offer him a watch, how acceptable is this gift going to be? You kill my dog and now you're offering me a watch? What kind of person are you? How could you possibly think that this would gloss over and fix the problem? I don't care if it's a Rolex.

You murdered my dog. We have an irreconcilable rift and there's no gift you can bring me that's going to heal it because your way is wicked. This is God's attitude toward the wicked.

There is no amount of, Lord, Lord, in your name did I not do this, that is going to heal this rift and this breach. So we have this double reference to what is an abomination in God's sight. And we saw earlier that the Lord is keeping watch on the evil and the good.

His eyes are everywhere. And when he sees wickedness, it is loathsome to him. And anyone who tries to approach him, who has adopted and is maintaining and practicing wickedness, is going to be equally loathsome.

Well, look at what comes on the other side of this. If we just sort of assume for the sake of argument that verses eight and nine are at the center, we would expect what is on each side to correspond. So what does verse seven say again? The lips of the wise disperse knowledge, but the heart of the fool does not do so.

And you see there's a lot of italics there. They struggle to figure out what this line means. I will unscramble this for you.

Scratch out everything in italics and insert, and you can scratch out the word not. Not is there, but it's not in the right place. Not is not where it should be.

Not should come as the second word in the sentence. The lips of the wise disperse knowledge, but not to the heart of the fool. You see it? The lips of the wise are speaking truth.

They're dispensing knowledge. If you listen to the wise, this is going to be good for you. But no matter how much wisdom the lips of wise speak, no matter how much knowledge they communicate, it doesn't land in the heart of a fool.

It is dispensed, but it doesn't penetrate. It doesn't sink in. It isn't seed planted into the soil of the heart of a fool.

So the easy way to straighten this verse out, the lips of the wise disperse knowledge, but not to the heart of a fool. You can talk yourself blue in the face with wisdom and knowledge, and the heart of a fool is not going to receive it. Don't waste your breath.

It is only the one who is seeking who is going to find. It is only the one who is knocking for whom it is going to be opened. It is only the one asking that is going to receive.

Ask, seek, knock. You will receive. It will be opened.

You will find. The lips of the wise disperse knowledge, but not to the heart of a fool. That's what precedes these two references to what is loathsome to the Lord.

Now look at the other side. Remember how the soft answer, turning away wrath, was symmetrical with despising instruction? Well, the soft answer, turning away wrath, is symmetrical with despising instruction and not receiving correction. Remember that, verse 1 and verse 5? Notice the correspondence here, on each side of what is loathsome to the Lord.

The lips of the wise disperse knowledge, but the heart of a fool is not going to receive it. And look at verse 10. Harsh discipline is for him who forsakes the way.

You can scratch out, and he who hates correction will die. That goes back up to verse 7. These lips of the wise that are dispersing knowledge, the whole purpose of listening to knowledge and heeding wisdom is to be corrected by it, to improve, to do better, to stop failing, and to be more fruitful and more productive and more prepared for service and function in the plan of God now and in the ages to come, right? That's what knowledge is for. Knowledge that sits on the shelf is something that can only really puff up.

It has to result in love. It has to result in something that makes a difference, that results in change. So you get so much more benefit out of these verses when you see what they are linked to.

The lips of the wise disperse knowledge, unless you're a fool. It's not going to penetrate your heart. And harsh discipline is aimed at him who has forsaken the way.

You've got to change your mind and get back on the way. Remember they used to call the early Christians were those who followed the way? Jesus said, I am the way. So him who forsakes the way, the right way, the way of righteousness, the way of wisdom, the way that responds to correction and gains wisdom and knowledge and prudence and so on, harsh discipline is coming.

If you don't receive the instruction, if you've got the heart of a fool and the wisdom and knowledge don't penetrate, harsh discipline is coming your way. Harsh discipline is for him who forsakes the way and he who hates correction. If you still don't respond when that heart, first of all, it's words.

These are words of wisdom. The lips of the wise are dispersing knowledge. Respond to the message.

If you've got a foolish heart and it doesn't penetrate, harsh discipline is going to follow. So respond to the harsh discipline. But if you hate that correction, you didn't like it when it was spoken, and you certainly don't like it when it comes in harsher discipline, you're going to die.

This is the basis for the biblical doctrine of the sin unto death. You can be a believer and you don't respond to the spoken correction and rebuke and instruction in righteousness, the doctrine, you don't respond. So God sends discipline and it becomes increasingly harsh and you still hate correction, you're going to die.

That's what this scripture says. Now this can be metaphorical in the sense that your spiritual life is utterly fruitless. You are the field that it talks about in Hebrews where the rain comes many times upon it and it brings up only thorns and thistles and it is fit for burning and near to a curse.

That is a kind of death. Lack of relationship with God that produces any sort of benefit or blessing or fruitfulness. You are saved but you are fallen from grace, you're an enemy of the cross, and so on.

You're playing for the other team. You're a traitor in the midst. It's a horrific prospect.

So these symmetries shed so much light on the truths that are in each of these verses. Look at verse 7 and look at verse 10. It makes a difference.

We need to be humble enough to respond to correction. Preferably when we hear it. It's in the scriptures.

It comes to our attention in Bible class and we reflect, we examine ourselves. Am I in the faith? Lord, purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me, I'll be whiter than snow.

Try me, see if there be any wicked way in me. Show me my secret faults. I want to be cleansed.

I want to be productive. I want to respond to the correction that comes from your word. I don't want to go to the next level of harsh discipline.

And if we don't respond to harsh discipline, if we don't wake up when God smacks us with two by four guidance, you're going to die. That's it. It's over.

God is not going to continually expend grace and send good money after bad, as we say. That's what verse 10 means. Then in verse 11, we have another reference to the Lord.

Sheol and Abaddon, hell and destruction. Sheol and Abaddon are before the Lord. How much more the hearts of the sons of men.

Do you see how this connects back to verse three? The eyes of the Lord are in every place. Even Sheol and Abaddon are under his gaze. They are before him.

How much more so? Do you think that you can have hidden ideas, hidden motives in your heart and God's not going to be aware? Not going to happen. If Sheol and Abaddon are under his gaze, there is no hiding place. There's a guy named Jace Everett.

He put out a song and it's called, There's No Place to Hide Down Here. And he rehearses in lyric form, Cain's sin, my brother's blood cries out from the ground and there's no place to hide down here. And there are clanking chains and it's a very graphic representation.

There's just no place to hide down here. And that's the truth of this verse. Do we think we're fooling the Lord? Do we think we're going to put one over on him? Do we think that he won't care or he won't mind if the precious blood of Jesus Christ has been used to purchase us? And we're unresponsive.

We're uninterested. We don't think it's important to be corrected. Hell and destruction are before the Lord.

How much more the hearts of the sons of men? Well, this brings us to verse 12. And this is a new section. This is where we will pick up next time.

We have plenty to chew on here, do we not? It's a very practical, a very convicting set of precepts from God's word. And these Proverbs, once you begin to see that they are meaningful and they are organized to a purpose, spring to life and that hammer is swinging and we hope these rocks are being crushed. Is not my word like a hammer? It breaks the rocks in pieces.

We pray that God will break the rocks in our soul and create soil that will be productive. And if you're like me, I don't want to be 30-fold. I don't want to be 60-fold.

Wouldn't it be great to be a hundred-fold field? Get there and you got the highest score you can get. It doesn't depend on us. It depends on our recourse to God's strength and God's grace.

That's the key. It takes humility. It takes focus.

It takes paying attention to the knowledge that comes from the lips of the wise. And that's what we're getting here. Father, thank you for the powerful way it is presented, the wonderfully effective outcome that results in our souls.

When we reflect on it, when we allow the Holy Spirit to minister it to our hearts, we pray

that as we endeavor to represent the Lord Jesus in this life, that there will be a light on our path from your word that shines brightly and enables us to use it as a lamp to step and stay on the narrow road, to be pleasing in your sight in the time that remains to us in this life. We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.