

PRACTICE A LIFESTYLE OF LOVE AND MERCY

Introduction

I suspect that we all have been guilty of behaving like some young seminary students who were given the assignment of preaching a sermon on the Good Samaritan. When the day came for them to deliver their sermons, unbeknown to them, they were each deliberately delayed on their way to class: each one encountered a person who pretended to be in need. Amazingly, not one of the students stopped to help. They were all so pre-occupied with their sermons about the Good Samaritan that not one of them took the time and effort to be a Good Samaritan. (*Our Daily Bread*, 9/23/94) This account serves to highlight our next topical study from the Book of Proverbs: As Christians, we are called by God to practice a lifestyle of love and mercy like our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

I. Practice a Lifestyle of Love and Mercy, by Extending Forgiveness to Offenders

(Proverbs 10:12; Proverbs 17:9)

Hatred stirs up contentions; but love covers all transgressions. (Prov. 10:12)

Hatred arouses and awakens old contentions that have been put to rest and have fallen asleep; hatred turns loose discord that was securely locked away and forgotten. Hatred refuses to forgive and forget. Hatred nurses the offense, amplifies it, and seeks to stir up the smoldering embers into destructive flames of strife.

But love covers over transgressions, snuffing out the glowing coals of offense before they can be fanned into a blazing fire of strife. To “*cover transgression*” does not mean to minimize it, excuse it, dismiss it; rather, it means to forgive it. Note how this is defined for us in Psalm 32:1, “*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered,*” and also in Psalm 85:2, “*You have forgiven the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins.*”

We must ever be mindful of the Apostle Paul’s exhortation given to the Ephesian church: “*Get rid of all bitterness and rage and anger and clamor and slander, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other just as God by Christ forgave you*” (Eph. 4:31-32.) We must likewise be careful to abide by our Lord’s admonition: “*if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins*” (Matt. 6:14-15.)

He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends. (Prov. 17:9)

The latter part of this proverb may be speaking about the opposite of forgiveness. The offended party refuses to extend forgiveness. On the contrary, he constantly

repeats the matter, dwelling on the offense and bringing it always to the attention of the one who offended him—he constantly holds the offense between himself and the offender until it becomes a stonewall separating the two.

Or, it may be speaking about the abuse of forgiveness. The offending party refuses to repent. On the contrary, he repeats the matter—he continues to practice the same offense until inevitably a barrier is built between the two.

The point of the proverb is this: For there to be true reconciliation there must be both forgiveness and repentance; the offended party must be willing to extend forgiveness and the offending person must be willing to stop engaging in his offending conduct.

What if you, as the offended party, comply with your responsibility to forgive but the offender fails to repent? Like our Lord Jesus Christ, commit your cause to your heavenly Father, rather than taking matters into your own hands: *“When they insulted him, he did not insult them; when he suffered, he did not threaten; rather, he committed himself to him who judges righteously”* (1 Pet. 2:23.) If necessary, follow the way prescribed by our Lord in Scripture and solicit the help of fellow believers:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. ¹⁶But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. (Matt. 18:15-17)

II. Practice a Lifestyle of Love and Mercy, by Combating Evil with Good (Proverbs 25:21-22)

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; ²²by doing so, you will heap burning coals on his head, and Jehovah will reward you. (Prov. 25:21-22)

The LORD commands us to respond to evil with acts of mercy (the enemy as he is presented here is in need,) not acts of revenge:

If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. ⁵If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it. (Ex. 23:4-5)

... love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Lk. 6:35-36)

The inevitable affect of ministering mercy to the offender will be the conviction of his conscience, which may be the greatest kindness of all, for it may lead to repentance. Consider the following example of a Christian showing mercy, and the effect such behavior had upon the offending individual:

A young factory worker noticed one day that a valuable tool was missing from his toolbox. Later he recognized it in the toolbox of a fellow employee. The young man was the only Christian in the shop, and he wanted to have a good testimony for Christ. So he went to the man and said, "I see you have one of my tools, but you may keep it if you need it." Then he went on with his work and put the incident out of his mind. During the next two weeks, the person who had taken the tool tried to soothe his conscience. First he offered the young man something of equal value, then he offered to help him on some home projects, and finally he slipped some money into his coat pocket. Eventually, the co-workers became good friends, and the one-time tool thief admitted he couldn't resist the man's kindness. (*Our Daily Bread*, 8/8/94)

Note: For a biblical interpretation of this difficult passage of Proverbs we may consider the incident involving David and Saul as related in 1 Samuel 24,

After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, "David is in the Desert of En Gedi."² So Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel and set out to look for David and his men near the Craggs of the Wild Goats. ³He came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave. ⁴The men said, "This is the day of which Jehovah spoke when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'" ... ⁶David said to his men, "Jehovah forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, Jehovah's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of Jehovah."⁷ With these words David rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul. And Saul left the cave and went his way. ⁸Then David went out of the cave and called out to Saul, "My lord the king!" When Saul looked behind him, David bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground. ⁹He said to Saul, "Why do you listen when men say, 'David is bent on harming you?' ¹⁰This day you have seen with your own eyes how Jehovah delivered you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, 'I will not lift my hand against my master, because he is Jehovah's anointed.' ... ¹²May Jehovah judge between you and me. And may Jehovah avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you..." ¹⁶When David finished saying this, Saul asked, "Is that your voice, David my son?" And he wept aloud. ¹⁷"You are more righteous than I," he said. "You have treated me well, but I have treated you badly... ¹⁹When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed? May Jehovah reward you well for the way you treated me today." (1 Sam. 24:1-4,6-10,12,16-17,19)

III. Practice a Lifestyle of Love and Mercy, by Showing Generosity (Proverbs 28:27)

He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses. (Prov. 28:27)

There is always the fear—the temptation to rationalize—that if I give to the poor I will deprive my family and myself: either the little that I have will be exhausted; or the poor coming to my door will multiply.

Scripture does provide guidelines to assist us in the matter of giving. First, we are not to deprive our family of the basic necessities: *“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”* (1 Tim. 5:8.) Second, we are expected to give according to our income, not beyond our means: *“On the first day of [the week] each of you should set aside a portion of your income, so that no collections be made when I come”* (1 Cor. 16:2.) Third, we are not to subsidize sin with our giving. When the prodigal son left home to squander his inheritance in immoral living, his father did not send him financial aid, *“He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything”* (Lk 15:16;) although his father graciously received him back when he returned home: *“while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him”* (Lk. 15:20.) Fourth, we are not to create a situation of permanent dependency. We are to come to the aid of those who are in need *“Bear one another’s burdens, and by doing so you will fulfill the law of Christ”* (Gal. 6:2;) but we are not to allow our aid to nullify their responsibility and make them habitually dependent. Any aid given is intended to help a man get back to a position where he can once more carry out his own God-given responsibilities: *“each one must bear his own load”* (Gal. 6:5.) Fifth, we are to promote work as the God-ordained way of life: *“even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: If a man will not work, he shall not eat”* (2 Thess. 3:10.)

But the Word of God does command us to practice generosity. We are to do good as we have the opportunity: *“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good works for all men, but especially for those who belong to the family of believers”* (Gal. 6:10.) We are to guard against a callous, selfish spirit:

If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that Jehovah your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother; ⁸rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs... ¹⁰Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this, Jehovah your God will bless you in all your work ... (Deut. 15:7-8,10)

We are to imitate the righteous man: *“He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor, his righteousness endures forever; his horn will be lifted high in honor”* (Psl. 112:9.) Indeed, we are to imitate the Lord Jesus Himself: *“you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich”* (2 Cor. 8:9.) We are to make provision for the needy: *“He who has been stealing must no longer steal; rather, let him labor, doing honorable work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with the one who is in need”* (Eph. 4:28.)

Proverbs 28:27 assures us that when we imitate our Savior and exhibit a generous spirit, He will provide for us. Note, also, Proverbs 19:17, *“He who is kind to the poor lends to Jehovah, and he will reward him for what he has done.”* Furthermore, we must take to heart the warning of Proverbs 21:13, *“If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.”*

IV. Practice a Lifestyle of Love and Mercy, by Defending the Oppressed (Proverbs 24:11-12; Proverbs 29:7)

Rescue those who are being led away to death and hold back those who are ready to be killed. ¹²If you say, “Look! We knew nothing about this!” does not he who evaluates the hearts observe it? Does not he who preserves your soul know it? Will he not repay every man according to what he has done? (Prov. 24:11-12)

Put yourself into the following situation, and ask yourself, “What would I have done?”

I was working in a tourist shop in Estes Park, Colorado. Across the street there were several other shops, a drugstore, and a bar known for its rough crowd. On a certain week every spring the bikers came to town, using the bar as the center for most of their activities. Harley motorcycles lined the streets.

It was a slow day. Most of the bikers had already left town. I was always glad to see these denim-and-leather clad men kick-start their cycles and ride off. Their presence was menacing ...

One biker remained, though I wasn’t aware of him at first. He was hanging out in the bar where he had stabbed a tourist the day before. I remember talking with Dorothy, a young woman who worked in the shop. ... As we talked, we saw the biker emerge from the bar followed by the bartender who owned the place. They were arguing loudly, cursing at one another. It was obvious the biker was drunk.

They yelled again, and then the bartender, a much smaller but heavier man, tackled the biker, pinning the man’s hands behind his back. As they went down, we could hear the biker’s skull crack as it hit the sidewalk. The

bartender pounced on the man's chest and swung his fists back and forth, first the right and then the left, slamming the biker's jaw until it flapped loose, broken on both sides. Then the bartender stood up, shouted a final curse, and returned to his shop. The biker lay bleeding and unconscious on the sidewalk.

Dorothy and I were shocked by what we had just witnessed. I had never seen such brutality before, except on T.V. In a few moments we mustered enough composure to react ... Dorothy ... started across the street to help the biker.

As I and another Christian shop attendant watched, Dorothy raised the man's head to her lap and mopped away the blood. ... Dorothy nursed the biker back to consciousness ...

It is obvious to me that Dorothy responded as Christ would have ... while we born-again believers watched from a safe distance ... Like any good Levite, I had stayed on the safe side of the street. What would you have done? (POWER, 3/11/90)

When we hear of an instance of suffering, injustice, oppression, or when we are actually confronted by such a scene, what happens? We feel overwhelmed, shocked, threatened, frozen. We are tempted to stand aloof, to avoid the scene, to not get involved. We rationalize that it is none of our business. But consider the testimony of Rev. Martin Niemoller, speaking of his experience in Nazi Germany, as related by Charles Colson in *Kingdoms in Conflict*, p.125:

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.

What is Proverbs 24:11-12 teaching us? The LORD knows our hearts. He knows when we are rationalizing and excusing ourselves from our responsibility to stand up for righteousness and exhibit mercy. Furthermore, the LORD holds us responsible and accountable.

What present day applications might there be with regard to this message? Are we taking a stand against such evils as abortion, euthanasia, racism, social injustice?

The righteous takes into account the cause of the poor; the wicked does not have the understanding to know it. (Prov. 29:7)

“The righteous takes into account the cause of the poor;” or, *“a righteous man knows the cause of the poor.”* That is to say, a righteous man has compassion and an active concern and involvement in the cause of the poor, he does not stand aloof, he is sympathetic and understanding; he “feels their pain.” Look at Job’s testimony concerning his treatment of the poor and those suffering from injustice:

I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had no one to assist him. ¹³The man who was destitute blessed me; I made the widow’s heart sing for joy. ¹⁴I put on righteousness as my clothing, and the justice I practiced was like a robe and a turban. ¹⁵I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. ¹⁶I was a father to the needy; I investigated the stranger’s case. ¹⁷I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth. (Job 29:12-17)

But in distinction from the righteous, *“the wicked does not have the understanding to know it.”* A wicked man lacks the moral perception and sensitivity to feel such compassion and exhibit such concern—he *“does not have the understanding to know”* the cause of the poor. Because of his hard heart, he cannot sympathize and identify with the plight of the poor.

Conclusion

The Book of Proverbs teaches us that as Christians we are called by God to practice a lifestyle of love and mercy.

I recall one summer day at the New Jersey shore: the noonday sun was broiling hot, the boardwalk felt like fire under one’s feet. Out on the middle of that boardwalk I saw a black man. He was on his hands and knees, repairing a broken board, the sweat pouring down his face. Over him stood a white man, his foreman. That white man was cursing him and scowling down at him like a plantation boss over his slave.

At the time I didn’t do anything but watch. But I know what I should have done: I should have gone to the nearest refreshment stand, asked for two glasses of ice water, and handed one to the black man and one to the white man. By God’s grace, next time I will.