

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.

---

Would you take a Bible and turn to Proverbs, chapter 25...just two verses this morning, Proverbs 25, verses 21 and 22.

This is our third week looking at these points from Proverbs. So far, we've looked at the dangers of greed and lust – we've seen how living with those sins in our hearts damages our relationship with God, our relationship with others – it even hurts ourselves.

Today, Proverbs tells us, beware of vengeance. Beware of vengeance.

What is vengeance?

An author named James Clark was in a bookstore one day, and he found six copies of a *very boring, 900 page* historical novel on a bargain book table. The book was written by some other author who also happened to be named James Clark. So, Mr. Clark bought all six copies of the book and mailed them to six of his enemies with a note enclosed that said, "I hope you enjoy this book, and that you won't mind the slight reference to you." This is vengeance at work, isn't it?

A woman divorced her husband in a very cruel manner. Months later, she was surprised to get an invitation in the mail to a masquerade party hosted by her

ex-husband and his new wife. Determined to check out the situation, the woman showed up dressed like a scarecrow. The ex-husband's maid then ushered her into the ballroom where everyone else was dressed in formal attire.

This is vengeance.

Vengeance is the desire to settle the score. Vengeance is the desire to get back at someone who has wronged you. Vengeance is the pursuit of revenge for an evil deed done to you.

Vengeance is talked about a lot in Proverbs. Apparently, it was a problem in Solomon's day, although I'm so glad our society has advanced enough to overcome it, aren't you?

A man went to school to be a preacher, worked at that for seven years, then resigned to go back to medical school and become a doctor. When his wife questioned him, he said, "I've found that people don't really want spiritual health. They just want to feel good." But then, after working as a physician for seven years, he again resigned, this time to go to law school. When his wife again questioned him, he said, "You know, I've found that people don't want spiritual health. They don't even want physical health. What people really want is to get even."

How true that is. There seems to be a growing surliness in our world today. Nations and tribes and

people are bristling with sarcasm, law suits, hand guns, nuclear warheads. Many, many people are absolutely at war in their relationships. Husbands against wives, children against parents...we're at war with our next-door neighbors, with our co-workers, maybe even with people at church.

So much of our energy is consumed by licking our wounds and plotting our revenge. We want to hurt back. We want to get even.

Let me ask you this question, "With whom are *you* at war? Who are your enemies? And then, the more important question, how are you treating your enemies?"

You say, "But I'm a Christian. I don't have any enemies."

Please! You do have enemies. You *must* have enemies. Without enemies, a person's Christianity is highly suspect! The reality is, you can't live the truth in this untruthful world and *not* upset some pocket of evil somewhere. Jesus didn't say, "You are the sugar of the earth." He called us "salt!" And salt has a way of stinging, however unintentionally. He called us "light," and light exposes things that would rather stay in darkness. Christians have enemies.

Jesus certainly had enemies. So did Paul and Stephen and Peter and John. In fact, Jesus said in Luke chapter 6, "Woe to you when people speak well of you."

If we are truly living for Christ, the question is not, "Will we have enemies?" The question is, "How will we treat the enemies we have?"

*Proverbs says, "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink."*

We're to treat our enemies well. We're to meet their needs. We're to show them compassion.

Now, that's not to say we're ignore the wrong they've done to us, or to pretend it doesn't exist. We shouldn't necessarily trust them with things precious to us. After all, they are our enemy for good reasons.

But still, we are to treat them with concern and kindness and care.

And lest we think Solomon was off his rocker when he wrote this, we find the same command from Jesus in Matthew chapter 5: "Love your enemies," He says, "...and pray for those who persecute you." The Apostle Paul tells us the same thing in Romans 12, where he quotes this very proverb and then says, "My friends, do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath."

This whole idea is counter-cultural. This is the exact opposite of the way natural men and women think.

Years ago, when the Soviet Premier Khrushchev visited a French cathedral, he remarked to a reporter,

“There is much in Christ that agrees with Communism, but I cannot agree with Christ when he says that when you are hit on the right cheek, turn the left cheek. I believe in another principle. If I am hit on the left cheek, I hit back on the right cheek so hard that the head might fall off.”

God says “No. No vengeance.”

The obvious question, then, is “Why? Why no vengeance? Why be kind to your enemies?”

Verse 22 there: “*In doing this*, (in being kind to your enemy) *you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.*”

Scripture gives us at least three reasons why we’re called to kindness and to beware of vengeance.

First, Scripture says that showing kindness to our enemies is the best way to win them over to us, and, more importantly, to God and to *His* purposes.

If you resent the fact that your boss requires you to bring her a cup of coffee every morning, knock on her door some morning, thirty minutes after you bring the coffee and ask, with a smile, if she wants a re-fill.

Returning evil with good makes people face their own nature. Now, that may not happen immediately. It may not happen even in your lifetime, but a soft answer really does turn away wrath...*and*, it shows the world the

love of Christ in our hearts. People will immediately wonder, “How can he be so nice to that obnoxious jerk?”

An old Chinese proverb puts it another way: “Meet good with good, so that good can be maintained. Meet evil with good, so that good can be created.” Jesus Christ, living within us, gives us the power to meet evil with good, and thereby create good. Forgiveness is better than vengeance because love really is the most powerful force on earth.

The message of Jesus is this: Win over the aggressor with sincere love.

Second, we’re called to kindness and to beware of vengeance because *vengeance injures the avenger. Vengeance injures the avenger.*

Someone once said, "Nursing bitterness is like drinking poison while hoping the other person will die." When we nurse vengeance in our hearts, we’re the one who becomes injured; we’re the one who becomes bitter and miserable and hard to live with.

The comedian Buddy Hackett used to say, “I’ve had a few arguments with people, but I never carry a grudge. You know why? While you’re busy carrying your grudge, they’re out dancing!”

Vengeance is a burden. It ends up hurting you worse than it does the other person.

Vengeance is like an acid. It ends up wounding the thrower more than it does the one on whom you throw it.

If someone has done something to you, and you're nursing feelings of bitterness in your heart, go fix it. Don't put it off any longer. For your sake, for their sake, for God's sake – go to that person and deal with the problem! Even if the other person won't respond, break down that hostility in your own heart; confront those feelings of vengeance before it's too late.

Bob Tuttle tells the story of his children having a real fight when they were young; and against their parents' wishes, they went to bed mad at each other. In the middle of the night a terrifying thunderstorm hit the town and woke up the children. During the worst of the storm, Tuttle says, "I went upstairs to see how they were getting on. I went to Betty's room. No Betty! To Robert's room. No Robert! To Kitty's room. No Kitty! What was going on? Then I heard, above the storm, some muffled sounds in one of the big hall closets. I opened the door, and there were the three children, huddled in a dark corner. I asked, "What in the world are you doing in the closet?" The answer came, "We're in here forgiving each other."

Don't harbor the poison of vengeance in your heart. It will destroy you, it will destroy those around you, and it will eventually destroy your relationship with the *God who forgive you*. You don't want to meet God harboring vengeance in your heart.

Third, we're to avoid vengeance because in exacting vengeance upon others, *we put ourselves in God's place*. Vengeance is God's duty and privilege, not ours. In Deuteronomy 32:25 God says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay!"

This is part of living by faith in God: we let Him mete out justice. Let Him save our reputation. Let Him be the judge and the punisher and the defender and the avenger – we don't take those roles on ourselves. Now, I'm not talking about the state and the nations – God has clearly given authority to the state to rule in things like this.

I'm talking about *personally* – taking personal vengeance upon other people who wrong us.

I served a church as an associate pastor for less than a year before I came back to Wilmore. Early on in that year, it became obvious that the senior pastor and I had some very basic philosophical differences about ministry and people and, well, almost everything, and so I called a meeting with our church delegate and the senior pastor, and I told them I was not planning to seek appointment at that church the next conference year. Of course they were both shocked and asked why, and I said that I'd really rather not go any further than to say I recognize several philosophical differences between the senior pastor and I that would preclude our continuing to work together. I didn't want to get into a bunch of personal stuff, because that's what it was.

My explanation satisfied the delegate, but not the senior pastor, who demanded that I spell it out, and so I did. From that point on, the senior pastor and his wife went on a campaign to smear Annette and I. They told lies to the congregation about us, they insulted us behind our backs. It was not pretty.

Without a doubt, that time was Annette's and my greatest struggle in ministry thus far: to let this couple say untrue stuff about us and not set the record straight. I didn't want to leave the 200 or so people in that congregation thinking those lies about Annette and I were true. I wanted to retaliate, and not even with evil – I just wanted the truth, but speaking the truth would have involved the revelation of ugliness on the part of the senior pastor and his wife.

The best single piece of advice I've ever received was from my friend, Tom Halford, in a phone call to him in the midst of this experience. He said, "Do not go on a campaign to defend yourselves. Let the Lord bring truth in His time." And that's what we did. We did not go on the offensive. And you know, through a series of truly divine circumstances, the truth was told in a way that moved everyone toward the good and toward health in the church. In the next few months, we were vindicated, and much of that time, we weren't even there.

It is God's work to sort out situations like that. Often times He uses other people...people in authority. But we need not rush to exact vengeance or retribution or even justice. God is the judge, and vengeance is His.

The thing is, the world will never turn to Christ because Christians seek vengeance. The world will turn to Christ, they will come to him when Christians live the radical life-style that he commands: not holding grudges, not seeking retribution for wrongs - no matter how legitimate, not campaigning to defend ourselves. The world will come to Christ as Christians love and pray for their foes.

Rebecca Copeland is right when she says that "Praying for enemies is not a natural act. It is a supernatural act. That is why we cannot do it on our own." Loving and praying for our enemies is impossible to do apart from the power of the Holy Spirit within us. In order to love our enemies; in order to pray for those who persecute us, Christ must be alive in our hearts, and He must own that part of us where pride seeks to take over; that cocky part of us that always wants to defend ourselves; that wants us to look good in the eyes of others.

How do we get there from here?

First, pray that God would show you any area in your heart that is dark – any place where you harbor vengeance against someone. He may be doing that right now. Will you let God deal honestly with you about that place...about those roots of bitterness?

Second, as he shows you those places of bitterness, those weeds...pull them. Get rid of them. Ask God to forgive you for them. Every weed He exposes,

acknowledge it as a weed, as something you don't want growing inside you and pull it, today.

Third, as you pull that weed, ask God to fill you with His Spirit. Ask Him to pour His love into that barren place – His love toward whomever it was that you sought vengeance. This is the secret – **His** love working **though** you and me; transforming the ugly places of our hearts and then bubbling up in us and overflowing onto even our enemies, so that the world around us sees our good deeds and praises our Father in Heaven. Ask Jesus to love that person through you, that you might be a true channel of His mercy.

Finally, pray for whoever it is that's been the focus of your vengeance. You know, it really is true, when we pray for someone, it's really becomes impossible for us to despise them.

The power to live without resentment comes only from the Holy Spirit alive within us. The love of Christ shed abroad in our hearts to love others, even our enemies.

Call to Prayer: Change my Heart, o God