

---

# Wisdom in Relationships

by Winston Smith

## Wisdom Frames Relationships within a Big Picture

Relationships require *wisdom*. They can be satisfying and full of promise, but they can also be unpredictable and full of danger. The self-help section of any bookstore testifies to the challenges of relationship. Look there and you will find shelves promising wisdom to all who seek it. One book urges you to “understand your man”; another promises to help you “win friends and influence people”; a third tends to the wounded by offering training in “verbal self-defense.” Lots of promises, yet mastering relationships always seems beyond our grasp.

I was struck both by the promise of relationships and by my utter lack of wisdom at a young age. When I was six years old, my brother got a record player and a Beatles album from my grandfather for Christmas. I was immediately hooked. But I wasn’t just entranced by the catchy melodies and jangling guitars. I was captured by the allure of relationship. Lyrics like, “And when I touch you I feel happy inside. It’s such a feeling that my love, I can’t hide. I can’t hide. I can’t hide,” pointed me to an experience that was like nothing I had experienced before. The Beatles were celebrating in song something that I knew I had to have. I wanted that feeling that I just couldn’t hide, that feeling that

made you want to twist and shout, that compelled girls to stampede and scream down the streets of Liverpool.

And the Beatles made it sound so simple, as easy as falling off a log. “Love, love me do. You know I love you. I’ll always be true. So, please, love me do.” Could it be any easier than that? These are propositions that any six-year-old can easily understand—not a sentence over five words. As I listened to the Beatles I knew there was something out there for me that was very exciting and wonderful, and I couldn’t wait for that wonderful thing to happen to me.

And then one day it happened. When I was about ten years old I met *her*, Sonja. I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life and when I looked at her, I heard all those Beatles songs in my head. This was the exciting person who would make my life come together. At long last I was going to have this “thing” called being in love. So I did what all ten-year-olds do when they are in love. I asked my friends to ask her if she liked me, I bought her milk during lunch, and I sent notes to her that said, “Do you like me? I like you. Circle yes or no”—all the subtle overtures that ten-year-olds make. And after she finally circled yes I heard all of that Beatles music playing in my head for about three more days. Then she started doing things that stopped the music, things like calling me on the phone wanting to talk about stuff that I had no interest in—girl stuff. She started expecting

---

*Winston Smith counsels at CCEF and teaches at Westminster Theological Seminary.*

---

me to do things like taking her roller-skating. She expected me to wear a matching friendship bracelet. As a ten-year-old boy I was not going to wear a bracelet for her or anybody else. I realized very quickly that the Beatles had led me astray. That wonderful experience was there, but it wasn't very long lasting.

Maybe you have noticed similar things in your relationships. We all have hopes and dreams that we bring to relationships, whether it is a friendship or marriage. Think of all the things you typically expect out of a relationship. I want to be understood and accepted for who I really am. I want companionship that heightens the joys of life and supports me in the trials. I want loyalty and security. I want to be admired and appreciated. I want to be in control and to be served. I want things to be smooth and easy and fun. The list goes on.

But how often have you found that instead of companionship you get boredom, instead of acceptance you end up feeling rejected, and instead of finding faithfulness and trust you find betrayal? Relationships just don't work out the way you had hoped. Maybe you are already wise enough to know that the difficulties and mysteries of relationships require more than the world has to offer, and so you turn instead to the wisdom of Scripture.

In your disillusionment you might be inclined to begin with the book of Ecclesiastes. After all, the refrain of this book is "Vanity, vanity, everything is vanity...striving after the wind." The author of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet, or King Solomon, invites you along on a journey to examine life under the sun. Life under the sun is simply looking at life without reference to the greater things of God. It is looking at things at face value, just the way they are—under the sun, without reference to bigger purposes or meaning.

Qohelet looks at pleasure under the sun to see what it is worth. He throws himself into wine and drinking. He throws himself into laughter and pleasure. He throws himself into women. His conclusion, after examining his experience, is, "This is meaningless. This is striving after the wind." He throws himself into industry and building projects. He builds orchards and buildings and multiplies his flocks, but in the end he reaches the same conclusion: "This is meaningless; this is not fulfilling; this is empty; this is chasing after the wind." He throws himself into the pursuit of wealth. Again, he reaches the same conclusion. In every category he examines under the sun, Qohelet *always* reaches the same conclusion. You'll notice that he doesn't single out relationships for special treatment, but he doesn't have to. The point is that *everything* he looks at under the sun, in and of itself, fails to satisfy; it doesn't last. Your own experience tells you that same thing.

Relationships, unto themselves, under the sun, without reference to God's greater purposes, are empty. It is fun to listen to the Beatles, but they cannot tell you what relationships are all about. If my brother had gotten the book of Ecclesiastes on tape, I might have had a very different relationship with Sonja!

But Ecclesiastes is not the last word on relationships. Wisdom doesn't cynically advise us simply to expect less of people. In your pursuit of wisdom, look also to the first chapter of Proverbs. Proverbs doesn't begin by telling you that relationships have no value. On the contrary, the book of Proverbs immediately

---

*Relationships, unto themselves,  
under the sun, without reference to  
God's greater purposes, are empty.*

---

places you in relationship with people and urges you to appreciate the power and significance of relationships.

The book begins, "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel," with the voice of a wise king who urges us to study his words "for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair...Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance." Solomon, in turn, directs you to relate to the Lord as the very foundation of wisdom by informing you that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." Then he places you in relationship to a wise mother and father: "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching." Later, wisdom itself talks to you, personified as a wise woman who can teach you how to live (1:20-33). As we seek wisdom *about* relationships, we are immediately introduced into a network *of* relationships that urge and direct us to wisdom itself, a prudent life, righteousness, and all kinds of other good things that make for constructive relationships.

And these voices warn us about other, destructive relationships, "My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them." There are other people in my world, fools and sinners. Fools and sinners direct me to wicked behavior. They say, "Let's wait for someone's blood." Verse 18 says, "These men lie in wait for their own blood; they waylay only themselves! Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away the lives of those who get it." Ultimately fools and sinners direct me to death.

---

Far from directing me *away* from relationships, wisdom places me *in the midst* of them, exhorting me to value the company and counsel of the wise and warning me to avoid the company and counsel of fools. Proverbs teaches me that my world is full of relationships; my world is full of people and voices. These people, in turn, both embody and direct me down certain paths and destinations in life. You could say it is like this: I live every moment as a person at a crossroads. I

---

*The path I travel in life has everything to do with the people to whom I listen and with whom I seek companionship.*

---

am always choosing to live either a wise life or a foolish life. The path I travel in life has everything to do with the people to whom I listen and with whom I seek companionship. Some people walk with me and direct me down a wise path. Other people will walk with me and direct me down a path of destruction. Relationships are important because they have everything to do with where I will wind up in life.

This understanding is reinforced throughout the Proverbs. Proverbs 12:26 states, "A righteous man is cautious in friendship, but the way of the wicked leads them astray." I need to be cautious in friendship because, if I am not, the way of the wicked will lead me astray; I will walk down the wrong path. Proverbs 13:20 similarly states, "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm." Or consider Proverbs 14:7, "Stay away from a foolish man, for you will not find knowledge on his lips."

Unfortunately, we tend to approach relationships more the way Qohelet describes life, as life "under the sun." Wisdom admonishes us to look beyond our immediate experience of relationship to consider where we are going. It is folly to consider relationships only within the limited scope of our desires—desires for companionship, acceptance, trust, etc. These desires are not evil in and of themselves, but desires, when abstracted or removed from God's greater purposes, blind me to where relationships ultimately might take me. Wisdom calls me to live in relationships while acknowledging that they are not an end unto themselves, but actually vehicles that deliver me to the ends of either life or death.

This is most clearly depicted in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, as you are introduced to metaphorical incarnations of wisdom and foolishness. "Lady wis-

dom" is depicted early in the book. Proverbs 3:13-18 describes her as "...more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed." Here is a wonderful, attractive woman, "Lady Wisdom." Later in 4:6-9: "Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor." Proverbs basically says that there is a beautiful woman with whom you ought to be having a relationship. This woman offers everything you really need in life. Have a relationship with "Lady Wisdom." Listen to what she teaches.

But there is another lady who is no lady at all. You might think of her as "Dame Folly." When you read Proverbs 9:13-18, listen to the way "Dame Folly" is described. "The woman Folly is loud; she is undisciplined and without knowledge. She sits at the door of her house, on a seat at the highest point of the city, calling out to those who pass by, who go straight on their way. 'Let all who are simple come in here!' she says to those who lack judgment. 'Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!' But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave."

Consider why we are given these incarnations of wisdom and foolishness. Why women? Notice that when you read in the book of Proverbs you often read exhortations to men. When addressing marriage, you are warned not to marry a nagging *wife*. The qualities of a desirable *wife* are described in Proverbs 31. There are exhortations to stay away from immoral *women*, the adulteress, not the adulterer (the adulterous male). Like it or not, in that society men were the ones who were educated and being prepared for public service so the proverbs are designed to help young men become wise. Wisdom was something particularly needed by the king. Perhaps this explains why Wisdom and Folly are portrayed as women. Proverbs recognizes that men tend to look at women with tunnel vision. Young men tend to look at women and consider only their outward beauty. Proverbs dresses wisdom and folly in the garments and language of women to suggest that we need a different kind of relationship, something beyond our narrow vision of relationship, especially with the opposite sex. You need to see that your relationship with the

---

opposite sex ushers you down a critical path. Do not think of women as mere women (or men as mere men), but understand that your relationship with the opposite sex will ultimately lead you in a direction.

But wisdom is not restricted to a handful of Old Testament books. Obviously we cannot truly understand wisdom apart from Christ. Christ *is* the wisdom of God, the very image of God, the embodiment of God. All wisdom comes from the Lord, for raising up sons and daughters of the Most High, kings and queens.

The book of Colossians makes a clear connection between Christ and wisdom. In Colossians Paul addresses a heresy called gnosticism. Simply stated, gnosticism believes that some special kind of wisdom is needed apart from an ordinary understanding and faith in Christ. It's a "Jesus-plus" theology: "It is good to have Jesus, but you need a special, secret wisdom if you are really going to make it in the Christian life." Obviously, Paul will have none of this "Jesus-plus" theology. Paul argues that Jesus *is* the fullness of God; nothing extra is needed. This is all relevant to our examination of relationships because even as Christians we tend to approach relationships as if we were gnostics. We assume that something extra is needed apart from Christ. We want to know the "secret" to relationships. Loosely translated, Paul's response to the Colossians and us is, "Do you want to know what the secret wisdom is? I'll tell you." In Colossians 1:26 Paul says, "...the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is *Christ in you*, the hope of glory." What is the ultimate mystery of the universe? What is the ultimate purpose of life? What is the secret wisdom you need to understand relationships? It is Christ in you. In relationship I either serve myself (being a fool) or I am in relationship with Christ, both transforming and being transformed by others in relationship.

Wisdom tells us to look beyond the immediate in relationships. Relationships are embedded in bigger things. Wise or foolish? In Christ or self-willed? Ends in themselves or contexts for a bigger purpose? We must choose wisdom and life as our ultimate destination and understand that relationships will usher us down one of two paths, depending on our relationship with Christ. Proverbs 4:18 describes it this way, "The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day." As Christians we live on a path, and in Christ we walk down that path with Him in the company of the wise; otherwise, relationships will lead us down dark paths that end in destruction.

### Wisdom Tells Us Who People Really Are

How does wisdom help us stay on the path of sanctification and off of the path of destruction? On which path are our current relationships? Wisdom tells us very important things about the people in our relationships. One of the first things Proverbs teaches us about people is that they are all sinners. To some this is a familiar truth, but sometimes our familiarity with a

---

*What is the secret wisdom you need  
to understand relationships?  
It is Christ in you.*

---

particular truth is precisely the problem. In a sense, we become blind to it. Theoretically we may agree that we are all sinners, but often we don't recognize the role sin plays in our relationships.

I once counseled a man who had been in two terrible marriages in which he had been taken advantage of and treated horribly. He also had a string of friends who betrayed him and treated him poorly. When I first met him he was extremely depressed and suicidal. As I got to know him, I realized something important about the way he thought about relationships. His working assumption was that if he was nice to people and gave them what they wanted, they would in turn be kind to him. As I shared that observation with him I described it as life in a theme park. Everyone is there for the same reason, to enjoy each other, the rides, the games, the snack bar, the entertainment, etc. There are no worries. All contingencies have been taken care of. Your job is just to have fun and enjoy your time. He acknowledged that was true. As we explored his reasons for believing this he shared with me that he was raised in a home that practiced Christian Science. I am no expert in Christian Science, but one of its tenets is that sin and evil are an illusion. Sin and evil do not exist objectively outside of your own way of thinking; they are a state of mind. If you take that theology and teach it to a "people pleaser," you wind up with someone who has no category for sin and no way of understanding how to live among sinners. This man had no way of discriminating between fools and wise people—and no way of seeing his own folly. One of the first things I asked him to do was to read through the book of Proverbs and categorize all the people he found there by asking, "What am I to expect and how must I interact with *this category* of person?" He began to see people more accurately.

Notice how the book of Proverbs tries to help you

---

identify sinners via their words. Proverbs 1:10-13 teaches about sinners who will entice you and try to get you to do evil things. They will appeal to your own selfishness. They will say, "Come along with us. Let's lie in wait for someone's blood, let's waylay some harmless soul." There are sinners out there who will promise you things. They ask you to do evil.

In 7:4-27 we meet a wayward wife. Proverbs describes her as loud and defiant. We read lots of details about the way she talks to us. She says things like, "Come, let's drink deep of love till morning; let's enjoy

---

*I must be circumspect about my own heart and motives if I am going to be wise in relationships.*

---

ourselves with love! My husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey. He took his purse filled with money and will not be home till full moon.' With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk" (v. 18).

Why does Proverbs think I need to know that? Why do I get this descriptive word-by-word dialogue of what seducers will say to me? Part of being wise means knowing what sinners look like and sound like. When they talk to me, it should ring a bell. I should be able to say, "I've heard that before," and I should avoid these people.

Other proverbs teach us more about sinners. Look at 12:17, "A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies." Does that strike you as strange? It is self-evident and circular, isn't it? By definition, a truthful witness gives honest testimony. By definition, a false witness tells lies. Why does Proverbs think I need to hear something that is obvious? We need to hear it because often we don't live like we know it. We approach people in relationships, wanting to believe things that aren't true. Proverbs gives us a simple lesson and makes a connection between what people say and who they are in their hearts. Proverbs is saying, "Has somebody just lied to you? Understand this—he is a liar. Do you know someone who speaks truth to you? Understand that he is a truthful person." It gives us the principle that we need to be able to connect what people do with who they are in their hearts. Often we are blinded by our own desires for what we want people to be. Proverbs 11:13 is similar, "A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret." In essence, wisdom tells us that if someone is known to be

a gossip, you should expect him to betray your confidence. If you know someone to be trustworthy, he likely will keep what you confide. Proverbs gives us wisdom to help us identify people. Of course, it would be foolish to see only one aspect of anyone's character, but when you have evidence of someone's sin, it tells you what he is about and how you ought to relate to him.

Proverbs doesn't just help me identify other people as sinners. Proverbs helps me identify myself as a sinner in how I relate to others. Proverbs 3:5 is popular. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." Obviously, there is something about me that is not totally trustworthy. I am a sinner. I tend to live life under the sun with primary reference to myself and my own desires, and therefore, I shouldn't lean on my own understanding. I need the Lord if I am going to be walking down the right path with people.

Proverbs 14:12 puts it this way: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." In other words, sometimes I might think I am on the right path when I'm actually walking down the path of destruction. I must be circumspect about my own heart and motives if I am going to be wise in relationships.

Proverbs also tells us about the depth of our sin problem. Proverbs 29:15 says, "The rod of correction imparts wisdom, but a child left to himself disgraces his mother." What does wisdom tell us about people, even children? If we are left to our own devices, we will end up going down the wrong path. Why? Because from the very beginning we are sinners inclined to go down the path to death and destruction and not the path of life.

The world does not share this view of people. Instead, it aggressively asserts just the opposite, that people are basically good and should feel good about themselves. In fact, it is considered the height of virtue to follow one's own heart and instincts. I have a five-year-old, a three-year-old, and a one-year-old at home so I watch a lot more public television than I really want to. I frequently end up watching "Sesame Street," "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood," and other children's shows. The messages promoted in some of these shows are often very interesting, even in the introductory theme music. One show my kids especially enjoy is a cartoon show called "Arthur." The theme song goes something like this: "And I said Hey, what a wonderful kind of day. We can learn to laugh and play, and get along with each other. [So far so good.] You've got to listen to your heart, listen to the beat. Listen to the rhythm, the rhythm of the street. It's a simple message and it comes from the heart, believe in yourself, for that's the place to

---

start." If children absorb this message, then it's easier to understand why many kids think their parents are to be ignored by the age of eight. They've been taught that they already have all of the answers and don't need to listen to anyone else. Whenever we watch Arthur together, my children usually turn to me in unison now and say, "That's not true, Daddy, we're not supposed to trust ourselves, we're supposed to trust God." I don't want my kids walking down the road of destruction, having absolute confidence in their own desires and the way they think. I want them to have confidence in someone outside of themselves, Christ. He will make their paths straight.

Not only are your children sinners, but if you're married, you're married to a sinner. It's important to truly understand this. I regularly counsel couples who haven't dealt with this fact. Failing to recognize they have married a sinner, they will punish their spouse because of their disappointments and unmet expectations. Either they fail to recognize the selfish nature of their expectations or they fail to recognize that their spouses will fail them at times simply because they are sinners. It is important for them to understand that if they are unwilling to acknowledge that their spouse is a sinner, then they can't lead them to the Savior. If it is not safe for them to acknowledge their failures to each other because they become disappointed in each other, then there is no gospel for them. They communicate to each other that the other person's job is to be perfect. Instead, marriages need to be the kind of relationship where one can freely confess sin and admit failures, so spouses can go to Christ together and grow and be redeemed.

Failing to recognize that we live in relationships with sinners also means that we might put people in situations that are dangerous. I frequently talk to men who are addicted to pornography on the Internet. What strikes me most about these situations is how other people in their lives are surprised to learn they have this problem. These are men who spend hours and hours alone on the Internet, and yet no questions are asked. There is no accountability. Isn't it understandable that a sinner in a room by himself with the ability to view pornography anonymously with the click of a button could give in to temptation? It is a growing problem, even in the church. Pastors are not immune from this temptation. Churches often feel they have a need for Internet access, but no one monitors its use. It is as if the church office has a pitfall in the middle of it, with no fences, barbed wire, or warning signs around it. Proverbs informs us about the enticement of the adulteress because of the power of seduction. Men go on business trips and stay in hotel rooms where, with a

few clicks of the remote, they can view pornography with no record of it. We can't afford to be surprised by our sinfulness. We need to love our neighbors enough not to put them in positions where they will be sorely tempted. Wives need to have permission to say lovingly and respectfully, "You are spending a lot of time on the computer. Is this a temptation for you? How do you handle that?" A husband needs to be able to confess if it is a temptation, and have his activity monitored in some way, have his wife pray for him, and have some

---

*Part of being wise in relationships is understanding that people are sinners.*

---

kind of accountability with other men. Part of being wise in relationships is understanding that people are sinners.

Wisdom also means understanding the complexity of the heart. Proverbs 20:5 states, "The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out." I grew up on a lake. One of my brother's and my favorite activities (besides listening to the Beatles) was swimming in the lake. We enjoyed throwing things in the lake and then diving for them. When we first moved to the lake, we were naive. We thought we could throw in a couple of pennies and just easily dive for them. It doesn't matter how shiny the penny is, if you throw a penny more than ten feet away from you, you will not find it on the bottom of a lake. All kinds of things happen in deep water. The water gets murky the closer you get to the bottom, mud is stirred up, and things don't appear the way they really are. The Bible tells us that is the way the human heart is. Not only is it sinful, but it is deep and murky. It is a place of mystery. It is hard to get a full understanding of what is going on with people. We need to know that. There is a danger in recognizing that people are "sinners" but only having a simplistic understanding of them. To know that somebody is a sinner doesn't mean that we know all we need to know about him and therefore assume the worst about his every motive. Sometimes when someone has been hurt in a relationship, he wants to protect himself by assuming the worst about the other person, as if to prevent being hurt again. As we have seen, some of the proverbs warn that someone who lies *is* a liar or a gossip *is* a gossip. But wisdom also cautions us to be careful in our understanding of people. I have seen many people make this mistake. In a moment of hurt and a desire not to be hurt

---

anymore, they refuse to see the other in a favorable light again, and so all of the other's actions from that point forward are considered suspect. In effect, they put the other person in a box from which he can't escape. Of course, this destroys the relationship, because without trust no relationship can survive. We must keep the second half of verse five in mind, "but a man of understanding draws them out." The human heart is myste-

---

*Pride breeds quarrels, but wisdom allows me to embrace correction.*

---

rious and treacherous, but it is not impenetrable. With wisdom we can begin to understand important things about the heart and have some reasonable strategies about how to minister to each other. We are not to live naively with each other, nor are we to be simplistic in our understanding.

#### **Wisdom Teaches Me How to Love**

It stands to reason that if wisdom tells me that I (and anyone I am in relationship with) am a sinner, then part of loving other people and being loved by them will involve correction. Wisdom is eager to impart a positive attitude to us regarding correction. Proverbs 13:1 states, "A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke." Similarly, Proverbs 13:18 teaches, "He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame, but whoever heeds correction is honored." Or consider Proverbs 17:10, "A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool."

Correction is a good thing, but our tendency is to hate correction or criticism, especially by a spouse or someone who is close to us. Who likes it when a friend says, "That really hurt my feelings" or even, "That was a sinful thing to do"? But wisdom tells me that if I recognize God's greater purposes in relationships, I ought to welcome and invite correction.

This can be hard to embrace. It helps to hear Proverbs say this over and over again in many different ways. Proverbs 13:10 addresses the issue this way, "Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice." There is an interesting connection between the fights I find myself in and my own pride and unwillingness to take correction. Rather than take correction, I want to fight about correction. I am unwilling to hear negative things about myself. Pride breeds quarrels, but wisdom allows me to embrace correction.

This understanding should inform the way we live out our marital duties of headship and submission. It is not wise for husbands to put themselves in positions where they cannot be corrected. If a wife is supposed to be a true help, what is the ultimate way in which a person needs help? As sinners we all need help with our sin. A wife is someone who has covenanted to help and bless her husband. Would it make sense then to put her in a position where she can't speak words of correction? That would be throwing away the most precious resource a husband has. No one knows a husband like his wife. Headship is not a provision to prop up a husband's ego. To love wisdom more and see that relationships exist in the bigger arena, husbands need to be willing to invite feedback and critique. This is a critical category for marriage that is often missed. I see people in marriage counseling who are defensive and committed to being right, but not very committed to being holy. They are not committed to growing in their marriage. They fight for the status quo, their own comfort, and all those desires that exist under the sun. They want to serve those desires in and of themselves. They don't understand that the relationship is taking them somewhere.

Interestingly, not only does Proverbs say we need correction, but it teaches us that one of the key elements in the definition of love is our willingness to correct one another. Proverbs 27:5-6 says, "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." Notice that: "Better is open rebuke than hidden love." Do you see what is being placed in opposition? Hidden love. If I love you but am not willing to rebuke you, I am hiding my love. It is not love made manifest. It is not love that can be seen as love. "Better is open rebuke than hidden love." "Wounds from a friend can be trusted." What does it mean for me to be a friend? To be a true friend means occasionally I am going to wound you. Out of love I will say things you don't want to hear. If I say them in your best interests out of love, it is a wound you ought to be willing to endure. What is the very characteristic of an enemy in verse 6? An enemy multiplies kisses. If I am the type of person who lives only to tell you what you want to hear, I am living like your enemy. Enemies flatter you. Proverbs says, "Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet" (29:5). Flattery spreads a net for your feet. If you look for relationships only where you hear what you want to hear, you are setting a trap for yourself and a net for your feet. Sometimes when I teach about marriage counseling I hear people say, "I feel so lucky. My wife and I never fight." I'm not so sure that they are lucky. How is that two sinners live together and never fight? Maybe they mean

---

"We don't yell at each other," but I hope there is lots of room for correction. If you love each other wisely, it will probably come out in a constructive conflict every once in awhile. It doesn't mean you have to sin when fighting each other, but there ought to be times where you have earnest discussions with each other that are uncomfortable.

I know how unnatural it seems to look for friendships where people will say things that feel like wounds. But whoever said getting wise was easy? It is not easy. Sometimes it is very hard work. We all should work to develop relationships, especially in marriage, where correction is not the enemy but where silence or flattery is the enemy. We need to become wise enough that we recognize our spouses are going to lead us down the path of life and wisdom by helping us spot sin.

There is much need for encouragement here. No one can live in a world in which he feels like he is being nitpicked all the time. The importance of encouragement is understood in the background of Proverbs. We are not to play Holy Spirit with each other. Encouragement is an important part of friendship and marriage, too—the part that often doesn't get talked about. "Oil and perfume make the heart glad, so a man's counsel is sweet to his friend" (27:9).

As we love each other and make it our duty to correct one another, however, we need to recognize our tendency towards defensiveness. Proverbs 18:19 says, "An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel." Sometimes you hear people describe others as having their "walls up." This is the picture of people that Proverbs 18:19 gives. When someone is offended, he becomes like a fortified city, a walled city. Once those walls are up, it is hard to get in. How do you take a walled city? Lots of times you have to put up siege works or try to wait them out. It can take a long time. We need to understand that if we unnecessarily offend the other person, the walls will go up, and the relationship will become much more difficult. This is the nature of sinners.

We know from Genesis 3 Adam and Eve's first response to being sinners. They hid from each other and from God. When they were caught, what was Adam's first line? "I didn't do it. She did it. The woman that you put here." Automatically the pointed fingers go out, not in. Sinners want to point out others. They want to defend themselves. Sinners are committed to glorifying themselves. I am a Christian, I am regenerated, I am a new creature, but there is still indwelling sin and part of the old man that makes me susceptible to defensiveness. I need to be aware of that and my own

tendency toward defensiveness, and that I live with people who also can become defensive. The way I speak the truth to them and help them down the path of wisdom and life needs to be wise, and I must recognize the danger of creating offense. Proverbs tells us ways to become skilled in correcting one another. Proverbs 15:23 says, "A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!" Here are two characteristics of being wise in relationship. I give an apt reply. I don't shoot from the hip. I think about what is apt or appropriate. What is the appropriate way to

---

*If you look for relationships only where  
you hear what you want to hear,  
you are setting a trap for yourself  
and a net for your feet.*

---

respond? It is not just finding the right words. The words need to be timely. There are also times when I need to wait.

I met recently with a couple who would regularly stay up until four o'clock in the morning to argue about things. I have found that after about eleven-thirty I don't talk sense anymore. My mind turns to mush. My wife and I strive not to go to bed bitter, but that doesn't mean that we have to agree about everything. It's true, the Bible teaches us, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." I am not to live in bitterness, but that doesn't mean I have to agree before I can go to sleep. In frustration and fatigue things can go from bad to worse. It is important to speak timely words. There are times when someone is having a bad day and lots of other things are going on that might make the person prone to defensiveness. I need to wait so that I can speak apt and timely words.

I also need to speak pleasant and gentle words to my spouse and others as I try to love them. Proverbs 16:21 says, "The wise in heart are called discerning, and pleasant words promote instruction." When people fight, they often have a tendency to think that the louder and angrier they get, the more is going to get through to the other person. But the experience of most people proves that just the opposite is true. One may intimidate another through anger and volume and thereby cause the other to submit, but if true instruction and an appeal to the heart is the goal, then pleasant words are wise words. Proverbs 15:1 says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up

---

anger." If I want the person to be angry and defensive, I should say harsh things. If I want to turn away wrath, I need to give them a gentle answer. If we intend to walk down the path of growth, wisdom, and instruction with others, we need to learn to speak in ways that promote instruction and minimize defensiveness.

### **Wisdom Teaches Me to Trust God in Relationships**

Proverbs 15:11 says, "Death and destruction lie open before the LORD—how much more the hearts of men!" If God can fathom death and destruction, how much more is He able to understand what is going on in our hearts.

---

*It is easy to walk down the path of fools and do foolish things because we have forgotten that God is in control.*

---

Proverbs 17:3: "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart." God is the One who examines what is going on in our hearts, sees what comes out, and purifies our hearts in a crucible as if purifying metal. It is God's business to help us move down this path. He is the one who tests our hearts.

Proverbs 20:27: "The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man; it searches out his inmost being." God is able to search out my inmost being, to know what is happening at the deepest level.

Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases." In the day and age when these proverbs were written, no one was more powerful than the king, and yet God is greater than the king. God is able to affect even the king's heart. The king is not superior to God. God can change the heart of the king and direct it like a watercourse wherever He wants. Why do we need to know that as we try to minister to our spouses and to each other? First of all, we need encouragement. We need to know we are not alone in living with sinners whose hearts can often wound us. God knows what is going on in their hearts and in mine. I need to understand that, ultimately, God alone is able to control and direct the hearts of those who live as if they were my enemies. And I need confidence that God will protect my heart from evil and bitterness as I am sinned against. What happens when we lose that vision or hope? In our sense of being alone, we act as if we have to fight for ourselves. It is easy to become controlling and angry. It is easy to walk down the path of fools and

do foolish things because we have forgotten that God is in control. I have seen too many marriage situations where, although one spouse is doing damaging and sinful things, the other spouse's response is ten times as destructive. They become so hyper-vigilant, angry, and controlling in their efforts to stop the other person's sin, that they live like a godless person. They take the law into their own hands. They usurp God's role. We need to understand that God is able and He is in control of the heart. He is able to help you and the other person.

### **Wisdom Teaches Me How to Speak in Relationships**

Of course, communication plays a critical part in wisdom in relationships. Wisdom wants us to understand the power of words because, in a sense, words are the vehicles of relationship that transport us down the paths of wisdom and folly. Proverbs tells us about the words of the enticer, the words of the adulteress, and the words of the fool. Their words are portrayed to us because their words are powerful, and we need to be able to recognize them lest we be carried away by them. We are given the words of the king, our parents, and the Lord as well because their words invite us down the path of wisdom.

Proverbs 12:18 says, "Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing." When you were young you probably heard, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." Anybody who has ever felt the need to say those words is probably saying it to hide their wounds. Words can break a bone. Words can totally undo people, and yet we often neglect the power of words. Therefore, we give ourselves permission in moments of anger to undo each other and say the most awful things imaginable. We justify it by saying, "I was just angry. They were just words. They don't mean anything." Words mean something. Words can pierce all the way into the heart. Proverbs 10:20-21 says, "The tongue of the righteous is choice silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value. The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of judgment." We should have lips that nourish other people.

There is more to wise communication than space allows for here, but let me offer one often overlooked bit of wisdom concerning communication. Wisdom recognizes that because of the power of words we ought, in general, to speak less. We want to promote good communication in relationships, but Proverbs warns us that good communication is not the same thing as talking a lot. Proverbs 10:19 says, "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise." Proverbs 17:27 says, "A man of knowledge uses words with restraint." The second half of Proverbs 12:23 says,

---

“The heart of fools blurts out folly.” Recognize that it is because words are powerful and because we are sinners that we need to show restraint in the way we use words. Just because somebody is my spouse or a friend doesn’t mean that I can let it all hang out, and my words won’t hurt them. We need to be especially careful with our words because of their power. Always remember—our words encourage people either down

the path of wisdom or of folly. Words like, “You’re a jerk!” or “You’re a loser!” or “You’re the worst thing that ever happened to me!” or “I hate you!” do not lead people to Christ. Those are discouraging and destructive words. If we speak them to Christians, they are labels that deny the redemptive work Christ is accomplishing in their lives.