

I've titled this sermon “political life in the kingdom of God”
because it's talking about how do you live in society –
how do you live in community?
How do you live life in this age – as a citizen of the kingdom of God?

Introduction: Proverbs of Solomon Copied by Hezekiah's Men (v1)

25 These also are proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied.

Chapters 25-29 consist of the proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah copied.
Hezekiah was king around the year 700 B.C. – more than 200 years after Solomon –

If these are the proverbs of Solomon – then why bother mentioning Hezekiah's men?

Hezekiah lived and reigned during the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel.
These were the years when Israel and Syria (Samaria and Damascus)
united in trying to force Judah into their coalition against Assyria.
So while these proverbs may have their *roots* in Solomon –
their *fruits* are seen in the context of Hezekiah –

a reminder that the scriptures were never intended for one particular time only.

They were given for God's people in all times.

The first of these five chapters – chapter 25 –
consists of four sayings interspersed with three admonitions.

The sayings provide principles – while the admonitions then urge you to particular action.

1. Saying: The King Stands Between God and the People – So His Advisors Should Protect Him from Wicked Counselors (2-5)

*² It is the glory of God to conceal things,
but the glory of kings is to search things out.*

Our passage begins and ends with searching and glory.
The glory of kings is to search things out (v2).
But it is not glorious to seek one's own glory (v27).

It's the same verb both times (to seek/search).
It is the glory of kings to search things out.
It is not glorious to search out glory.

Think about the implications of this.

It is the glory of kings to search out the things that God has concealed.
But it is not glorious for us all to act as though we were kings.

You may remember the days of the Judges –
there was no king in Israel – everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

They *needed* a king – *we* need a king – who would lead the people of God
to do what is right in God’s eyes!

Because the king is God’s servant.

Of course, this is preeminently true of Jesus –
but as verse 3 makes clear, this proverb is not speaking in the singular:

³ *As the heavens for height, and the earth for depth,
so the heart of kings is unsearchable.*

Kings are *supposed* to be a picture of God to us.

Think of Solomon –
whose wisdom searched out the mysteries of creation and providence.
He sought to understand the natural world –
as Adam named the animals, so Solomon also discoursed about them.
Likewise, Solomon sought to understand the human heart –
he showed his wisdom in his judgment when the two mothers came before him.

Because that is what kings do.

They search out the things of God;
they also search out – they investigate – the cases that come before them.
They seek to understand things so that they rule wisely and well.

As Waltke puts it,

“God obtains his social dignity by hiding his wisdom in his actions of creation,
and kings get theirs by searching out the affairs of state.”

But precisely because of the uniqueness of the king – and the special glory of the king –
it is dangerous for a king to be influenced by the wicked:

⁴ *Take away the dross from the silver,
and the smith has material for a vessel;*
⁵ *take away the wicked from the presence of the king,
and his throne will be established in righteousness.*

Here you start to see the importance of the counselors – the courtiers –
those who advise the king!

The courtier – the adviser – is like a refiner.

The smith is the one who builds the vessel.
The refiner is the one who purifies the silver.

If the refiner does not do his job well – if he allows impurities to remain in the silver –
then the smith will not be able to make a beautiful vessel.

Likewise, if the courtier – if the adviser – allows the wicked to have free access to the king,
then his kingdom will not be established in righteousness.

Even in a small kingdom like Judah,
the king cannot possibly know everything that is going on.
He needs his advisers to be careful and prudent in their duties –
in order to prevent the wicked from wreaking havoc on his kingdom.

When you read through the prophets, you hear all about the various courtiers of the OT.
We often think of Joseph in Egypt – or Daniel in Babylon –
but what about the elders and counsellors of Judah?!

Jeremiah 26 recounts a time when the priests and the prophets were all allied against Jeremiah.
They wanted him to be put to death for speaking against the city and the temple.

But certain elders arose and said, “

¹⁸ *“Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and said to all the people of Judah: ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts,*

“‘Zion shall be plowed as a field;

Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,

and the mountain of the house a wooded height.’

¹⁹ *Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and entreat the favor of the LORD, and did not the LORD relent of the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster upon ourselves.”*

²⁴ *But the hand of Ahikam the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah so that he was not given over to the people to be put to death.*

Ahikam had been present on the day when the Book of the Law had been found
and was read to King Josiah (2 Kings 22:12).

His father, Shaphan, was the scribe who read the Book of the Law to Josiah!

Now, 13 years later, Ahikam protects Jeremiah from the wrath of Josiah’s son.

This is what it means to be a wise courtier –
a public official who seeks the good of the king.

What about us?

We have no particular promise that God will protect us from suffering.

We only have the promise that God will raise us up at the last day!

We need to think seriously about this.

Some of you should seriously consider entering public service.

Government jobs are a useful place for Christians to love God and neighbor.

Ahikam was a scribe who served a wicked king.

You can still seek to do what is right and good – even in a corrupt system.

There is no one-size fits all approach.

Some prophets were called to die for their faith.

Jeremiah was not – at least not yet! – but he was called to be equally blunt.

Ahikam was not called to preach – but he was called to protect Jeremiah.

The elders of the land were called to remind the people and the rulers
of the importance of listening to the prophets.

When things are not the way they should be,

there may be considerable variety in the way that God calls his servants to respond!

And that is why verses 6-10 provide an admonition to be prudent in your speech:

a. Admonition: Be Careful What You Reveal and Where (v6-10)

⁶ *Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence*

or stand in the place of the great,

⁷ *for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"*

than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

Jesus will use this in Luke 14.

If you put yourself forward, you may be humbled.

But if you humble yourself, you may be honored.

There is a lot of jockeying for position in society –

and alas, the same is too often true in the church!

We saw earlier in Proverbs that the wise (and skilled) craftsman
will stand before kings (Prov 22:9).

He is confident in his work – and so he is always ready to bid –
ready to go to the king and say “I can build that.”

That is *not* what this proverb is warning against.

If you are good at what you do – then you should do your best work,
and make your pitch for getting the best job.

Verse 6 here is talking about jockeying for position.

The way Jesus uses this parable correctly interprets it:

when there is a banquet – don't rush for the important seats.

Don't call "shotgun" all the time – but practice humility.

And be careful.

You may *think* that you know what happened.
But do you know the whole story?!

What your eyes have seen

⁸ *do not hastily bring into court,^[a]*

for^[b] what will you do in the end,

when your neighbor puts you to shame?

This is talking about party politics.

Hey, I have evidence that will support my party!

I should it bring it forward to undermine the other guy!!

Proverbs was warning about partisan bickering 3000 years ago!

When you see a video posted on social media – it probably shows something outrageous.

Think twice before jumping on the bandwagon!

Fake news is nothing new.

Beware of using information to engage in social climbing.

To achieve success at the price of your own integrity or another's well-being –
is to destroy yourself and others!

Instead (v9):

⁹ *Argue your case with your neighbor himself,*

and do not reveal another's secret,

¹⁰ *lest he who hears you bring shame upon you,*

and your ill repute have no end.

Go to the person directly.

Don't be a gossip.

Don't spread secrets.

Deal openly and fairly with your neighbor.

Don't use information against them.

Use your knowledge of a person – of a situation – to *love* that person!

I used to want to know all the dirty secrets.

I wanted to know everything about everything.

But the more I learned, the more I realized – I really *don't want to know*.

Part of the reason, admittedly, is not all that noble.

Part of the reason is that *I don't love people that much!*
If I know something, then I need to use that information to love.
But the more I learned, the more I realized that every story is filled with sin and misery.
Every person you meet is a miserable sinner.
The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.
An estate.
Not two different things.

Yes, we are sinners – we muck things up.
But we are also miserable – we have suffered grievously.

So be careful how you use information – be careful what you repeat.
Make sure that you only repeat someone else's sin and misery
in an effort to *love them better*.

2. Saying: Wise Counselors Will Consider Carefully How to Speak (v11-15)

How do you do that?!
I'm glad you asked!
Because our second saying starts positively! (v11-12)

¹¹ *A word fitly spoken
is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.*
¹² *Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold
is a wise reprover to a listening ear.*

This is rooted back in chapter 9 –
when wisdom told us that if you reprove a wise man, he will love you!

Learn to be one who speaks wisely – one who both gives reproof well,
and hears reproof well!

But in order to reprove well, you need to be one who speaks well to begin with.
A word fitly spoken!
Don't you love it when someone says something that "fits" the situation!
Solomon says it is like apples of gold in a setting of silver!
Indeed, he goes a step further and says that a wise reprover to a listening ear
is like a gold ring – or an ornament of gold.

A person who is able to give reproof well is valuable!
(and, you may note – the listening ear is essential to the value!).
Notice that we are talking about a *ring* and the *ear*.
An ear-ring.
"The matching of a wise arbiter who finely crafts his decision

with one who listens and accepts his correction
is just as lovely and precious as an exquisitely wrought gold earring on an ear.”
(Waltke, 321)

You need someone who can say the hard things that you need to hear –
but you also need to hear them! –
you also need to be the sort of person who accepts correction.

The next saying – in verse 13 – adds the idea of reliability:

¹³ *Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest
is a faithful messenger to those who send him;
he refreshes the soul of his masters.*

You might think at first that snow at harvest is a bad thing –
but notice that verse 13 does *not* say “snow at harvest” –
rather, it is the *cold* of snow.

It was a well-known practice in the ancient world to climb the high mountains
(like Mt. Hermon) during the summer,
and bring down snow and ice (insulated as best they could)
to refrigerate drinks.

When it is hot – and it’s harvest time – so you have to get out and work...
the cold of snow is truly refreshing –
and you would bless the servants who made the long, hard trek
to bring the snow from the mountain peaks!

In the same way, the faithful messenger who delivers his message *well*
refreshes the soul of his masters.

Remember that in those days, there is no email – there are no text messages!
If you want to send a message, then you will need to send a *person*
to deliver the message.

And while it was *possible* to send a written note –
very few people knew how to read or write –
and so the most common way to send messages
was to send a *messenger*.

You tell the messenger – “here’s what I want you to say...”

And then you trust the messenger to go say it!

How often, do you suppose, did the messenger mess up the message?!
If your messenger secretly hates you, he could screw it up on purpose!
But even if he likes you, there are so many ways that this could go wrong!
A faithful messenger refreshes the soul of his masters!

Are you *trustworthy*?
Are you reliable?
Are you *faithful* in the discharge of your duties?
When you say that you will do something for someone,
do you do it?

In contrast (v14):

¹⁴ *Like clouds and wind without rain
is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give.*

The unfaithful boaster promises – but does not deliver –
just like clouds and wind that give no rain.
When you have clouds and wind – the next thing should be rain!

It is easy to talk big and perform little.
Don't be like that!
I know a man who really wants to be liked –
so he regularly says that he will be there – he will come!
But he *so rarely does* that his word has come to mean nothing.

If you say that you will do something:
Do it.
Be a person of integrity – be faithful to your word!

Because if you do all these things –
if you are not a gossip –
if you are good at rebuking (and accepting rebukes) –
if you are faithful in doing what you say you will do –
then you have a shot at verse 15:

¹⁵ *With patience a ruler may be persuaded,
and a soft tongue will break a bone*

If you are a gossip – he won't trust you with information.
If you are too hot-tempered to rebuke well – and too proud to listen to others –
then you won't be around very long.
If you are unreliable and unfaithful in the discharge of your duties,
you won't get a hearing.

But if you are wise and faithful in your words and deeds,
then *with patience* a ruler may be persuaded.
Bones are rigid.

Bones do not bend.
But even the most rigid, inflexible ruler may bend to a soft tongue –
to gentle words –
whereas harsh words will not accomplish much at all!

Speaking as a husband and father – and as a pastor –
I can attest that a soft tongue is very effective!
For some reason, I have a harder time hearing when someone is yelling at me!

a. Admonition: Be Prudent in Your Use of Honey and Hospitality (v16-17)

Verses 16-17 then provide the second admonition:

¹⁶ *If you have found honey, eat only enough for you,
lest you have your fill of it and vomit it.*

We saw last time that honey is good – so eat it!! (24:13)
Now we are reminded that too much of a good thing is not good!
Too much of a good thing is not a good thing!

Which leads us to the *point* of verse 16:

¹⁷ *Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house,
lest he have his fill of you and hate you.*

Neighborliness – like honey – “is precious, delightful, and beneficial to both parties” (W 327).

The key is – don’t be selfish about it!

Your neighbor does not exist to serve and please you!

Your neighbor exists to serve and please God!

You are to love your neighbor.

If you love your neighbor you will not be in their house too often – or *too* seldom!

You need to learn your neighbor’s tolerance level for you!

In the same way that too much honey results in vomit,
so also, as the English proverb puts it, “Guests, like fish, stink after three days”!

3. Saying: The Evils of False Witness, Treachery, Or Just Poor Timing (v18-20)

The following sayings (verses 18-20) continue to play off the theme of the “neighbor” –
pointing out three evils: the false witness, the treacherous man,
and the one with just bad timing!!

¹⁸ *A man who bears false witness against his neighbor
is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow.*

Choose your weapon!

A false witness – someone who speaks evil against his neighbor –
is on the attack.

Be careful how you speak!

You may *think* that you are in the right –
but if, in fact, you are in the wrong –
then you are destroying others with your words!

Secondly,

¹⁹ *Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble
is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.*

The treacherous man is the “fair-weather friend” –
when things are good, he’s your buddy –
but when trouble comes, he’s like a bad tooth – or a foot that slips...

it’s painful.

And in the midst of such pain and affliction...

²⁰ *Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart
is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day,
and like vinegar on soda.*

This isn’t the “lethal talker” or the “silent traitor” –
but it’s still really annoying!

The word translated “song” is a word used for victory songs, praise songs, joyful songs –
but it generally is *not* used for a lament!!

In Psalm 137, the Psalmist says that the Babylonians
wanted the exiles to sing “one of the songs of Zion.”

He can’t do it – he’s singing a lament about Zion
as he says I can’t sing a song of Zion!

Seasonable songs bring refreshment and joy!
But to sing a happy song to a sad heart...?

That’s like one who takes off a garment on a frosty day –
that’s like vinegar on soda –
(you could also translate it, putting vinegar on a wound –
wouldn’t that feel nice?!).

But rather than be that sort of person –

verses 21-22 admonish you to do good to those who hate you:

a. Admonition: Do Good to Those Who Hate You (v21-22)

²¹ *If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat,
and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink,*
²² *for you will heap burning coals on his head,
and the LORD will reward you.*

Previously we have heard that we should not gloat over our enemy's misfortune.
We should not take revenge.

But now we are told that passivity is not acceptable.
If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat.
Feed him.
Care for him.
Love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you.

What does it mean to "heap burning coals on his head"?
Certainly most commentators have agreed that your good deeds will shame him.
It's related to the idea earlier about how patience may persuade the ruler –
and how soft words accomplish more than hard words do.

Think of it this way:
your enemy has done you harm – he has poured out fire against you.
When you do good to those who hate you,
you hand the fire back to them –
you say, in effect, "No, I am not going to play this game.
I am not going to play the game of revenge and destruction.
I will simply hand this back to you –
you can either repent or not – that's your problem!
But I'm not playing that game!"

And the LORD will reward you for not playing the vengeance game.
He promises that he will take care of it –
he will make everything right!
And he will reward you for loving your enemies –
after all, God loved *us* when we were enemies!
So when you love your enemies, you are imitating God!

4. Saying: When Good Things Go Awry – the Estate of Sin and Misery (v23-27)

Our final sayings – verses 23-27 – talk about how good things often go awry.

²³ *The north wind brings forth rain,
and a backbiting tongue, angry looks.*

- ²⁴ *It is better to live in a corner of the housetop
than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.*
- ²⁵ *Like cold water to a thirsty soul,
so is good news from a far country.*
- ²⁶ *Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain
is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked.*
- ²⁷ *It is not good to eat much honey,
nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory.^[c]*

Rain, marriage, a fountain, honey –
all of these are supposed to be good.
But the north wind isn't supposed to bring rain.
Marriage isn't supposed to bring quarreling.
A spring or a fountain isn't supposed to be muddy.
Honey is supposed to be good for you.

But good things can go astray.

This is a reminder that we live in an estate of sin and misery.
I think that conservative churches tend to do well at pointing out sin.
Liberal churches do well at talking about misery.
But our problem is that we live in *an* estate of sin *and* misery.
These are not two different problems!
It's not that if you solve the sin problem the misery problem will go away –
neither will focusing on misery take care of sin.

But this is why verse 25 is at the center of this final section:

“Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.”

The gospel comes to our thirsty souls like cold water on a hot day.
Jesus came to deal with our sin – he offered himself as the atoning sacrifice –
the one who died in our place – who cleansed us from our sins!
But Jesus also came to deal with our misery –
he joined himself to our humanity, in order that he might join us to God!

God did not leave us to perish in the estate of sin and misery.
He sent his Son to be our Redeemer – to solve our sin problem *and* our misery problem.

And the key for us – as verse 27 points out – is not to seek one's own glory.
Rather, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness –
and all these things – all the things that we need for life and godliness –
will be added to you.