

We have been studying some Hebrew proverbs these past January Sundays. Proverbs are collected wise saying that are passed on from one generation to the next. Every culture has its own unique collection of proverbs. When we were down in Brazil a couple of weeks ago on our church's missions trip, Al Cornelius and I decided to walk down into the small town of Pacoti and do some exploring one afternoon. Walking straight down the mile or so steep hill was much easier than walking back up it and we found ourselves having to stop a couple of times to catch our breath on the way back to the conference center. When we were eating dinner that night and recounting our adventure, a Brazilian lawyer who helps the mission out remarked, "We have a Brazilian saying, 'All the saints help you walk down the hill.'" That was a Brazilian proverb – every country and culture has proverbs.

Many of our American proverbs come from the early days of our country's formation. Benjamin Franklin both wrote and collected many of these proverbs. He was the Solomon of our country's early history. An elementary school teacher was concerned that many of our children today are not as aware of American proverbs as they should be. So she decided to test her students on their knowledge of traditional proverbs that we have that have been passed down from generation to generation. She found this process to be so interesting that she continued it year after year. Near the time of her retirement, she compiled some of the most interesting answers that she received. I'm going to start my sermon this morning by giving you a little test on American proverbs along with sharing some of the interesting answers that this elementary teacher received. See if you can complete the following proverbs in your mind and I'll give you the answer that this teacher's students gave.

*Better to be safe than . . . punch a 5th grader.

*Strike while the . . . bug is close.

*It's always darkest before . . . daylight savings time.

*You can lead a horse to water but . . . how?

*Don't bite the hand that . . . looks dirty.

*You can't teach an old dog . . . math.

*An idle mind is . . .the best way to relax.

*Where there's smoke, there's . . . pollution.

*A penny saved is . . . not much.

*Two's company, three's . . . The Musketeers.

*Children should be seen and not . . . spanked or grounded.

*If at first you don't succeed . . . get new batteries.

*You get out of something what you . . . see pictured on the box.

*There is no fool like . . . Aunt Edie.

*Laugh and the whole world laughs with you. Cry and you . . . have to blow your nose.

The book of Proverbs is the collected wisdom of the nation of Israel. It is a book rich in practical advice for living a successful life because it was written by King Solomon who is widely accepted as being the wisest man who ever lived. We have been looking at 12 Wise New Year Resolutions from the 3rd chapter of this book as we are beginning 2012. Let me review the 1st nine resolutions that we have already seen before we move on to look at the final 3 this morning.

*become a more loving and faithful person

"Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man." (3:3,4)

*grow in faith and trust in the Lord

"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." (3:5,6)

*don't be overconfident or wise in our own eyes

"Do not be wise in your own eyes;" (3:7a)

*fear the Lord

*Avoid evil

"Fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones." (3:7b,8)

*Honor the Lord with our wealth

"Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine." (3:9,10)

*Accept God's Discipline into our lives for our good

"My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in." (3:11,12)

*Make wisdom a top priority in our lives

"Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her." (3:13-15)

*Choose not to live in fear

“Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked, for the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared.” (3:25,26)

Now while the majority of the first 9 resolutions have been more personal in nature, the last 3 all have to do with our social responsibilities – how we treat our fellow human beings.

Resolution #10 – Show love to your neighbor. Notice Proverbs 3:27-28:

PR 3:27 Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act.

PR 3:28 Do not say to your neighbor,
"Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"--
when you now have it with you.

Solomon’s advice to us is to show love to our neighbors when we have an opportunity to do so. Showing love is just choosing to act in their best interests – doing something kind or nice for our neighbor when we have the opportunity to do so. Solomon would advise us not to put kindness to our neighbors off. Rather, take advantage of opportunities that we have to actively show kindness to our neighbors. Now sometimes we are tempted to put off doing good to our neighbors because many of us have a natural tendency to procrastinate. We mean to do well, but we just have trouble getting around to it. Other times, we are just concerned about ourselves and our own interests that we don’t even see the needs that others have. But whatever the reason, a good New Year’s Resolution would be to try to do good for our neighbors on a regular basis.

And when we remember Jesus’ teaching about who our neighbor is, we are reminded that this means doing good to everyone of our fellow human beings that we meet regardless of where he or she lives, or regardless of their social class, or race, or any other factor. You will recall that classic passage found in Luke 10 where an expert in the Jewish law came to Jesus asking him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Without hesitation, Jesus turned the tables on him asking this expert what the law of God commanded. The expert knew and answered that to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves fulfilled the intent of God’s law. Jesus confirmed this seeker’s answer saying that if he would follow this standard he would live pleasing to God. But the scribe knew that he wasn’t able to fulfill God’s law in his own strength. So seeking to justify himself he asked Jesus the question, “Who is my neighbor?” He undoubtedly was thinking that Jesus would answer “your Jewish friend who lives near you and who treats you well.” For the rabbis of those times taught that neighborliness was determined by race and cordialness and proximity. Jews at this time were only taught that they had to regard their fellow nationals as neighbors – the Gentiles were the enemy. And if someone were your friend and lived near you, certainly this was also a consideration in determining who your neighbor was. Jesus broke all of these stereotypes when he then told the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. Listen to this story as I read it for you from Luke 10:30-36:

LK 10:30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

LK 10:36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The Scribe immediately recognized the point of Jesus' story as he answered in verse 37 – "The one who had mercy on him."

*Now we have a tendency to be overly critical of the Priest and the Levite. But we must consider their situation before judging them too harshly.

*recall the Treacherous road dropping 3,000 feet in about 20 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho.

*Every Jewish person would take this road traveling from Judea to Galilee to avoid going through Samaria.

*Priests and Levites were probably either coming to the Temple to fulfill their responsibilities in the Temple or concluding a tour of duty at the Temple and were anxious to get back to see their families.

*They probably couldn't have told the race or status of the man who appeared to be dead crumpled by the side of the road. There were 3 major ways to tell a person's nationality back in these days – appearance, speech and clothing. This man were beaten unconscious. They might not have even been able to see his face, and if they could he would have been bloodied and unrecognizable. He couldn't speak, and the thieves had taken his clothing. So they couldn't tell whether he was Jewish or not. If he were not Jewish, they were not obligated to help him at all according to their law.

The passage from a midrash on Ruth, chapter 4 couldn't have been clearer: "(concerning) The gentiles. . . that are keepers of sheep amongst the Israelites, and the like, we are not to contrive their death; but if they are in danger of death, we are not bound to deliver them. . . for it is said, "Thou shalt not rise up against the blood of thy neighbor"; but such a one is not thy neighbor."

If the Priest or Levite came close to the person and he were either non-Jewish or a Jewish person who had died, they would immediately become ceremonially unclean.

According to their law, if the man were dead, and if one walked closer than 4 cubits (6 feet) to that man, he would then become ceremonially unclean. The Jewish law listed 5 sources of defilement, making one unclean. Contact with a corpse was at the top of the list. And the regulations had added over time with the 6

feet addition just for added insurance. The oral traditions listed 4 more sources of defilement. Contact with a non-Jewish person was first on this additional list. So you see, the priest and the Levite were in danger of contracting ritual impurity in its most severe form from both the written and the oral Jewish laws. This would have hindered their temple service or severely inconvenienced their plans to get back home to their families.

Now what would have happened if the Priest and Levite became ceremonially unclean? They would go to Jerusalem and go through an entire week's process of ceremonial cleansing before they could either serve in the temple or return home. They had undoubtedly been away from their families for some time and were anxious to see their wives and children. So they both decided not to take a chance. They crossed over to the other side of the road so they couldn't even see whether the man were Jewish or not and wouldn't get close enough to him to become unclean, and passed on their way home. Their personal convenience was more important to them than helping this person. And the audience listening to Jesus' story would have completely understood their actions. The Samaritan had a different attitude. Even though he was of a different race and social class, he had compassion and helped this Jewish man who was in so much need. He inconvenienced himself both financially and with the sacrifice of his time. It is not happenstance that Jesus used this illustration to define who a neighbor was. One of the best resolutions that we can make for this New Year is to regularly go out of our way to do good for our neighbors. God is pleased when we inconvenience ourselves to help someone else.

Resolution #11 – Resolution #11 is really the flip side of resolution #10. We are not to do harm to our neighbors. READ Prov. 3:29-30:

PR 3:29 Do not plot harm against your neighbor,
who lives trustfully near you.

PR 3:30 Do not accuse a man for no reason--
when he has done you no harm.

One of the strongest drives that many people have is the felt need to get revenge. Some hold grudges for years, waiting for the right opportunity to make a pay back. This drive to get retribution or revenge has ruined the lives of many people. And even those who do not act aggressively on these feelings end up being filled with anger and bitterness and completely ruin the quality of their lives.

Chicago police have a recurring problem during this specific time of year. Parking is such a premium in downtown Chicago that large snowstorms really complicate the issue. The piles of snow make parking spaces even more valuable and rare. Now it is an unwritten law in Chicago that if a person takes the time and energy to dig out his car after a snowstorm from his normal parking place in the lot by his apartment, then that parking space is his when he returns from work in the evening. But, you guessed it – quite often someone else tries to sneak into the shoveled out space getting all the benefit without doing the work. This is where the

police come in. Tires are often slashed, cars are often keyed and damaged, people have even gotten into serious fights with serious injuries fighting over these precious parking spaces. Recently, I read of a novel, more creative way that a person got revenge. One of his neighbors had parked in his spot that he had shoveled out after this recent snowstorm. So he ran a hose out from his apartment and turned that car into a big block of solid ice. Then he put a note on it that read: "You want the space? Here, it's yours until spring."

There are many times when we have opportunities to harm our neighbor in some way. Sometimes, we feel a sense of justification in doing harm because in this fallen and sinful world, people are going to act selfishly and violate our rights through the year. But in the final analysis, a spirit of revenge hurts us more than anyone else.

Frederick Buechner the theologian wrote in one of his books: "Of the most deadly sins, revenge is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back; in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

The eskimos in Alaska have an interesting way to get rid of a wolf who is endangering their community. They take a knife and dip the blade in blood. The blood quickly freezes on the knife-blade, of course. Then they bury the knife-handle in the snow and freeze it into place so that just the bloody blade is sticking up from the ground. The hungry wolf soon finds the protruding knife, of course, and instinctively begins to lick the blood from the knife blade. The sharp blade immediately cuts the wolf's tongue, but the wolf is so intent on drinking the blood that he doesn't even notice that the blood now is warm. The wolf continues to greedily drink his own blood until he collapses, having bled himself to death.

This is what happens figuratively to a person who is consumed with bitterness and bent on revenge. They are so intent on hurting the person that they feel wronged them that they don't realize that the person that they really are killing is themselves.

If anyone had the justification to lash out in revenge against those who had wronged him, it was the Lord Jesus Christ hanging upon the cross of Calvary. Here was the only perfectly sinless human being being executed like a common criminal in the most cruel and inhumane manner. Here was the creator and ultimate judge of everything in the universe being judged and put to death by the very creatures he had made. Jesus could have railed on those who were pounding the nails into his hands and feet. He could have reminded them of the price that they would pay someday when they stood before his judgment seat. But Jesus demonstrated no anger or bitterness towards his accusers. Rather, his first words from the cross were "Father, forgive them." And the Apostle Paul would later write to the church at Ephesus under the inspiration

of the Holy Spirit commanding them to “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Eph. 4:32)

Perhaps you have someone that you have been holding a grudge against for some while now. One of the most healthy and godly resolutions that you could make for this New Year would be to finally let it go – resolve to do no harm to your neighbor.

Resolution #12 – Don’t envy or associate with wicked people. READ Prov. 3:31,32:

PR 3:31 Do not envy a violent man
or choose any of his ways,
PR 3:32 for the LORD detests a perverse man
but takes the upright into his confidence.

I saved one of the American proverbs that we have that the elementary teacher used with her children that I gave at the beginning of the sermon until here at the end. So let me test you on this one to see if remember it as we close.

*If you lie down with dogs, you . . .will get up with fleas.

*The student didn’t remember the exact proverb, but basically got the idea when she said, “If you lie down with dogs, you will stink in the morning.”

We must never forget that the friends and acquaintances that we choose for ourselves will have an influence and impact on our lives. If we choose godly people as our close friends, then we will be encouraged and edified in our faith throughout the year. But if we choose ungodly people as our close friends, then we have already started down the road to trouble.

Our neighbors are important to us – and by neighbors, I mean, of course, every one of our fellow human beings with whom we share this planet earth. We should show love to them whenever we can. We should make the choice not to harm them when it is our power to do so. And we should surround ourselves with the best influences possible so that we can have godly friends and accountability as we journey through this new year.

12 wise resolutions for the New Year:

- *become a more loving and faithful person
- *grow in faith and trust in the Lord
- *don’t be overconfident or wise in our own eyes
- *fear the Lord
- *Avoid evil
- *Honor the Lord with our wealth.
- *Accept God’s Discipline into our lives for our good

- *Make wisdom a top priority in our lives
- *Choose not to live in fear
- *Show Love to our neighbors
- *Don't harm our neighbors
- *Don't envy the wicked or choose their ways.