

Ready to act

**'Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
when it is in your power to act.'**

Proverbs 3:27

Lent 2020 - 40acts Generosity Challenge

Wednesday 26th February to Saturday 11th April 2020

Small Group Studies

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What is 40acts?

Lent marks a pivotal point in the history of the church, when Jesus prepared to give himself up as a sacrifice. Tradition has it that we mark the 40 days of Lent by giving something up, but what if it could be more than that? What if Lent were to become a preparation for a lifetime of big-heartedness? 40acts is a generosity challenge which encourages people to approach Lent differently. During the 40 days of Lent, 40acts participants are invited to take part in 40 simple acts of generosity which will challenge them to 'do Lent generously' in 2020. The acts or challenges are wide-ranging but all are designed to explore what it means to be generous in a very practical way. They can be done by individuals or done in groups, but the key is that small acts of generosity, performed by thousands of people across the UK and beyond, have the power to make a big difference to our communities, to our churches and, ultimately, to our world. It's about creating a movement of generosity.

How to use this resource

-  This course is divided into seven separate sessions and provides adaptable meeting guides, activity ideas and prayers.
-  Each session is intended to last approximately one hour.
-  This resource has been designed to suit a wide range of ages and interests. Group leaders should feel free to adapt each study to suit the needs and interests of their particular group.

Complimentary materials

You have the opportunity to engage with the daily challenges as a group of individuals, sharing your experiences with each other. The challenges are released daily by email and social media during Lent and you can sign up at www.40acts.org.uk Each challenge has three traffic light options to choose from, so people can engage with the daily acts in the way that suits them best. There will be a corresponding reflection, written by a different author each day, offering their take on that day's challenge, which can be a source of inspiration or insight. There is also the option to interact with 40acts via social media.

However you use these resources, we hope that they are a way for you and your church or group to experience more of what living generously looks like. Please use these materials in whole or in part, just as a reference, or not at all. They are a gift from Stewardship!

About this series

40acts 2020 is shaped around the book of Proverbs, and particularly Proverbs 3:27: 'Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act.' Many traditional written confessions include repentance for not only wrongdoing, but neglecting to do right. When we have the power to act but we don't, we are making a choice. We can feel paralysed by the needs of the world and our own limitations, but this Lent we will be exploring just how much good we can all do if we refuse to sit back and do nothing. We will be reminding ourselves that we have resources and the agency to direct them in God-pleasing directions.

Proverbs belongs to a genre called 'wisdom literature'. There are four other biblical books in this category: Job, Psalms, Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. Rather than a set of instructions, they are poetic reflections on the nature of reality and what it means to live in the world as a God worshipper. This form of literature is an earthy, everyday spiritual guide for ordinary people like us. As we engage with the season of Lent through 40 daily acts of generosity, these pithy sayings will embed what we do in the soil of our faith.

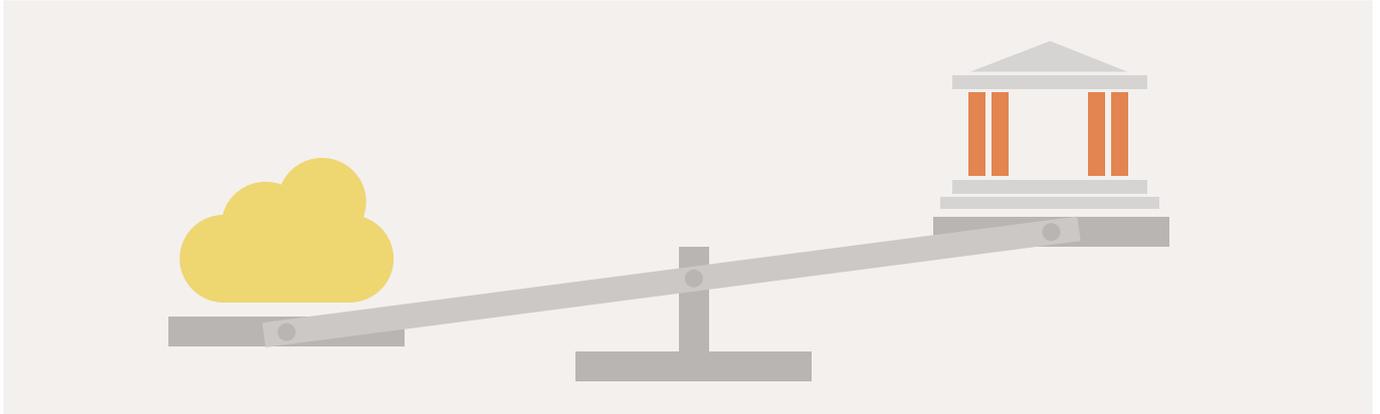
Wisdom literature is best read slowly. As we chew it over, the depth, power and complexity of its message grows. Each study in this series explores a number of proverbs. You'll get the most from the experience if you choose just one proverb each week, commit it to memory and ponder it as you go about your days. Consider how the proverb speaks to the daily 40acts generosity challenge and ask God to empower you to do all the good you are able to do.

Wisdom – ready to pursue wisdom

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act. (Proverbs 3:27)

Introduction

Gold was valuable in biblical times and remains so today, held by most central banks and considered a universal currency. When we read that wisdom 'yields better returns than gold' (Proverbs 3:14), we know what that says about its worth. Proverbs 3 introduces us to wisdom personified and makes the case that she holds the secret to a God-pleasing and fulfilled life.

**The aim**

- ➔ To consider the characteristics of godly wisdom
- ➔ To discuss ways we can put wisdom into action
- ➔ To compare and contrast godly and worldly wisdom
- ➔ To explore the blessings of living wisely

Preparation

There is no preparation needed for the icebreaker this week.

Activity

Send one person out of the room. As a group, choose an adverb, such as grumpily, confidently, slyly or sweetly. When the person comes back in, get them to ask questions which you answer in the manner of the word. Continue until the word has been guessed. You could use 'foolishly' and 'wisely' but try not to make it too obvious!

Read

*Blessed are those who find wisdom,
those who gain 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.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honour.
Her ways are pleasant ways,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed. (Proverbs
3:13–18)*

Reflection

Let me introduce you to Mr Worldly Wisdom. He's young – we highly value youthful insight these days – and he's well dressed, charming and confident. He's all about diversifying risk, maximising profit and looking after Number One. He makes a lot of persuasive but empty promises about happiness and, although he's polite at first, he's quick to lose his temper if he's crossed. Now you know what he looks like, you'll see him everywhere. Most people you know make decisions based on his advice.

Lady Wisdom, who we meet in Proverbs, couldn't be more different. She doesn't mince her words: 'How long will you who are simple love your simple ways?' (1:22). She's demanding: 'Repent at my rebuke!' (1:23). She's as old as time (3:19). And she's peaceful, loving and trustworthy. She is portrayed as the key to a good, righteous and blessed life.

Proverbs urges us to resist the lure of worldly wisdom and resolutely seek out true wisdom. The biblical definition of wisdom is living in a way that honours and glorifies God. It is entirely unrelated to IQ, formal education or age, and it is given to anyone who seeks it: 'If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you' (James 1:5).

King Solomon was known far and wide for his great wisdom. Early in his reign, God said to him, 'Ask for whatever you want me to give you' (2 Chronicles 1:7). Rather than requesting long life, the gruesome deaths of his enemies or piles of gold (or three more wishes!), he replied, 'Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people' (2 Chronicles 1:10). Because he asked for it, God gave him wisdom that is still admired today. Wisdom is a gift from God, but we must ask for and seek after it. Look at how many imperatives there are in this week's passage: find wisdom, gain understanding, take hold, hold fast.

Worldly wisdom dictates that we invest our resources so they grow and make us richer, and, we hope, safer. It urges us to hoard and protect our assets, be they financial, material or personal, storing them up for ourselves and our immediate family. But godly wisdom leads us into radical, sacrificial generosity – the kind that gives glory to God.

Questions

Vital

- How is biblical wisdom different from worldly wisdom?
- What does it look like to seek wisdom? How do we do it?
- What returns might we expect from an investment in wisdom?

Reflective

- Is there a wise and a foolish way of being generous?
- Think of a person you consider wise. What is it about them and how they live that speaks to you of wisdom?
- Look back over the passage and note the characteristics of Lady Wisdom. What else would you say about her from your life's learning about wisdom?

Practical

- Share an example of something that is wise in a biblical sense but would be considered ridiculous by a financial adviser.
- Why is it wise to be generous?

Prayer

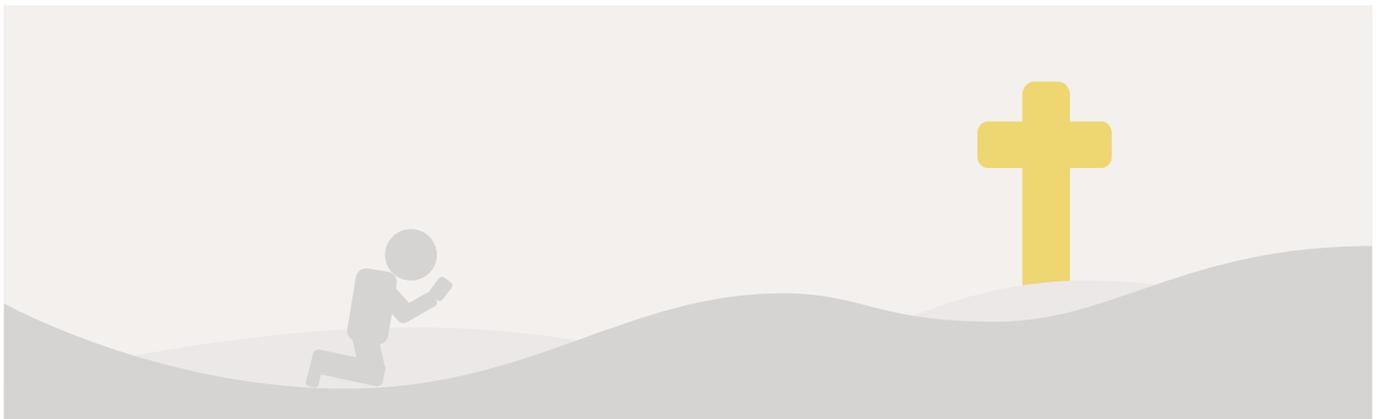
God of unsearchable wisdom, make us wise. Forgive our foolish impulses and instincts and lead us down straight paths, for the sake of your glory and your kingdom. Amen.

Humility – ready to put others first

Wisdom's instruction is to fear the Lord, and humility comes before honour. (Proverbs 15:33)

Introduction

'Pride comes before a fall' is one of the most well-known proverbs, and one that, if we're honest, we secretly enjoy seeing play out when it doesn't involve us. There's something pleasing about seeing the arrogant brought down a few pegs. Pride puts us at risk of humiliation, but it also hinders generosity. This week we'll be looking at how humility leads to loving others as we love ourselves, and what we can do to become humble.

**The aim**

- ➔ To unpack what it means to be humble
- ➔ To explore the connection between humility and generosity
- ➔ To discover ways we can cultivate humility

Preparation

Write or type the following quotes and write or type another list on a separate piece of paper of the people who said them. Feel free to add to the list if you know of any amazing boasts from well-known figures.

Activity

Who said that?! Match the quotes to the names.

'I am a great looking, stable genius.' – Donald Trump

'You'll never defeat me! I'll return when you least expect it.'
Master Vile, Power Rangers

'Some people are just born stars. You either have it or you don't and I definitely have it.' – Lady Gaga

'Don't say I'm not talented. If you hadn't noticed, I wasn't made, I was found.' – Justin Bieber

'I always knew I was special.' – Cristiano Ronaldo

'I am the greatest! I am the greatest thing that ever lived!'
Muhammed Ali

'I'm the king of the jungle, the jungle VIP.'
King Louie, The Jungle Book

'Please don't hate me because I'm beautiful.'
The Notorious B.I.G.

'I'm too sexy for my shirt.' – Right Said Fred

'I am smarter than the average bear.' – Yogi Bear

Read

Acts 6:1–7

*He mocks proud mockers
but shows favour to the humble and oppressed.
(3:34)*

*Wisdom's instruction is to fear the Lord,
and humility comes before honour. (15:33)*

*Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall.
Better to be lowly in spirit along with the oppressed
than to share plunder with the proud. (16:18–19)*

*Humility is the fear of the Lord;
its wages are riches and honour and life. (22:4)*

*Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence,
and do not claim a place among his great men;
it is better for him to say to you, 'Come up here,'
than for him to humiliate you before his nobles.
(25:6–7)*

Reflection

In the UK, we tend to frown on overt bragging. We are more likely to fish for compliments from others by making self-deprecating remarks about our accomplishments. Watching politicians try to sell themselves at election time or reality TV contestants make the case for keeping them in the competition is excruciatingly awkward. They know, and we know, that boasting just doesn't work for us as a culture and viewers are more likely to hate them for it than be convinced they are as amazing as they say. The fact we don't openly show off doesn't mean we aren't full to the brim of toxic pride though, or that pride isn't celebrated and encouraged in our culture. It just manifests more subtly.

Pride leads us to think we are worth more than others. 40acts takes us back to what Jesus identified as the greatest commandments: to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves. Humility enables us to serve others and to care for needs beyond our own. We don't need to wait for painful circumstances to humble us; Proverbs shows us how, with God's help, we can develop humility as a mark of character. Here are three ways from today's reading.

Firstly, we can deepen our knowledge of God. An ant who has even an inkling of the size of a human is going to realise it is small by comparison. Likewise, to grasp anything of God's majesty is to see ourselves in scale. Humility is the only response to seeing our place in the grand scheme of things, and it leads to a respectful fear of God (15:33).

Secondly, we can seek out the oppressed and avoid the proud (16:19). Jean Vanier founded the L'Arche communities on the basis of total equality and mutual respect between those with and without mental disabilities. In his book *Community and Growth* he wrote, 'If we are to grow in

love, the prisons of our egoism must be unlocked. This implies suffering, constant effort and repeated choices.' In the presence of the vulnerable and oppressed, we are confronted by our common humanity and our own weakness.

Thirdly, we can put humility into practice until it comes naturally. Proverbs 25:6 illustrates this by suggesting you don't push yourself forward in royal company, risking a public put down. Hang back, and maybe the king will call you forward (25:7). Humble behaviour is not far behind true humility.

Questions

Vital

- What does it mean to be humble, and what does it not mean?
- Have any of the 40acts challenges so far required you to face your pride?
- What do you understand by the statement 'Humility is the fear of the Lord' (22:4)?

Reflective

- Share a story about a time you learnt a lesson in humility. What has been the long-term result?
- What does it mean to love others as ourselves?
- Think about someone you know who is genuinely humble. How do you see this quality manifested in their life?

Practical

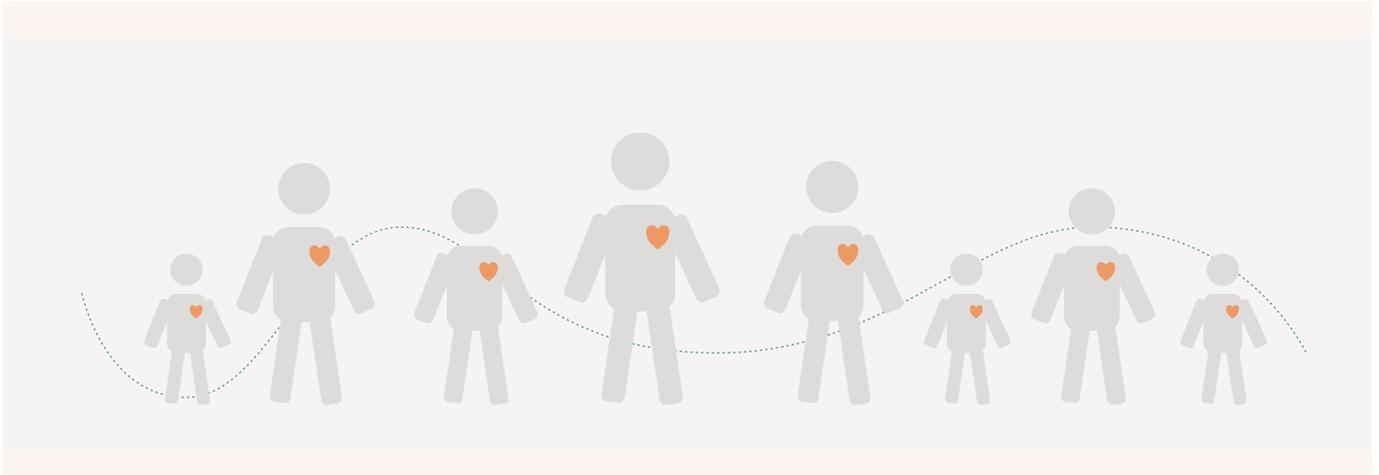
- Are there any more ways you can think of to develop humility?
- Who do you know who could be described as 'oppressed' (3:34)? How can you come alongside them, learn from them and offer them your support?
- Think of ways you can put others first in this coming week.

Prayer

Lord, open my eyes to your power, your majesty and your glory so I can see myself in a proper perspective. Forgive me for my pride and arrogance and show me how to be humble before you. Amen.

Friendship – ready to be a good friend*A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity. (Proverbs 17:17)***Introduction**

Romantic love gets a lot of attention, and advice about dating and marriage is not hard to come by. But how much consideration do we give friendship? Friendship at its best can make life bearable, light up dark days, make us better people and teach us about God's love. We'll be exploring what wisdom Proverbs has to say about what makes a good friend.

**The aim**

- ➔ To think about how to be a good friend
- ➔ To consider the ways friends influence our lives
- ➔ To look at the cost of being a friend to someone in a hard place

Activity

Take turns pulling a piece of paper out of the bowl and telling the group about someone who fits the description you've selected.

Preparation

Put each of these on a separate piece of paper, fold them up and put them in a bowl. Feel free to add any more you can think of.

- 📄 A friend who has stuck by me in hard times
- 📄 A friend who I've had since childhood
- 📄 A friend who brings out my silly side
- 📄 A friend who is completely different to me
- 📄 A friend who I've made in the last year
- 📄 A friend who is of another generation
- 📄 A friend who lives a long way away
- 📄 A friend who encourages me in my faith
- 📄 A friend who I could call in the middle of the night
- 📄 A friend who I made in unusual circumstances
- 📄 A friend I wish I had stayed in touch with

Read

*A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for a time of adversity. (17:17)*

*One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.
(18:24)*

*One who loves a pure heart and who speaks with
grace
will have the king for a friend. (22:11)*

*Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person,
do not associate with one easily angered... (22:24)*

*Better is open rebuke
than hidden love.
Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses. (27:5-6)*

*Do not forsake your friend or a friend of your family,
and do not go to your relative's house when disaster
strikes you –
better a neighbour nearby than a relative far away.
(27:10)*

*As iron sharpens iron,
so one person sharpens another. (27:17)*

Reflection

Friendship is one of the great joys of life and also the source of a lot of pain and making new friends doesn't necessarily get easier in adulthood. Proverbs has a lot to say on this matter – it is ancient wisdom that has stood the test of time and speaks powerfully into an era where the word 'friend' has been co-opted and degraded by Facebook.

Proverbs tells us that a good friend is faithful in adversity (17:17). To stick by someone when they suffer is costly. When we care for someone, we hurt when they hurt; it is easier to sidle off somewhere less risky.

Proverbs tells us a good friend is reliable (18:24). This might mean something as small as showing up on time or keeping a confidence, or as major as promising to accompany a friend to all their hospital appointments and still doing it when they have more than either of you could have predicted.

Proverbs tells us that a good friend takes the risk of telling hard truths (27:5-6). Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to say something that we know will hurt at first but which in the long run will help. This is a scary thing to do because our friend may lash out or withdraw. But 'iron sharpens iron' (27:17) and an honest friend can enable growth in maturity and character.

Cultivating strong friendships is better insurance than any

you can buy on the open market. Most of us are happy to be generous to our friends, and this week's 40acts challenges shouldn't be too hard for that reason. Let's not forget, though, that Jesus challenges us to love not only our friends but our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

Questions

Vital

- From the proverbs above, what are the qualities of a good friend?
- What would you add to that list?
- Proverbs talks a lot about choosing friends carefully because of how we are formed by those we spend time with. In what ways do our friends influence us?

Reflective

- What examples from your life, from the Bible or from literature can you give of 'wounds from a friend' (27:6) that could be trusted?
- In what ways are you a good friend? How could you become a better friend?
- Talk about any times you refused to be drawn into friendship with someone because you've sensed they would be a bad influence.

Practical

- Are any of your friends in particular need? In what ways are you supporting them?
- Give each other ideas for ways to show love to friends going through hard times.

Prayer

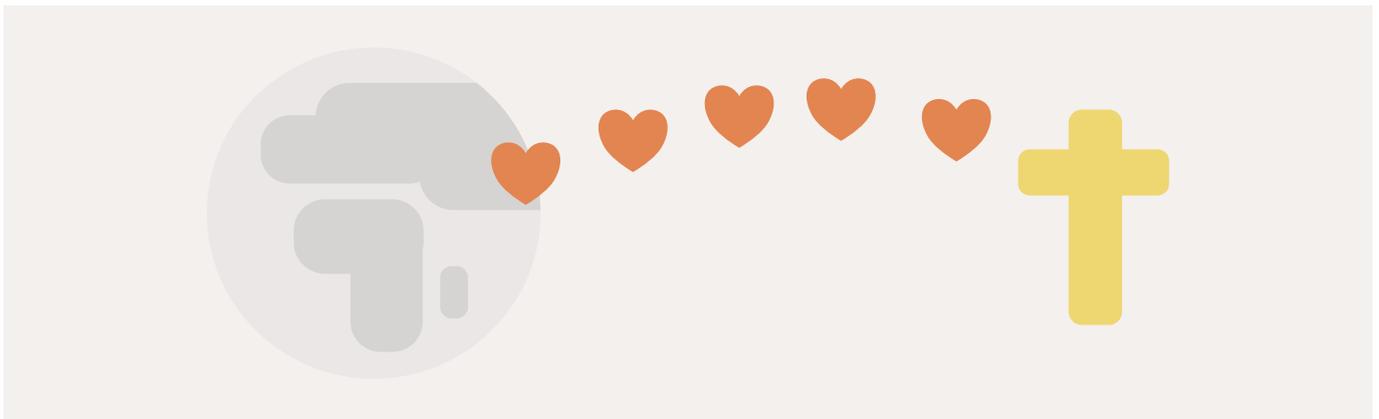
Lord, help us to grow in the art of friendship. We ask for the willingness to be sacrificially generous to our friends. And we lift before you our friends who are suffering right now. Amen.

Charity - ready to care for the poor

Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. (Proverbs 14:31)

Introduction

The Bible talks a lot about God's particular love of the poor, weak and vulnerable. If we are serious about following Jesus, we will do what we can to meet needs where we find them, to fight oppression and to treat everyone with honour and respect. 40acts is about tangible, practical acts of generosity to others. It is about doing what it is in our power to do, in Jesus' name.

**The aim**

- ➔ To identify 'the poor' in our own context
- ➔ To consider the biblical mandate to care for the needy
- ➔ To explore what Proverbs says about what we can do to help

Activity

Thread a ring on to a long piece of string and tie a knot. Get one person to stand in the middle and everyone else to hold on to the string. Pass the ring from one person to another as subtly as you can. The person in the middle needs to guess whose hand the ring is in. If they are right, that person then goes in the middle for the next round.

Preparation

You will need a ball of string and a ring.

Read

Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God. (14:31)

Better to be lowly in spirit along with the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud. (16:19)

Whoever mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker; whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished. (17:5)

The poor are shunned by all their relatives – how much more do their friends avoid them! Though the poor pursue them with pleading, they are nowhere to be found. (19:7)

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done. (19:17)

Rich and poor have this in common: The Lord is the Maker of them all. (22:2)

The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor. (22:9)

Do not exploit the poor because they are poor and do not crush the needy in court, for the Lord will take up their case and will exact life for life. (22:22–23)

Reflection

The proverbs we are looking at this week answer three questions concerning care of the poor.

1. Who are the poor?
The poor, in these proverbs, are 'the lowly in spirit', 'the oppressed' (16:9), and 'the needy' (22:22). In our society, one of the most developed and privileged in the world, there are still people sleeping on the streets, using food banks to stay alive, shut away in immigration centres under threat of deportation, crippled by debt and unable to find work. Financial poverty leads to disempowerment, anxiety, reduced life expectancy and ill physical and mental health. As long as humans are sinful, poverty will persist – in every era, and in every country of the world.
2. As Christians, why must we care for them?
God cares so much about the poor that he takes our treatment of them personally: if we dishonour them, we dishonour him. As Jesus taught, if we feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned and look after the sick, it is as though we did those things for him (Matthew 25:37–40). Another reason we must care for the poor is because there is blessing if we do (Proverbs 22:9) and punishment if we don't (17:5). Finally, we care for the poor because of our common humanity. We might like

to think a great chasm splits it into us and them, but 'the Lord is the Maker of [us] all' (22:2). There but for the grace of God go I...

3. How do we care for them?
The first thing that probably comes to mind for most of us is giving money, and that is not a bad thing. We can and should be as financially generous to those in need as we possibly can be. There are all kinds of ways to do this, whether directly or via charities and organisations better set up than we are to make a lasting difference. But Proverbs reminds us that care involves other things: kindness (14:21), presence and solidarity (16:19) and fair and just treatment (22:22–23).

Questions

Vital

- Who and where are 'the poor' in your community?
- Why do you think God cares so much about how the vulnerable are treated?
- How are the poor oppressed in our society? What can we do about this?

Reflective

- What difference might it make to our treatment of the poor if we had a deeper understanding of what we have in common – that we are all created by God?
- How do you understand the extent of your responsibilities towards those less fortunate than you?

Practical

- List all the things you can think of that are being done for the needy in your area.
- Discuss amongst yourselves something you could do for the poor as a group. For example, you could look into running a holiday lunch club at your church (<https://www.tlg.org.uk/your-church/make-lunch>).

Prayer

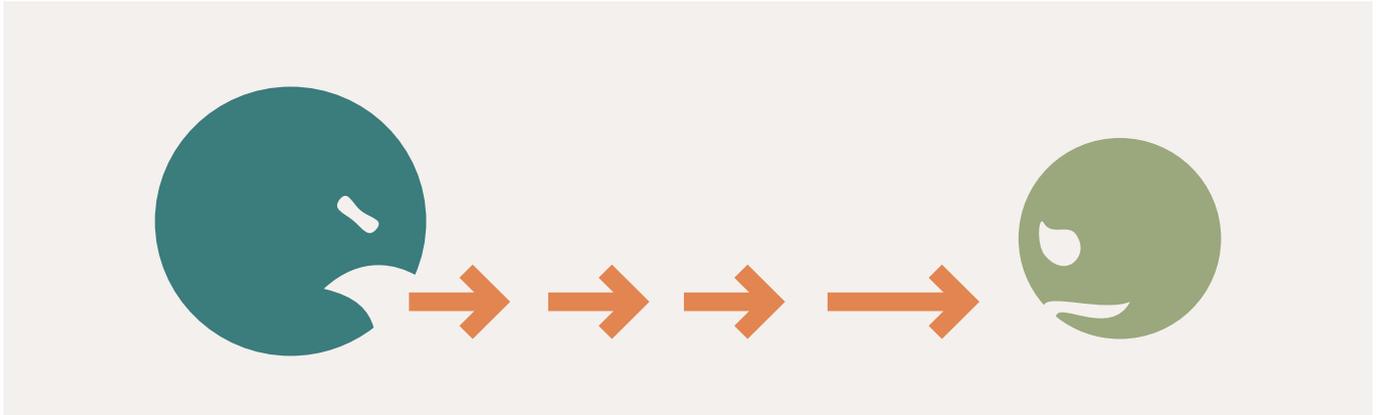
Lord, forgive us for our lack of generosity for, compassion toward and understanding of the poor. Help us to see them as you see them and to give you glory in the way we behave and think. Thank you that you do not value people according to their status or resources but love everyone because you made us all. Amen.

Words – ready to speak kind words

The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Proverbs 12:18)

Introduction

Was there ever a less true saying than ‘sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never harm me’? How about these words? You’re fired. I want a divorce. You are ugly. I hate you. Asylum request denied. Words can cause immeasurable harm; conversely, they can be an unstoppable force for good. This week we are exploring the impact of what we say.

**The aim**

- ➔ To look at what Proverbs says about good and bad speech
- ➔ To think about ways to control our tongues and how we can use them for blessing

Preparation

You will need enough paper and pens for every person in your group to have one each.

Activity

The game of consequences: each person writes a line at a time, before folding the paper to cover their writing and passing it to the person next to them.

1. [A boy's name] met...
2. [a girl's name]...
3. at [place/event].
4. He said...
5. She said...
6. And the consequence was...

Read aloud the completed stories.

Read

*The words of the reckless pierce like swords,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (12:18)*

*Whoever conceals hatred with lying lips
and spreads slander is a fool.
Sin is not ended by multiplying words,
but the prudent hold their tongues.
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 sense. (10:18–21)*

*Without wood a fire goes out;
without a gossip a quarrel dies down.
As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire,
so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.
The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;
they go down to the inmost parts.
Like a coating of silver dross on earthenware
are fervent lips with an evil heart.
Enemies disguise themselves with their lips,
but in their hearts they harbour deceit.
Though their speech is charming, do not believe
them, for seven abominations fill their hearts.
Their malice may be concealed by deception,
but their wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.
Whoever digs a pit will fall into it;
if someone rolls a stone, it will roll back on them.
A lying tongue hates those it hurts,
and a flattering mouth works ruin. (26:20–28)*

Reflection

Sentences that begin 'I don't want to be mean but...' never end well. And they beg the question: if you don't want to be mean, why would you be? Unless there is something wrong with our frontal lobes, most of us have the ability to control our impulses. We may joke about having no filters, but we do have filters. We choose the words we say.

There are many proverbs about 'the tongue' because words have enormous power. They can 'pierce like swords' or bring healing (12:18); they can nourish (10:21) or bring ruin (20:28); they can escalate conflict (26:21) or end it (26:20). The 40 acts challenges involving words are no less impactful than the actions. Think about the last time you felt a stab of emotional pain or a bubble of joy. Chances are you were responding to something someone had said. When someone says something generous, it feels like you have been given a gift. This week's proverbs lay out a number of ways we can cause harm with our speech, and from these we can infer how to do good. Rather than being reckless, we can be cautious and careful. Something we often say to children is the old chestnut: 'If you can't say something nice, say nothing at all!' Most of us would benefit from the practice of counting to ten before replying to something hurtful. Once the words are out, they can't be pulled back in.

Instead of passing on gossip, we can shut it down. The Oxford Dictionary's definition of gossip is 'reports about other people, typically involving details which are not confirmed as true'. These reports can spread like wildfire because in our fallenness we derive pleasure from salacious speculation. We need to discipline ourselves to hold our tongues and close our ears.

We can be kind and not malicious, tell the truth and not lie, be honest and not flatter. These choices will make the world a better place. These choices honour God and bless those around us. Let's choose our words well.

Questions

Vital

- Why are words so powerful?
- What can we do to get better at controlling what we say?
- What examples can you share of being nourished by words?

Reflective

- How does 'a flattering mouth [work] ruin' (26:28)?
- How can you judge whether 'fervent lips' conceal an 'evil heart' (26:23)?

Practical

- Who can you bless with words of kindness, encouragement, insight or comfort?
- What situations are you in where you need to hold your tongue? Commit to staying silent and see what happens.

Prayer

God, you have created us in your image and given us the gift of language. Help us use it wisely. Show us when to speak and when to stay silent. Forgive us for the wounds we have inflicted through hasty or unkind words. Amen.

Money – ready to be generous with our money

*One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.
(Proverbs 11:24)*

Introduction

It has been said that the best way to find out what someone cares about is to look through their bank statements. How we spend our money matters to God – it is one of the truest tests of how much we love him. Many of us in the developed world have the luxury of extra cash once we've covered the basics of food and housing. The challenge of Proverbs is to resist the urge to keep it all for ourselves and instead choose a life of radical generosity.



The aim

- ➔ To unpack what it means to 'honour the Lord with your wealth' (3:9)
- ➔ To look at some of the financial principles in Proverbs
- ➔ To face the challenge of the call to be generous

Preparation

For today's activity you will need flour, a shallow dish, a plate, a butter knife, and a £2 coin.

Activity

Fill the dish with flour and pack it down as tightly as you can. Cover it with a plate and turn it over. Remove the bowl. You should now have a 'flour cake'. Put the £2 coin on it in the centre. Each person takes a turn cutting off a piece of the cake with the butter knife. The person who causes the cake to collapse and the coin to fall must pick up the coin with their teeth. If they can manage to get it, they can keep the money.

Read

*Honour 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)*

*The desire of the righteous ends only in good,
but the hope of the wicked only in wrath.
One person gives freely, yet gains even more;
another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.
A generous person will prosper;
whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.
People curse the one who hoards grain,
but they pray God's blessing on the one who is
willing to sell. (11:23–26)*

*The greedy bring ruin to their households,
but the one who hates bribes will live. (15:27)*

*Do not wear yourself out to get rich;
do not trust your own cleverness.
Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone,
for they will surely sprout wings
and fly off to the sky like an eagle. (23:4–5)*

Reflection

American televangelist Creflo Dollar has a private jet, two Rolls-Royce cars, several multi-million-dollar homes and a reported net worth of over 26 million dollars. He solicits gifts and donations on the basis that if you give, you get even more back, and he teaches that it is God's will for everyone to be materially prosperous.

You could possibly make that argument from the proverbs we've just read, but before you do, remember this: proverbs are observations, not predictions or promises. And all Scripture must be read in the context of the whole. There are more places in the Bible that warn of the dangers of money than extoll its wonders, and Jesus taught his followers to pursue treasure in heaven, not worldly riches.

Whether we have a lot of cash or a little, there are some great principles here for using our finances in a way that honours God. The most important is to be generous – to give freely (11:24). There's a pragmatic reason for this: if you support others when you are in the black, they are likely to support you when you are in the red. But beyond pragmatism, we honour God by being generous because he cares for the poor and because he knows we are liable to become slaves and worshipers of money. We are all too inclined to 'wear [ourselves] out to get rich' (23:4) or to foolishly believe the lie that the more you earn the happier you will be.

Other principles here include not hoarding, not being greedy, not paying bribes, and remembering that fortunes can be made and lost in a heartbeat – all earthy, practical wisdom and worth heeding. The ultimate purpose of life is to bring glory to God. Let's 'honour the Lord with [our] wealth' (3:9).

Questions

Vital

- What does it look like for us to honour God with our money?
- How can you explain the fact that there are huge numbers of people who remain or become poor even though they are generous?
- In what ways, other than financially, might a generous person prosper?

Reflective

- Can you share an example of a time you experienced the truth of Jesus' teaching that it is more blessed to give than to receive?
- What riches to rags stories can you think of? How can we live mindful of the transitory nature of wealth?

Practical

- Is there a person, a project or a cause that you or your group could support financially and in prayer?
- What have the generous actions of this year's 40acts taught you about your approach to money? Are there any changes you plan to make to your regular spending as a result?

Prayer

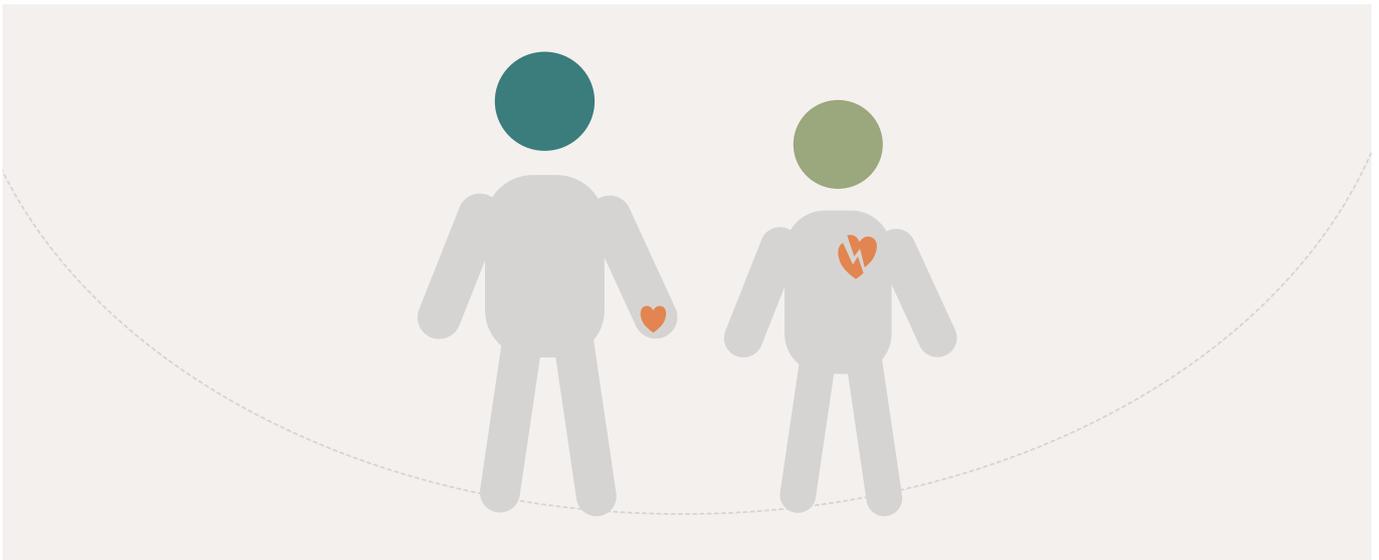
God, you are a generous God. You bless us extravagantly and beyond all we could have imagined. We ask for your heart for the poor. We ask that you would free us from the love of money. We desire to honour you with our resources. Thank you for your mercy and forgiveness for our greed and fear. Set us free to worship you with all we have. In the name of your Son, Jesus, amen.

Reconciliation – ready to take the first step

Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs. (Proverbs 10:12)

Introduction

There is much wisdom in Proverbs about how to live at peace with our fellow humans. We need it, because conflict comes more naturally to us than peace. When we have been wronged, our default is to crawl away and lick our wounds or to fight back. The Holy Spirit empowers us to override our instincts though, to forgive, to make amends, to apologise, to overlook – in other words to love as God loves us.

**The aim**

- ➔ To look at the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation
- ➔ To think about what it means to take the first step

Preparation

There is no preparation needed.

Activity

Think of examples of estrangement in films or novels. Discuss these questions:

- ❓ What was the initial conflict about?
- ❓ What prevented the characters resolving the conflict?
- ❓ How might you have behaved in their shoes?
- ❓ How did the estrangement impact the lives of the people directly involved?
- ❓ Were there wider consequences?

Read

*Hatred stirs up conflict,
but love covers over all wrongs. (10:12)*

*Fools mock at making amends for sin,
but goodwill is found among the upright. (14:9)*

*Better a patient person than a warrior,
one with self-control than one who takes a city.
(16:32)*

*A person's wisdom yields patience;
it is to one's glory to overlook an offence. (19:11)*

*What a person desires is unfailing love;
better to be poor than a liar. (19:22)*

*It is to one's honour to avoid strife,
but every fool is quick to quarrel. (20:3)*

*Many claim to have unfailing love,
but a faithful person who can find? (20:6)*

*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. (25:21–22)*

Reflection

A woman lives in an apartment with a mother and father who haven't spoken to each other in two years. They can't afford double the rent so they live alone together. Another is estranged from her father, whose new wife made him choose between them. A man comes in to work on the day his mother dies, seemingly unaffected. They haven't spoken in twenty years.

In the proverbs we're looking at this week, there is a long list of the ways things can go sour: hatred, wrongs, sin, offences, lies, strife, quarrels. Left unresolved, these can lead to bitterness and the death of relationships. The sad and shocking truth is that relationships can break down permanently if neither party takes the first step towards reconciliation.

Ever since the fall, as described in the first chapters of the book of Genesis, conflict has been inevitable. The only person who will never let us down is Jesus. What is not inevitable is our response to difficult situations and relationships. We have it in our power to find healing, restoration and forgiveness. To live at peace with each other requires sacrifice and courage. Taking the first step towards someone who has hurt us is one of the most generous acts imaginable. It requires us to overlook offences (19:11), and to treat people better than they deserve (25:21). The result may well be to shock their consciences into action – the burning coals of our generosity igniting dormant shame (25:22).

The good news is that we don't have to do it in our own strength. In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul talks about qualities, or 'fruits', that naturally result if we live by the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Many of them appear in these proverbs in relation to resolving conflict: love, patience, self-control and faithfulness. The Spirit in us produces these virtues, which enable us to seek reconciliation, even on the rare occasions when we are entirely faultless.

Questions

Vital

- ? What is the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation?
- ? What does it mean for love to cover all wrongs (Proverbs 10:12)?
- ? In which situations is reconciliation impossible or ill-advised?

Reflective

- ? What can we learn about reconciliation from the life of Jesus?
- ? Who do you need to take a step towards?
- ? Share stories of relationships you have seen restored. How did it come about?

Practical

- ? In what ways can we 'avoid strife' (20:3) (genuinely, not by being passive aggressive!)?
- ? What might a first step towards reconciliation actually involve?

Prayer

Father God, you loved us before we loved you. You sent your Son into a world that would reject him and he laid down his life willingly. You have taken more steps towards us than we deserve. Help us forgive as you forgave us, help us let go of grudges and bitterness, and bring about healing and restoration in our conflicted relationships, to your glory. Amen.

Acknowledgements

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