

WISDOM CALLS (PROVERBS 17:14)

The beginning of strife is like releasing water

Friendships, family relations and even religious brotherhood all face moments of distress, often when self-interest and entrenched positions or personal idiosyncrasies create conflict among otherwise reasonable people.

No one wants to see friendships dissolved or homes broken. Only the evil wish for congregations to split when the divisive issues are more personal than doctrinal. Yet it happens anyway in every category.

Especially in marriage, the combatants are often made to think about what could have been done differently to keep from reaching the point of no return. Usually both parties can own some of the blame, but what might have been done or left undone that could have led to a different result?

Sometimes the answer is all the way back at the beginning, or at least far enough back that the problem itself is still in its embryonic stage. So often, when the damage is done and is seemingly irreversible, our pride and hurt abates just enough that we realize we were fighting over nothing and allowing insignificant issues to tear us apart. No one was willing to compromise anymore; no one had any patience left. Things were said that people didn't really mean but couldn't "un-say."

There is simple wisdom in the Old Testament proverbs that serves to prevent this sort of divisiveness: "The beginning of strife is like releasing water; Therefore, stop contention before a quarrel starts" (Proverbs 17:14).

A breach in a dam or even a leaky pipe in the kitchen are trouble enough when but a trickle is passing through. Water leaks do not tend to repair themselves, nor do they usually just get better in time. The only easy time to fix the problem is when it is new and small; if allowed to drip, the leak will turn large and the repair will be costly and perhaps even impossible. Strife is just like water in that both are easier to release than to recapture.

Strife includes anger and wrath, but it goes beyond that to an abiding dislike and distrust cast at another person. Contentions and quarrels follow, even if violence never does. Hatred can become the reality of the situation even if that abhorrent word is never applied by the combatants.

Marriages descend into bickering and unhappiness, friendships wane and are terminated, churches are swept into partisan disharmony. Repairs are possible, but costly and difficult at this stage, for wisdom was calling when the leak was but small. Once strife is released, it is much harder to take back.

"So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20). "But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God" (First Corinthians 11:16).

Additional readings:

Monday, February 5 – Numbers 20:1-13

Tuesday, February 6 – Colossians 3:1-17

Wednesday, February 7 – Matthew 18

Questions:

1. When is the best time to stop a problem from occurring or at least keep it from becoming a larger problem?
2. What can happen when a slow dripping water leak is left unattended? What is the application?
3. What had Moses allowed to affect his thinking in Numbers 20? What kind of response did it create? What did it cost him?
4. Strife not only includes anger and wrath but where else can it lead us?
5. If we have struggled with these issues in the past, what great reminder is found in Colossians 3?
6. According to Matthew 18, what can help in stopping the problem from growing?
7. How should we react to one who is simply being contentious? (1 Corinthians 11:16)

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A friend loves at all times

Perhaps fair-weather friends are more common than relatives who do not show up when you need them most.

Perhaps.

The ideal is somewhere on a nobler plane, however, where friends and brothers are there for you even in the worst of times.

Wisdom calls: "A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity."

It is easy to be both a friend and a brother to someone when everything is going well. It's even easier when that friend or brother is doing something for you. The real test of both friendship and brotherhood comes when a serious need for assistance arises. It is just as true that a friend in need is a friend indeed.

The greatest application of the proverb is not necessarily in teaching us how to choose friends; brothers—whether after the flesh or the spirit—really cannot be selected anyway. The force of the axiom is in teaching us what kind of friends and brethren to be, especially for those of like, precious faith.

We must endeavor to be there for our friends in good times and bad and to show up when our brethren face adversity, that we might lighten their loads somehow.

Although it might cost us time, money and emotion, we show up when a friend or brother is felled by illness, accident, sorrow or disappointment. We offer more than shallow platitudes and self-serving excuses. We roll up our sleeves and attack the need with a believer's zeal.

Here, especially, is where faith without works is truly dead.

"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James 2:14-16)

Wisdom knows that apathy is usually repaid in kind, but the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches that believers do the right thing for its own reward (see Luke 10:30-37). "But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (First John 3:17-18).

We must be true on the other side of the equation as well, not being so proud that we refuse to accept the help of others when we really need it.

Additional Readings:

Thursday, February 8 – John 15

Friday, February 9 – Ecclesiastes 4

Saturday, February 10 – 1 Samuel 20

Questions:

1. Do all “friends” love at all times? What cautious understanding should that lead us to?
2. What does “and a brother is born for adversity” mean?
3. Should the Proverb only be thought of as a warning about how others may not live up to the ideal? What may be the more important lesson?
4. What did Jesus teach about the love of a friend in John 15?
5. What do we need, according to Ecclesiastes 4, to help us through life?
6. What should faith lead us to? (James 2:14-16) We should not love in words only but in what? (1 John 3:17-18)
7. In what ways was the friendship between David and Jonathan demonstrated? (1 Samuel 20 – you can also add 1 Samuel 18 for greater context)