

Prayer

How can we praise You enough, Lord God?
 We are amazed at Your love and Your forgiveness of all our sins;
 We are overwhelmed by the gracious help of Your Spirit at all times;
 We are astounded by the vision of Glory given us within Your Word;
 We are blown away by our sure inheritance of the Kingdom of God!
 We worship You, Lord God! Father, Son and Holy Spirit: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Houses

Give thanks to God for the preciousness of home, and all that it means. Give thanks for the memories you have of your home and other places where you have lived.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks to God for His mercies whilst travelling
- Pray for people who are in despair or suicidal
- Pray for the International Monetary Fund and its responsibilities

Meditation

Be present with us, Lord:

When we are faced with difficult situations;
 When others turn against us and reject us;
 When the things we have planned collapse;
 When we do not know which way to turn;
 When time passes and a deadline is not met;
 When relationships get worse, with angry words.

For You alone can enable us

To turn the impossible into what is possible;
 To help us stand back from hurting others;
 To build us up again, with lessons learned;
 To let You take the strain and learn to trust You;
 To enable us to be patient in all situations;
 To guard our words and repair relationships.

The Spirit can do all this in us!

Bible Study - Proverbs 3:27-35

- ²⁷ Do not hold back what is properly due to those who have a right to it, when the truth is that you have it with you.
 when it is in your power to do this
- ²⁸ Do not say to your neighbour, 'Go away and come back later; I will give it to you tomorrow.'
- ²⁹ Do not plan evil against your neighbour who lives beside you in trust.
- ³⁰ Do not quarrel with anyone for no good reason,

when nothing has been done to harm you.

³¹ *Do not be jealous of men of violence and do not choose to follow their ways;*

³² *for the LORD detests those who are devious, but the honest enjoy His counsel.*

³³ *The curse of the LORD is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the place where the righteous live.*

³⁴ *He scorns those who are scornful, but to the humble he shows kindness.*

³⁵ *The wise will inherit honour, but the foolish will have their stupidity exposed.*

Review

Wisdom appeals to us to learn about the moral nature of the world in which we live. People cannot live with each other unless there is fairness and honesty within community life, and it does not matter what community of people you are talking about of whatever time or place, the underlying truth of Wisdom's teaching here is essential for successful human relationships and any kind of common endeavour or work. This passage talks firstly about issues of honesty and trust between people who live together in community (3:27,28), then we are told about the consequences of the pursuit of violence and dishonesty (3:29-31). Lastly, using the standard technique of comparison between the wicked and the righteous, Wisdom tells us about the Lord's response to such behaviour (3:33-35) and reinforces the alternative godly path of the honesty, righteousness, humility and wisdom.

Almost every religious system or community way of life the world has ever seen has had sayings and teachings that are little different from the underlying moral principles of decency and honesty found within this passage. However, the way Wisdom deals with it is fascinating and quite different from what we might expect, and it leads directly to a description of the way that the Lord is involved in human affairs. To begin with, verse 27 is a strangely awkward verse to translate, and many Bible versions of this are quite different, but the gist of it is that we are told not to hold on to things we have been loaned, using them for our own benefit when they really should be given back to the rightful owner. This principle follows on into the next verse (3:28) which chastises those who commit this sin exactly, by not returning something owed when they have been asked for it, even when they have it with them at the time of asking! The picture painted by this text is disarmingly realistic, and it would be fair to say that most of us have witnessed such a scenario at some time or other. We have either been infuriated by the dishonesty of the one who has made excuses for not doing what is right, or frustrated by seeing people offer untruths as excuses for failing to meet their clear obligations!

It is things like this that sow the seeds of disunity and mistrust within a family or within a community, and Wisdom recognises this in the next verse; 'do not plan evil against your neighbour ...'. This is a further powerful word in Scripture that tells us not to be devious in our dealings with others. The next two verses (3:30,31) demonstrate how such evils escalate in our midst and under our noses, talking of quarrelling, injustice, jealousy and violence in turn. Wisdom cautions against all of them, but the real value of the teaching of Proverbs here is the recognition of how evil works. It is sown in the 'little sins' people commit against each other, indeed, things people might easily forget providing they think we have 'got away with it'. Evil then grows bigger into full grown offence against others and an intolerance of the nature of community.

For this reason, Wisdom brings in the judgement of the Lord at this very point. The Lord 'detests' the deviousness whereby such things happen in a community, and which enable unhappiness, discontent and violence to grow amongst people. All of this is true in the natural moral law of the created world, but how much more tragic is this when it happens

amongst God's own people; for remember, these words were addressed to the people of Israel, for their edification and their learning.

A final series of three parallel Wisdom sayings completes the passage (and also chapter 3) and summarises the Lord's active response to such problems within His community. His blessing rests not on the 'house' of the wicked, but on the dwelling of the 'righteous'; and the Hebrew word for 'house' does not simply mean a building, but someone's whole sphere of life; work, rest, family, wealth and inheritance. Secondly, the Lord returns sin to those who practice it (3:34) but offers his Covenant kindness to those who refrain from such evil. And lastly, in the Lord's providence, those who follow the teachings of Wisdom receive 'honour', which could also mean 'glory'! However, those who turn away from the moral teaching of the Lord will be exposed within the community (3:35).

You might say that this is simple moral teaching with the added feature of divine threat as an incentive to act rightly. This Scripture is more than that, it is highly perceptive, and it is God's Wisdom which reaches out to us across the centuries and takes little interpretation for us to perceive its truth even today.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What are the little things that bring discontent and unhappiness into church communities?
2. How do we deal with the 'small sins' which we know we have been involved with? Do we know them, or do we need others to point them out?
3. How does the Lord work actively in the life of His people the Church, today?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

We will sometimes be aware that we have acted incorrectly by trying to 'get away with' something, from time to time, believing that no-one will suffer from our lack of returning an item borrowed, or using up a resource loaned so that it cannot be returned, for example. But we do not know, and sometimes we only find out the consequences of our actions if we are told by others that what we have done has caused distress or inconvenience. The message of this text is that to allow ourselves to behave in this way is wrong before God; we should always seek to act with integrity. This is a rare resource in our world; but if we live according to God's laws, then we will make a difference.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Read through this text and ask yourself whether it identifies any aspect of your life that may not be what it should be. Only you can make this assessment by God's grace, and only God can deal with the problem if you confess it!*
- *Pray for any communities you know that are hurting because trust has been betrayed and people are struggling with relationships; this might be church, or a neighbourhood or a nation. You choose.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, there is so much that we should prayerfully bring to You concerning our lives and all we do. Take us, we pray, and infuse Your Spirit into every part of our being. Sort out the wrong and bring to light the right, so that we may live and work according to Your Wisdom; and make our lives an offering of prayer to You; AMEN