

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

August 9-15, 2020

Sermon Series: The Fine Art of Disagreement

Week Three: “Disagreement & Love”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have promised never to forsake or leave us. Accept our lives and ministry as living sacrifices to You and grant us strength to keep our promises to You. In the name of Christ, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Our culture today faces disagreements with great energy - not all of it positive. Some disagreements tear down other people as arguments become name calling and finger pointing. Is it possible to have a difference with someone and love them? We Christians are called to it. Let's learn the fine art of disagreement.

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

On and off this year, we’ve been talking about cultivating in our lives “the mind of Christ.” Conflicts in life are unavoidable, but we can always alter the outcome in our approach. That is, we can disagree in love.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Proverbs 15:1-4 (A group member should read the passages aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

How are a gentle answer and a harsh word contrasted? (15:1)

How is the tongue of the wise contrasted with the mouth of the fool? (15:2)

Who all does God have His eyes on? (15:3)

What is the difference between a deceitful tongue and a tongue that brings healing? (15:4)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.

When we study Proverbs, we might wonder, are these sayings general observations, or ironclad statements of how the world works?

We might, then, also wonder in general about what kind of impact simple sayings are supposed to have on our lives.

When we notice the impact of words as the general theme of these verses, we might wonder – is the way we speak to other people really that powerful?

We might wonder about the picture of God as a kind of invisible observer in verse 3 and wonder whether God is “keeping score” or why God doesn’t intervene with the wicked.

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: 1 Kings 4:29-34; Proverbs 10:18-21; Proverbs 15:18; Proverbs 15:22; Proverbs 12:17; Proverbs 15:8; Proverbs 15:23

The book of Proverbs is part of the Bible’s “wisdom literature.” Wisdom literature, in general, is a vast body of written and oral sayings that has its roots deep in antiquity. Throughout history, certain people have been recognized for their wisdom. These people, often called “sages” or “wise men,” were often sought out for counsel. In the ancient world, they often served in official capacities in royal courts, because their advice was highly valued due to their deep insight into the ways of the world.

The proverbs themselves are typically sage observations about life. They often take the form of “rules” for success and happiness and are in a form that makes them easy to memorize. Wisdom writings and collections of proverbs had been in existence for a thousand years before Israel began making its own contributions to the genre. Egyptian wisdom writings have been discovered from 2450 BC, and from Mesopotamia well before the era of Abraham. But biblical wisdom literature began to be written down around 1000 BC, recording what had been passed orally for generations. It often resembles its non-biblical counterparts because wisdom’s teachings tend to be universal in application. King Solomon is traditionally given credit for more fully developing and codifying Israel’s wisdom writings (see 1 Kings 4:29-34). What made Israel’s wisdom literature unique was its insistence that following the teaching of the sages was an appropriate way to honor the God of Israel, Yahweh.

Many of the proverbs, like the ones in this week’s Scripture, are composed of short, pithy sayings which make acute observations about life. Many of them (like verses 1, 2, and 4 in this week’s reading) are in the structure called “antithetical” – two lines, where the second line states an idea opposite to the idea of the first line. This structure makes clear both the positive and the negative results of a given attitude or conduct. The clear conviction of the ancient sages is that there are only two ways to live – the way of the righteous/wise and the way of the wicked/foolish. The former leads to blessing, the latter

leads to judgment. Every choice has a consequence. However, we should not view proverbs as ironclad promises – their truths often depend on time and circumstances! To take a modern example – which is true: “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” or “Out of sight, out of mind”? The answer is circumstantially dependent, but that does not make the proverb any less apropos.

Today’s reading focuses on the theme of the use of human language, and the power of the spoken word. The ancient wisdom teachers taught their students to always use elegant or gracious language in their dealings with others – hence, “a gentle answer turns away wrath,” while a “harsh word stirs up anger.” Many other proverbs deal with this same reality – see 10:18-21 for another set of proverbs covering this issue. Many of these proverbs deal with the problems of gossip and slander, but the advice applies equally to the issue of disagreements, which so easily today slip into slander and gossip. The point is that our words can be used to feed, nourish, and even heal others, or they can be used to harm. Words can create, or words can destroy.

According to the proverbs, appropriate use of language includes teaching others (“The tongue of the wise commends knowledge”), resolving conflicts (“A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel” – Proverbs 15:18), providing wise counsel (“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” – Proverbs 15:22), to provide legal testimony (“A truthful witness gives honest testimony” – Proverbs 12:17), and, of course, for prayer (“the prayer of the upright pleases him” – Proverbs 15:8). Even proper language, though, as mentioned earlier, depends on time and circumstances – “a man finds joy in giving an apt reply – and how good is a timely word!” – Proverbs 15:23). Inappropriate use of language angers, lies, stirs up dissension, and curses others.

Part of the bottom line of the moral philosophy of the Proverbs is the understanding that God rewards the wise, righteous person when their words and actions help to create social order but punishes the wicked for disrupting social order. Proper speech coupled with righteous action is said to “delight” God, adding a level of divine authority to the wisdom sayings. Hence, in today’s reading, “the eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.” The incentive to live in obedience to the wisdom of the proverbs lies in the divine approval of this obedience – and God sees all! Essentially, God is the teacher of the wise sage, and the wise sage is simply passing on, through the Proverbs, the insights into “living well” that they have received from God. Ultimately, speech and language are important components of the wisdom teaching because they have the power to shape the behaviors that will create moral order, a stable society, and righteous living. At the same time, they also have the power to contribute to the chaos that continually threatens to undo that same society.

This is why the teaching of the proverbs is appropriate to the discussion of how Christians should behave in disagreements. Perhaps it is merely common sense, but if we pay attention to it, we really can impact the escalation, or de-escalation of arguments through the words we choose to use. A gentle answer really does turn away wrath, while a harsh word really does stir up anger. Let’s choose gentle answers. Let’s choose to use our tongues to commend knowledge and to bring healing, rather than to crush the spirit through a deceitful tongue. And let’s use the wisdom God makes available to us to recognize the difference between an “apt reply” or a “timely word,” and “stirring up dissension.”

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Do you hate conflict, or do you want conflict?

Are you more apt to respond in a disagreement with a gentle answer or a harsh word?

Whichever answer you gave, what were the ramifications of your response?

Have you ever considered that the way you responded may have honored or dishonored God?

How would such an understanding impact your future responses?

Have you ever been in a position to bring healing through your words? Or did you add to the hurt?

Have you ever been in a position to calm a quarrel through your words? Or did you stir up the dissension?

Do you believe that how you handle your personal disagreements has an impact on the Kingdom of God?

How can the way you handle disagreements provide a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, help us to learn to disagree in love. Make us wise in our interactions with others, so that our words turn away wrath, rather than stirring up anger. Give us the wisdom to know when our words are needed, and when it is better to keep quiet. We seek to become people who heal division, and who make Your Kingdom visible on earth. We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.