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Love Which Covers All Wrongs

So in the Old Testament scriptures, there are five books called the Wisdom Literature. In no particular order, these are Job, Ecclesiastes, Songs of Solomon, Psalms, and of course, Proverbs. These make up what is called the Wisdom Literature books.

One way to conceptualize what the Book of Proverbs is all about would be to use this title that many utilize of Proverbs, and that is this: "The Way the World Works." Proverbs shows us the way God's world works and how, as his image bearers, we can live in it with wisdom. These are the creator's words on the way things are and operate. All people, believers and unbelievers alike, can profit and benefit and gain wisdom and understanding about the way God has ordered his world.

For Christians in particular, it's interesting that there are 31 Proverbs. If you read a Proverb every day, every month, you would go through the Proverbs, and there would be tremendous wisdom that could be gleaned from such an undertaking. The Proverbs are immensely practical and offer wisdom on all manner of subjects, from human friendships to marriage, to sex, to romance, to happiness and joy, to anger, to speech, to money, to laziness, to parenting, to alcohol, to disputes. You name it, and Proverbs brings wisdom that we can access and apply to all areas of human life.

Now, Proverbs can be a little difficult for the preacher wanting to go chapter by chapter through the Proverbs. That's because most of the Proverbs are short, pithy sayings in a collection, but not necessarily bound together by any overarching theme, not obviously anyway. If you were to read through Proverbs chapter 10, you would see that there's all manner of subjects that are addressed.

So for today and the following two Sundays, instead of tackling a whole Proverb, as I probably would have liked to, we just want to select a few sayings from three chapters in the book of Proverbs and explore their meaning and application.

With these things said, cast your eyes down to verse 12 of Proverbs chapter 10, and there we read these words: "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions." So far reads God's word.

Well, as many of you, I hope, I have begun a new devotional Bible reading plan for the year ahead. As I've begun to work through Genesis again in the Old Testament, something that always strikes me about the narrative of Genesis is both the pace at which it will go along, often jumping hundreds or even thousands of years in a short space of time in the narrative of Genesis, but then also the way it can suddenly slow down to almost a grinding halt and focus on a particular person and specific details in various stories.

One of the places in Genesis we see this, what we call pace retardation, is most obvious in the many chapters dedicated to the story of Joseph in the latter chapters of Genesis, who was the favorite son of Jacob, as we learn in Genesis 37:3. Joseph had truly an unbelievable life. As you know, Joseph's older brothers hated him because he was their father's favorite son. They called Joseph the dreamer and they would mock him. One day they planned to kill him, but instead, as proposed by Judah, one of the brothers of Joseph, they sold Joseph to some passing Ishmaelites for 20 shekels of silver, and he ended up down in Egypt. You know the story.

Now, sometimes in my youth, I would bear a grudge against my brother over minor offenses—petty little things, really. But if you thought about that which Joseph had to suffer at the hands of his brothers and how justified he may have felt to bear a grudge against them for the rest of his life. You see, his own brothers staged his death and told their father Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast. Joseph found himself down in Egypt.

So think about Joseph's thought life for a moment. As he was taken against his will down to Egypt, do you think that he spent much time plotting how he would take revenge on his brothers if he ever had the opportunity? How would he exact retaliation for what they had done? Something remarkable occurs in the story of Joseph, however, and when the opportunity arose later in his life, Joseph shows not hatred, not the creation of further strife, but he shows love for his brothers who betrayed him. For those who meant him harm, he responded not with retaliation, but with forgiveness. Not with anger, but with peace.

And so when at last he got to see his brothers again in the providence of God, Joseph ends up second only to the Pharaoh in all of Egypt. Genesis 45 says these words: "He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it and the household of Pharaoh heard of it. Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph, is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Please come closer to me.' And they came closer, and he said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here. For God sent me before you to preserve life.'"

Think now of Proverbs 10:12 here. This morning we read of that which we see illustrated in the life of Joseph: "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions." Joseph chose the way of wisdom. Every day, friends, we are all presented with a similar choice in situations that we encounter voluntarily or involuntarily. We are asked this question: Will I respond with hatred? Even if it's not expressed from ourselves, will I respond with hatred in my heart? Or will I respond with love and cover wrongs?

Now, the wisdom of the world might tell Joseph that he had every reason to hate, that strife in the lives of his brothers is deserved, that he should exact revenge and level the scores with his later inherited power that came upon him. But this is not how God would have his people live. And so this morning we want to learn the lesson for ourselves.

But let me first address what this proverb does not mean. There are two things in particular. This proverb, this teaching we see in this proverb is not referring to that worldly kind of way that if you do some bad things, you can make up for it with love, as in love can cover your wrongs.

That is not what this proverb is about. This would be a horrible misreading of the passage, for that would make love out to be some kind of law which, if obeyed, makes you right with God and man. But this is seldom the case with man, and nothing could be further from the biblical gospel with respect to God. For to say that if we show love to cover our wrongs is to say that works can cover my sin, and we know that is not the case at all. So that is a wrong reading.

Another wrong interpretation of this proverb would say that to show love is to sweep sin and transgressions under the carpet, as it were, to act like sin doesn't really matter, because love covers all wrongs. And that would be another wrong interpretation.

Now, of course, this can't be right either, for as Jesus said, "If your brother sins, go to him and show his fault in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother" (Matthew 18:15). You see, sin is

serious, and there are times when the truly loving thing to do for someone is to expose in our brothers and sisters, sin. So that they might be sanctified in the Lord. To truly love your brother or sister means we're not going to be able to let sin slide by the wayside. It's going to take courage and great humility to call upon a fellow believer to repent and to confront sin. But you must be wise in this and ever so careful.

James, in his letter in James 5:19-20, draws from Proverbs 10:12 and he says these words: "My brethren, if anyone among you strays from the truth and turns one back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." So sin matters. Sin is serious, and it must be addressed at times.

So this proverb is not about sweeping sin under the rug at all. That's not what it's meaning. So the meaning is not love can atone for your transgressions, nor is it saying that love simply sweeps in under the carpet or makes little of it.

So what does this proverb mean? There's the question. What it means is, as another has aptly explained it, wisdom teaches that to love in this way is to draw a veil of love over the faults of others. To have wisdom, as in Proverbs 10:12, is to draw a veil over the faults and wrongs of others, even committed against you or others. To show love, the love which wisdom demands, will deny the flesh its want to harbor hatred, disdain, anger, and bitterness and resentfulness in our hearts, and will choose instead to draw a curtain of love and choose to veil, choose to smother transgressions committed with love. It is to choose forgiveness. That's what this passage is talking about.

Listen to what our Lord Jesus says on a similar strain in Matthew 18:21: "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?' And Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you up to seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" In other words, you must forgive and forgive and forgive.

And is not our baseline for this love found in God himself and in our Lord Jesus Christ. Does wisdom not call us to imitate Christ's own love? For this call reflects what the gospel itself demonstrates, as another wrote: "Love is the highest value in the Old Testament and the New, because love is the nature of the covenant Lord." You see, the love of Christ covers all our transgressions. On the cross, the sinless Son of God, guiltless of any transgression himself, willingly made himself the substitute in our place. He drew the veil of love over our sin, not that he ignored the reality of our sin, but he dealt with it. He paid for it, and he was punished for it. And so he conceals our transgressions under his love.

And so he no longer remembers our guilt. He won't even bring it up and accuse you with it. Satan will, but Christ says, "No, you are forgiven." So Christ hides his people away from the storms of judgment under the umbrella of love. And this is what the proverb would have us reflect on.

I've got two headings to structure the remainder of our considerations. The first one is this: Love that Forgives.

First of all, we need to understand that in order to draw the veil of love over all wrongs, we must learn to forgive others. So hear me when I say: to forgive should become as natural to the Christian as breathing itself. We are a people forgiven. We are the damned whom God has spared and shown mercy. We are the prisoners in shackles granted pardon by the merits of another.

So how then can we not forgive? Why do we keep hatred in the storehouses of our memory and our consciences? This is the first way love will cover all transgressions, as the proverb says. Because we need only to think of the love which has been extended to us by God in Christ, and we can realize that we can do the same to others. And so we must love in this way even when it feels quite inconvenient.

Perhaps we haven't received an apology from someone that we were expecting. Perhaps that apology will never even come at all. But you, Christian, must first forgive in your hearts. You must transfer the committed wrongs against you to God. You must tell the Lord and say, "Father, as one whom you have forgiven, might you release me from holding a grudge against my brother or sister, though they have wronged me." Do not let me be consumed with fury for their wrong. That must be our prayer.

To cover transgressions, you must learn to transfer feelings of justice that we have to God. To act unbecomingly to someone, no matter how much you think they may deserve it—and maybe they do, to do that is to harbor pride in your own heart. It is to take the place of God when you will not transfer to the Lord his right to bring justice, in his ways.

And I know it's difficult to let things go. I struggle with this as much as many of you. I know what it's like to hold on to harsh words spoken to you by people, and your memory just replays them over and over again. Words that people may have said in a flash of emotion, words that cut you down, words that offended you. But how will you choose to respond? What does wisdom say?

The Proverbs tell you exactly what will happen if you harbor hatred. What does it say? You will have strife.

If the person you think owes you an apology refuses to, or perhaps they think nothing of the incident and will not come forward themselves, if you hold on to that in your heart, you will have only strife in and of yourself. You will carry a chip on your shoulder that will continue to haunt you. You must let the matter rest in God's providence.

The Apostle Peter drew from Proverbs 10:12 as well, just like James did, when he wrote in 1 Peter 4:7: "The end of all things is near. Therefore be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint."

I'm reminded of a shocking story of one of the worst serial killers in U.S. history being held to justice for the some 48 murders—although I read it was possibly more—of women, he committed in the 1980s and 1990s. One woman taking the stand in court, a family member of one of the victims, her name was Carol Estes, and she stood up and declared, "He's going to hell, and that's where he belongs." Constantly this man had vitriol come down, as you would expect, in the courthouse from family members of the victims.

Then finally a man named Robert Rule, an older man, had his turn to speak, and he was the father of one of the victims. In a softly spoken voice, he took the stand in the court, and he looked over at the man. He said, "Mr. Ridgeway, there are people here who hate you. I'm not one of them. You've made it difficult to live up to what I believe and what God says to do, and that is to forgive." Then he said to this man who had taken the life of his daughter, "You are forgiven."

Now does this mean that Robert Rule, this father, does it mean that he minimized the extent of the guilt of Gary Ridgeway, the serial killer? Or did it mean that he even wanted this man to be set free from his prison sentence when he said, "You are forgiven"? No, that's not what it meant. He was still going to serve his prison sentence.

What it meant was he had transferred, Robert Rule had transferred ultimate justice to God, and he refused to live with hatred in his own heart because he knew it would eat him up, and he must forgive in his heart. In love, he himself forgave and thereby covered a multitude of transgressions with love. He fulfilled Proverbs 10:12 in that way.

Did our Lord not say in Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"?

So perhaps then in application, it's time that some of you—and myself—perhaps it's time we go to the Lord about that family member who has grieved you in the past, that you have stored away in your heart and you won't let it go. Perhaps there's a neighbour down the road who's used

you in the past, who broke your trust. You must do the same there too. You must forgive in your heart.

The second heading is this: Love that Conceals.

We've seen love that forgives; there is love that conceals. There is a second way we must strive to veil transgressions with love, and that is by deliberate concealment of transgression. What do I mean by this? I mean, to truly see love cover all transgressions, we must not become the purveyors of gossip of the wrongs committed by others.

So what I mean is perhaps you've been wronged. You take it to the Lord, but not sincerely, because then you feel the need to tell 10 other people about what this person has done to you. You multiply the sin. You start a gossip train, and it causes defamation of someone else. And who was to know whether the Lord was not going to lay it on this person's heart to come to you and seek forgiveness? But you've already told everyone about it.

You see, our love must be a concealing love. Strife is caused by hate. So can you love your brother or sister enough that you can keep the way that you were wronged to yourself? Now, that's a challenge, because there's a temptation, isn't there, to self-serve when we are wronged. We want to vindicate ourselves. There's a feeling of superiority and a feeling of righteousness that surges through us when we do so. We think to ourselves, "This transgression must be exposed. I must expose this person." The flesh in our hearts cries out for this self-vindication.

But the word of choice here in Proverbs 10:12, the word translated in my translation anyway, "covers," has underneath at its root this idea of concealment. And that's what we must do. We don't want to parade wrongdoings. We want to leave it with the Lord and ensure others are none the wiser.

Now, don't get me wrong, there may very well be occasions where you have to tell someone—in the case of abuse or assault or that which is punishable by law. I'm not talking about such matters as that.

So exercise tremendous caution and wisdom and ask, do others really need to know about this wrong that has been committed against me? Or am I just seeking self-serving vindication and affirmation from others over the wrong that I've experienced?

Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, the famous chapter on love. He says, "Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not jealous. Love does not brag and is not arrogant. Love does not act unbecomingly. It does not seek its own. It is not provoked." Now listen to this: "It does not take into account a wrong suffered. It does not rejoice in

unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things."

The Puritan Thomas Watson put it this way. He said, "Forgiveness means we strive against all thoughts of revenge." You see, gossip of wrongs is a form of revenge. He says, "When we will not do our enemies mischief, but wish well to them, grieve at their calamities, pray for them, seek reconciliation with them, and show ourselves ready on all occasions to relieve them."

Do we have that kind of love? You see, we're trying to minimize sin here. Our love must become blind. It should be blind. The incident has happened. We have to deal with it. Maybe we have to go to this person; maybe we don't. We give it all the same to God, and we forget about it. We let him work in people's hearts to bring about repentance where there is none.

And so the law says, as Jesus quotes from Leviticus 19 in his ministry, "You shall not take vengeance nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:18). So to bear a grudge, you see, is not to conceal, but to spread and multiply the transgression of speaking it to others, to gossip about others' faults. We don't want to do that. We want to live the gospel. We want to live the gospel and learn how to love, how to forgive, and how to cover a multitude of transgressions.

Let's pray.