

## **Dr. Daniel J. Treier, Proverbs, Session 2, Proverbs 10-29, Virtues**

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This is Dr. Daniel J. Treier in his teaching on Proverbs for Christian Living. This is session number two, Proverbs chapters 10-29, Virtuous Character.

This is lecture two on what I'm calling Reading Proverbs for Christian Living.

Proverbs 1 through 9 confronts us with two ways, the way of wisdom leading to life, and the way of folly leading to death. Now that these chapters have urged us to embrace the heritage of wisdom presented by faithful parents, Proverbs 10 through 29 collect and represent the divine revelation that the initial section has introduced. These relatively large collections contain sporadic clusters of themes that signal an underlying coherence regarding the moral life.

So, we need an orderly pattern for setting forth the main lines of this teaching, and the Christian tradition provides both positive and negative depictions of the moral life with which Proverbs is concerned. Positively, the church is the primary context within which the family, creation's home for moral formation, can rightly direct a person's life toward virtuous character, our theme for this second lecture. Virtues are developing deep dispositions, resulting in the habitual recognition and realization of the good, what one ought to feel, think, and do in particular situations.

People are not born with virtues, they are made. Hence, Proverbs treats the relative innocence of the young as dangerously unstable. People eventually form character one way or the other.

Cardinal virtues, prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, are possible to some degree for all humans as God's creatures. The cardinal virtues deal fundamentally with living well in this world. Their only biblical citation as such comes actually in the non-Protestant canon, Wisdom of Solomon 8.7, and if anyone loves righteousness, her labors are virtues, for she teaches self-control and prudence, justice and courage.

Nothing in life is more profitable for mortals than these. Given this association with nature and the Greek origins of this virtue scheme, talking about cardinal virtues has raised some evangelical Christian suspicions. Yet this framework offers possibilities for civic and philosophical engagement between Christians and those of alternative moral traditions.

At the same time, these virtues are cardinal or principal. They are those on which moral development chiefly hinges, because they incorporate appropriate desire, not

just behavior. After falling into sin, humans cannot rightly order their appetites apart from redemption.

So, particular virtues may be developed to some degree because of the integrity of God's creation order, even apart from integration with the fear of the Lord. But ultimately, to their fullest extent, in an integrated way, even these cardinal virtues are going to require the fear of the Lord. This distinction between partial realization of the virtues in a somewhat fragmented way, because of creation order, and holistic, full integration of the virtues with all of one's life, is one that I have found helpful in Oliver O'Donovan's book, *Resurrection and Moral Order*.

Theological virtues, in contrast, clearly require redemptive grace by which to attain and then pursue genuine faith, hope, and charity. Dealing directly with God, these spiritual realities are above humanity, as Thomas Aquinas puts it. Hence, they should properly be called not human, but superhuman or divine virtues, he says, for beyond human morality, they are forms of participation in the divine life by the Holy Spirit.

Theological virtues align us with our true end as God's creatures, but they are not available for our native taking from creation. They result from God's taking initiative to bring us back into covenant fellowship, which can render the Christian practice of the cardinal virtues distinctive as well. I want to suggest that the cardinal and theological virtues in this lecture, and the seven deadly sins or capital vices that we'll talk about in the next lecture, although they were not originated directly from Proverbs, nevertheless, they fit, they correspond to the book's moral teaching, and they provide us a helpful way of organizing most of the main emphases of that teaching.

Virtues and vices afford a language within which we can examine, structure, and summarize Proverbs' instruction. They catch quite well the fact that Proverbs isn't just interested in promoting or proscribing particular behaviors, but it is looking at behaviors in order to address character. In the first lecture, I've already shown that Proverbs promotes moral progress and wisdom, and in particular, a disposition to embrace the spiritual heritage of the parents and the covenant community.

As we move forward, Proverbs will continue not only to speak of concrete behavior but in so doing, to foster character formation. Thus, Proverbs can align with, but also supplement and refine the Christian tradition's portrayal of these cardinal and theological virtues. The following survey of these virtues in Proverbs does not rely exclusively on any given Hebrew terminology for any of them.

Instead, what we're going to do is sift through the various collections for pertinent concepts, which may involve an array of vocabulary and verses regarding any particular theme. I'm going to put a fairly heavy premium on quoting from various Proverbs because I believe that they are intended for oral encounters and that the

Proverbs can do a lot of the work better than my explanations of them can. So, I'm going to try to keep enough quotations here to keep the form and not just the content of the Proverbs front and center.

The first of the cardinal virtues, prudence, has a higher-order function involved in regulating the others, whereas the other three virtues are principal in their particular spheres. Prudence regulates them. It commands action and response by reason rather than whimsical passion, while still respecting the particularity of individual situations.

Justice then renders what is due in our actions related to God and others. Fortitude enables right living to endure, even in the face of difficulty and ultimately death. Temperance is going to restrain bodily appetites.

Now prudence should not be confused with being timid or fearful or with being sneaky or duplicitous. To the contrary, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it. It guides the other virtues by setting rules and measures.

When we start to come to Proverbs then, it should first of all be obvious how strongly the book of Proverbs values prudence. The theme of chapters one through nine, get wisdom, and its context, the doctrine of the two ways, are repeated endlessly throughout the rest of the book. The antithetical parallelism that is so frequent, especially in Proverbs chapters 10 through 15, this antithetical parallelism where one line will state one side of the coin and then, but, and then the opposite.

This antithetical parallelism reinforces this value of prudence in literary terms, the value of wisdom and knowing how to live in particular situations and how to avoid folly. Among other distinctive expressions of the value of prudence in Proverbs 10 through 29 are contrasts between default human thinking and divine wisdom. For instance, the human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established 19:21.

Thus, prudence is socially necessary as a whole host of verses suggest. Parents delight in wise children and prudence confers power and true wealth. And there are streams of verses for every one of those summary assertions.

Moving secondly from the value of prudence to its components, a key illustration of its components is planning ahead. For instance, in chapter 10 verse 5, a child who gathers in summer is prudent, but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame. Put the other way then planning ahead, one should avoid being hasty.

For instance, in chapter 29 verse 20, do you see someone who is hasty in speech? There is more hope for a fool than for anyone like that. Here the theme of thinking ahead and avoiding haste merges with the fact that speech is a vital domain for prudence. This is true in terms of timing.

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver, 25:11. And it's also true in terms of listening, which is a related form of prudently avoiding haste. If one gives an answer before hearing, it is folly and shame, 18:13.

For another common illustration of spoken wisdom's situation-sensitive character and a very common illustration of learning how to read and use Proverbs well in general, we go to chapter 26 verses 4 and 5. Do not answer fools according to their folly, or you will be a fool yourself. Answer fools according to their folly, or they will be wise in their own eyes. Do these back-to-back Proverbs suggest that the collector of Proverbs didn't know what they were doing, or somehow the Proverbs contradict themselves? Not at all.

The point is that some situations call for one response, and other situations call for the other response. The prudent person is the one who has grown enough in wisdom to have discernment about which situation calls for which response. Learning these Proverbs in advance will help us to recognize the dynamics of situations and to focus one or the other direction.

Should I focus on avoiding becoming a fool myself? Well, then I won't answer a fool in that particular situation. Should I focus on helping someone who is vulnerable to folly not to be wise in their own eyes? Are they, in a sense, redeemable? Well, then I should answer that fool according to their folly, and so on. Many of Proverbs' truisms, then, promote assessing opportunities and resources prudently.

However, what one avoids can be just as important as what one plans for and pursues, if not more so. In short, then, prudence lies in listening to parents and other wise people so that one fosters greater development in wisdom, along with various forms of self-control and strategic planning, rather than foolish self-reliance. We've already touched a great deal, then, on the acquisition of prudence involving fear of God, avoidance of folly, attention to parents, and so forth.

Here, we can add that acquiring prudence frequently involves responding to correction. A fool despises a parent's instruction, but the one who heeds admonition is prudent 15:5. Those who ignore instruction despise themselves, but those who heed admonition gain understanding, 15:32. A rebuke strikes deeper into a discerning person than a hundred blows into a fool, 17:10. More positively, prudence may gain from advice. Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisors, they succeed, 15:22. Catherine Dell Reilly comments here, that this is the best argument for a committee that I have ever heard.

I'm not sure it's a good enough argument for a committee, even then. In any case, people who lack the fear of the Lord can partially acquire this virtue of prudence in certain particular aspects of life, thanks to their creator's common grace that undergirds human culture, and even that enables Israel to borrow and learn from proverbs from other cultures. Pagans can align their lives with elements of the created order and thereby acquire some prudence through avoiding folly, attending to parents, receiving correction, and seeking advice.

In so doing, though, their lives bear indirect witness to God's authoritative design for human flourishing, and they won't have fully integrated, holistic, comprehensive prudence apart from the fear of the Lord. Sorry, the computer has gone to sleep. The second cardinal virtue, justice, faces a similar ambiguity between nature and grace.

Justice, again quoting the Catholic Church's catechism a bit, consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. Justice in the fullest sense integrates piety toward God with responsibility toward our neighbors, disposing us to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and the common good. The Old Testament prophets consistently treat idolatry and injustice as inextricably linked.

Definitive solutions to social problems then involve not only dutiful acts toward neighbors but also appropriate desires. Rightly ordered worship is finally required to realize comprehensive justice. So, first, Proverbs asserts this need for righteousness, for justice before God, on many occasions.

For instance, Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death. 10:2. The wicked earn no real gain, but those who sow righteousness get a true reward. 11:18. Crooked minds are an abomination to the Lord, but those of blameless ways are his delight.

11:20. To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. 21:3. Such righteousness involves the inside, not just the outside. The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord, searching every innermost part.

20:27. Ultimately, such righteousness reveals itself in action, 20:11, not just in good intentions or high self-appraisals, which may explain the hints in Proverbs that few people are truly righteous. 20:6-9. Of course, wisdom and justice are available to a degree merely by avoiding foolish errors. In the fullest sense, though, the evil does not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely.

28:5. For this reason, when secondly, we examine justice among humans, charity can be an obligation in a sense, not just an option. Some give freely, yet grow all the richer. Others withhold what is due.

Hear the note of obligation there? And only suffer want. 11:24. The righteous know the rights of the poor. The wicked have no such understanding.

29:7. It's not that the poor are automatically righteous, but in terms of relative tendencies, the implication contrasts certain misunderstandings of Proverbs with regard to blessing or retribution. In terms of relative tendencies, the implication sometimes is that the poor are better off than the rich. 28:6. Better to be poor and walk in integrity than to be crooked in one's ways, even though rich.

In this way, maybe only in this way, does Proverbs affirm a preferential option for the poor, but it certainly does not assume that wealth automatically correlates with divine favor. Proverbs contains numerous warnings against ill-gotten gain as a frequent source of wealth. We've already seen chapter 10 and verse 2 refer to treasures gained by wickedness.

Then there are other texts such as 11:1. A false balance is an abomination to the Lord. 15:27. Those who are greedy for unjust gain make trouble for their households, but those who hate bribes will live. Many texts also prohibit violence, with Proverbs 24:15, and 16 acknowledging that sometimes righteousness can offend the wicked and thereby lead to victimization.

False witnesses and unjust rulings constitute another form of human injustice that is frequently condemned. 17:15. One who justifies the wicked and one who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord. 19:5. A false witness will not go unpunished and a liar will not escape.

19:28. A worthless witness mocks at justice and the mouth of the wicked devours iniquity. Once again, then, I would suggest in the composite picture that a measure of justice for human communities and righteousness for particular people is possible through certain basic practices that are available in principle to everyone. If people do not oppress or commit violence against others, if they do not pursue unjust gain or hoard all their wealth without helping others, then they will be righteous in a legitimate though limited sense.

If a community has people who embody such righteousness, along with judges and rulers who refuse bribes and seek the truth, then the resulting basic justice can bring joy to everyone. Yet overall, Proverbs reflects little optimism about the extent of such virtue. The book is so pervasively concerned with wicked practices, among the people of God no less, that its anthropology can hardly be called optimistic.

Moreover, justice in the fullest sense again involves giving God, not just other people, what is due, and God searches the heart. Therefore, while the fall did not destroy all possibilities for human virtue or communal justice, redemptive grace is

necessary to reorient us toward the fear of the Lord, to perfect nature, indeed more fundamentally to transform culture, so that God's design for creation might come to fruition. Accordingly, the next cardinal virtue, fortitude, is necessary for the poor and the righteous to endure the injustice they are likely to encounter on the path of wisdom.

Fortitude blends courage with patience. Quoting the Catechism again, Fortitude is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life.

The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice their life in defense of a just cause. Therefore, what is being praised in the courageous, patient person, the person of fortitude, is the dogged pursuit and grasp of the most important goods in life, even in the face of potentially losing important but lesser goods.

It's not the suffering itself that's praised, but it's the prioritization of the goods that God has called us to. By implication, fortitude is a key point at which Proverbs is anthropologically suspicious. Lots of people can talk a good game, but the necessity of parental instruction, ongoing guidance, and frequent correction suggests that Proverbs is realistic about our persistence or lack thereof.

This reality concerning the need for the nurture of prudence exemplifies what philosophers have called the unity of the virtues, that attaining one virtue is intertwined with the others. Attaining justice requires prudence, knowing what is due in a given situation. But one must also follow through on this knowledge, and fortitude.

Fortitude is also essential for overcoming the tempting obstacles to temperance. The virtues are unified to some degree, even though we might have them in different proportions. You must have something of all of the virtues in order really to have any one of them.

Now, specific portrayals of fortitude as such are modest in Proverbs, even though its necessity is everywhere by implication. The ultimate basis of fortitude is, to no one's surprise, God. The name of the Lord is a strong tower.

The righteous run into it and are safe. 18:10. Proverbs recognizes the need to develop the endurance of various kinds of suffering, and it acknowledges the severity of pain.

The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy. 14:10. Even in laughter, the heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief.

14:13. The human spirit will endure sickness, but a broken spirit, who can bear?  
 18:14. Endurance addresses not just the inner life, but more external circumstances as well.

With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones. 25:15.  
 Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain are the righteous who give way before the wicked.

25:26. The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.  
 28:1.

God provides various aids to sustain us in fortitude. 17:17. A friend loves at all times, and kinfolk are born to share adversity.

16:26. The appetite of workers works for them. Their hunger urges them on.

Proverbs does not portray fortitude merely as an accomplishment of personal heroism. Building upon support from family and friends, along with occasionally making a virtue out of necessity, such as satisfying hunger, fortitude reflects God's all-sufficient provision for creatures who have been given the gift of time, and who are to develop character accordingly. Beyond patiently resisting evil, we are to exercise courage in helping others.

Famously, Proverbs 24:10-12. If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength being small, if you hold back from rescuing those taken away to death, those who go staggering to the slaughter, if you say, look, we did not know this, does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it? And will he not repay all according to their deeds? To be sure, this charge here could be misused to legitimate extreme action supporting whatever ideology a person wishes to claim. I have to go murder people in order to rescue the perishing.

And we have heard that kind of claim with these verses in some cases. However, the unity of the virtues means that fortitude aligns with prudence, justice, and the like. So, a person is bound to be wise regarding what God actually calls for in terms of courageous action.

Proverbs 24:10-12 is not a blank check for politicized courage. It is an encouragement, if necessary, confrontation for the person who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it. James 4:17.

Finally, fortitude confers on the aged a particular dignity. The glory of youths is their strength, but the beauty of the aged is their gray hair. 20:29.



Older and wiser tend to go together, given a lifetime of enduring and attacking evil. Gray hair is a crown of glory. It is gained in a righteous life.

16:31. Lastly, among the cardinal virtues, temperance moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. Humans should not be merely instinctual, like animals, but should govern their desires in harmony with reason.

Far from making the moral life overly intellectual or opposed to emotion, this intentional aspect respects our unique God-given vocation as human creatures. We can think about and communicate our choices. Such temperance requires discipline.

Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but those who hate to be rebuked are stupid. 12:1. Our desires must initially change to the basic extent of welcoming discipline.

Thereafter, they can change in the very nature of their satisfaction. The righteous have enough to satisfy their appetite, but the belly of the wicked is empty. 13:25.

If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, or else, having too much, you will vomit it. 25:16. By contrast, at present, Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, and human eyes are never satisfied.

27:20. The prudence that accompanies temperance prompts saving. 21:20.

Precious treasure remains in the house of the wise, but the fool devours it. Lacking temperance keeps us from being prudent. 24:27.

Prepare your work outside, get everything ready for you in the field, and after that, build your house. Depictions of life without temperance become even more specific when we encounter capital vices in the next lecture, such as gluttony and lust. So, the portrayal of this virtue here for now can be comparatively brief.

25:28 summarizes what is at stake. Like a city breached without walls is one who lacks self-control. The New Testament, of course, reinforces the importance of this fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, in the book of James, in several passages in 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and 1 Timothy.

Biblical teaching on temperance fits the realistic pattern of the cardinal virtues that we've already sketched. On one hand, as God's creatures, all humans can meet some basic standards of self-restraint, sometimes even to the relative shame of God's covenant people, as Paul suggests in a passage like 1 Corinthians 5. On the other hand, the overall assessment of human culture is not optimistic here. Fools are aplenty.

Paganism generally reflects God giving people over to the foolish, idolatrous, unbridled pursuit of passions, which become degrading, as the end of Romans 1 suggests. And the situation is not getting better in these last days after the first advent of Christ. People oppose the truth with obvious folly, which can be summed up, as 2 Timothy 3 does, as loving pleasure rather than God.

Therefore, the grace of God must train us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly. Because without a blessed hope, fallen humans lack the incentive to pursue temperance to the full. Titus 2:11-13 From the four cardinal virtues, which are available to all, in principle anyway, by virtue of creation, our study now turns to the three theological virtues tied more particularly to redemption.

The contours of faith, hope, and charity are filled in most fully by divine self-revelation in Jesus Christ, as that fulfills and overflows God's revelation to Israel. Vital precursors shaping Christ's vocation appear in the Old Testament, in God's work with the covenant people there. Admittedly, there may even be loose analogies for these theological virtues that are operative among pagans.

Yet ultimately, these are forms of virtue that depend on God's gracious initiative and on a relationship with God in covenant. So first, regarding faith, there is a basic and pervasive human need for trust, but we're not just talking about that. Faith, in the crucial sense here, begins and ends with God, the Creator.

Among the relevant passages in Proverbs, several associate fear of God with, first of all, upright conduct. For instance, 16:6, By loyalty and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord, one avoids evil. Notice the parallelism between fidelity, faith vocabulary, and fear of the Lord.

As with faith in the New Testament, here in Proverbs, fear of the Lord is essential to both the beginning of walking the path and each step of the ongoing journey. God cares about the heart from which piety and conduct spring. 15:8, The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight.

28:9, When one will not listen to the law, even one's prayers are an abomination. A second aspect of faith in Proverbs is humility. Loving the God of Torah from the heart means not pursuing one's own path.

Sorry, we lost our computer again. The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility goes before honor. 15:33, Notice the parallelism between fear of the Lord and humility.

20:24, All our steps are ordered by the Lord, how then can we understand our own ways? Humility was not a cardinal virtue for the Greeks, but it is prominent in the biblical tradition. Which tends to see pride as an idolatrous root of sin, maybe even of the other capital vices. Though not named among the theological virtues as such, humility is vital to a Christian account of the moral life, its ingredient in hope and charity, while it's distinctively implied by the concept of faith.

Humility has its blessings, as 22:4 depicts positively, and 28:25 and 26 insists on contrastively. Such a person of faith confesses sin. 28:13 and 14, No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.

Happy is the one who is never without fear, but one who is hard-hearted will fall into calamity. Besides riches, honor, life, safety, mercy, and happiness, all these blessings are associated with humbly fearing God, humbly fearing God offers divine refuge, and thereby confidence for oneself and one's children. See for instance 14:26 and 27.

Rather than placing confidence in a ruler's favor, or anything else in which we are tempted to trust that can be so fleeting, we are to humbly entrust ourselves to God and God's protection. Yet, faith in Proverbs involves wisdom, not credulity. 14:15, The simple believe everything, but the clever consider their steps.

Not only should we avoid believing everything, but neither should we trust just anyone. 25:19, Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is trust in a faithless person in time of trouble. Obviously, we need to avoid trusting in fools.

The fear of God instructs us in wisdom, not anti-intellectualism. Faith seeks understanding. What is crucial about faith is not its subjective quality as if it were opposed to reason.

Rather, its importance lies in linking us to trustworthy objects and, in the end to God. Hence, we must listen to wise words and apply our minds to divine teaching, growing in readiness to speak such words to others, so that our trust may be in the Lord. 22:19 in its context.

Hope and faith are very closely connected. Since, as Hebrews 11 puts it, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Whoever would approach God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.

Without frequently using the word, Proverbs, therefore, addresses hope pervasively, reassuring us that God will indeed bless those who are righteous with life, while those who spurn wisdom eventually fall into folly's deadly traps. The hope of the righteous ends in gladness, but the expectation of the wicked comes to nothing. 10:28 So, positively, wisdom is a tree of life by which humans may hope to flourish.

11:28-30 Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves. Those who trouble their households will inherit wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise. The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but violence takes lives away.

The focus of hope in Proverbs is on the present time. Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life. 13:12 The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the body.

15:30 Even so, Proverbs is not naive. Its understanding of life focuses on temporal blessing, but it encompasses future promises, even if their meaning and scope remain undefined. Hope motivates not only pursuing wisdom yourself but also promoting it in others.

Discipline your children while there is hope. Do not set your heart on their destruction. 19:18 The vocabulary here refers to the time of simplicity in which young people may still choose wisdom over folly.

But the context puts hope's larger range in view as well. If the young people respond well, they may avoid destruction, and their parents may rejoice in their flourishing. Wisdom offers to young people the sweetness, like honey, of a divinely granted future.

24:13-14 Among the other temporal incentives for pursuing wisdom is the opportunity to live in peace, even with enemies. 16:7 Yet, contrastively, Proverbs diverts hope away from wickedness, strength, riches, and other deadly alternatives in which we might trust. Note Proverbs 11:7 in addition to texts I've already mentioned.

When the wicked die, their hope perishes, and the expectation of the godless comes to nothing. Proverbs 23:18 warns against envying sinners or placing one's hope in companionship with gluttons and drunkards. Proverbs 24 warns against fretting about evildoers or envying the wicked.

The evil has no future. The lamp of the wicked will go out. Hope can't be placed wisely in human strength, either, or the future's predictability.

27:1 Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring. Against Nietzschean critiques of Christianity as world-denying, biblical wisdom recognizes both that good cheer is healthy and that it often needs proximate, not just ultimate, incentives. These here-and-now incentives, an encouraging word, a tranquil mind that triumphs over anxiety, good news, and the like, only have full significance within a life devoted to fearing God.

Life must lie at the end and not just in the middle of the path, and God must eventually smooth out the inevitable inequities of how the wise and the foolish experience life in the here and now. The book's very efforts to downplay or deny the success of the wicked serve as Exhibit A, acknowledging apparent evidence to the contrary, for now at any rate. Proverbs' hope is not irrational or naive, but it helps us to apply our reason beyond present experience, or what we can automatically see.

Hence, finally, we arrive at the pinnacle of the Christian virtues. The greatest of these is love, 1 Corinthians 13:13. Augustine treats even the cardinal virtues as forms of love. This means, he says, that our love for God must be preserved whole and unblemished, which is the work of temperance, that it must not give way before misfortune, which is the work of fortitude, that it must serve no one but Him, which is the work of justice, and finally, that our love must be vigilant in its discernment of things, so as not to be undermined by trickery or deceit, and this is the work of prudence.

In some respects, humility is the root of the virtues, and charity is the fruit. In another sense, charity is the root and mother of all the rest of the virtues, says Thomas Aquinas, because the moral life is fundamentally a matter of loving God and neighbor. In their own ways, both humility and charity oppose pride, the fundamental sin that turns our propensity for idolatry in self-serving directions.

I'm using the term charity to guard against unhelpfully broad connotations of the word love. I don't want to convey with charity too narrow of a focus on almsgiving either. Charity perfects, rather than destroys or leaves untouched, good natural loves like friendship, parental love, and romantic love.

Nonetheless, charity is revealed distinctively and definitively in Jesus, oriented first and foremost to the triune God who redeems us in Christ. Charity involves seeking the good of others in light of God's love for them. Now, in Proverbs, as we contemplate generosity and blessing, I've already mentioned that Proverbs seemingly treats charity almost as an obligation, without solving every conundrum that that overlaps with justice might raise.

Proverbs simply gets busy depicting the blessedness of the generosity that's involved. 11:17, those who are kind reward themselves, but the cruel do themselves harm. 11:24-25, some give freely, yet grow all the richer.

Others withhold what is due and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water. In a striking metaphor, 19:17 says, whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and will be repaid in full.

The underlying view of possessions is that used moderately, they are a means to sharing joy. Whereas used immoderately, they deceive us into pursuing happiness the wrong way. Today's prosperity gospels latch onto the linkage between generosity and blessing, without emphasizing equally and adequately the nature of true blessing.

Not to mention Proverbs' warnings against latching onto wealth and itself. So, for instance, better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it. 15:17.

Secondly, charity in Proverbs is a matter of mercy. Help is necessary at times for everyone, and God graciously meets this need through family, friends, and neighbors. However, some are truer friends than others.

Some friends play at friendship, but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin. 18:24. Given the strong dependence on family in the context from which this proverb stems, it contains a remarkable affirmation of friendship, if a friend can stick closer than a brother.

Family members don't always meet our needs. Don't forsake your friend or the friend of your parent. Don't go to the house of your kindred on the day of your calamity.

Better is a neighbor who is nearby than kindred who are far away. 27:10. Mercy is not just for our loved ones or even for other humans, but also for animals.

The righteous know the needs of their animals, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel. 12:10. Charity, then, is a disposition that pervades someone's life.

It's not just being kind to friends or superiors through whom you wish to get ahead. Such merciful charity, thirdly, pursues reconciliation. Hatred covers up strife, but love covers all offenses.

10:12. One who forgives an affront fosters friendship, but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend. 17:9.

This is not to deny that reconciling charity may need to confront error. Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Well-meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

27:5 and 6. Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another. 27:17. Rather than fostering strife or despising our neighbors, we ought to promote the well-being of the community, which may sometimes entail neglecting offenses, while at other times graciously confronting them.

Beyond particular verses in joining charity, fourthly and finally, in Proverbs we encounter a loving pedagogy, an effort to help people learn and teach virtue. The book itself is loving in both its desired end and its patient implementation of that end. Recognizing the initial simplicity and the many potential pitfalls that are faced by the young along the way.

Proverbs' pedagogy is firm yet tender, avoiding the urbane, banal tolerance that is so tempting to us today. Proverbs is realistic. Patience cannot be endless.

Past a certain point, people are unlikely or even unable to reform, humanly speaking. So, no one should bother casting pearls before swine. Charity doesn't mean naivete or decay about the likelihood of turning people around, which could be dangerous to the wise.

Charity is for friends and not just fools, calling for sensitive wisdom in how we help others. Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart. Like a moth in clothing or a worm in wood, sorrow gnaws at the human heart.

25:20 and 14:10. So, what is desirable in a person who would help you as a friend or a family member to grow in wisdom is loyalty. 19:22. And charity then must be integrated with prudence if we are to participate in the kind of pedagogy that Proverbs is trying to implement.

So as Paul says in Philippians 1, 9 through 11, this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you determine what is best so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

This is Dr. Daniel J. Trier and his teaching on Proverbs for Christian Living. This is session number two, Proverbs chapters 10-29, Virtuous Character.