

# Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Lecture 15, Proverbs 25-29

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This is Dr. Knut Heim and his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 15, Proverbs chapter 25-29.

Welcome to lecture 15 on the Biblical Book of Proverbs. In this lecture and the next, we will be looking at collection number five of Proverbs, chapters 25 to 29.

In this lecture now, I will be looking at a collection of verses in chapter 25 in particular, and I am going to propose an imaginative interpretation of them.

They come in three groups, but all three of them are dispersed through chapter 25, and I will give them an imaginative reading along the lines of what I have suggested before, especially this time focusing on the aspect of metaphor and how to interpret metaphors imaginatively. I hope also to include in this lecture some more reflection on the difference between an imaginative reading on the one hand and a fanciful reading on another, and then I will also reflect on one of the things that many people, I hear many people say, especially from more conservative Christian circles, where they insist on taking the Bible literally. And I will make some comments on that, some critical comments, to help us gain from the Book of Proverbs and from imaginative readings of poetry in general, a wider hermeneutical perspective on how as Christians and Jews who want to be faithful to our scriptures, should competently and skillfully and wisely read biblical texts.

So let us get started. I first of all read from chapter 25. This is my first of three examples of imaginative readings.

I read from verses 21 to 22. This is a very well-known passage because it is also repeated by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans in chapter 12, verse 20, where he is encouraging people, in line with the vengeance, but to be generous to their enemies. And he is inspired in saying this by the Book of Proverbs and uses it creatively again in order to make his point, referring to scripture, to bolster the argument and the spiritual authority he wants to put into his advice to the Christians in Rome.

So here it goes. If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them water to drink.

For you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you. If your enemies are hungry, feed them and give them a drink. For you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you.

Now here, most people have no problem at all reading this in a fairly imaginative way, recognizing that eating and drinking, feeding one's enemy is not necessarily to be taken literally, but can be applied readily in a wide variety of contexts of hospitality, of generosity, of friendliness, of gentleness, of kindness to those who may be ill-wishing one, or even be physically violently opposed to somebody. The reference to an enemy here is very generic. It's not clear what kind of an enemy it is, but the enemy is to be treated kindly.

And the outcome of this is twofold according to verse 22. Number one, you will heap coals of fire on their heads. Number two, and the Lord will reward you.

Now, I've already said most people readily recognize this is not to be taken literally because by treating one's enemy kindly, one does not literally shovel burning coals on their heads that then somehow remain on their heads like crowns or something like this. And of course, enemies who would be treated like that literally would not take kindly to that at all. But rather the idea is some kind of enemy of a generic kind is in a way shamed into relenting from their animosity by one's kindness.

That's the idea. I have seen a number of things in my life, and here I want to not so much share personal stories, but I want to share some personal insights. I think I want to say this in particular against the background of Christian ministry, both pastoral ministry, but also ministry in other spheres of Christian ministry organizations.

And I want to make some recommendations that hopefully as you engage with this lecture and maybe use some of what you learn here in teaching others, you may find helpful. And it is this. And this has been my experience certainly in pastoral ministry, but also in other ministry organizations as well.

Namely, people often say when they come out of seminary, this, that, and the other, I was never taught in seminary. Often people after seminary experience feel let down a few years into their ministries because somehow they feel that while they were taught about all sorts of theological disciplines, they were often not taught spiritual wisdom and practical professional know-how when dealing with unexpected situations. And there are many I could mention.

One of them, for example, is abuse within the church in general, but also more specifically a key issue I think that is a burning issue in many churches around the world these days is the situation of sexual abuse or child abuse. I do not want to speak about this in a minute at the moment because it is not relevant to the Book of Proverbs, and this is a lecture about the Book of Proverbs, but I do want to acknowledge that this is a very important issue that has not been sufficiently dealt with in many churches and denominations as yet, something that I think is really

important that the church will catch up with. But what I do want to focus is another kind of abuse, and this is something I have seen, I have sadly experienced myself personally, but also, I have seen it with many colleagues in different contexts, both in Europe, in Africa, and also here in North America where I live and work now.

And it is this, that people who are employed by the church or volunteer within the church, or part-time, full-time, or whatever, are sometimes being treated unfairly and inappropriately, either by the church organization as an organization and leaders within that organization, or sometimes by members of those organizations or those churches. And regularly, people are being encouraged to be mild and kind, almost to the point of saying, to simply endure the abuse. I think that is a serious mistake.

It is, however, partially based on a misreading of biblical texts like this one here in Proverbs 25, and also of texts in the New Testament. And I do go here to the New Testament because I think this is such an important issue in Christian ministry in particular. And I hope that from this part of my lecture, at least some people will gain some wisdom, both for themselves, but also for how they help young Christian leaders develop a more holistic understanding of how they should engage with abuse in Christian ministry contexts.

The other text that I want to make reference to is from Matthew 6, in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus himself appears to be giving evidence that is generally interpreted to mean that people should just put up with the abuse. Jesus speaking here with regard to a person who brings a sacrifice to the temple to God, and then urges them, if your brother has something against you, go and meet with them before they go to court, and pay whatever is owed, for otherwise they will take you to the court and put you in prison, and you will stay there until you have repaid every penny of it. This is often read in conjunction with Paul's advice in one of his letters to the Corinthians, where he says that Christians should not go to non-Christian courts to settle their disputes, but they should be reconciled before it comes to that situation.

Almost universally, in my experience of several decades of Christian ministry now, these texts, these three texts in conjunction with one another, have been interpreted consistently to discourage those who are at the receiving end of abuse from defending themselves through legal means or other means that are at their disposal. Universally, it seems to me, these texts have been interpreted to be speaking to the victims of abuse and appeasing them. I think this is in itself a terrible abuse and a consistent systemic abuse that has been perpetuated in the Christian cultural milieu for decades, maybe even longer.

And I think this is an evil that needs to be addressed, and I'm doing it right now. When we look at Jesus' own words specifically, it is most clear. Jesus is not speaking to the victim.

He is speaking to the perpetrator. Because if the perpetrator, the person addressed here by Jesus, was not to follow Jesus' advice, he would be dragged before the court and be found guilty to the point of being put in prison. And so what Jesus is recommending here very clearly is that the sinner, the perpetrator, the abuser, the victimizer is the one who should avoid being dragged to court and should repent of their wrongdoing and make it right with the person whom they have abused.

In Paul's letter, it is less clear, and I don't think he means to make any distinction between victims and victimizers and abusers, but what he is saying is that the people who are at odds with one another, fellow Christians, should be reconciled to one another rather than go to court. But surely the implication must be, if this is the Apostle Paul who is speaking, not that those who are being abused should just put up with it, but rather that those in the dispute who are in the wrong should acknowledge their wrongdoing, repent of it and make it right with the person whom they have abused or taken advantage of or stolen from or mistreated or whatever else. This now brings me back to Proverbs chapter 18, and I want to say here that I believe most, and I'm not the only one, there is a very strong consensus among biblical scholars, that Proverbs chapters 25 to 29 are very much addressed to leaders in society.

And this is the case also of the person being addressed here in verse 21, if your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat, for you will heap coals of fire on their heads. And now I want us to really, in light of what I've just said about these other texts, read this passage with imagination. But in imagination that is not fanciful, but realistic about human dynamics, the dynamics of human interaction, especially when things count, when things are at stake, with leaders.

And it is this, what is being recommended here to the would-be leader who is addressed in these Proverbs is a situation of conflict, and probably a situation of conflict of high stakes. This isn't about banalities, this is about serious matters, and the outcome of whatever happens between the enemies that are being envisaged here will matter for other people too, not just for the person who is being addressed. And the recommendation is not one of pacification, of passivity, but rather an invitation to engage wisely with a high-stakes crisis situation that is potentially dangerous for the person being spoken to, and perhaps others under their care as well, for whom they are as leaders responsible.

And so, when these leaders now are encouraged here to be kind to their enemies, it does not mean that they are invited to be doormats, here's another metaphor, people who just let themselves be abused by others willy-nilly. Rather, this kind of kindness is actually a very aggressive one, because the outcome of that kindness is to shame the enemy, the opponent, into desisting from their animosity. And the picture that is being presented is one of heaping coals of burning coals on their heads.

That is a very aggressive thing to do, in fact. It's a very strong, violent thing to do. So, this opponent is not just being submitted to, rather this opponent is being dominated by the would-be leader's kindness.

So how would that perhaps work out in detail in the real world? Well, it seems to me that the leader that is being addressed here is not encouraged to let their opponent have the final word or to win the argument. Rather, the proverb is encouraging the would-be leader to interact with the opponent in a wise way that attempts to address in a generous and kind way the concerns of the opponent. But not to the degree where the argument is lost, but rather in a way that helps the opponent to see the superior arguments and the necessity of what this leader that is being addressed here is trying to achieve so that the opponent will become an ally and not the winner of the argument.

That is the impact of this proverb. I now want to move to the second outcome that is being promised here in these proverbs, namely that the Lord will reward you. And I speak here again not only from the exegesis of these passages but also from personal experience.

I have seen this time and again. When we act spiritually, when we act with leadership, generosity, and kindness, when we act wisely in our capacities as leaders and help even our opponents to see what is right, without bending to their willy-nilly demands or whatever it is, often there is a great spiritual reward just around the corner. Number one, God will actually reward us by helping us to achieve what is necessary to do and be successful in what we are being made responsible for in Christian ministry work.

The second thing is that often because we have been generous, the blessing of God will make the work flourish even more. Whereas a passive giving into silly demands of our opponents would just destroy the fruitfulness and effectiveness of the work. As I come to a close in my reflection on this particular group of proverbs, there is one final thing I want to say.

Going back to my earlier comments it is quite regular that people in Christian ministry, especially in leadership situations, encounter animosity. The animosity that they encounter is often, very often, not from non-Christians, either from people of other religions or people of no religion at all, but often the animosity that they encounter is from fellow Christians. Much of it is not of a kind and generous way.

And people often, I have spoken to many fellow Christian leaders about this, and many Christian leaders are deeply hurt by this, greatly disappointed, frustrated, and often hurt, because they do not fight back in appropriate ways, as this proverb recommends, and as Jesus and Paul recommend, but they give in and let themselves

be victimized. And the end result of it is hurt, is bitterness, and is long-lasting emotional damage. I have seen this time and again.

What I want to say to any of you who are listening to this lecture today, and who are hoping to be involved in Christian ministry, is a number of things. Number one, expect to meet animosity and deal with it. Secondly, expect that much of that animosity not to come from non-Christians, but from fellow Christian believers, sometimes from colleagues, sometimes from the very people you are trying to serve and minister to.

Thirdly, as you rise in ministry leadership opportunities, as your leadership grows, I want to say to you, thirdly, the quality, the power, and the impact of your enemies will grow. The more important you are in leadership, the more able, the more committed, and perhaps sometimes the more nasty your enemies will be. Deal with it.

From my personal experience, I want to say, I'm actually quite proud of my enemies. I've got enemies that are worth fighting with, and I want to beat them for the praise and glory of God. Because when I know that I'm right in what I'm doing, in trying to serve the Lord, I need to deal with those who don't see it.

I want to give one example. I don't want to put myself into the same kind of category of achievement, but we see this, for example, in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer did exactly what Proverbs 25, 21 following is recommending.

In his generous way of dealing with the German regime under Hitler, he was heaping coals of fire on the heads, on the heads of so many fellow Germans in the way they were dealing with what was going on in his time. So, this is not a proverb for weaklings. This is a proverb for strong, courageous, and wise people who stand up for what is right.

I end with another appeal just to say, we need to bring to a stop the abuse that sometimes is allowed to happen in the Christian church because of a misunderstanding of some of these biblical passages. And a misunderstanding of Christian love to the point where we accept abuse, either of ourselves or of others who are under our care. And it must not happen.

So, you can see I speak strongly here because I think this is an important area where a lot of people have suffered unnecessarily because of poor teaching. And here I think I have presented an imaginative reading of these verses that is not willy-nilly, it's not fanciful, but is grounded both in the biblical texts themselves, paying attention to the metaphors, but also grounded in a wider wisdom of my own personal experience and based on a sense of social and individual justice for the abused and the vulnerable in competition and confrontation with aggressors,

abusers, and victimizers. I now come to two groups of other proverbs, also in chapter 25.

All three of the examples I'm mentioning here are proverbial pairs, by the way. The first of these, actually I'll mention the third one, the first. This is in verses 27 to 28.

I'm just going to read these verses and then present my interpretation of them. It is not good to eat much honey or to seek honor on top of honor. Like a city breached without walls, is one who lacks self-control.

I'll repeat those two verses. It is not good to eat much honey or to seek honor on top of honor. Like a city breached without walls, is one who lacks self-control.

What is going on in these verses? Most people kind of read this and say, let's move on. And to be honest, I have been working with the Book of Proverbs for over 25 years now. And for many, many years, I have never paid any particular attention to this.

But through my training in metaphor theory and metaphor interpretation, I've become more sensitive now to picking up some of the subtleties and the really important impact of these proverbs. Because here we have a gem of great advice that can change our lives. Let me explain.

So really the first of these two verses, verse 27, is kind of preparing the way only for the main lesson to be learned in the second half. And it kind of builds up to a broader reading of verse 28. So, let's see how verse 27 does that.

So first of all, it is not good to eat much honey. Why is it not good? Honey is great. It tastes fantastic.

It has incredibly healthy vitamins and all sorts of healthy ingredients. So, people are constantly recommending to us in the modern world, to eat honey. Much better than chocolate.

Much healthier for you. It's natural and all that sort of thing. So why is this wise person, whoever that was, of ancient times telling the would-be leader, don't eat too much honey? Well, because of the old wisdom that too much of a good thing is not a good thing at all.

Same thing with chocolate. That is even more obvious. Chocolate is very nice.

Ice cream is very nice. Steak is very nice. But if we eat too much of it, it will actually be detrimental to our physical well-being and even our own emotional short-term

sense of being bloated, tired, exhausted, and just feeling lethargic because we've eaten too much of a good thing.

And so, this really counterintuitive saying, don't eat too much honey, although honey is so great, is setting the scene now for what comes next. Because the second half of the saying is, and so it is not good to seek honor on top of honor. Why is that not good? Well, honor is a good thing, right? Honor is about high social status.

And remember we're dealing with proverbs here throughout these chapters specifically addressed to fledgling leaders, people who are in high social standing and often high in the hierarchy in their communities. And the person who is being built up to become a mature, able leader who benefits wider society and his or her community is now encouraged not to seek too much of the very thing they need in order to be good leaders, namely high social standing and social status and high esteem among their fellow members of the community. Because too much of a good thing is not a good thing at all.

Because if that person becomes susceptible always and only to seek the approval of the people they are leading, they are not a leader anymore. They are being led. Suddenly the tail wags the dog.

Because the leader is so concerned with their social standing, with their approval rates, and with being liked by the people whom they are leading, they become ineffective as leaders. But that is not all. And again, I'm just continuing an imaginative reading of an apparently quite unimportant proverb.

And it is this. There is another side to this and another extreme to this. Because we also see, and I should actually just, no, I have three points, exactly.

So there's another side to this, the other extreme of seeking too much honor, of course, is not at all about seeking the approval rates of the people who are being led, but rather the other extreme is that leaders are desperately trying to bolster their high social status through manipulative and often aggressive, coercive, and even criminal ways in order to overcome their own insecurities or their fears and anxieties. Because, of course, the more high up you are in the hierarchy, the more high risk the whole situation is, and the more powerful, the more dangerous your enemies are. So one natural way of counteracting this is to try and avoid that at all.

And the danger is for leaders to become autocratic to become power hungry, to coerce the people they are leading, and to press them into submission. Just like too much honey is no good, seeking too much honor is no good at all either. And that leads me to a third one which is actually in a way connected to both of these on either side, and I'm sure as you're listening to this you can immediately think of one or two people you know personally and others you know about from the



international news, people who are being influenced by what is often referred to as psychopaths.

They surround themselves with people who constantly praise them, constantly say, you are the one and all, you are the most amazing, you can do no wrong, surrounded with friends that never criticize you and only affirm you as that grand leader. And what happens of course is they are building up these people into emotionally infantile dictators who do whatever they want because all the people around them are constantly affirming them no matter what they do, no matter how outrageous, no matter how foolish, no matter how oppressive the things are, how exploitative they are of what they are doing. Can you see just how powerful this proverb is? But that's not all, that's just the proverb building up to the really cool proverb.

Let's look at it, verse 28, like a city breached without walls, is one who lacks self-control. So, what's the proverb about? As we know, I think that's intuitive, it's about self-control. Where is self-control important? Well, self-control is important in all of those circumstances where we have more resources and opportunities at our disposal than are good for us.

That's when we need self-control. Just like when there is too much honey, too much chocolate, too much money, too much sexual gratification waiting for us to be consumed. The proverb here in particular, of course, focuses on power, in particular political power, but all these other areas I think are also helpfully kind of addressed indirectly by this proverb.

But I want to focus now on power. With regard to honor, in the previous verse, the temptation for the leader is not to exercise self-control, but to grab more and more and more political power. That's what is at issue here.

And the more they do this, and the more they put themselves as the most important thing in their leadership, their leadership becomes about themselves, not about the people they are supposed to lead. The point is that they are leading their people. They are there for the sake of the people, not for the sake of themselves.

And this now brings me to the first half of this proverb which says, like a city breached without walls is one who lacks self-control. What's going on here? Here we need to unpack the metaphor a little bit more. The metaphor has to do with a city and its walls.

And because it has no walls, the city is being breached by an enemy. Back to enemies again here. And why is this important for the would-be leader? Because the would-be leader therefore is the one who looks after the city.

Through the leader's self-control, a wall would be built to surround the city protectively against any would-be enemies. And the purpose of the self-control of the leader is to provide a home and a shelter, a protective and safe environment for their community. If they fail to exercise self-control, this protective, safe environment is being eroded away.

The defense system for the community is undermined. And if the community does come under attack from whatever extraneous forces that may be the city, the community is vulnerable to defeat. That, I believe, is the impact of those two proverbs together.

Incredible advice, I think. This reminds me of a Chinese proverb that addresses this issue of self-control. And the proverb, and there's probably a wider context to this, and of course, I don't fully understand the depths and subtleties of Chinese culture, but nonetheless I find this proverb helpful.

And it says something like this, the person without any desires is invincible because they cannot be manipulated, coerced, or blackmailed into following the demands of those who want to do them harm. I want to share with you a prayer that I have composed on the basis of my imaginative interpretation, as I've just presented it, of these two verses. Let me read it to you.

So, this is something that I pray every day. Oh Lord, make me invincible in you by setting me completely free from all earthly desires. It's a bit of an allusion to Sermon on the Mount here.

That I may always seek your kingdom first and that you, oh Lord, might add all the things that I need and many of the things that I want and desire. And I pray, oh Lord, that, no, I think I should just stop here. Actually, I'll go a little bit further back and start the prayer a little bit earlier.

So, it's part of a longer prayer. Oh Lord, make me a strong city with strong walls, wide gates, and a citadel. Able and willing to provide a home and a shelter for myself, for those close to me, and for everyone entrusted to my care by giving me self-control.

Self-control over my, and then I mentioned three or four different things where I know I am vulnerable because it doesn't come that easy to me to exercise self-control in these areas and I want to encourage you to think about what are those areas in your life and put them in prayer before God. Give me self-control and then finally I can close this list of things with self-control over my ambitions as a leader, my desires, my wants, and even my needs. And if that happens, I believe, in line with the Chinese proverb, and also I think this proverb here with the wall and the city,

make me, as it were, invincible in you by setting me completely free from all earthly desires.

That I may always seek your kingdom first and that you, O Lord, might add all the things that I need and many of the things that I want and desire. You can hear the allusions here to the Sermon on the Mount as well. So, I want to say, you know, this is just a little proverb that most people don't spend another minute with but I can share with you from personal experience that these two proverbs alone together with those others as well have changed my life.

They really have. I now turn to the third group of proverbs. These are two proverbs that are immediately in front of these two that I've just shared with verses 25 and 26 Let me read them.

Like cold water to a thirsty soul so is good news from a far country. Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain are the righteous who give way before the wicked. What's that about? Again, a consistent interpretation of the metaphor hugely enriches our understanding and appreciation for the incredible wisdom that is being shared in these two seemingly quite unobtrusive proverbs.

And again, as before, the first proverb is setting the scene for a richer interpretation and application of the second proverb. Let me begin with verse 25. Like cold water to a thirsty soul so is good news from a far country.

I believe that the good news from a far country is perhaps not even essential to this proverbial pair but the fact that such good news whatever that might be of international aid even in those ancient days this good news from afar country has the emotional physical and social impact on a community of people that is comparable to cold water for a thirsty soul. It's refreshing. It's nourishing.

It is life-sustaining. That is the metaphorical image that is being evoked here of good news that comes to a community from far away from unexpected quarters from people who are perhaps not even under obligation or direct obligation to help in whatever that situation is. So, what we have in the proverb is number one is people who are helping who are producing good news from unexpected quarters who are very likely not under obligation to do so but do so out of the goodness of their hearts or whatever.

And the impact of what they are doing now without having to do it is life-sustaining nourishing refreshing beautiful. Now let's turn to the second proverb. Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain are the righteous who give way before the wicked.

What is that about? Most people read this and think oh you know interpret it individualistically first of all. So, it might be a situation where the righteous gives way

before the wicked. Presumably, most people might think of some situation of a controversy with somebody and very often Christians in particular may well tend actually to give in to the demands the coercion or whatever of a wicked person because often Christians misunderstand the command to love your neighbor or even to love your enemies as an invitation to accept abuse.

And so, if they read this proverb if they even follow it or don't just ignore it they may then just say oh maybe it would be a good idea if I stand up for myself every once in a while and that will be better for me and I will be a clearer spring or something like this. My life will be better if I stand up for myself. But remember this is about the context of leadership formation and the previous proverb told us about help coming to a community from unexpected quarters.

And that brings me back to the image of water being refreshing life sustaining life enhancing perhaps even saving people who are thirsty who are dying of thirst in a hostile environment. And so in line with the water imagery the life-giving water imagery I now notice and want to draw attention to the fact that in verse 26 righteous people are compared to clear springs and pure fountains. What is the metaphoric impact of a righteous person being compared to a clean spring and a pure fountain in the context of being life-enhancing? Well clearly if that righteous person is a pure fountain and a clean spring what they're doing especially in the situation of a leadership responsibility they as leaders are meant to be life-enhancing for their communities especially in the context of those who are vulnerable those who cannot help themselves those who need support from the wider community protection by those who have the power to do so.

And it is in this context now that our proverb is saying that the righteous when they give in to the wicked become a useless source of life. They are not fit for purpose anymore. They are now a muddied spring and a polluted fountain.

The people who should benefit from their work cannot do so anymore. Because these so-called righteous people by giving in to the pressures the abuse the demands the threat of the wicked who are endangering their community because they are giving in because they are giving way to the pressure they are not helping their community anymore. And ultimately what might have once made them righteous namely that they are benefiting their community they are defending the vulnerable are opposing evil is not happening anymore.

They have lost their purpose. Their righteousness is not even self-righteousness anymore. They have become part of the problem.

They are wicked. I have to say often this proverb like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is the so-called righteous who give way before the wicked. This proverb does not let me sleep at night and neither should it let you sleep at night.

That brings us to the end of this lecture.

This is Dr. Knut Heim and his teaching on the book of Proverbs. This is session number 15, Proverbs chapter 25-29.