

Dealing with Antagonistic People

A Study of Proverbs 25:21-22

Characteristic of Completeness: Kindness

Big Idea: Kindness can kindle a revolution.

Related Scriptures: Exodus 23:4-5; 1 Samuel 24:18-20; Proverbs 20:22; 24:17-18; Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 23:33-34a; Romans 5:8-10; 12:14, 17-21; Acts 7:54-60; 1 Corinthians 4:11-13; 13:4-5; 1 Peter 2:20b-23; 3:8-9a

Introduction:

- A. (Play video, “pc_dontgetalong” here. It should play automatically.)
- B. How do you deal with antagonistic people?
 1. Say you’re a wife and your mother-in-law has never liked you. You’re simply not good enough for her boy. In fact, from her point of view, the only mistake her son has ever made is marrying you. And she seems to take every opportunity to somehow let you know how you’re not measuring up in the way you cook, or the way you keep your home, or the way you are raising her grandchildren. How do you deal with antagonistic people?
 2. Say you’ve got a friend, or at least he used to be your friend. You’ve worked with him. You’ve had fun together. You used to confide in him. But strangely, through a difficult set of circumstances that you don’t even fully understand, he has become your antagonist. And now the things you confided in him, he has shared with others, exaggerating the parts that cast you in a negative light, seemingly for the purpose of harming your reputation. How do you deal with antagonistic people?
 3. As a pastor, I get to meet all kinds of people. Like the guy who visited church a while back and said to me in disgust, “I cannot respect any preacher who does not hold the Bible in his hands while he preaches.” Or like another guy who came up to me all red-faced, and pointing his finger, saying, “Satan is on your shoulder, whispering a false gospel to you.” How do you deal with antagonistic people?

- C. The biblical text we're going to study today gives us some insight into how to deal with antagonistic people. It's ► Proverbs 25:21-22. Here's what it says:

^{NAU} **Proverbs 25:**

²¹ If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;
²² For you will heap burning coals on his head,
And the LORD will reward you.

I was drawn to this passage, primarily because of the part that talks about heaping burning coals on my enemy's head. I was hoping to come up with some big idea like, "take up your tongs," or "bring on the briquettes," or "barbeque his brain," "kill him with Kingsford."

But I figured maybe I ought to figure out what this passage really means before I jump to my desired applications.

- I. This text raises a number of questions that we need to deal with before we get to the burning coals part. Like, who is ► my enemy? Who qualifies to be on my list of enemies, antagonists, or adversaries?
- A. In our text, the term "enemy" does not describe a national enemy, but a personal one.¹ The Hebrew term could literally be translated ► "one who hates you." In fact, that's exactly the way the word is translated in ► Exodus 23:5, where it says,

^{NAU} **Exodus 23:5** "If you see the donkey of one who hates you . . ."

The phrase, "one who hates you" comes from same Hebrew word in the exact same form as our text. This raises the question: What does ► it mean to hate? One Hebrew lexicon defines the word ► this way:

¹ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. "שָׂנֵא," (Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1994-2000), hereinafter referred to as HALOT.

It expresses an emotional attitude toward persons and things which are opposed, detested, despised and with which one wishes to have no contact or relationship. ► It is therefore the opposite of love. Whereas love draws and unites, hate separates and keeps distant. ► The hated and hating persons are considered foes or enemies and are considered odious, utterly unappealing.²

Is there anybody you know who hates you right now? Is there anybody who doesn't really want to interact with you because he or she finds you "utterly unappealing?"

- B. There is ► no mention of how long a person must hate me in order to qualify as my enemy. So I take it that the length of time someone has hated me is not critically important. If somebody has hated me for only five minutes, maybe he or she qualifies.
- C. And I believe there is evidence to suggest that the enemy in view in our text is someone with whom we are fairly familiar. It's someone we know—perhaps even someone with whom we have frequent contact.

Verse ► 21 of our text says that if our enemy is hungry, we ought to give him something to eat. If he's thirsty, we ought to give him something to drink. The idea that we would be able to observe and know the hunger and thirst of our enemy suggests that the enemy in view is a person with whom we have fairly frequent contact. The hunger and thirst could not easily be discerned otherwise. So the enemy is probably not some faceless terrorist we've never met; chances are we know him by name.

The idea of doing good to a familiar enemy is presented in ► Exodus 23:4, where it says,

^{NAU} **Exodus 23:4** "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him."

² R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s.v. "אָוֶן," (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), hereinafter referred to as TWOT.

Here, the enemy appears to be a neighbor who is known so well that the one who is hated can immediately identify his wandering ox or donkey.

- D. All ► this suggests that we need not look far away for our enemy; he's probably close to home.
1. In fact, your enemy could be *in* your home. I don't think of my wife as my enemy, but there are times when she doesn't really want to interact with me because she finds me utterly unappealing. My kids have felt the same way on occasion.
- Sometimes those married can act more like enemies than partners. And sometimes homes can look more like the battlefield than the barracks.
- Do you have an enemy at home right now?
2. Or perhaps your enemy is at church. The church is a family where conflict occurs, and in the midst of interpersonal conflict, a brother or sister in Christ can look an awful lot like an antagonist.
 3. Or perhaps your enemy is at work.
 4. Or perhaps your enemy is a neighbor.
 5. Or perhaps your enemy is an in-law.

- II. With an antagonist in view, we now come to the next question: What am I supposed to do with this enemy? How am I to react to an adversary? What is my responsibility? Proverbs 25:21 tells us,

^{NAU} **Proverbs 25:21**

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;

- A. Are we to take this in a strictly literal sense? It would be easier to take this in a strictly literal way. Then, if our enemy isn't hungry or thirsty, we're off the hook. But I'm afraid we're not off the hook. The author is simply using figurative language to communicate the general idea that we ought

to help our enemy when he is in need. The basic idea is kindness. In fact, that's our Characteristic of Completeness for the week: ► kindness. We are to be kind to our enemies.

B. How are we supposed to be kind to our enemies? The mention of ► water and not wine suggests that basic needs be met, not niceties.³ Water is a need; wine is a luxury. So we're not talking about buying your enemy a new *iPod*. But if he needs some help with the basic necessities of life and we're in a position to help, then we help. That's kindness. This idea is corroborated elsewhere in the Bible.

1. Notice how God's people are called to help antagonists with basic needs that may present themselves in ► Exodus 23:4-5. It says,

^{NAU} **Exodus 23:4** "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. ► ⁵ If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying *helpless* under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release *it* with him."

That's kindness.

2. Jesus says in ► Matthew 5:43-44,

^{NAU} **Matthew 5:43** "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you

How can we love our enemies? Well, in ► 1 Corinthians 13:4, it says,

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 13:4** . . . love is kind . . .

Therefore, we can love our enemies by being kind to them.

³ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15-31, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 330.

- C. I want to take a minute to point out what kindness is not.
1. First, kindness is not enabling sinful behavior. For example, we are under no obligation to feed a lazy antagonist who is perfectly capable of working for his own food. In 2 Thessalonians 3:10, it says,

^{NAU} **2 Thessalonians 3:10** . . . if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either.
 2. Also, kindness is not pretending no harm has been done. We can and should extend forgiveness to an enemy who has hurt us deeply. But that doesn't mean there are no appropriate relational consequences and boundaries. If your bookkeeper embezzles your money, it would be appropriate to forgive him *and* fire him. If someone has abused you, it may be perfectly appropriate to forgive him *and* end your relationship with him.⁴
 3. Also, kindness does not preclude constructive confrontation. If a fellow believer has wronged you, kindness does not prevent you from going to the person who wronged you and kindly calling for his repentance.
- D. With these caveats in mind, what does this kindness look like in real life?
1. Let's go back to the mother-in-law-who-hates-you scenario with which I introduced my message. Let's say your antagonistic mother-in-law falls victim to a serious illness and becomes incapacitated. And you and your husband are the only family she has. Kindness could include providing help and care in her time of need, even if it galls you to do so.
 2. I think back quite a few years to a colleague who betrayed me and sought to smear our entire Elder Board. It was one of the most painful circumstances I've ever been through. Every member of

⁴ I'd be happy to send you one of my messages on forgiveness that helps distinguish different types of forgiveness in the Bible. Just request it at bob.kerrey@moonvalleybible.org and I'll send it to you.

my family was affected. And every member of our Elder Board was slandered by this guy.

It came to light that he had a history of antagonism and probably needed professional counseling. As an act of kindness, we paid for the counseling to try to help the guy who hated us.

- III. Having ► described what kindness toward enemies can look like, we come to another important question: Why bother? Why am I to be kind toward a person who hates me? What does it accomplish?

In our text, I find two important reasons for being kind to our enemies.

- A. The first reason comes in the first part of ► Verse 22:

^{NAU} **Proverbs 25:22**

For you will heap burning coals on his head . . .

1. At first blush, the idea of burning coals on the head of my enemy sounds pretty good. It sounds like this could be a kill-him-with-kindness approach. It sounds like kindness could be a sneaky way of getting revenge and sticking it to my enemy. But it's not. Let me show you why this isn't about revenge.
 - a. First, personal revenge against an enemy is prohibited in the Bible.

- 1) In ► Proverbs 20:22, we are told,

^{NAU} **Proverbs 20:22** Do not say, "I will repay evil"; Wait for the LORD, and He will save you.

- 2) In ► Romans 12, beginning in Verse 17, the Apostle Paul says,

^{NAU} **Romans 12:17** Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. . . .¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave

room for the wrath *of God*, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord.

Then Paul ► quotes our text from Proverbs 25:21-22, saying,

^{NAU} **Romans 12:20** “BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

b. So personal revenge is not an option. Not only this, we are not even to wish our enemy ill. Our kindness is not to be motivated by a desire that our enemy will ultimately stumble or fall; rather, we are to be motivated to do him some good.⁵

1) Proverbs ► 24:17 speaks to the issue of motive, saying,

^{NAU} **Proverbs 24:17**
Do not rejoice when your enemy
falls,
And do not let your heart be glad
when he stumbles

So we are to be kind for the good of our enemy.

2) Romans ► 12:14 says,

⁵ F. Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 6, 2ed., translated by Francis Bolton, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, reprinted 1975), 167.

^{NAU} **Romans 12:14** Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

To bless can mean to ask for something good, especially in calling on God's gracious power to do something good for someone or something else.⁶ It can be a kind of intercessory prayer on behalf of your enemy. To bless can also mean to give something good. It can be about the fulfillment of the basic needs of your enemy.⁷

2. Well, ► if the heaping of burning coals is not about revenge, then what does it mean? There are at least two alternatives:
 - a. First, some believe this may be a metaphor for showing kindness. In ancient Jewish culture, sometimes a person's fire went out in his home and he would have to go around with a bowl on his head, collecting hot coals from kind neighbors to rekindle his fire.⁸ So to heap burning coals on his head may simply be a figure of speech for an act of kindness. The weakness of this view, however, is that it seems to make the argument of the proverb tautological—something redundant and circular like, “Be kind to your enemy for in so doing you will be kind.” That doesn't make much sense to me.
 - b. I think a second interpretive option is better. Heaping burning coals on the head of the enemy is probably a metaphor for encouraging your enemy to regret and to repent for his own good.

⁶ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “εὐλογέω,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sid S. Buzzell, “Proverbs 25-26,” *Learning from the Sages*, Roy B. Zuck, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 335; Charles R. Swindoll, *Living Beyond the Daily Grind, Book II*, (Dallas, London, Sydney, Singapore: Word Publishing, 1988), 438.

- 1) Some scholars (perhaps most) support this by simply saying that the burning coals represent the pain of remorse and contrition.⁹ The idea is that your kindness provides such a sharp contrast to your enemy's cruelty that he will see the difference and feel regret for being such a jerk.

- 2) Others say this may be an allusion to an ancient Egyptian ritual in which a person guilty of some wrongdoing would carry a pan of burning coals on his head as a sign of repentance.¹⁰ The verse in Proverbs 25:23 immediately following our text may support this view. It ► says,

^{NAU} **Proverbs 25:23** The north wind
brings forth rain . . .

If you are a Jew in ancient Palestine, in a largely agrarian culture dependent on rain, this sounds strange because you know that the north wind does *not* bring forth rain in Palestine. But the north wind does bring forth rain in Egypt.¹¹ So perhaps this is a clue that our text may be alluding to the Egyptian ritual of repentance.

In any case, it seems that kindness toward enemies does encourage healthy regret and repentance. It can change things. Kindness can kindle a kind of revolution. In fact, that's my ► big idea for the week: Kindness can kindle a revolution. By "revolution" I don't mean political overthrow or violence. I'm using the following dictionary

⁹ Delitzsch, 168; Derek Kidner, *Proverbs, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, D.J. Wiseman, ed., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 160; NET Bible notes; Allen P. Ross, *Proverbs, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 1084; Waltke, 331.

¹⁰ Buzzell, 335; Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs," *Learning from the Sages*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 161; Waltke, 331.

¹¹ Parsons, 161.

definition of “revolution”: “a complete or marked change in something.”¹²

- 3) Do you believe that kindness can kindle a revolution? Do you believe that kindness has the potential to change your enemy?

Consider the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. Increasingly, history looks back at Martin Luther King as an incredibly influential man who revolutionized civil rights in America. He did it largely through biblical kindness.

In his book, *Soul Survivor*, Philip Yancey writes,

The civil rights movement gave King many opportunities to test his nonviolent philosophy. A deranged woman stabbed him in New York, her weapon lodging a fraction of an inch from his aorta. A white man in Birmingham rushed the platform and pummeled King with his fists. (“Don’t touch him!” King cried to his supporters, who surrounded the attacker. “We have to pray for him.”) Southern sheriffs delighted in roughing up their famous adversary as they handcuffed him and hauled him away in paddy wagons. They clubbed his marchers with nightsticks, sicced German shepherd dogs on them, blasted them with water canons that cracked ribs and sent bodies sprawling on the streets. . . .

¹² *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, unabridged edition, s.v. “revolution.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. did many things wrong, but one thing he did right. Against all odds, against all instincts of self-preservation, he stayed true to the short view. He did not strike back. Where others called for revenge, he called for love and forgiveness.¹³

The first important reason for being kind to our enemies is that kindness can kindle a revolution, a change, a turnaround, a breakthrough for your enemy.

- B. A ► second important reason for being kind to enemies is that this will bring reward from God. God will see to it that kindness pays. Proverbs ► 25:22 says,

^{NAU} **Proverbs 25:22**

. . . And the LORD will reward you.

1. Reward for being kind to enemies is corroborated elsewhere in the Bible. For example, in His encouragement to love our enemies, Jesus says in ► Matthew 5:46,

^{NAU} **Matthew 5:46** “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”

The idea is that we’ll be rewarded much more for loving our enemies because it’s easy to love our friends; even godless people love their friends.

2. What ► kind of rewards are we talking about? Our text doesn’t really provide any specifics. But the Hebrew word for ► “reward” helps us some. The word basically means to restore to

¹³ Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor*, (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 25, 28.

completeness or wholeness.¹⁴ It's the root from which the word *shalom* is derived.¹⁵

The basic idea is that when we help our enemy, something is sacrificed, something is subtracted from what we have: time, energy, resources, comfort, whatever. But the resulting deficit is only temporary. In the end, God sees to it that we are restored or made complete again. And the intensive form of the Hebrew verb suggests that the reward is very great.¹⁶ So, in the bigger picture, the sacrifice of kindness is not a sacrifice at all; it's an investment.

I suspect the payback is not always in kind—dollar-for-dollar or hour-for-hour. But the good news is that, in the end, we lose nothing worthwhile by being kind to our enemy; in fact, we gain.

IV. Let's ► take a look at some examples of people who were kind to their enemies.

A. In the Old Testament, 1 Samuel 24 records the story of how ► David responded to his enemy, Saul. Saul was the king of Israel who jealously and repeatedly tried to kill David because, as a young man, David had been anointed the future king of Israel, and David had become popular with the people. Saul's strategy was simple: Murder the rising star to protect himself; eliminate the threat of an overthrow.

For years David was an innocent fugitive on the run from Saul. One day while chasing David in the desert, Saul walked into a dark cave—the ancient version of a men's room—to relieve himself. Saul didn't realize that he walked right into the cave in which David was hiding. This was David's opportunity for revenge. David could have easily killed Saul right then. But instead, David showed his enemy kindness.

B. ► Stephen provides another example. Stephen was a follower of Jesus Christ in the first century. After preaching one day, Stephen was driven out of town by some Jewish religious leaders and stoned to death. A young

¹⁴ William Lee Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972), s.v. "שָׁלוֹם."

¹⁵ TWOT, s.v. "שָׁלוֹם."

¹⁶ The verb is in the *piel* stem.

man by the name of Saul stood by in support of the murder. As Stephen was being stoned to death, Acts 7:60 ► records his final words:

^{NAU} **Acts 7:60** Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” . . .

Instead of cursing his enemies, Stephen blessed them.

- C. Stephen’s act of kindness toward his enemies left an impression on the young man named ► Saul who gives us another example. Years later, after his conversion and after his name had changed to Paul, he recounts in ► Acts 22:20 . . .

^{NAU} **Acts 22:20** “And when the blood of . . . Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.”

Indulge me in a little sanctified speculation. I suspect that the kindness of Stephen heaped coals on Saul’s head—coals God used to later bring Saul to regret and repentance.

After his conversion, Paul followed Stephen’s example of kindness toward enemies. In the midst of opposition to his missionary efforts, Paul writes in ► 1 Corinthians 4:11-13:

^{NAU} **1 Corinthians 4:11** To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; ► ¹² and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when we are slandered, we try to conciliate . . .

- D. ► Jesus provides us with the ultimate example of kindness toward His enemies. I’d like you to think about the kindness of Jesus as we anticipate communion today.

We were His enemies. And yet He died for our sins that we may have eternal life. While we were spiritually hungry, He offered Himself as the bread of life. While we were spiritually thirsty, He offered Himself as living

water. While we were His enemies, He gave Himself for our good. ►
Romans 5, beginning in Verse 8 explains,

^{NAU} **Romans 5:8** But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. . . .
► ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

Not only was the *act* of giving Himself an example to us, the *way* He gave Himself is also an example of kindness. In ► 1 Peter 2:21-23, it says,

^{NAU} **1 Peter 2:21** . . . Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²² WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; ► ²³ and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously;

May the kindness of Christ kindle a revolution in our hearts.