

PROVERBS

On Friday morning, news broke that former pastor and president of The Gospel Coalition, Tim Keller, had passed away. Tim had served in a rural Pennsylvania setting where he cut his teeth on pastoral ministry, only later to move to Manhattan, NY where he planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Through his gracious and winsome ministry, Tim effectively planted a thriving church that would become the hub of a global church planting network called “City-to-City.”

As tributes poured in from all over the evangelical world, one example stood out to me and helped me to understand how Tim was able to reach people in one of America’s most elite neighbourhoods. One man shared how he had written a scathing blog critiquing Tim Keller and his ministry, warning of the dangers of Tim. When confronted, he pulled the blog down, issued a letter of apology to Tim, and what began was an email exchange and dialogue that was non-confrontational and incredibly gracious between these two men. (Tony Reinke, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CscOBLLyKwr/?igshid=NTJiYzM2YjdNw%3D%3D>)

Tim Keller had learned the effectiveness of how to reach out and win people from different walks of life with a humble, godly, and winsome approach. While there may be differences here and there that one may have with Tim Keller, his life was a model of Proverbs 25-27 – the commendation for a young man to prepare himself for an effective future by influencing the rich, the powerful, and discerning between wise and foolish leaders.

If we want to be the kind of people who are not merely right but effective, Proverbs 25-7 gives us some effective skills to learn to make an influence in our world for the common good. We don’t have to be culture warriors; we don’t have to argue every point and try to prove ourselves smartest and the most right. We need to be seen to be humble people who learn to live for the glory of God. So how can we learn to influence others for the common good?

Seek the Glory of Humility (Prov. 25)

As this section begins, we notice that some of Solomon’s proverbs have been collected and probably organized by King Hezekiah’s men. Hezekiah was king of the southern kingdom of Judah when the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. He would face a great threat by the Assyrians when they would surround Jerusalem and try and fail to overtake it (Isa. 36-39). Certainly this section is concerned about the future political state of Judah, and for good reason – Hezekiah’s father was the wicked king Ahaz, and Hezekiah wanted to bring about positive change to his nation. How could that be accomplished?

In Proverbs 25, we have a connection in vv. 2 and 27 with the word “glory” and vv. 16 and 27 with the idea of eating honey. The positive aspect is in vv. 2-15 and the negative in vv. 16-27. The first 15 verses point out how we can humbly persuade power.

When we read the first 7 verses, it is very clear that we are in the presence of people with power. Kings, nobility, and greatness are all mentioned in vv. 6-7, and humility is needed to make a difference among those with power, just like humility is needed in the presence of God. God's glory conceals, kings seek things out (v. 2). But you can't know what's going on inside a king's heart (v. 3). But what you can be sure of is that humility is needed in the presence of leaders, and that humility comes by pursuing righteousness and not following wickedness (vv. 4-5). And the way that righteousness is promoted is not by self-promotion but by humbling yourself. For everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled, but whoever humbles himself will be exalted. No one likes the self-promoter, the guy who wants to be noticed. It's the person who is lifting up the other people around them, not trying to point out everyone else's faults (vv. 8-10). They're the kind of people who know how to speak a timely word (vv. 11-12). They know how to bring a rebuke and they know how to speak a timely word of encouragement (vv. 13-14). This is how you influence the powerful (v. 15).

But if you're going to learn to persuade the powerful, you've got to have the humility to learn how to deal with the difficult (vv. 16-27). Most of the images in these verses point out how careful we have to be – you don't want to eat too much honey and get sick (v. 16) just like you don't want to be around your neighbour too much and annoy them (v. 17). You don't want to lie about your neighbour or trust in someone who isn't trustworthy (vv. 18-19). Similarly, you don't want to make light of other people's troubles (v. 20) or have a sharp tongue (v. 23). It is so important that we learn self-control (vv. 27-28) because if we don't, we will find that sin is like mud that contaminates a spring or a fountain.

What humility calls for is to do the opposite – don't seek vengeance, but serve those who are difficult. Give the hungry some bread, some water to the thirsty. Don't repay evil for evil; repay evil with good. This is the power of humility.

This is what struck me about Tim Keller. He was a guy who would use social media and graciously interact with people in ways that didn't encourage quarreling, but dialogue. He didn't react to those who were difficult. He graciously engaged them, sometimes in shockingly polite ways.

Seek the Honour of Humble Self-Control (25:28-27:4)

There is a real danger in humility to compromise. What Proverbs 26 commends is self-control when dealing with three types of people: fools, sluggards, and quarrelsome people.

First, we are to beware of fools and sluggards. Verse 1 warns us not to honour fools. What we need to learn is to discern when a person can or cannot receive correction (vv. 4-5). We want our influence to extend to others, not be shaped by foolishness. This is the point of the seemingly contradictory words of vv. 4-5. People who won't listen have lame feet (v. 6) and just doesn't learn (v. 11). So we need self-control and not become like them when trying to deal with them.

Similarly, a lazy person doesn't want to change; they want a hand out. This is the point of vv. 13-16). What is needed is for us to recognize when people will and won't change instead of just being generous to those who don't want to change.

The second warning comes in 26:17-27:4 – that there are people who are simply quarrelsome and being generous to them will not resolve matters. If you can remove them from the situation and things become better and do not continue to be enflamed (vv. 20-21), you can discover that you are dealing with a divisive person. And the New Testament commends that you warn a divisive person once and then have nothing to do with them (Titus 3:10-11).

What the divisive person wants is to look good on the outside (v. 23) yet are motivated by revenge (v. 24). Ultimately, they will self-destruct (vv. 26-27).

What we need then, is the humility not to seek revenge, but to do good. And sometimes the good that we are called to do is to limit mercy with mercy. We do not perpetuate folly; we restrain ourselves so that folly doesn't become something that destroys us. It takes wisdom to know when to engage and when not to – the very point of vv. 4-5.

Understand the Gift of Humble Correction (27:5-22)

If there is anything that will make us wise and influential, it is the ability to receive and give correction. In vv. 5-10, what we are told is that we need faithful relationships that will bring us correction. We need the kind of relationships that won't abandon us when we need correction (vv. 9-10). These relationships are the kind that will last a life-time and will help us to change and grow if we receive their words. But there are two things that are needed to grow in influence and wisdom: the right kind of friends and the right kind of heart.

The first thing that is mentioned is that you need someone who will stick by you (v. 10) even when you're wrong. You don't want people who will flatter you with kisses (v. 5-6). Wisdom doesn't cut people off or cut people out who genuinely love you; wisdom keeps them nearby because they are for your betterment.

The second thing that we need to influence for the common good is the ability to receive correction. In vv. 7 and 9, we discover that even the bitter word becomes sweet when given from a friend who wants our betterment. Having a humble disposition to receive correction is sweetness from a friend (v. 9).

When we understand how to receive correction, we can also learn how to give effective correction. In vv. 11-18 we hear several pieces of advice: give it early, and give it wisely. Verses 12-13 commend being the kind of person who gives correction early – before someone gets themselves into a mess. And vv. 14-16 point out how timing is key.

By having these kinds of people in our lives, we will grow in wisdom and effectiveness. I remember in my first pastorate a man by the name of Phil wanted me to grow in both doctrine

and skill. He sharpened me (v. 17) by reminding me that I could be right AND effective. The danger for so many is that they want to be right but they fail to be effective. Others want to be effective and compromise on truth. What Proverbs commends then is that we learn to discern our motives (v. 19-22) and be honest with ourselves and have friends who will stick with us and be honest with us.

See the Wisdom of Christ

If we are to see wisdom lived out in real time, we only need to look to the Lord Jesus Christ. He knew what it meant to be humble. Here was the King of the universe, yet he appeared humbly as a poor baby born in scandal. Here was the King of kings associating not with the rich and powerful, but with the humble and lowly. Here was all power lying in an animal feed trough. So it should not surprise us that Jesus taught us the words of Proverbs 25:6-7 – not putting ourselves forward – by commending to us that we humble ourselves rather than being exalted; not to take the seat of honour, but the seat of humility (Lk. 14:7-11). This is what he did. Paul said in Philippians 2:5-11 that our attitude should be like Christ – who humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross, and was exalted by his Father.

And if anyone knew what it meant to heap coals upon the heads of his enemies, Jesus knew. Instead of sending fire from heaven to strike down his enemies, he forgave. As he was on the cross, we are told in Matt. 27:44 that both the criminals heaped insults on Jesus. But Luke tells us (Lk. 23:34) that Jesus prayed for their forgiveness, not insulting them, but showing them grace. To the one, this could only result in more insults. To the other, it softened his heart and caused him to respond in grace upon grace (Lk. 23:39-43). And this was the kindness that Paul commended, quoting Prov. 25:21-22. The wisdom of Christ, the humble influence in the world is the kind of influence that doesn't repay evil for evil, but repays evil with good.

When we receive this gift of grace, what we can do is know that God's grace to us has taken away all condemnation. Since there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus, we can receive the word of correction as a word that only aims to make us better, not destroy us. Because the greatest criticism in the universe has been removed so that we no longer have to prove ourselves to be right; we can be corrected a Father who so dearly loves us that his discipline seeks to change us from one degree of glory to another (cf. Rom. 8:1; 2 Cor. 3:18).

This is what I loved about Tim Keller. He had publicly stated that he didn't like being attacked and he didn't like controversy. And yet he found himself in the middle of many controversies and was a model of grace and truth. When reviled, he didn't revile in return (1 Pe. 2:23). Instead, he commended Jesus, he showed grace in the face of truth. He disagreed with humility and gentleness.

It's no wonder why Redeemer Presbyterian saw some of New York's elite attend there. Not because it was a church for the powerful and elite, but because it was a church where the grace of the gospel called sinners to come and find grace and mercy in their time of need.

If we are to be a people who influence the world for Christ, it won't be through culture warrior postures. It will be through the humble influence of the gospel of grace – the grace that won a thief on a cross to ask Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk. 23:42).