



Vulnerability

Wisdom from Proverbs for Reengaging Relationships

David Sunday January 3, 2021

Happy New Year to all of you. We need God in this new year as much as we always have. I pray this will be a year when we really experience some rebuilding and growth in our ministry and mission together.

When you think about the year that's just passed, what words or phrases come to mind to describe 2020? I think of an unprecedented overuse of the word "unprecedented." I think we should scale back in using that word for a while. Or "zoom fatigue." It was a foreign concept to me a year ago; now I understand what it means. Or I think of the word m-a-s-k, that four-letter word. I think I'll always cringe just a little bit when I hear about masks.

I'll be happiest when we can finally retire the phrase "social distancing." I understand the need for it and am on board with how we need to protect one another from the virus by physically keeping our distance, but I think we need to at least be mindful of one of the unintended consequences. What are we losing when we start viewing one another as a possible source of contamination?

All the protocols of 2020 have made me appreciate the radical love of Jesus all the more, how He approached those who were afflicted with all kinds of uncleanness and diseases like leprosy. What did Jesus do? He didn't distance from them; He moved toward them. He touched them. How radical that was! To be touched is to be acknowledged, to be noticed, to be valued. We all need that desperately.

On May 16th, the APF news agency posted a video that went viral. We'll put the picture on the screen. It showed this woman, Carolyn Ellis, from Ontario, hugging her aging mother through a plastic sheet that she configured into a "hug glove." At the time of the video, the daughter and mother hadn't touched



one another for two months. The video shows them smiling as they hug one another, pulling away, hugging each other again, then pulling away and then hugging each other again. They hug for about a minute in this video.

Something about that strikes us at a visceral level, because along with this viral pandemic we've been experiencing a plague of social isolation. All of us have felt it, some more poignantly than others. This secondary pandemic has taken a toll on marriages, families and church fellowships. Many people have suffered from mental and emotional illness this year.

That's because we've been created by God to live in relationships with one another, face to face, so we can touch one another in a way that communicates care and brotherly and sisterly affection. So we're going to spend the first seven weeks of 2021 seeking God's wisdom for how we can re-engage and go deeper in our relationships with one another.

We've coined a new phrase for this series, calling it "Social Un-Distancing." We're going to be going to the goldmine of the Bible called Proverbs which is a book that brings godly living down to earth. If ever we imagine that being a spiritual person is just about you and your own personal relationship with God, this book corrects us. We can never separate our vertical relationship with God from our horizontal relationships with our families, friends, neighbors and co-workers—even our enemies.

This book shows us there's no distinction between the practical and theoretical in the Christian life. Theology is meant to be lived out in the nitty-gritty details of life. The fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7, 4:7, 9:10), is meant to be fleshed out in how we relate to one another. One of my pastor friends, Josh Fenska, put it like this: "Proverbs is where the gears of redemption go down into the sidewalk cracks of life."

This week we're going to explore what we can learn from Proverbs about our human vulnerability. I don't think we're going to appreciate our need for wisdom on relationships until we recognize how desperately we need one another. We prefer to identify as self-sufficient individuals and to conceal our vulnerability. But author Madeleine L'Engle observes, "When we were children, we used to think that when we were grown up, we would no longer be vulnerable. But to grow up is to accept vulnerability. To be alive is to be vulnerable."

So what does it mean to be vulnerable? Think of a soldier without his sword or gun, going into battle unprotected. To be vulnerable is to be exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, to be at risk of failure, to be in a position of weakness rather than strength. It means to be woundable, then when we're wounded, we walk differently through this world. Does that make you a little bit nervous? Vulnerability is not a comfortable condition.

Andy Crouch describes it as a form of nakedness. He says:

Nakedness is a funny thing. Of all the creatures in the world, only human beings can be naked. By adulthood, every other creature naturally possesses whatever fur, scales or hide are necessary to protect it from its environment. No other creature...shows any sign in its natural state of feeling incomplete in the way that human beings consistently do. Only human beings live our whole lives able to return to a state that renders us uniquely vulnerable, not just to nature but to one another.

Reading that, of course, reminds me of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. After they sinned, what was the first thing they noticed? That they were naked. What did they do? They tried to conceal it. They covered themselves with fig leaves.

Can you understand why we don't want to admit or accept our vulnerability? It's risky to do so, but your vulnerability is a reality you cannot negate. Any attempt to deny it is to your own detriment. When we try to conceal our vulnerability, we cut ourselves off from relationships. And without relationships, there can be no joy, no peace, no human flourishing. Here's the main point I want us to see this morning. We are all vulnerable when we're alone, yet the cure to our loneliness is found in being vulnerable. Think about that for a minute. We're all vulnerable when we're alone, but paradoxically, the cure to our loneliness is found in being vulnerable. We'll always be lonely in this world, until we're willing to be vulnerable.

So let's dig into the book of Proverbs to grasp this paradox of wisdom.

1. Our greatest vulnerability is not physical sickness.

First I'd like you to turn to Proverbs 18:14. We're going to discover an important lesson here about what makes a person strong or healthy. Proverbs 18:14 says, "*A person's spirit can endure sickness, but who can survive a broken spirit?*" Our first lesson this morning is this: our greatest vulnerability is not physical sickness.

We've spent a lot of time this year focusing on protecting ourselves from a deadly virus. If you know someone who's suffered greatly from COVID, you understand it's nothing to play around with. It's foolish to be reckless in the face of a contagious virus that is sometimes randomly lethal. This verse acknowledges the importance of physical health. This verse acknowledges that without physical health, life can be very challenging. It can become something you have to endure.

I've heard some people say this year, "Your health is everything," as if nothing matters more than being physically healthy; as if if you don't have physical health, then what else can you really enjoy in life? But there are conditions more harmful than physical sickness. God has given to human beings an amazing degree of resilience and fortitude. We can adapt to all kinds of adverse situations. We can endure prolonged and fierce illness. But we cannot flourish without joy. We cannot thrive without hope. We cannot really live without love.

A person's spirit can endure sickness, but a broken spirit, a wounded spirit, a crushed spirit, who can bear? If your spirit is strong, your body can be broken and somehow endure, even triumph through it, but even the most physically strong person in the world cannot survive long with a spirit that's crushed. What this means is that your character is more important than your health. Your spiritual vitality matters more than your physiology. Who you are on the inside is far more consequential than what's going on outside. We see this in the New Testament as well, as the apostle Paul counsels young Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:8-9, "*Train yourself in godliness. For the training of the body has limited benefit, but godliness is beneficial in every way, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*"

You see, the Bible is operating under the assumption that there's more to life than what we see under the sun. This life is a dot from which extends an infinite line called eternity. There is a life to come. So the cultivation of your spiritual life is infinitely more valuable than the preservation of your physical health.

A proverb like this should make us pause and ponder, "Well, I need to focus on my physical health" —and we should— "but am I being sufficiently attentive to my spiritual health? Do I make decisions that are calculated to minimize every physical risk, while being relatively careless or indifferent toward spiritual pitfalls or opportunities for spiritual growth?"

This proverb should also make us think about the people around us. Who around me is at the breaking point spiritually right now, through neglect, drifting or through life circumstances that have become so severe? Who in my life is close to breaking down spiritually? Who is dealing with a crushed spirit, a wounded spirit, a broken spirit? How can I model the gentle and lowly heart of Jesus, of Whom Scripture says, "*A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly smoldering wick he will not quench*" (Isaiah 42:3)? Jesus is moved toward those who are spiritually broken, wounded and crushed. How can I come alongside those in my life who may be very close to that point in their lives right now?

The author Thomas Hardy commented on a phrase from the Book of Common Prayer, saying this: "If all hearts were open and all desires known, as they would be if people showed

their souls, how many gapings, sighings, clenched fists, knotted brows, broad grins and red eyes would we see in the marketplace of this world?” In other words, how many people are slogging through life on the death row of a broken and crushed spirit? What can we do to minister to them? As much as we care about protecting people from the corona virus, we should be even more concerned about the spiritual health of those we love.

2. Isolation aggravates our vulnerability.

As we see the importance of a healthy spirit in this proverb, is it possible to have a healthy spiritual life without vibrant human relationships? The answer to that question from the book of Proverbs is a very definite “no.” It’s not possible. So let’s look at Proverbs 18:1 for our second lesson which is that isolation aggravates our vulnerability. It exacerbates our vulnerability.

Proverbs 18:1 says, *“One who isolates himself pursues selfish desires; he rebels against all sound wisdom.”* Here we meet a person who is either reclusive or divisive. They’re either the type of person who withdraws from meaningful relationships because they’re afraid to get close or they don’t want to be bothered by someone else. Or they’re the type of person who says, “I think I know better than everyone else,” so they set themselves apart from the fellowship and create quarrels and divisions, because they’re unteachable, as we see in Proverbs 18:2.

Either way, the point is clear: if you do not actively pursue relationships in your life, it’s not because you’re just a loner. It’s not just because you have a certain personality profile. If you don’t actively pursue relationships, it’s because you’re acting selfishly. You’re behaving as if you can live a self-sufficient, independent life with no need for the encouragement and aid of other people. You’re also behaving like there’s no one in your life who needs your encouragement and help. That’s selfish.

Not only is it selfish to isolate yourself from relationships, it’s also rebellious. You’re rebelling against all sound judgment when you do this. The reason for that is there’s nothing in the Bible that’s going to tell you you can live a life of wisdom, love and godliness by isolating yourself from other people. In fact, there are all kinds of Scriptures and commands in the Bible that can only be obeyed by getting close to another person. We call them the “one anothers” of the Bible.

Not only that, you’re exposing yourself to an ambush if you isolate yourself from other people. Think about a battalion of soldiers in a flank. They are stronger and more able to

defend themselves when they stand shoulder to shoulder. But if one of the soldiers decides, “I’m just going to break away and go over here by myself,” he becomes a sitting duck. He’s a target.

The book of Hebrews tells us that, as God’s people, we are to consider how to stir one another up to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). It says in Hebrews 3:13 that we are to watch out for one another because we are our brother’s keeper. We are to watch out for one another so there is not in any of us an evil and unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. It says we are to encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of us becomes hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

What are we learning from Scripture? We are spiritually vulnerable. We are vulnerable to every manner of sin, evil and unbelief; that’s just a fact for all of us, even if we’ve been walking with the Lord for 90 years. We need one another to protect each other from this vulnerability.

Just think of King David, alone in his royal chamber when he should have been out on the battlefield with his loyal soldiers. King David is vulnerable up there, looking across his neighborhood at another man’s wife. He’s going to fall.

Or think of the prophet Elijah after he had his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, which was a great spiritual high point. Now he’s out in the wilderness, running away from Jezebel, who’s thirsting for his life, but he comes to this place where he is so crushed in his spirit that he says to the Lord, “I just want to die out here. Take my life.” He’s at the brink of despair. What does the Lord remind Elijah of? He says, “You’re not alone, Elijah. There are more than 7,000 people in this country like you who are serving Me.” He reminds Elijah of his solidarity with other believers. All of us need to choose between relationships or isolation.

Ray Ortlund counsels us wisely when he says, “Christians have to choose between isolation, which is easy, and belonging, which is costly and much more satisfying.”

What do you choose? Easy isolation or costly belonging? This first way is cheap, the way our hearts are naturally inclined—just isolate and be on our own. But belonging to others, as costly as it is, is a much more satisfying way to live.

3. The cure to our loneliness is found in being vulnerable.

So what have we seen so far? We’ve seen that being healthy spiritually is more important than being healthy physically. And we’ve seen that we cannot be healthy spiritually in isolation from one another; we are vulnerable when we are alone. But here’s the paradox—and this is the third point this morning—the cure to our loneliness is found in being vulnerable. If you don’t want to be all alone in this life, you have to learn to be vulnerable.

For this let's look at Proverbs 14:10. This is one of those verses in the Bible that shows how profound the Bible's insight is into human psychology and sociology. It says, "*The heart knows its own bitterness, and no outsider shares in its joy.*" Just suck on that like a lozenge for a little bit this morning. "*The heart knows its own bitterness, and no outsider shares in its joy.*"

I read a sermon by Charles Spurgeon on this passage which was kind of funny. It was speculating about life on Mars. It actually sounded like in the 1800s Charles Spurgeon believed that there might be life on Mars. But that really wasn't the point of the sermon. He was saying, "If there were life on Mars, think about how inaccessible humans on earth would be from the creatures on that planet, how impossible it would be to communicate with one another, because there's this great gulf fixed between them and us, and neither can pass from one to the other." Then Spurgeon said, "That's the way it is in human relationships. Humans are microcosms. We are little worlds."

Each person has his or her own distinct sphere in which we dwell apart from one another. Your world does not exactly overlap my world or another person's world, and their world does not overlap yours. You cannot completely know another human being. You cannot really know what is going on emotionally inside another person and they can't know what's going on inside you.

Even in marriage, which is ideally the closest of human relationships, sometimes we feel like we can read each other's minds. I can look at Kate and know what she's thinking...sometimes. But there are limits, which is why marriage counseling is such a lucrative career in this world—teaching people how to communicate with one another.

So on the one hand this should cause us to be patient with others whenever we feel misunderstood or underappreciated. It's hard enough to understand our own hearts, let alone the life experience of another person, so cut the people around you some slack. Realize that just like their understanding of you is limited, so is your understanding of other people limited. You might think of yourself as a very empathetic person. You might think you're able to sympathize with just about anyone. But you haven't experienced life in the same way they have and they haven't experienced life in the same way you have. There are limits to what we can know and understand.

It is so very easy to wrongly guess what another person is thinking. Why do they do the things they do? What motivates them? What's the reason for the intensity of their emotions in some particular situation? So we need to be very careful how we judge other people from the

outside. But what about from the inside? What can this proverb teach us in terms of how we relate to other people?

Listen to these wise words from Tim and Kathy Keller: “Remember that no one can read your mind. If you don’t want to be terribly lonely, you will have to open your heart and reveal yourself.” What is that? Vulnerability—and that’s scary. True vulnerability is putting yourself into the hands of another. We don’t always react really well to vulnerability, do we? Someone described it like this: “We see the scenes repeated throughout life. In a friend’s confession of her deepest secret, how do people respond? As an estranged family member asks forgiveness for an old hurtful action, what’s our reaction? Or perhaps even in strangers, as we pass a man with a cardboard sign and a tattered blanket every day on the way to work? How do we react to people in their vulnerability?”

This writer goes on to say, “More often than not, my reaction to vulnerability is to avert my gaze, rather than immediately rejoice in celebration.” We know that’s what it’s like. We know that we get squeamish around human vulnerability. But there is Someone Who never averts His gaze. There is Someone Who is not squeamish about our weakness.

Look at Proverbs 15:11: “*Death and Destruction lie open before the Lord—how much more do human hearts!*” (NIV). Listen, no manner of scientific inquiry can probe the depths of what’s inside the grave and what happens to life after death and the regions beyond—the underworld, heaven, hell. No line of scientific inquiry can probe into that. There’s no way human minds can comprehend that, but these lie open before the Lord, Yahweh, the God of covenant grace and truth. Death, destruction and all these realms that are inaccessible to human minds, lie open before Him, so how much more do human hearts that He has created. He knows how to judge and evaluate our hearts.

Look at Proverbs 21:2: “*All a person’s ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs hearts.*” This brings us back to the Book of Common Prayer where it says, “Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires are known, and from whom no secrets are hidden.” This is God, the God about Whom Hebrews 4:13 says, “*All things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.*”

There is nothing about you, nothing about me, that He doesn’t know. We might lull ourselves into a false security beneath some kind of self-protective shield, but at any moment, God could ask a question that would put a chink in our armor, that would expose us for who we really are, that would eviscerate us, showing the truth about us. He could unravel us with a word. That would terrify us if it were not for what we celebrated at Christmas. This God Who

knows everything about us, Who sees the world in the depths of its depravity, came down to us, not as a Judge to condemn us, but as a Savior to rescue us and as a Friend to walk beside us.

Deep in our hearts, we fear that God is disgusted with us, that He has had enough of us. But the fact is we're projecting our own feelings upon Him. In reality, we are the ones who are disgusted with ourselves. We don't want to face up to our sins and failures. We're too proud to come to Him and acknowledge who we really are. We're too afraid to admit our vulnerability. We think God is out to ruin us and that's the reason things in our lives are difficult. So we hide behind this façade of having it all together.

But look more closely at Jesus. Consider how He deals with sinners. Can you think of a single time in the life of Jesus in the Gospels when He comes to a sinful person and exposes their sinfulness in order to make them feel ashamed and leave them there in the gutter of their own wretchedness? Every time Jesus deals with sinners, He does so as a most skillful physician of souls, unmasking the sinfulness of our hearts with the greatest of sensitivity.

Think of the woman at the well when He told her He knew she had had five husbands and that the man she was living with now was not her husband. Did Jesus do this in order to shame her, in order to humiliate her, expose her and leave her there in her wretchedness? No. He did it in order to unburden her of her shame and enable her to drink of Him, the Living Water (John 4; John 7:37-39).

Consider how tender Jesus is as the friend of sinners. As you look at Jesus, consider how God Himself became vulnerable in the person of Jesus, how God exposed Himself to such harm, to such humiliation, to such pain, to death itself, so that we could be unshackled from our shame. There is nothing about you that God doesn't already know. In fact, God knows worse about you than you know about yourself, because He plumbed the depths of your disgrace. He drank the bitter cup of your sin and shame. He took every accusation that justly stood against you and let it be hurled at Him on the cross, as He hung there in your place as a sacrifice for your sin. He answered those accusations. He bore your condemnation. So on the cross, your condemnation now becomes your emancipation proclamation. You are set free from your sin and shame through the death of Jesus Christ when you trust in Him.

The question I want to ask you this morning is this: if it's true that the One Who knows you best loves you like this, is there anything you really need to hide? Don't you see that you've got nothing to hide if you're loved with a love like Christ's? If the One Who loves you like this is telling you that He wants you to grow in the experience of His love by becoming vulnerable with other people He also loves—others He's put in your life to help you grow more and more into the

likeness of His image—can you not trust Him Who loves you so? Can you not open your heart and unpeel the layers of your soul—sharing your fears, failures, hopes, dreams, sadness and joys—with brothers and sisters in Christ who are also learning to be loved by Jesus?

This is what makes life in the body exciting. This is what makes a gospel community vibrant. This is what makes a SPUR men’s Bible study alive. It’s when we go beyond the surface—beyond merely filling our minds with truth, when we start sharing side by side, life to life, what’s really going on inside us—that we discover that we’re not shamed for it, but we’re loved. We know one another more deeply, then we know God more deeply, as we walk in the light with one another. You can only love and be loved to the extent that you’re willing to be vulnerable in this life.

C.S. Lewis said it famously:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

God in His wisdom is calling you out of the casket today. He’s calling you into a lifestyle of what Stephen Lee calls “redemptive vulnerability”—a vulnerability that leads to life where we share our brokenness in order to display the all-surpassing power and sufficiency of Christ as He works in us through His Spirit to make us more and more like Him. Redemptive vulnerability is not calculated, not where you appear weak, but only insofar as it serves a selfish end—like we sometimes do on social media. Redemptive vulnerability is not indebted, where you’re vulnerable with someone else because they have information about you that would damage your reputation if it were leaked out. Redemptive vulnerability is not positional, where your role by definition makes you dependent on or vulnerable to someone who has a higher rank or tenure.

Redemptive vulnerability is where you freely own and admit the truth about yourself—the pains, the joys, the failures, the fears—because you know you’re loved by the One Who knew everything about you and had every right to humiliate you and expose you, but He instead chose to redeem you and restore you.

Next week Pastor Brandon is going to preach on friendship. It’s a beautiful gift we all need. Today we’re being shown the gateway into a fuller, richer enjoyment of that gift. Jesus is

the Friend of sinners. His love frees us from pretending we've got it all together. His Spirit empowers us to accept our vulnerability and to be vulnerable with one another.

Let's close in prayer.

Almighty God, to Whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from Whom no secrets are hidden, encourage us today with Your love, acceptance and advocacy on our behalf, as we hold in our hands these symbols of the death of our Savior on the cross. Enable us to walk in the light as You are in the light, for we know that nothing the light exposes in our lives is beyond the power of the blood of Jesus to cleanse. When we walk in the light as You are in the light, we have fellowship with one another and with You. We thank You that Jesus is the Friend of sinners. We marvel at His love for us. Help us taste and see that You are good, as we take this sacrament together. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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