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# Iron Sharpens Iron



## From Exposition to Sermon Proverbs 27:14–19

BY DAVE BLAND

Wisdom is acquired through many avenues, which may include prayer, experience, observation, and knowledge. One of the most popular views today, however, is that wisdom is attained through a lifetime of quiet meditation. The 1984 movie *The Razor's Edge* portrays such a perspective. Because of the traumatic experiences he went through in World War I, Larry (played by actor Bill Murray) seriously reconsiders his life and sets out on a lifelong quest for meaning. He explores many different options, many lifestyles. At one point he begins reading the Upanishads and finally finds himself in India. While there, he climbs a mountain and spends time in solitude, reading and meditating. The experience is transformational. He leaves the mountain a different, wiser person.

The book of Proverbs would not deny the important place of time spent alone in reflection. But that is not the center of focus for attaining wisdom in Proverbs. The center of focus is time spent in a city of activity, a sea of humanity. Notice where Wisdom is when first introduced. She is in the street, at the marketplace, and in the city gate (Prov 1:20–33). Wisdom finds herself in a city teeming and bustling with the traffic of human life. According to Proverbs, wisdom is acquired at the hub of human activity.

That is why Proverbs places such a heavy emphasis on the value of human interaction. The ultimate fool is the one who is “wise in his own eyes” (3:7; 26:5, 12). Fools rely exclusively on self-evaluation. In contrast, the wise do not depend solely on their own perceptions but rely also on the wise counsel of others. The book of Proverbs makes this clear: “Without counsel, plans go wrong, but with many advisers they succeed” (15:22).<sup>1</sup> Wisdom believes that two heads are better than one. Because of a high regard for human ingenuity, the wise seek out the insights of others, whether from other cultures or from

the wise in their own communities. Sometimes in these encounters interaction goes awry; relationships turn dysfunctional. However, when individuals and communities seek out the best in others, wisdom is acquired. New insights are gained.

The text of Prov 27:14–19 speaks to this phenomenon. It contains links that tie its individual proverbs together. First, all the proverbs in the text describe interaction between two individuals. Second, throughout chapter 27 the topic of friendship dominates. Verses 5, 6, 9,<sup>2</sup> 10, 14, and 17 all portray the value of the friend. Friendship is a key theme in the cluster of proverbs in verses 14–19. These links make it appropriate, then, to study the proverbs in this text together as a unit.

Verses 14–19 speak of tensions that exist in a variety of relationships, including friends, family, and community. The text pictures both constructive and destructive interaction:

<sup>14</sup> Whoever blesses a neighbor<sup>3</sup> with a loud voice,

rising early in the morning,  
will be counted as cursing.

<sup>15</sup> A continual dripping on a rainy day  
and a contentious wife are alike;

<sup>16</sup> to restrain her is to restrain the wind  
or to grasp oil in the right hand.

<sup>17</sup> Iron sharpens iron,  
and one person<sup>4</sup> sharpens the wits of another.

<sup>18</sup> Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit,  
and anyone who takes care of a master will be honored.

<sup>19</sup> Just as water reflects the face,  
so one human heart reflects another.<sup>5</sup>



The text brims with tension and vignettes of spirited interaction. The first two proverbs portray strife between two friends (v. 14) and two spouses (vv. 15–16). The friend in verse 14 blesses his neighbor with a loud voice early in the morning. It is true that the friend extends pleasant greetings to his neighbor. But there is a major problem: his timing is off! For the sage, timing determines the appropriateness of a word or deed. Because of the friend's poor timing, his words become abusive; his blessing turns to a curse. Discord between the parties arises because the one who greets has no tact. He greets when it is convenient for himself, that is, when he is in good humor. The exhilarating songs and words of the early riser are nothing more than clanging cymbals to the late sleeper. But beneath the image of the early-morning riser lies a larger issue: the churlish attitude of tactlessness toward others. This friend disguises insults with a lighthearted demeanor.

The second portrayal of a dysfunctional relationship, described in verses 15–16, is of a contentious woman. In Proverbs women are known by the words they speak. There is the capable woman, who offers words of truth and justice to her family and to the poor (31:10–27). There is the temptress, whose words lure and entice the simpleton into the snares of death (2:16–19; 5:3–14; 6:20–35; 7:6–27). And finally, there is the contentious woman, who nags, who constantly complains, who is the in-house critic.<sup>6</sup>

The quarrelsome woman is infamous for the imagery that she evokes. The sage reserves some of his most sarcastic humor for her (see 21:9, 19). The imagery of continual dripping on a rainy day is similar to that used in Eccl 10:18 to describe a leaky roof that can erode a whole house. Eugene Peterson in his modern paraphrase misses the gravity of the "continual dripping" image when he translates the proverb in the following way: "A nagging spouse is like the drip, drip, drip of a leaky faucet; You can't turn it off, and you can't get away from it."<sup>7</sup> The image is not about something that is simply a nuisance with which one must learn to live. It is about a long-established habit that can destroy a whole house. Both the insensitive friend and the quarreling spouse are images of conflict gone awry. They are pictures of relationships in discord.

In contrast to these dysfunctional relationships are the relationships depicted in verses 17–19. Here, constructive portrayals of interaction unfold. The sage observes, "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wit of another" (v. 17). The first line is an old proverb: Iron sharpens iron. The image is of someone using metal to sharpen a sword or a farming implement. The metaphor of steel rubbing against steel in the first line is applied in the sec-

ond line to the abrasion or friction necessary for growth in one's own relationships.

As iron sharpens iron, so one friend sharpens another. We know this is true in the physical realm. Our athletic abilities are sharpened when we engage in competition with others. In a similar fashion, mental faculties are sharpened when the mind is engaged in reading, reflecting, and interacting with others over issues that matter.

**As iron sharpens iron,  
so one friend sharpens  
another.**



Iron sharpening iron is not an isolated image in the text. The proverb in verse 19 confirms the idea: "Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another." This proverb, like many, is intentionally ambiguous, though more cryptic than most. There are a couple of different ways to interpret it. Some understand the second line to refer to a single individual who is reflecting on his own thoughts.<sup>8</sup> Through introspection a person comes to a better understanding of the self. Others understand the second line to refer to two people engaged in reflecting on each other's ideas.<sup>9</sup> Through interaction a person comes to a better understanding of the self. So how is it to be interpreted—introspection or interaction?

One possibility for determining its meaning is to look at the context in which the proverb appears. Granted, not all proverbs have a context. Some may be randomly collected or quite loosely connected with their surroundings. But this proverb has a thematic connection with the proverbs that precede it. The focus of verses 14–19 is not the isolated individual but the self in relation to friends, family, and community. In addition, two proverbs located earlier in this chapter reinforce the idea of spirited interaction:

<sup>5</sup> Better is open rebuke  
than hidden love.

<sup>6</sup> Well meant are the wounds a friend inflicts,  
but profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

Within the context of chapter 27, it is better to interpret the reflection of verse 19 not as self-reflection but as inter-reflection.<sup>10</sup> Individuals come to know themselves not ex-



clusively through introspection but also through interaction.

What a potent image this proverb conveys! "Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another." When one engages in rigorous interaction with another who reflects with him or her, who offers counter ideas, who expresses alternatives, or who just listens, such a person discovers new insights. Thoughts are clarified. Someone has made the observation, "The thought process is not complete until the idea is verbalized." This statement means that until individuals can explain or express their thoughts to others, they do not understand them as well as they think. When thoughts and ideas are clarified to others, we come to better understand them ourselves.

The proverb revolves around the image of water, which incorporates two dynamic qualities of human nature. First, unlike the predictable reflection in a mirror, reflection on the surface of water is ever changing, a quality also characteristic of human nature. Second, unlike the mirror, the reflection in water implies depth. There is more than meets the eye. A proverb parallel in thought observes: "The purposes in the human mind are like deep water, but the intelligent will draw them out" (20:5). The image is of a deep well. It takes a person with a bucket and long rope to draw out the water.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, it takes time, patience, and one who is indeed a friend to plumb the depths of another.

There remains yet one other relationship described in this text. That is the relationship between master and servant. Verse 18 observes: "Anyone who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and anyone who takes care of a master will be honored." In similar fashion to verse 17, the first line of this saying contains an old proverb. The second line applies the agrarian figure to the master/slave relationship. The one who takes care of his farming responsibilities will eat the fruit of his labor. In the same way, the worker who looks after and protects his master's interests will also receive honor. By itself this proverb could have any number of references, because of its metaphoric nature. However, in taking seriously the surrounding proverbs, this gnomic saying may hold up another relationship to consider in reflecting on how iron sharpens iron.<sup>12</sup>

Proverbs 27:14-19 presents a powerful cluster of images that revolve around the tensions inherent in relationships. While the first two proverbs describe dysfunctional relationships in destructive conflict, the last three depict strong relationships that have implicitly resulted from healthy conflict. The former are divided by conflict; the latter, bound together by it.

## Sermon

*October 26, 1997*

*White Station Church of Christ, Memphis, Tennessee*

*Sermon Focus:* By engaging in constructive conflict, individuals grow stronger.

*Sermon Function:* To stimulate a fresh vision of the value of conflict in healthy relationships

In 1961 the United States embarked upon the now infamous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. The invasion was a plan that called for the secret arming, training, and transportation of an elite fighting force of Cuban exiles. These Cubans, recruited in Miami, received the best training America had to offer. The plan, initiated by President Kennedy and a half-dozen advisors who represented the brightest and best minds of the time, was to land in Cuba and spearhead a popular uprising against the Castro government.

After two months of deliberation, the group had unanimously approved the invasion. But three days after the initial landing, all 1,400 invading troops were either dead or in prison camps. The United States was demoralized, and Castro stood stronger than ever. What had happened? This blue-ribbon think tank had made a terrible decision. The advisors were not lazy or evil. They had fallen victim to what has been called groupthink. Later, in reflecting on the Bay of Pigs disaster, two of the members confessed that they had had misgivings about it all along. But they had remained silent out of fear of group resentment. Dissident views had been unwelcome. Solidarity had been more important than the decisions and actions of the group.

That is groupthink. It is a phenomenon to which a group, a family, or a church falls prey when it becomes so concerned with unity that no one can afford to raise honest doubts. Independent thinking is replaced by collective thinking as evidenced in the group. Conflict is avoided at all costs, because it is viewed as the enemy of the group.

The text of Prov 27:14-19 addresses the issue of conflict. The text speaks of conflict in a variety of relationships: between friends, family, and community. It describes both healthy and unhealthy conflict.

Sometimes conflict is destructive, as portrayed in the first two proverbs (vv. 14-16). Such is the person who blesses his neighbor with a loud voice early in the morning. There are two reasons for the unwise action. For one, it's done in a loud voice (that is, it's done for show, to impress). For another, it's early in the morning (that is, at an inappropriate time).



But this proverb is not limited to how early risers are to behave. Its implications are broader. Underlying the image of the early-morning riser is an attitude of inconsiderateness toward others. This is the person who does not know when a joke has gone too far, someone who has fun at the expense of another. This is the person who wins, but not graciously. He or she rubs it in. Cheerful words are used to disguise what is really insulting. Such rudeness creates unnecessary conflict.

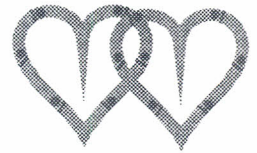
Not only are destructive patterns of interaction developed among friends, they spring up in the home as well. Husbands and wives can develop communication patterns that eventually lead to constant quarreling. Such quarreling is simply a long-established pattern of insensitivity. Verses 15–16 compose one proverb that presents this dysfunctional picture of conflict: the picture of the contentious woman. (Keep in mind, in Proverbs not only are women contentious, but men can be drippy too. Proverbs describes the male verbal abuser in 26:17–26.)

The imagery in 27:15 is quite sarcastic: “A continual dripping on a rainy day and a contentious wife are alike.” Do not, however, be deceived by the image of constant dripping! This is not a lighthearted picture of a leaky faucet that is simply irritating and in need of minor repair. Rather, it is a description of a leaky roof that, if not stopped, will destroy the whole house. Such quarreling not only tears the couple apart, it affects everyone else under the roof. There is an African proverb that describes the dynamics well: When two bulls fight, it’s the grass that suffers. Everyone loses.

These two images, the image of the insensitive friend and that of the quarreling spouse, depict conflict gone awry. Unfortunately, many people have more negative experiences with conflict than positive. That’s the reason we have such an aversion to conflict in the first place. Negative experiences are all too common, and so we avoid conflict because, after all, look what it does! It destroys friendships and homes. It destroys churches. So an environment is cultivated for a form of groupthink to develop. Everyone works to calm the troubled waters, to cover over any differences for the sake of maintaining unity. We are conditioned to avoid any semblance of confrontation or controversy.

Conflict, however, is inevitable—but it doesn’t have to be destructive. Healthy conflict between spouses, friends, and Christians can lead to growth. Rather than dividing us, conflict can enable us to be a more spiritually responsible body. This is the thrust of the proverbs in verses 17–19.

**Tension and struggle must also be a part of church life if the church is to grow spiritually strong.**



The sage observes, “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another.” The first line is an old proverb: Iron sharpens iron. The image is of metal being used to sharpen a sword or a farming implement. The imagery of steel rubbing against steel in the first line is applied in the second line to a relationship between friends: As iron sharpens iron, so [literally] one friend sharpens another.

The proverb in verse 19 carries a parallel thought: “Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another.” The idea here is not of an individual privately reflecting on his own thoughts but of two people interacting with one another. The result is that they come to a better understanding of themselves.

Spiritual health is sharpened when defensiveness is put aside and Christians engage in serious and open discussion about life issues that will lead to stronger faithfulness. Sometimes when iron is sharpening iron, sparks fly. But when two friends in conflict have the best interest of each other in mind, such conflict results in good. Christian character does not develop in a vacuum but only in interaction with others.

Tension and struggle must also be a part of church life if the church is to grow spiritually strong. Here is a scenario of the way in which two different churches might face difficult issues. There is a conflict brewing in Northside Church: Should the church add a new wing to the auditorium? Group A is for it, and so is Group B. But Groups C and D are not. There is another conflict: Should they have a contemporary worship? Here, Groups A and C want it, but Groups B and D do not. Still a third conflict: Should Christians be involved in politics? Groups A and D say yes, but Groups B and C say no. There are also other issues at stake besides these! Confusing? This church is a maze of intertwining relationships. If you had just arrived in town and were looking for a church, would you choose Northside?



Before you decide, look at Southside Church. It's about the same size and demographic makeup as Northside. This congregation also disagrees over similar issues. But at Southside there are just two distinct groups. The people in Group A are in general agreement on all the issues, and the people in Group B oppose them on those issues.

Now if you were seeking a church in which to place your membership, would you be more interested in Northside or Southside? Despite the complexity of the interaction, the Northside Church is more healthy in terms of conflict management. There is more "cross-stitching" interaction going on among many different people and groups. The Southside Church is less complicated in its interaction, but the lines are clearly drawn: there is Group A, and there is Group B. The church is polarized. Little interaction is taking place between the two sides. At Northside some members find themselves in disagreement about some issues but in agreement on others. There is healthy dialogue. The dynamic of iron sharpening iron is actively at work at Northside.<sup>13</sup>

There is a principle of conflict management that states the following paradox: If you want to have less conflict in your relationships, try to have more. This doesn't mean that we should try intentionally to get people angry. More precisely, it could be stated: If you want less conflict, invite disagreement.<sup>14</sup> Be open to different opinions that others have on various issues and experiences. This is a sign of a healthy family, a healthy friendship, and a healthy church. Engaging in healthy conflict is an indication that we are taking each other seriously. When iron sharpens iron, not only do individuals grow, but God's community, his church, grows as well.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup>There are some textual problems with the second line. The Hebrew text reads, "The sweetness of a friend is better than one's own counsel."

<sup>3</sup>The Hebrew term can be translated either "neighbor" or "friend."

<sup>4</sup>This is the same term as in verse 14 and can be translated either "friend" or "neighbor."

<sup>5</sup>In Hebrew thought, the heart is the center of the thought process. Thus "heart" here refers to the mind. Literally, this verse translates, "As in water the face to face, so the heart of man to man."

<sup>6</sup>I must hasten to add that in Proverbs not only can women be censorious, but men can be just as scathing. Read the description of a contentious man in Prov 26:20-23. The focus on the male, however, is lost in the inclusive language of the NRSV.

<sup>7</sup>See Eugene Peterson, *The Message: Proverbs* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995).

<sup>8</sup>The second line, William McKane says, "has to do only with one man whose self is mirrored in his *lev* [heart], and the meaning . . . is that it is through introspection . . . that a man acquires self-knowledge." See William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 616.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Alter's analysis of the imagery is especially apropos: "The terseness makes you work to decipher the first verse. Once it dawns on you that what is referred to is the reflected image of a face in water, further complications ensue: Does each man discover the otherwise invisible image of his own heart by seeing what others are like, or, on the contrary, is it by introspection (as we say, "reflection"), in scrutinizing the features of his own heart, that a person comes to understand what the heart of others must be? And is the choice of water in the simile merely an indication of the property of reflection, or does water, as against a mirror, suggest a potentially unstable image, or one with shadowy depths below the reflecting surface?" See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 178.

<sup>10</sup>Raymond Van Leeuwen writes: "The idea is of water as a mirror: man comes to self-knowledge through confrontation with the other." See Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Context and Meaning in Proverbs 25-27*, SBLDS 96 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 125.

<sup>11</sup>Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 176. R. N. Whybray concludes that the proverb is "tantalizingly obscure" so as "to provoke thought," R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 289.

<sup>12</sup>John Eaton sees 27:17-18 as a proverbial pair. He claims the referent of both is a tutorial debate that takes place between a teacher and student. See John Eaton, *The Contemplative Face of Old Testament Wisdom in the Context of World Religions* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989), 26.

<sup>13</sup>This scenario is paraphrased from a video entitled *Conflict in the Church: Division or Diversity?* (Akron, Pa.: Mennonite Central Committee, 1988).

<sup>14</sup>From *Conflict in the Church: Division or Diversity?*