

lovewisely

BIBLICAL WISDOM
FOR LOVING RELATIONSHIPS

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Published by Wesleyan Publishing House, Fishers, Indiana 46037
www.wesleyan.org/wph
Printed in the United States of America
ISBN: 978-1-63257-514-2
ISBN (e-book): 978-1-63257-515-9
Library of Congress Control Number: 2022912837

Note: All names (besides my own, my family, and my friend Bill) and identifying circumstances have been changed to protect the privacy of my clients and all individuals involved.

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Introduction

This book is about how to do relationships well.

Relationships are the stuff of life. Our highest highs and lowest lows, our deepest fears and greatest joys, all stem from relationships. Yet, I have found, in more than three decades of ministry and counseling, that most people struggle miserably to do them well.

Frequently, I sit in the counselor's chair across the table from yet another frustrated soul pouring out their heartbreak about a relationship that is not working. About 85 percent of my counseling practice deals directly with the condition of a relationship between two people (or more, as in the case of a family). The other 15 percent are internal issues that either have their roots in relationships, have a major effect on relationships, or both.

Thankfully for us, God is all about relationships! The triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—was already in relationship long before angels, animals, or humankind were created. So, it comes as no surprise that the Bible is packed with instructions, warnings, admonitions, and encouragements about how relationships are to be conducted and cultivated. God has the answers to make relationships work.

The Bible expounds God's relationship with his people, our personal relationship with God, and our relationships with each other. It highlights how they are disrupted, how they are healed, and how they are successfully maintained.

For this book, I pull out several strands of biblical wisdom that are most relevant to what I've seen in relationships as a pastor and

counselor, as well as in my personal relationships. In fact, much of this book contains lessons I've learned during my life.

I've suffered all the emotional ups and downs that come with relationships. Looking back, most of the problems in my relationships have stemmed from not understanding God's perspective and the Bible's wisdom. I would apply verses in incorrect ways that ironically worked *against* healthy relationships. As a result, I suffered depression, self-doubt, feelings of failure, resentment, and loads of anger.

If I had understood biblical wisdom early on, it would have saved me—and my family—a lot of grief.

The Bible offers wisdom about the how-to of love, the goals of love, and the pitfalls of love done poorly. It also holds wisdom about fixing love relationships: How do we reset a relationship to accomplish the goal of love again? Biblical wisdom prescribes answers for loving relationships, even those that don't seem loving right now.

In *Love Wisely*, I will share how you can obtain the following biblical wisdom:

- An assertive, balanced demeanor when relating to others, especially those you are closest to. Biblical wisdom warns against aggression and passivity.
- Appropriate boundaries in your relationships. Biblical wisdom does not endorse relational styles of enmeshment, isolation, use and abuse, codependency, or subjecting yourself to being treated like a doormat.
- Boundaries for yourself. The Bible is filled with instruction to discipline and control your thoughts, actions, decisions, and words in the context of relationships.
- Elimination of relational drama through emotional maturity. Scripture holds up as negative examples those who manipulate

or abuse others or play games that create chaos and drama in relationships.

- Entering intimate relationships only with people who are “safe.” Biblical wisdom strictly warns against being “unequally yoked” (intimately bound) with those who would draw you from God or bring dysfunction, drama, and damage into your life.
- Trust as foundational to any healthy relationship.
- Heavy doses of forgiveness and reconciliation in relationships.

The major idea of this book is that *biblical love and biblical wisdom won't contradict each other*. In fact, biblical love and biblical wisdom will act the same. A person who relates to others according to the ancient wisdom of the Bible will be successful in love. A person who applies biblical love to their relationships will approach those relationships with true wisdom.

As you read, let Christ be your guide, and love wisely.

part 1

Love and Wisdom

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is
the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two
commandments.”

—Matthew 22:36–40

I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.

Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.

—Matthew 10:16

Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has
put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their
food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose
master finds him doing so when he returns.

—Matthew 24:45–46

All who are prudent act with knowledge,
but fools expose their folly.

—Proverbs 13:16



Love requires: A desire for others to experience true shalom in their hearts and lives—and actively works to encourage that experience.

Wisdom requires: Doing the most effective, ethical, moral, compassionate, and God-honoring thing in the most effective, ethical, moral, compassionate, and God-honoring way possible. In short, it's doing the best thing in the best way.



Bringing Home the Shalom

We're told an inspiring story about a wife in an abusive relationship who keeps on loving her husband for years, despite his cruelty. She serves and dotes on him, until one day, the violent husband suddenly has an epiphany: "Hey! She loves me unconditionally! Maybe that means God loves me unconditionally! I ought to change the way I'm treating her." And he does.

And so, it seems "love wins" and "love conquers all" once again. The wife never has to complain, object to his behavior, let him know she is hurting, defend herself, enforce a boundary, or be anything but a verbal and sometimes physical punching bag—but instead, makes his dinner, does his laundry, and gives him all the sex he wants. He never has to worry about what his behavior has done to her, because she has loved on him no matter how he has been treating her. The two now share a perfect marriage of everlasting bliss.

Do you personally know of any such dysfunctional relationships where the story ends so easily and happily? In my many years of pastoring and counseling, I don't. The reason we don't have firsthand knowledge of these fairytale stories is because they don't reflect reality.

What really happens in these scenarios is that the man is increasingly consumed by his self-absorption, while the woman is diminished to non-personhood and ends up in the hospital, psych ward, or morgue. Maybe you've observed such disastrous relationships—or have experienced one yourself. Perhaps you can relate to the overly submissive wife in our fictional story with a skewed view of what it means to be in a loving relationship.

Have your relationships ever caused you to ask yourself, Do I love too much?

Or have you wondered, Why do all my relationships end up the same way? Why do I get the short end of the stick in relationships? Why am I constantly taken advantage of? Why are my loving actions toward others rarely reciprocated?

Have you questioned, Why do I get into these relationships where there's so much chaos and drama? How is it that a friendship or love relationship can be so riddled with fights and arguments and cold wars?

Perhaps you ask, Do I invest more into others' well-being than they seem to invest in themselves? Have I enabled someone to live an irresponsible life? Why does my loved one seem to stay stuck no matter how much I help her? At what point is my help doing more harm than good?

Or these . . .

- Why have my efforts to love my husband out of his moods failed miserably?
- Why do I always end up a victim?
- Why can't I seem to attract the right kind of person?

If you've thought any of the above questions, I invite you to consider the wisdom of your love for others. Your love may be deep and genuine, but somehow you still have unsatisfying

relationships. Your affection may indeed be sincere, but if it isn't paired with biblical wisdom, the result will ultimately be dysfunction, broken relationships, and hurting, unhappy people.

Does the Bible have anything to say about these situations? Yes, and we will look at many places throughout the Bible that bring clarity and direction, hope and healing, to these complicated relationship issues.

Maybe you are in a relationship with a person whose behavior seems very selfish. He says whatever he wants, however he wants, and it doesn't matter to him who he hurts—including you. His behavior can be controlling and manipulative, and you often feel put down and taken advantage of. How can you love this person like Jesus would? What would wisdom dictate? Would loving him and treating him with wisdom turn out to be the same set of actions?

Our impression may be that God expects us to lie down and die for other people's selfishness, because we love them. Because Jesus died for our sins, we wrongly assume we are supposed to die for their sins too—by allowing ourselves to be destroyed by their sinfulness, so they can go on sinning.

The truly loving thing to do for someone who is controlling, manipulative, insulting, and angry is not to “love him” by letting him do and say whatever he wants, and only “being nice” back to him. This kind of love is superficial, unthinking, constitutes the road of least resistance—and most of all, it's unwise. The wisdom of the Bible is way more realistic.

For instance, 1 Peter 3:1–2 says, “Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.” A misreading of this passage might lead one to do exactly as the wife in our example did—keep on loving amid

the abuse and to her own detriment. But 1 Peter 3:1, which refers to our return to “the Shepherd and Overseer” of our souls, immediately follows 1 Peter 2:25. In other words, wives are to submit to their husbands “in the same way” that we all submit to the Shepherd and Overseer who loves us, cares for us, and watches over us with protection and provision. This kind of submission is a long way away from submitting to abusive treatment. The “purity and reverence of your lives” that may win over a husband refers to one’s self-control, devotion to the Lord, and doing what is right while in a relationship with someone who acts like a shepherd and overseer. It doesn’t mean submission to abuse and mistreatment from one who acts like a selfish tyrant.

Jesus demonstrates a much more realistic approach to sinful people than our wishful fantasies. The truth is that the behaviors and attitudes of *biblical wisdom* and *biblical love* take the *same actions* and have the *same outcomes* in relationships. In reality, *wisdom and love never contradict one another*.

For example, if I truly love someone, it is unwise to let them consistently violate my boundaries without speaking up. Such passivity results in an artificial relationship that lacks honesty, and a dishonest relationship is not a loving one. Consistently allowing boundary violations is unwise. Wisdom and love both demand that I honestly express where my boundaries are being violated and adjust the dynamic of the relationship so that there is mutual respect and reciprocated love.

Think of it this way: If love doesn’t result in a long-term, positive, God-honoring outcome for the recipient, is it really love?

We can sometimes more easily understand this with our children. If we give children what they want when they want it, based solely on our affection for them, we will spoil them. And when I say spoil, I mean, potentially ruin their life.

The following meme has been around for a long time. Whether the Houston police produced it or not is unknown, but its commonsense wisdom rings true.

The Best Way to Raise a Delinquent

After making a study of juvenile delinquency, the police department of Houston, Texas, issued a leaflet containing twelve rules on “How to Raise a Juvenile Delinquent.” They are:

1. Begin with infancy to give the child everything he wants. In this way he will grow up to believe the world owes him a living.
2. When he picks up bad words, laugh at him. This will make him think he's cute.
3. Never give him any spiritual training. Wait until he is twenty-one and then let him decide for himself.
4. Avoid the use of the word *wrong*. It may develop in the child a guilt complex. This will prepare him to believe that when he is punished later for stealing cars or assaulting women, society is against him and that he is being persecuted.
5. Pick up everything after him: his shoes, his books, his clothes. Do everything for him so that he will be experienced in throwing his responsibilities on others.
6. Let him read anything he wants. Have no concern whatever for what goes into his mind. Be careful that the silver and drinking glasses are sterilized but let his mind feast on garbage.
7. Quarrel frequently in the presence of your child. Then he will not be shocked if the home is broken up later.

8. Give a child all the spending money he wants; never let him earn his own. Why should he have things as tough as you had them?
9. Satisfy his every craving for food, drink, and comfort. See that every sensual desire is gratified. Denial may lead to harmful frustration.
10. Take his side against policemen, teachers, and neighbors. They are all prejudiced against your child.
11. When he gets into real trouble, apologize for yourself by saying, "I never could do anything with him."
12. Prepare for a life of grief. You will be likely to have it.¹

It would be foolish to raise a child according to such rules, and wise parents understand that to truly love a child, they must use wisdom and set limits. Otherwise, they are not really loving him, but setting him up for a disastrous life.

This kind of common sense needs to apply to all our relationships, not just in raising our children. If we don't learn to use biblical wisdom in our relationships with others, we are likely to have a life of grief.

Maybe you have a loved one who continually finds herself in a crisis, and you feel bad for her. You love her, you want so much to see her situation changed, and you want to help make it better for her. What is the most loving thing to do? What is the wisest thing to do? Are these the same thing? How can you love her, but love her *wisely*?

Listening to some impassioned Bible teachers, we may get the idea that loving people means we rescue them from their problems. Jesus rescues us from hell, so we assume we should rescue others from their difficulties. So, we're taught that the loving thing to do for hungry people is to give them food. Sounds pretty straightforward. But what about tomorrow when they're hungry again? What about the day after that?

In his book *Toxic Charity*, Robert Lupton lays out this maxim:

- Give once and you elicit appreciation;
- Give twice and you create anticipation;
- Give three times and you create expectation;
- Give four times and it becomes entitlement;
- Give five times and you establish dependency.²

Is establishing dependency the core of Christian love? Is the goal of loving like Jesus to get people to sacrifice their dignity and be forever dependent on you? That doesn't seem very wise.

It is also neither loving nor wise to simply approve of everything my loved one does, which seems to be the fallacy of our age.

- If you loved me, you would approve and celebrate everything I do.
- If you loved me, you would agree with my point of view.
- If you loved me, you would support all my choices and decisions.

We have seemingly lost the ability to say:

- I love you, but I cannot celebrate your behavior.
- I respect you, but I must disagree with what you are saying.
- I support you, but not this decision you're making.

The fallacy of our age is that, if anyone challenges us or pushes back on our beliefs, they are no longer friends, but enemies. Gone is the day of friendly disagreements. Our culture no longer understands Proverbs 27:6: "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." Instead, this is turned on its head to say that, if you're not coddling, you're not loving.

Worse yet, this view of love can lead to disaster:

- If you really loved me, you'd let me [take advantage of you].
- If you love him, you'll forgive him, look the other way, and not do anything about [his abusive behavior].
- If you love her, you won't cross her [when she wants to go out binge drinking].
- If you love people, you won't tell them they're wrong [even if you believe they're running headlong into a burning building]. Just live and let live [or die—whichever it may be].

Is this really what it means to love? Is this what Jesus meant when he said, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39), and “Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44), and “Turn . . . the other cheek also” (Matt. 5:39)?

Such superficial interpretations of Jesus' commands only perpetuate destruction, selfishness, and evil. With this errant mindset, and because unwise love inevitably leads to evil, our world desperately needs to apply wisdom in the arena of love.

But what does it mean to love wisely? How do you love wisely?

The most definitive description of love may arguably be the famous “Love Chapter” in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13. Let's take a closer look at these verses.

Love Is the Point

The first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13 make it clear that love is essential to the point of human existence. Without it, most human functions lose their purpose. Love makes everything useful and meaningful. In other words, love is the point.

Communication

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. (v. 1)

Communication that does not come from a place of love, according to Paul, has no value—it's meaningless racket. By inference, Paul's declaration means that love is the ultimate point of communication, whether earthly or heavenly. Without love, communication is only so much noise. Noisy, worthless communication misses God's intended point of communication. The apostle was saying that, if we communicate without love as an integral ingredient in our goal and manner of communication, we have gutted communication of what it is truly meant for.

Communication is a means to accomplish something *beneficial* for ourselves or others. Even people who spew hatred or wickedness are motivated by some preferred outcome for themselves, like removing obstacles to their dominance, for example. And when people speak words out of pure selfishness, they misuse communication. They are just blurting meaningless racket.

For most of us in everyday life, communication has a less sinister goal than a self-centered, wicked spout of demands. Think of the words you use throughout your day with your family—from “Do the dishes,” to “I have a doctor's appointment at 3:00,” to “The dog got out again.” All these communications contribute in some way to the functioning of the family, which contributes to the well-being of its members. Taken as a whole, they may be seen as expressions of love. Love is the point of communication.

Information

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge . . . but do not have love, I am nothing (v. 2).

Prophecy means “to declare the purposes of God.” To “fathom all mysteries and all knowledge” is to know and understand everything there is to know. If someone had both the gift of prophecy and could fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, he or she would carry an awful lot of information. Paul’s statement seems to indicate that, if you had all the information in the world at your fingertips, but didn’t have love, that wealth of information wouldn’t be worth much in the eyes of God.

God’s ultimate purpose for all information is love: God’s love for humankind, people’s love for God, people’s love for other people. Information—spiritual or natural—does no one any eternal good if the purpose, goal, and use of information isn’t infused with love. God’s design is that we use the information we learn in the natural and spiritual realms to benefit people. Love is the point of information.

Faith

If I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. (v. 2)

Great faith is powerful. Both Jesus and Paul showed that faith can move mountains. Jesus taught us, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you” (Matt. 17:20). Paul came across a man lame from birth and “saw that he had faith to be healed.” The man’s faith changed his life (Acts 14:8–10).

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