

**The Quiet Force of Our Character (Proverbs 25)**  
Proverbs: The Wisdom of God as a Way of Life  
Zionsville Fellowship | February 8, 2026 | Drew Hunter

We're continuing our series in Proverbs this morning—and we're in chapter 25 today.

We've seen that Proverbs is a curriculum in character development. It begins with the fear of the Lord, and it ends with the likeness of Christ. It begins with a posture of trusting reverence for God. And it ends in us being transformed into the character of Christ.

Proverbs shows us that the good news of the gospel is not just forgiveness of sins, but also character transformation. When you come to Christ by faith, you begin a process of being renewed as a true human. This process continues until we are more and more like Christ.

Proverbs 25 shows us how even subtle aspects of our character powerfully shape our lives.

We may go through a day and we cannot think of any big sins we've committed. And we think we're doing fine and there's nothing we need to change. But Proverbs shows us the subtle ways our character shapes our lives. It shows us the quiet force of our character.

Think of this past week. You may not have lost your temper or deceived someone—but you may have annoyed, frustrated, or discouraged someone and not even knew it. We still have subtle, selfish tendencies that create friction with people.

This is part of your character that Proverbs 25 exposes and that Christ can change.

**Proverbs 25 shows us the quiet force of our character.** It shows us not so much how we blatantly sin against people, but how our selfishness shapes our lives in subtle ways—and how it leads us to be annoying, frustrating, and disappointing to people. And it shows us this so that we can pursue the joy of forgiveness and transformation.

**We'll see three areas of life that our character subtly shapes—our leadership, words, and relationships. We'll see humility for leaders, wisdom with words, and then peace in relationships.**

Now, before we look at this, here's a note about how to think about this chapter.

Proverbs leads us to change by taking us through its curriculum of character development. It's carefully organized as a progressively unfolding curriculum to shape our character. We're entering the fifth major section in Proverbs, which we can call *Advanced Wisdom*.

## Proverbs: A Curriculum in Character Development

1. The Beginning Wisdom (1–9)
2. Elementary wisdom (10–15)
3. Intermediate Wisdom (16:1–22:16)
4. Vocational Wisdom (22:17–24:34)
5. Advanced Wisdom (25–29)

Earlier sections of Proverbs gave us basic wisdom—now we are in advanced wisdom for the complexities and gray areas of life. This chapter focuses on the more subtle aspects of character for life and leadership.

But think about it like this. Have you ever seen *Ford v Ferrari*? It's one of our family's favorite movies. It's about how Ford tried to beat Ferrari in the Le Mans. They needed to design and build a new race car that could win. So Carroll Shelby and Ken Miles designed and built a car that could compete. But for Shelby and Ken, it wasn't not good enough. It could still improve. So they put it through all sorts of advanced tests, made minor tweaks, and refined it to perfection. And this Ford GT40 won.

This is like the process of our character development in Proverbs. The earlier sections give us the essentials and basics: It begins with the fear of the Lord, and then it starkly contrasts righteousness and wickedness. This is the process of trusting Christ, and then addressing the big sins and character flaws. You are now a functional car, and you are highway ready. But if you are going to race the Le Mans, you need to be refined. This is *Advanced Wisdom*.

The issues we'll see in this chapter may not seem like big deals at first. These seem like minor character flaws. We are unconscious of how problematic some of these behaviors are. So the chapter uses vivid imagery to alert us to the quiet power of our character.<sup>i</sup>

We'll see three areas where character subtly shapes our lives and relationships. We'll see humility for leaders, wisdom with words, and peace in relationships.

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### 1. Humility for Leaders (vv. 1–7a)

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First, humility for leaders.

The first seven verses refer to leaders as kings, great ones, nobles, and rulers. This section is for those who advance in societal leadership. The main theme is humility for leaders.

First, humble leaders know their place.

Verses 2–3 set up a hierarchy of wisdom and knowledge—with God at the top, then kings, then subjects: “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out. As the heavens for height, and the earth for depth, so the heart of kings is unsearchable.”

Part of God’s glory—his greatness and worth—is how he conceals his infinite knowledge. Yet he does this so that kings can search it out. This sets an ideal standard for kings and leaders—they are to be among the wisest of people. They are to know how God designed the world to work, so they can lead people well.

We should have high standards for the wisdom of rulers. They are ideally to know their place before God. Many nations have plunged into ruin when their leaders take the place of God—they either claim to be divine or they functionally take the place of God. Authoritarian states are dangerous and don’t respect the God-given rights of citizens. I’m reading a history book right now that chronicles this in China under Mao, and with Khomeini in Iran—and other Islamic and secular states.<sup>ii</sup>

Kings, presidents, prime-ministers—and leaders of all kinds, even business owners and parents—need to know their place before God. And then lead with the wisdom he gives.

The second insight about humble leadership is that they should surround themselves with virtue.

Verses 4 and 5 picture the king’s leadership group as silver. Silver can be pure, or it can be contaminated with dross. How do you make silver pure? You get rid of the dross. “Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel; take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness.”

Leaders need to have people of virtue around them. Because you will be influenced by the people who are around you. When unrighteous and unwise people surround a leader, it corrupts the way they lead.

So, when we vote for a president, we should not just consider their character—we should consider the kinds of people they will surround themselves with. Who will they appoint in other roles? Who will influence them? Some good leaders are corrupted by foolish people; and some foolish leaders lead with wisdom because of the people around them.

And in our nation, we spread the ruling power across many different areas—the president, congress, the supreme court, and the voting citizenship. This requires us as a people to be a moral people. This is why John Adams once said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” The freedoms and moral vision of our country depends on the wisdom and virtue of the people.

The third insight is for those who want to be leaders—and it’s to not put yourself forward.

This is about refusing to use self-promotion for advancement. If you want to be a leader, don’t grasp for it. You humbly wait for people to invite you into leadership. You don’t try to work the angles to be noticed.

This is verses 6–7: “Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, “Come up here,” than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.”

The lesson is clear: If you want to be a leader, don’t pridefully grasp for it. If you want to be a leader, you have to be content without being a leader. Jesus said this as well, didn’t he? He seemed to draw on this proverb in his teaching.

He was at a dinner, and he watched how people started taking the places of honor. He saw people working the angles to get to the important places. So, Luke 14 says, “he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you” Luke 14:7–10). And then he broadened his point to apply to all of life and even eternity: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 11).

And at one point, do you remember that James and John sent their mom to secure places of leadership for them? And Jesus said that it’s not for them to decide. And then he addressed the basic issue of pride and humility: He said, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” And then he gave himself as the ultimate example: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43–45).

This prideful, self-asserting tendency is often very subtle, isn’t it?

You can have a good, God-giving impulse to lead. But if you cannot *not* lead, that’s revealing a character issue. Wise leaders can handle not leading. And they don’t grasp and push to be known and seen among leaders. They don’t feel entitled to lead. They wait to be invited; and if it doesn’t come, that’s okay.

This is humility for leaders.

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## 2. Wisdom with Words (vv. 7b–15)

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The second way our character subtly shapes our lives is with our words. So, second, wisdom with our words.

Our words seem like small things—but we’ve seen throughout Proverbs how significant they are. Earlier sections of Proverbs addressed more obvious issues with our words. Now in this advanced wisdom section, we see the more subtle ways our words affect people. And it’s here that Proverbs uses striking imagery to help us see the problem with our words.

In verses 7–15 we see five kinds of wise speech that are subtle, but powerful. I’ll list them here, and then we’ll walk through the text—the five kinds of speech that mark the wise are circumspect, fitting, confronting, reliable, and patient.

First, circumspect.

This is verses 7–10. What your eyes have seen 8 do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end, when your neighbor puts you to shame? 9 Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another’s secret, 10 lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end.

So, someone wrongs you, and you have some evidence—you’re an eyewitness. What do you do? Do you just sue the person? Take it to court? Share it online?

Wisdom says to go to them privately. Why? First of all, because even if you’re an eyewitness, you may not have the full story. You may be wrong about their motives or what was really going on. Don’t jump to conclusions. And second, it’s unkind to go public without giving them a chance to make it right. It’s unkind to spread information publicly.

This is pervasive in our society. Journalists are incentivized to report and spread information first—whether it is true or right to do so. Social media incentivizes half-baked hot takes. And people love bad news—so they are incentivized to make the problem look even worse than it is. Everyone clicks the article, feels informed, feels righteous—and yet someone’s reputation was wrongly destroyed.

So, if you have been wronged, you have to ask yourself: Do I really know the full story? Have I gone to this person personally? Is it necessary and kind to go public with this?

Second, fitting speech.

Verse 11 says, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” This is a well-stated, well-timed statement. It’s something said at the right time and in the right way.

Wisdom doesn't just ask us to make sure our words are true—it also leads us to restrain our speech. To decide what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. These are like golden apples, placed in a setting of silver.

Which leads to the third kind of words—which are confronting speech.

Verse 12 says, “Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprover to a listening ear.” This isn't merely confrontational speech—it assumes the person speaking is wise, and the person receiving it is listening. Wise people know how to deliver a well-timed correction, and it will be a blessing only if it's received.

The fourth kind of speech is reliable.

Has someone ever said they would give you something and they didn't follow-through? They say, “oh, you need one of these. I'm going to get you one.” And then you wait months and they never give it. What is that like? Verse 14 says that's like seeing wind and clouds coming—and assuming it's bringing a well-needed rain. But then the rain never comes. It's a false promise and a let down.

The fifth kind of speech is patient.

Lots of people like to speak truth to power. But their demands never work. Why? Because they don't know how to make their words powerful and persuasive. They try to persuade a leader, and the leader gets defensive. They make personal attacks rather than reasonable arguments. Or they use slogans to manipulate people's thinking rather than reasonable arguments. Or they shout at people rather than talk with people.

Verse 15 shows us how to persuade: “With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.” Be patient, be clear, be calm, be kind. This is how to break a bone—which refers to overcoming resistance. I think of how Martin Luther King, Jr. was so compelling in his day. He knew how to persuade through rational and peaceful persuasion.

The Apostle Paul told Timothy to not be quarrelsome, but “correct your opponents with gentleness,” knowing that God may grant them repentance and change their thinking.

All of these are very subtle ways that our words either create conflict or lead to peace. And our words flow from our character.

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### **3. Peace in Relationships (vv. 16–28)**

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The third way our character shapes our lives is with relationships. In verses 16–28 we see how to create peace in our relationships.

Now, a number of these will, again, maybe seem obvious. These may seem like basic or beginning wisdom. But this is *advanced* wisdom. And it's advanced because we often don't often see these issues in our lives. We don't see how these subtly affect our relationships.

So, this section of Proverbs uses vivid, striking imagery to awake us up to this. Here we see eight relational tendencies that are more problematic than we may think at first. These are eight ways that your character may be subtly undermining your relationships. You may not see how people are frustrated by you, annoyed by you, wishing they could get some distance from you, and so forth. You may not even realize that people are creating distance between themselves and you. But they're doing it because of some subtle issues in your character that you don't see—or you don't think are a big deal.

Here are eight ways you may be subtly undermining your relationships.

First, smothering.

This whole chapter often pairs two verses together to make a single point. You can only grasp the bigger point if you see how both of them relate. Notice how verses 16–17 help us see the problem of smothering people in relationships.

Verse 16 seems to be just about eating too much honey. It says, "If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you have your fill of it and vomit it." If you eat too much of even a good thing, you can get sick of it. My friend Jeff and I talked about this Proverb when I was in college. We were often hungry after church, so we would go get a Papa John's pizza. We couldn't wait to eat it. We would smell it all the way home in the car. And then we would devour the whole thing and feel like trash. There may be a piece or two left—that looked amazing a few minutes before, but now looked disgusting. We had a good thing, but we had too much, too quickly.

Now, why is this here? How is this advanced wisdom? Notice the connection to verse 17: "Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you." What's the connection? You visiting your friend's house is like honey—it's a great thing, and they enjoy it. But what happens if you go there too much, too often? You smother them. They get sick of you. They look at you like I looked at that last piece of pizza.

So, don't smother people. You may not realize you do this. But you are calling too much, texting too much, emailing too much, trying to get together too much. And the person stops reciprocating. They stop responding much. Why? You could think they are being a lousy friend, and you're upset with them. They may be a bad friend. *Or* you may be smothering them. You just need to give them a bit more space.

Second, betraying.

Verses 18–19 refer to bearing false witness against a neighbor, or being a treacherous man in a time of trouble. In both situations, someone is relying on you—relying on you to tell the truth or support them. But then you betray their confidence.

And notice the imagery used to help us see how painful this is—18 A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club, or a sword, or a sharp arrow. 19 Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.”

Some of you have experienced this—maybe we all have. You trusted this person. You thought you could rely on them. But then they turned on you. They spread gossip about you. They worked the angles to get the promotion ahead of you. They borrowed from you and didn’t pay you back. And you think with bewilderment, “I trusted you. I thought we were friends.”

Third, annoying.

We may be generally kind and faithful—but we can also be insensitive and annoying. And we may not even see it when we do it. Verse 20 uses imagery to help us see that this is a bigger deal than we may think: “Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda.” Someone is grieving or having a terrible day, and you are not sympathetic. You don’t pick up the cues. They have a heavy heart, and you sing them a song.

This is about what we call emotional intelligence. We are to grow in reading people’s emotions and adjusting to them.

Some of you have people in your life who are like this—and they don’t know why you are annoyed with them. Some of you may be the one who annoys and doesn’t know it. We all can be insensitive like this. Proverbs shows us that it matters.

Fourth is retaliating.

If someone wrongs you, or bothers you, how do you respond to them? Our default response is to retaliate. We want to see them harmed for what they did. But that only deteriorates the relationship further. Verses 21–22 shows us how to bless those who harm us: “21 If your enemy is hungry, give him bread 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.”

This is about meeting the basic and urgent needs of even your enemies. It’s hard to tell exactly what it means to “heap burning coals on their head.” It may refer to the burning shame of grief that it produces in them.<sup>iii</sup> They have wronged you, but then you bless them—and it leads them to feel ashamed.

Fifth is quarrelling.

Verses 23–24 refer to having a backbiting tongue, or being a wife who quarrels. Both of these are unbearable.

Sixth, is capitulating.

This is verse 26. It refers to someone who *is* righteous, but they don't stand up against evil. They capitulate. It says, "Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked." So, here is someone who follows Christ, they have grown, they have character. But they lack courage. They cannot lead the community because they back down when it's hard.

In many countries, the strategy of revolutionaries is to wear out the leaders. The car bombs, the violent protests, the riots. They create chaos and disorder. At first the people say that they will never back down. But eventually they get worn down. They give in. And this destroys the community.

And this happens at a smaller level as well. This gets played out in classrooms, with bullies, in neighborhoods, towns, and churches. People who are unwise and want power, control, and change—they wear down faithful leaders. Wise leaders need character to keep enduring.

Seventh, glory-seeking.

We're back to humility with this one. Verse 27 says, "It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory." Honey, sugar, deserts are good—but too much and we get sick of it. This is what happens when we think too highly of ourselves—and we try to find ways so that people see it. We want to promote ourselves. We proclaim our own greatness. We say we're amazing. We like to show how wonderful we are.

If we didn't do that, people would see us as honey—they see our competence or skill. But if we promote ourselves, people get sick of us.

Finally, overindulging.

Verse 28 shows us what someone who overindulges, or who lacks self-control, is like: "A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls." When we start giving in to an addiction—whether it's a drug, or lust, or alcohol, or gaining control—we are like a city that's walls break down. We self-destruct.

All of these have one thing in common: they are subtle ways that we deteriorate relationships. These are seemingly small character flaws—but they create a big impact in our lives.

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## Conclusion

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So, let's step back and think about the main message here.

This is advanced wisdom for character development. This is the final stages of refining the Ford to beat the Ferrari. But let's set this within the bigger picture of how God changes us.

In light of our sinful natures, we all start out like broken-down cars. Our character is malformed. We are spiritually dead. We're more like Tow-Mater than Lightning McQueen. We are oriented toward ourselves, and our selfishness hurts the people around us.

When God brings us to Christ, he gives us a new engine and starts replacing parts. He forgives our sins, he gives us new hearts, and he begins renewing our character.

But he doesn't just lead us to get rid of the big sins in our lives. He continues to refine our character to become more like Christ. And even when we've been growing in Christ for many years, there are still rough edges to modify.

God works on you like Carroll Shelby and Ken Miles perfected the Ford GT40. The book of Proverbs moves us along the stages of forming our character. And now in chapter 25, we are starting to see the more subtle character issues. They may seem small, but they make a difference.

Jesus is the ultimate model—and God is forming us to become like him.

But here's the problem: by the time we get to the end of this chapter, we feel exposed.

We see ourselves more clearly than we have before. We see that we still have selfish and foolish tendencies. We see that they are a bigger deal than we may have thought. We get a glimpse of the perfect image of Christ, and we see that we fall short. We can leave this chapter discouraged.

And so, in the end here, I want to draw attention to the truth that encourages and empowers us to change.

The central message of the Bible is good news for people who have character issues.

And there are two verses in this chapter that remind us of how the gospel encourages us. They are the only two we haven't looked at yet. Notice verse 13: "Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the soul of his masters." And verse 25, "Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country."

We have the cold of snow in the dead of winter, so it doesn't feel refreshing. But what about if this snow came on a 104-degree day in July? That's what the gospel is like, and Jesus is the faithful messenger who brings this good news.

When we see how pervasive our character issues are, we feel worn down and discouraged. So we need to remember that this chapter is here as part of a bigger story. Jesus came as the wise man with perfect character. He is the finished product. And he came to bring forgiveness and renewal. He died for our sins, he rose again, and he sent the Spirit to refresh us. To renew us. To bring the power to change.

So, if you have not received the grace of forgiveness and renewal, you don't start with this chapter. You don't start with refining the rough edges. You must be born again. You must get the new engine. You need forgiveness and the Spirit's power. So receive his grace—and welcome this renewal.

And if you have received this grace, then don't pursue change apart from it. Let's always remember that we don't refine our character to earn salvation—this is part of God's grace to us. He forgives us, renews us, and refines us by his own grace and power.

And what a gift it is that he would give us a chapter like this. He doesn't save us and then leave us on our own to keep frustrating people. He patiently renews us. He humbles us. He leads us to gain humility for leadership, wisdom with our words, and peace in relationships.

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<sup>i</sup> Ryan O'Dowd notes, "here the rhetoric is more focused on particular moral behaviors that are too easily rationalized in common society. O'Dowd, *Proverbs*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 348. These are not all obvious sins or problems to us. This is like Jerry Bridge's framing of moral issues in his book, *Respectable Sins*. Bridges refers to "not the obvious sins of our culture but the subtle sins of believers" (Bridges, *Respectable Sins*, 9). Bridges is specifically focusing on sins, while Prov 25 also just includes things that are unwise and foolish. Jerry also calls these "subtle sins." The word can refer to something that is positive, but it is also used to refer to something more crafty or insidious. We think of certain sins or issues as not so bad, and we overlook them altogether (Bridges, *RS*, 25). We are unconscious of how problematic some of these behaviors are—which is why we need the creativity and striking imagery of this chapter to alert us to them.

<sup>ii</sup> Christian Caryl, *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

<sup>iii</sup> See Waltke and DeSilva, *Proverbs*, 364.