

Welcome

Almost a decade ago, my mom and step-dad moved to the United Arab Emirates for three years for work (if you wonder where I got my sense of adventure from). We got to visit them about a year-and-a-half into their time there, after they'd had a chance to make some friends.

It was only the second time I'd spent any significant time in a Muslim-majority country, and the longest extended time I've spent in a place I'm not the majority culture.

There were a bunch of really interesting differences. Since Friday is the Muslim holy day, for instance, the weekend in the UAE is Friday/Saturday, with Sunday being the first day of the work week. The church my parents attended there had their main worship gathering on... Friday morning. (They did a Sunday evening gathering, but it was poorly attended.)

And it was basically impossible to sleep in there because every mosque (which are on every two or three blocks) blasts the first call to prayer about 30 minutes before sunrise. In their defense, you're not *supposed* to sleep through it, but come on! We were on vacation!

I don't know about you, but when I'm in a place I'm not majority culture, I always get nervous about making the right impression. I know there are tons of cultural practices and details I don't know, and I don't want to be *that* American.

One of the trickiest areas to navigate is male-female interactions. Muslim countries have a reputation (well-earned, in some cases) for treating women as second-class. But in several Muslim countries - like Egypt and the UAE, women's attitude toward their own bodies varies greatly. In the shopping district in Cairo, for instance, I saw two mannequins in a store window. One wore a bedazzled burka - the garb that shows only a woman's eyes. The other wore a clubbing outfit that was barely more than a bikini. In the same store. On sale next to each other.

The UAE is similar - you'll see women wearing all sorts of different outfits from extremely modest to... much less modest. So it's hard to know how to interact with a woman in the UAE when meeting for the first time.

In America, our standard greeting is the handshake. But it's not uncommon, especially when meeting a friend of a friend, for someone to say, "I'm a hugger; bring it in!" and go for a hug.

(Maybe we should use these color-coded bracelets everywhere?)

So it was I think our second day in the UAE. My mom was teaching at a women's college there, and she brought Amanda and me to work to meet some of her colleagues. Mom introduced us to the dean of her college, a Muslim woman in a pretty conservative hijab. She reached for my wife, Amanda's, hand and shook it, then turned to me.

Without missing a beat, I extended my hand and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you!"

She stared at me, then looked pointedly at my hand, and back at me. Until it got awkward, and I lowered my hand. Then she smiled - thinly - and said, “It’s nice to meet you as well.”

I had breached a cultural barrier. In the UAE, default assumption is that men and women don’t make contact - no handshake. Certainly no hugs.

Now, that’s not *always* the case - a few of the women I met there offered to shake my hand, and several of the men did the same with Amanda.

But I had made a faux pas by not allowing her to take the lead, to show me what she was comfortable with. And in doing so, I had communicated disrespect. I had devalued her and her culture. Later, she told my mom, “Your son doesn’t know very much about Muslim culture!”

That small action - thoughtlessly extending my hand - became a barrier for the possibility of a friendship between that woman and me. Now, granted, that was the only time I met her, but it did also negatively impact (though fortunately, not in a major way) my mom’s relationship with her as well. My inattention and actions became a barrier for love in that moment.

I want to talk about barriers to love today - what are some of the things in our lives that can block us from giving or receiving love? What are the intentions and actions we need to search out in ourselves if we want to have more love in our lives?

Message

Welcome to Journey to Love. We’re in a 40-day experience that lies at the very core of our human existence. For the next couple of months, we’re gathering here in this group and also in our small groups to answer together some of the most basic questions we ask as humans:

How do we love well?

And How do we *receive* love well?

We began with our friend Matt Mikalatos, the author of the book we’re using as a guide in our journey. Matt invited us to prepare to set out. He invited us simply to ‘show up’, to agree to participate in this journey. We saw how to spot love, and also how to spot what love is not. Last week, we meditated on the true power of love in our lives and the world.

Today, I want to ask the question, “What barriers to love exist in our lives?” Not barriers others have placed, but barriers we erect ourselves. And I want to do this through the lens of things we actually *do*. What are some real, tangible barriers we erect through our attitudes and behaviors?

Turn with us to [Proverbs 6](#).

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom sayings. It’s easy to dismiss these as pithy cliches - like ‘look before you leap’ or ‘a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush’. But for Ancient Israel, ‘wisdom’ had a particular, strong connection to faith. When our ancient parents spoke of ‘wisdom’, they pointed to a rhythm in the way of things. To call someone wise was to

say that they were living a fully human life, the life God created them to live. They understood something elemental about humanity.

In contrast, a fool was a person whose life was destructive. Fools aren't necessarily stupid - in fact, wisdom and intelligence don't have anything to do with each other. Plenty of really educated people are fools, and plenty of folks without much formal education are wise. A fool is someone who is selfish, who disregards God and their fellow humans, a person who lives on for themselves.

We might say a fool is unloving, while a wise person is overflowing with love.

With that in mind, these four verses I want to look at list seven things God hates. What we should hear, then, in the context of Proverbs, is that these seven behaviors and attitudes are poison to a human life. God hates them because they destroy love - God's work in us.

(And a little bonus trivia: these are not the infamous 'seven deadly sins'. That is a list created as a guide to confession by desert monks a few hundred years after Jesus' resurrection. Not connected to this list here.)

As we read, I want you to pay attention to how embodied this list is. It's very tactile. Because God created love to be something we *experience*. It's not just an idea.

There are six things the Lord hates— no, seven things he detests:
haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that kill the innocent,
a heart that plots evil,
feet that race to do wrong,
a false witness who pours out lies,
a person who sows discord in a family. -- Proverbs 6:16–19 (NLT)

Haughty eyes - the Hebrew literally means 'high' or 'raised up'. So these are eyes that look down on everything. We would say 'prideful'. This is about our attitude toward others. Who do we look down on? Maybe different races? People of different faiths or different political beliefs? Different socioeconomic classes?

As soon as we've put ourselves above someone else, we're dehumanizing them. We're denying they bear the image of God the same way we do. So of course that keeps us from showing love.

The next one is a lying tongue. When we don't speak the truth about someone, it's hard to love them. The sense here is one that's more immediate. Maybe we don't plan to speak falsely, but we haven't done our homework. We're speaking out of ignorance, or spreading a bit of gossip. Are we careful to speak loving words? Or do we spread unlove?

The next has to do with our hands - Proverbs describes "hands that kill the innocent". Now, fortunately, I'm pretty certain most of us haven't done this. But Jesus, in the sermon on the Mount, presses us on this idea.

“You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.” -- Matthew 5:21–22 (NLT)

That changes things, doesn't it? Jesus warns us that the seeds of murder begin in hatred. What hatred do our actions reveal? Who do we prioritize? Who do we ignore? Who are we centering and who do we relegate to the margins? Who do we allow to have a voice in our lives and who do we silence?

When we silence someone, we're not loving them. We actually prevent them from speaking any love to us, and vice-versa.

I was most fascinated by this next one: a heart that plots evil. When the Bible talks about the 'heart', it doesn't mean the seat of emotions like we do. They mean closer to what we mean when we say 'mind' - our inner self.

And that verb 'to plot'... it comes from the Hebrew 'to plow'. I know we're not farmers in here, so ploughing is how you prepare a field. It's what we have to do before we plant. In many ways, ploughing is how we define the field - where will the seed go and where will it not?

So Proverbs asks us to imagine a person who spends their time plotting and wishing ill on others. I find it fascinating that, unlike the previous barriers, Proverbs says nothing about whether we act on these plots or not. Because it doesn't matter. When we spend our time plotting against others, we can't love them. We can't receive love from them.

Feet that race to do wrong. We tend to think of sin as individual bad acts, but we know that acts become habits. Have we made a habit out of being unloving? Do we repeatedly put ourselves in places love is not? If so, how can we expect to live love-filled lives?

A false witness who pours out lies. Again, the actual Hebrew here is 'breathes out'. It has become easier than ever for us to be a people of half-truths and alternative facts (which is a fancy way to avoid saying 'lies'). We will not invite more love into our lives when we make a habit of listening to and spreading lies.

And finally, a person who 'sows discord' in a family. Now this one is worth hanging out on for a moment, especially because it's become vogue these days to silence truth-tellers by claiming we are 'creating discord'. Those, for instance, who point out the racial injustices that not only exist in our history but have shaped our present reality, are often accused of 'creating discord'.

But the truth is that the discord already existed - injustice is discord. Those prophets among us who name the injustice that we might repent and be healed are not those being talked about here.

Because, friends, this is a truth: Love does not ignore or cover up wrong. Love does not insist we remain silent while abuse, injustice and harm continue. Those things are unlove. They are actually *barriers* to love. *They* are what God hates. Not those who speak against them.

So there you have, from Proverbs, seven barriers to love. Pride. Lying. Hatred. Wishing evil on others. Habits of wrong. Spreading lies. And those who work injustice.

When these characterize us, they become barriers to more love in our lives. But of course, we can work against them as well.

I think about the BBQ we did here 2 summers ago, before COVID. When we invited our friends from the Sachse mosque to join us. (And can I just tell you that is a relationship that was just beginning to bloom when we hit the pandemic! It's one that your Leadership Team here and our friends at the mosque both can't wait to return to cultivating!).

Anyway, a bunch of us in the congregation cooked food. And because we were hosting our Muslim friends, we had one rule: no pork.

Pork is haram - forbidden - for Muslims.

And if you know Catalyst BBQs, you know we like us some ribs. Some pulled pork. Some beans with chorizo and ham and bacon in them.

There was a little bit of weeping and gnashing of teeth when I made the announcement. Of course. We all like to be a little bit dramatic.

But you know what? None of us batted an eye at making that sacrifice for our new friends. We understood that we were working with them to create more love - between Christians and Muslims who are neighbors and maybe co-workers but were trying to be something more: friends.

And to create that love, we needed to make a sacrifice. We did it happily. Because a little bacon and some ribs is a small price to pay for love.

That day, you could measure our love for our Muslim friends in pounds of meat not prepared. Our respect for them and their differences from us was tangible. You could touch it. Taste it (or, rather you couldn't. Because it was missing.)

This is what Proverbs wants us to understand. Love is tangible. And barriers to love are tangible, too.

Will we show the world our love? Or will we erect barriers to love?

Communion + Examen

Jesus gives us a tangible expression of his love

There are six things the Lord hates— no, seven things he detests:

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Assignment + Blessing

The next time you interact with someone in the service industry - in person, on the phone, on the internet - ask yourself how you would want to be treated. Try to treat them that way and see how it feels.