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## **Back to School: Better Is...**

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TEXT: Proverbs 15:17 (ESV)

Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it.

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Today's proverb portrays two dinner parties. One is simple and modest, a traveler's meal from ancient times. At first glance, it may not seem impressive, consisting of herbs and vegetables. As a child, I would have been horrified by such a meal with only vegetables. However, there's an element that makes this meal delightful - a special ambiance that fills the room. This setting reminds me of a childhood memory: my family and grandparents sitting around the table after church, enjoying a simple meal, laughing, telling stories from the old days, and not feeling rushed to leave. I also recall roasting hot dogs over a campfire on a family camping trip. We'd gather around the fire, roasting hot dogs on sticks, trying to avoid burning them. Our faces would turn red from the heat, and we'd shuffle around to dodge the smoke, all while laughing and enjoying the experience. Afterward, we'd assemble our hot dogs on dry buns, add ketchup to cover the burnt parts, grab a few chips, have a cup of Kool-Aid, and sit down at a picnic table with my parents and sister. We'd talk about fishing stories or baseball and savor the meal in the Montana mountains.

Here's another memory from my adulthood: a few years ago, I went on a medical mission trip to Peru, high up in the Andes Mountains. We worked hard, traveling to various villages to provide medical and spiritual care from early morning to late afternoon. I was part of a team of doctors, nurses, and assistants. At the end of the day, we'd return to our base camp for dinner. We were all exhausted, but a simple, ordinary meal awaited us. Despite its simplicity, it tasted like a grand banquet after our long day.

There was a joyful excitement over the day's accomplishments, shared stories, laughter, and attentive listening to one another. No one was in a hurry to leave the table; it was a truly enjoyable experience.

What makes these simple gatherings special? Love. Love fills the room at those tables. Healthy relationships are rich with love, and people enjoy their time together, valuing each other's company. Love is the key ingredient.

On the other hand, the second dinner party described in the proverb doesn't sound as pleasant. Despite the presence of great food, such as fattened ox, a sign of prosperity in those times, the atmosphere is strained, uncomfortable, and awkward. It's a dinner filled with hatred, alienation, resentment, and potentially long-held grudges. The guests sit close to one another, but there's a significant emotional distance. Trust is missing, and most importantly, love is absent.

You might have experienced such discomfort at dinner tables in your life. For instance, a couple hosting you for dinner might engage in a harsh exchange, hurtful words exchanged, and one of them abruptly leaves the table. Or a family gathering during a holiday, where past troubles and disagreements cast a shadow, with forced smiles and an effort to avoid triggering an argument. The food may be exquisite, but the tension in the air is palpable. Or a senior living dining room, where despite good food and service, no one at a particular table is talking to each other. Hours before, an argument over politics and religion left lingering hurt feelings, and no one is ready to address the situation or offer an apology. Or a school cafeteria, where children at a table engage in mean-spirited exchanges, bullying, and exclusion. It's a reminder that words have the power to shape the atmosphere and dynamics around a table.

In today's proverb, we are presented with two dinner parties. The first is simple and modest, resembling a traveler's meal from ancient times. At first glance, it may not appear impressive, consisting of herbs and vegetables. As a child, the idea of such a meal might have horrified me – a dinner with only vegetables? Nevertheless, this meal possesses a special ingredient that transforms the experience into a delightful one – a unique ambiance that fills the room. This setting reminds me of a childhood memory, where my family and grandparents gathered around the table after church. We would share a simple meal, enjoy one another's company, share stories from the old days, and never felt rushed to leave. Another memory from my childhood involves roasting

hotdogs over a campfire on a family camping trip. We would stand shoulder to shoulder around the campfire, roasting hotdogs on sticks, attempting to avoid burning them. Our faces turned red from the heat, and we shuffled around to dodge the smoke, all the while coughing and chuckling as the fire seemed to follow each one of us. Afterward, we would assemble our hotdogs on dry buns, add ketchup to cover the charred bits, grab some chips, have a cup of Kool-Aid, and sit down at a picnic table with my mom, dad, and sister. We would discuss fishing tales or baseball, savoring the meal in the Montana mountains.

Here's another memory from my adulthood: a few years ago, I participated in a medical mission trip to Peru, high up in the Andes Mountains. We worked tirelessly, traveling to various villages to provide medical and spiritual care from early morning to late afternoon. I was part of a team comprising doctors, nurses, and other assistants. At the end of each day, we would return to our base camp to have dinner. We were all exhausted, but a simple, ordinary meal awaited us. Although the food wasn't particularly extravagant, it tasted like a grand banquet after our long day. There was an air of joyful excitement over the day's achievements, stories were shared, laughter filled the space, and everyone was attentive to each other. No one was in a hurry to leave the table; it was a genuinely enjoyable experience.

What makes these simple gatherings special? Love. Love fills the room at those tables. Healthy relationships, brimming with love for one another, are the key. People enjoy their time together and value each other's company, and this is what makes the difference.

On the other hand, the second dinner party described in the proverb doesn't sound as pleasant. Despite the presence of great food, such as fattened ox, a symbol of prosperity in those times, the atmosphere is strained, uncomfortable, and awkward. It's a dinner characterized by hatred, alienation, resentment, and potentially long-held grudges. While the guests sit close to one another, there's an emotional distance between them. Trust is missing, and, most importantly, love is absent.

You may have experienced such discomfort at dinner tables in your life. For example, at a couple's dinner, where a harsh exchange unfolds right in front of you, and one of them storms off from the table. Or a family gathering during a holiday, where past troubles and disagreements cast a shadow, with forced smiles and an effort to avoid

sparking an argument. Although the food may be exquisite, the tension in the air is palpable. Or a senior living dining room, where good food and service are provided, but no one at a particular table is talking to each other. A previous argument over politics and religion left lingering hurt feelings, and no one is ready to address the situation or offer an apology. Or a school cafeteria, where children at a table engage in mean-spirited exchanges, bullying, and exclusion. It's a reminder that words have the power to shape the atmosphere and dynamics around a table.

So, which of these tables sounds more appealing to you, the first or the second? What is the writer of this proverb teaching us with his observations? The context of this verse in the 15th chapter discusses what leads to a cheerful heart in life, offering an admonition: "Better is a table of herbs and vegetables with love than a table with prime rib and hatred." The proverb conveys a lesson on values, beginning with the phrase "better is." It highlights that relationships are more important than material possessions. While things are nice, the emphasis here is to prioritize relationships in life.

The metaphor used is that of a dinner table, but it can extend to any aspect of life. For instance, "better is a beaten-up old Toyota Corolla with love in it than a Mercedes where there is none." Or, "better is a ramshackle house filled with love and caring people than a spacious mansion where love is missing." The message remains consistent: choosing love and prioritizing relationships is wiser than pursuing material wealth.

This proverb earnestly encourages us to focus on making our homes a place where love resides. It would serve as a fitting wedding text, and it reminds me of a well-known New Testament passage written by the apostle Paul to a congregation that was experiencing internal conflicts. He emphasized that without love, nothing else matters, and he urged them to cultivate love. Ultimately, this teaching applies to our relationship with God as well – loving God and nurturing that relationship with Him.

In the Bible, love is not just a feeling or emotion; it's also an act of the will, a choice, and a verb – something we do to serve and sacrifice for the sake of others. Jesus exemplified this by washing His disciples' feet and then giving them a new commandment to love one another as He loved them. His ultimate act of love was laying down His life for us, even while we were still sinners. So, love is not merely a feeling; it is a decision and a commitment to sacrificially give of ourselves for the sake of others. It's about serving,

like Jesus, who laid down His life for us, washing away our sins and saving us from the grip of sin, death, and the devil.

A home or church family filled with sacrificial love is more valuable than anything else in this world. It's what God designed us for: to love Him and one another. This proverb wisely emphasizes that relationships are more valuable than material riches.

By the way, we often fall short in the realm of love and relationships, acting selfishly or carelessly, and sometimes even wounding our loved ones. Nevertheless, there is hope, and that hope lies in another dinner scene: the Lord's Supper. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are invited to participate. Although it may seem quite modest – a piece of bread and a sip of wine – do not underestimate its significance. At this table, you find forgiveness for your imperfections and shortcomings in love and life. As you are handed the bread and hear the words, "This is my body given for you," and then offered a cup with the words, "This is my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins," you receive new beginnings and the strength to love God and others as He has loved you. It's a table offered to imperfect sinners, like you and me, to refresh and renew our commitment to love. So, don't deprive yourself of this opportunity to dine with Jesus. There's forgiveness for your shortcomings, and you can leave with a renewed spirit to love God and those around you.

Loving God and cherishing the people He places in your life is an important priority, and according to this proverb, relationships indeed trump riches. Amen. Let's pray. Lord, guide us to keep our values and priorities aligned as we live our lives according to Your will. We ask that Your Holy Spirit empowers us to grow in our love for You and for those around us. Amen.