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March 28th: Proverbs 26 & Ephesians 6:10-24

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Dealing with fools, sluggards, trouble-makers, and false friends. The full armour of God.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Proverbs 26. Like snow in summer or rain in harvest, so honor is not fitting for a fool. Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, a curse that is causeless does not alight.

A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools. Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

Whoever sends a message by the hand of a fool cuts off his own feet and drinks violence. Like a lame man's legs which hang useless is a proverb in the mouth of fools. Like one who binds the stone in the sling is one who gives honor to a fool.

Like a thorn that goes up into the hand of a drunkard is a proverb in the mouth of fools. Like an archer who wounds everyone is one who hires a passing fool or drunkard. Like a

dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.

Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. The sluggard says, there is a lion in the road, there is a lion in the streets. As a door turns on its hinges, so does a sluggard on his bed.

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, it wears him out to bring it back to his mouth. The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly. Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.

Like a madman who throws firebrands, arrows, and death is the man who deceives his neighbor and says, I am only joking. For lack of wood, the fire goes out. And where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.

As charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels. They go down into the inner parts of the body.

Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart. Whoever hates disguises himself with his lips and harbors deceit in his heart. When he speaks graciously, believe him not, for there are seven abominations in his heart.

Though his hatred be covered with deception, his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly. Whoever digs a pit will fall into it. And a stone will come back on him who starts it rolling.

A lying tongue hates its victims. And a flattering mouth works ruin. Proverbs chapter 26 deals with a number of different types of figures.

In verses one to 12, the fool, quarrelers, and mischief makers are the subject of verses 17 to 22. And at the end, we have hypocritical and false friends. The focus of the opening verses is on the fool, his folly, and how to handle him.

Michael Fox observes that these verses view the fool chiefly from the angle of suitability or fittingness. The inappropriateness of giving honor to the fool is an especially important point here. And it is mentioned in the verse with which the chapter begins.

Snow in summer is out of keeping with the season. While it could be refreshing, as we see in Proverbs chapter 25 verse 13, here it is the fact that it is out of keeping with the season that is emphasized. Human blessings and curses in scripture are often spoken of as if they had an effective force.

However, verse two gives us a possible window into how this effectiveness was perceived. The baseless curse here is described as ineffective. It doesn't land.

A true curse presumably invokes the Lord's righteous judgment upon a person. Where a person is not properly subject to the Lord's curse, no curse will be effective against them. We might think of the story of Balaam and his fruitless attempt to curse Israel in the book of Numbers.

The fool is insensitive to wisdom and is beast-like. Like a brute animal that needs to be driven along by mankind, so the fool needs to be corrected by the rod. Having an untrained and resistant ear, his body must be beaten like that of an animal.

Verses four and five foreground a feature of Proverbs more generally that they can often seem contradictory. Wisdom is required to interpret and to apply a proverb effectively. And here we have two proverbs that are seemingly directly contradictory placed in immediate juxtaposition.

Clearly the compilers of these proverbs, if not Solomon himself, want us to reflect upon how they go together. Various proposals have been given for understanding the relationship between these two proverbs. Some focus chiefly upon the different contexts within which they could be applied.

Whereas others suggest that some sort of equivocation might be taking place. What is meant by answering a fool according to his folly in the first proverb may not be the same as what it means in the second. There is a dialectical character to wisdom where different principles push against each other and you need to hold these different principles in conversation.

People who would absolutize one principle without counterbalancing it by another are always in danger of falling into folly. It can be a very dangerous thing to enter into a quarrel with a fool. He is far more likely to bring you down to his level than you are to bring him up to yours.

Furthermore, to onlookers, you will be associated with him. The people that you choose to dialogue with are often seen to be your counterparts. It is very easy to cheapen wisdom by bringing it into conversation with fools.

We can think of the illustration that our Lord gives of throwing pearls before swine. Or in Proverbs 29, verse nine, if a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs and there is no quiet. Trying to reason with a fool in such a situation merely sets up your wisdom to be drowned out and to be ridiculed.

Besides this, by speaking to the fool on his own terms, you risk giving legitimacy to his opinions. The fool isn't motivated by the truth. He's motivated by the folly in his heart.

And the more that you try and reason with him, the harder it will be for people to discern the difference between your sort of speech and his sort of speech because you're having to deal with him on his own terms. There are, however, considerations on the other side.

A fool who speaks unchecked is in great danger of becoming wise in his own eyes, which is a far more dangerous state.

He can be puffed up thinking that he is wise because no one has challenged him. In such a situation, it may be important to speak directly to his folly and to address it forcefully and openly. Perhaps one of the best ways to do this well is to consider the audience who are listening to you address the fool.

The role of the audience may be a critical factor in helping us to understand the counsel that's being given here. In the encounter between the wise man and the fool, the wise man likely has to be very alert to the way that other people view the fool and his engagement with him. The ideal is to discredit the fool in the presence of the assembly, but not to get entangled in conflict with the fool.

Say enough to expose the fool as a fool, but don't try and best him in an argument. He is impervious to reason and you'll just end up looking like a fool yourself. As a modern illustration of this, you might think of the advice given to people online, don't feed the trolls.

There are occasions when the trolls need to be exposed as trolls, but most of the time it's best just to keep your distance. Verses six to 10 have a chiasmic or book-ended structure. As Bruce Waltke observes, verses six and 10 concern the hiring of a fool, which you should not do.

Verses seven to nine, the fool using proverbs, and then at the center, giving honor to a fool. It is that central element that explains the rest, the other things that are mentioned here, the fool bearing words of wisdom in his mouth or the fool being entrusted with responsible tasks are all unwise forms of honoring the fool. The fool is a figure who should be exposed, disgraced and pitied.

He should never be honored and any that honor him are merely inviting trouble. If the faithful messenger is like an extra pair of feet for the person who sends him and also like a refreshing drink or someone who brings healing, the foolish messenger is quite the opposite. The person who sent him is worse off than if he had no messenger at all and he ends up receiving violence rather than receiving health.

Proverbs are lame and powerless in the mouth of the fool. The fool doesn't know how to use them. However, in his ignorance of how to use them, he can actually cause damage as we see in verse nine.

He is like a drunkard wielding a thorn bush. The commissioned fool is also like an archer that ends up hurting people. The wise person will know better than to hire or to give an education to the fool who will merely use it to cause damage and to confirm him in his folly.

The fool confirmed in his folly is described in verse 12, the man who is wise in his own eyes. Far better to be a base and obvious fool than to be a fool with the veneer of learning, a fool who is heeded and is given reason to believe that he has something to contribute. The inveterate fool is the subject of verse 11.

For such a fool, his folly has become so habitual that there is no hope of his escaping from it. 2 Peter 2 21-22 uses this proverb. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.

What the true proverb says has happened to them. The dog returns to its own vomit and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire. Verses 13-16 concern the sluggard.

Verse 13, largely repeating Proverbs 22-13. The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside. "I shall be killed in the streets." One point of this proverb is that the sluggard will habitually rationalize his laziness.

Verse 14 compares the sluggard to the door moving on its hinges. The sluggard is set in his bed as the door is set in its hinges. Neither has an extensive range of movement.

However, the door turning on its hinges can actually be useful. The sluggard, however, is nothing of the kind. Proverbs 19-24 read, "The sluggard buries his hand in the dish "and will not even bring it back to his mouth." In verse 15, we are told that the reason for this is that he is so worn out.

The sluggard perpetually complains of his tiredness. He cannot exert himself. Even when he has food directly in front of him, he will end up starving because of his failure to put in any effort.

Verses 5 and 12 have spoken of the danger of someone who is wise in his own eyes, and the sluggard is one such example. The sluggard is the classic example of the incompetent person who, because he has not put in the effort to understand things, doesn't even know the measure of what he doesn't know. He is the pub expert.

One might think, for instance, of Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* as she spoke of the piano. "If I had ever learnt, "I should have been a great proficient. "True wisdom and skill "takes discipline, diligence, and application.

"The sluggard, lacking all of those things, "never attains it." Verses 17 to 22 concern quarrelers and those who cause conflict. Keeping out of conflicts not your own was the subject of Proverbs 22, verse 3, and it's the subject of verse 17 here. The person who gets embroiled in other people's fights is merely inviting trouble.

Verses 18 to 19 concern the cruel jester, the person who would mask his vicious action

as a prank or as a mere joke. He is compared to a madman hurling dangerous projectiles. Paying no care to his action, he is unmindful and utterly unconcerned about the damage that he might cause.

Having the measure of such a person, you should keep well clear. Verses 20 to 22 concern other figures who cause trouble for all who are around them. There are certain individuals in communities who are the cause of all the conflicts and the strife and the difficulties.

If you effectively remove such people, suddenly all of the conflicts and discord ceases. Proverbs 22, verse 10 makes a similar point. Drive out a scoffer and strife will go out and quarreling and abuse will cease.

Whisperers and slanderers are a particular danger. Proverbs 18, verse 8, the words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels. They go down into the inner parts of the body.

That verse is repeated here in the context of these troublesome figures within a community. One should steer clear of such individuals and if you can, remove them from the community altogether. The concluding verses of the chapter concern unfaithful or hypocritical friends.

Such persons are compared to the glaze or the sheen that can be on an earthen vessel. What may look attractive and precious on the surface may be nothing of the kind when you see underneath. These unfaithful friends are particularly defined by their lying tongues and by their flattery.

They mask menace and hatred. It is quite possible that they don't feel hatred towards the people that they are deceiving and flattering. Rather, they may just be seeking their own ends in a selfish manner.

But that selfishness is tantamount to hatred of others. It leads just as surely to other people's ill. The wise person should be able to see through such figures.

A question to consider, within this chapter we've seen the figure of the fool, the sluggard, quarrelers and those who cause conflict, and finally unfaithful and hypocritical friends. We often see blurring of the lines between these various figures. What are some of the affinities that these different figures and their characteristic vices can have with each other? Ephesians chapter six, verses 10 to 24.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore, take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth and having put on the breastplate of righteousness and as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances, take up the shield of faith with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one and take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the spirit with all prayer and supplication.

To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly as I ought to speak. So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts.

Peace be to the brothers and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. In the conclusion of the book of Ephesians, Christians are presented as those in a battle, those who need continual strength, strength that comes from the Lord.

The imagery here is that of clothing ourselves with armor is also found in 1 Thessalonians 5, verse 8. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. The parallels and the contrasts suggest that the point is less specific identifications than a more general effect. This passage is also drawing upon Old Testament imagery of the Lord clothing himself for battle in places like Isaiah chapter 59, verses 16 to 17.

He saw that there was no man and wondered that there was no one to intercede. Then his own arm brought him salvation and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head.

He put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. The enemy is the devil himself, a cunning and a brilliant strategist. He can easily outwit the careless and render them useless.

Paul began the epistle by focusing on the cosmic scale of Christ's victory and his exaltation over all authorities. And he returns to this at the end. We don't wrestle against flesh and blood.

We might think of the image of hand-to-hand fighting devolving into wrestling here. 2 Corinthians chapter 10, verses three to five. For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh.

For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ. We are caught up in a battle that is so much greater than us.

We're like hobbits in the struggle for middle earth. There are dark demonic forces and Satan himself is at work and we are in the middle of the battle. In the light of all of this, we must be dressed in preparation, wearing the armor of God so that we can withstand in the evil day and stand firm.

We face days of bitter testing, times when the church will not seem to be on the advance, but will be hard pressed on all sides, needing to hold its ground at all costs. The armor of God is the armor worn by the Lord himself and by the messianic warrior, as we see in Isaiah chapter 11, verses one to five. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse and a branch from his root shall bear fruit and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips, he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist and faithfulness, the belt of his loins. Christ is the messianic warrior whose victory over the principalities and powers was declared in chapter one. To share in his victory, we must fight in the spirit and with his armor.

We might also recognize the similarities between the clothing of God and the clothing of the priest who also has garments of salvation, a breastplate and other things like that. Isaiah chapter 61 verse 10. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord.

My soul shall exult in my God for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness. As a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

The question of the character of the things that we are wearing is an important one. Some lean in the direction of emphasizing their character as Christian virtues. However, this might miss the fact that the armor is the armor of God and of the messianic warrior, something that we must clothe ourselves with from without equipping us for battle.

This is presumably part of what it means to clothe ourselves with Christ. When God clothes himself with righteousness and salvation along with vengeance and zeal, the point is not that God needs to be covered with righteousness and needs salvation, but that God is clothing himself for and even with these actions. God's righteousness is his

redemptive work of setting things to rights, his delivering work of salvation viewed from another perspective.

When we clothe ourselves with these things, the point is less about personal virtues, but about clothing ourselves for and with God's saving work by what God has accomplished and is accomplishing in Jesus Christ. We are called to act within the act of the messianic warrior fighting his fight, clothed with him, both protected by and authorized by the clothing that he has given us. However, while the Isaiah text is about God clothing himself for offensive battle, the focus for us is defense.

We must be alert in all of this, mindful of the many perils and pitfalls. Our adversary is wily and cunning and he will do anything to destroy us. Before closing the letter, Paul requests a special prayer that the Lord would give him the words that he requires as an ambassador of the gospel in chains.

Paul is profoundly aware that he is serving the Lord's mission. In contrast to his other epistles, Paul does not end with a long list of specific greetings. This, it seems to me, is because this letter is an encyclical.

It's a letter to be sent around several churches rather than just to one. A question to consider, what are some very practical ways in which we can put on the armor of God in our daily lives?