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March 12th: Proverbs 11 & Colossians 1:21—2:7

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Integrity guarding the path of the upright. The hidden mystery proclaimed.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs 11. A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight. When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.

The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them. Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death. The righteousness of the blameless keeps his ways straight, but the wicked falls by his own wickedness.

The righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the treacherous are taken captive by their lust. When the wicked dies, his hope will perish, and the expectation of wealth perishes too. The righteous is delivered from trouble, and the wicked walks into it instead.

With his mouth the godless man would destroy his neighbor, but by knowledge the

righteous are delivered. When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish, there are shouts of gladness. By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown.

Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered. Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.

Whoever puts up security for a stranger will surely suffer harm, but he who hates striking hands in pledge is secure. A gracious woman gets honor, and violent men get riches. A man who is kind benefits himself, but a cruel man hurts himself.

The wicked earns deceptive wages, but the one who sows righteousness gets a sure reward. Whoever is steadfast in righteousness will live, but he who pursues evil will die. Those of crooked heart are an abomination to the Lord, but those of blameless ways are his delight.

Be assured, an evil person will not go unpunished, but the offspring of the righteous will be delivered. Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion. The desire of the righteous ends only in good.

The expectation of the wicked in wrath. One gives freely, yet grows all the richer. Another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.

Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered. The people curse him who holds back grain, but a blessing is on the head of him who sells it. Whoever diligently seeks good seeks favor, but evil comes to him who searches for it.

Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf. Whoever troubles his own household will inherit the wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise of heart. The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and whoever captures souls is wise.

If the righteous is repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner. Proverbs chapter 11 continues the collection of the Proverbs of Solomon. A balance would be scales used for measuring weights.

These could be tampered with in various ways to produce a false impression in favor of the owner. The weights were used on the balance against the items being sold. Unjust merchants could use weights that were lighter than they ought to be to tilt sales in their favor, and weights that were heavier to advantage them in their purchases.

They might keep both in their bags, bringing out the larger or the smaller weight

depending upon whether they were selling or buying. Proverbs is here repeating principles that are presented elsewhere in the Torah. Leviticus chapter 19 verses 35 to 36 for instance.

You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

And again in Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 13 to 16. You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small.

A full and fair weight you shall have, a full and fair measure you shall have, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God has given you. For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the Lord your God. In Deuteronomy the prohibition of the unjust weight appears among material mostly devoted to the tenth commandment against coveting.

One might also class this under the eighth against stealing or the ninth against false witness. Proverbs underlines the claim of Deuteronomy chapter 25 verse 16 that righteous practice in such matters should find motivation in desire for the Lord's favour. The Lord upholds the moral order and in many matters that cannot effectively be policed, a just society depends upon a population that fears the Lord and desires his favour.

A consistent use of just weights will raise people's trust of trustworthy individuals, but it will also raise the general trust levels in society as a whole. By contrast a society where people routinely defraud others will be greatly limited by its low level of social trust. An exaggerated opinion of oneself and presumption in one's action invites the corrective blows of bitter experience.

The proud man is unwilling to receive the correction offered by the wise rebuke, nor is he attentive to the teaching of the understanding more generally. Consequently he must learn the hard way by eating the bitter fruit of his folly. The downfall of the proud can come about by many different means.

By contrast the humble, humility being a virtue closely associated with the fear of the Lord, are not exalted in their own eyes. They will treat others around them accordingly, they will put them before themselves and win favour with many as a result. Humility also produces teachability, they will receive the law of the Lord and also learn wisdom.

Verses 3-8 contrast the ways of the righteous and the wicked. The way of the Lord is the way of integrity and the upright commit themselves to this way even when they can't understand why it is leading them on the path that it is. Here we see the importance of

trusting in the moral government and providence of the Lord and obeying his commandments accordingly even when it doesn't seem to be beneficial.

We often think about the righteous holding their own integrity but here we see that the integrity of the righteous as it is a commitment to the way of the Lord and his moral government is something that preserves and guides them. By contrast the treacherous are brought to ruin by the very dynamics of the path that they have committed themselves to. A similar truth is expressed in verse 4. Verse 4 is closely related to chapter 10 verse 2. Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit but righteousness delivers from death.

Implicitly then the riches at the beginning here are the unrighteous mammon that people can build up and trust in. However despite the fact that riches seem promising what will truly deliver someone is righteousness. When trials and days of testing come it will be integrity that guards people.

All of this requires a certain walking by faith. In the immediacy of a situation it can often seem pragmatic to compromise, to take the way of wickedness instead of the way of righteousness, to adopt just a little crookedness, to emulate successful sinners around you. However these verses make plain that those who adopt such paths will come to ruin.

The wicked person trusts in their own providence, their own ability to govern their world and yet the righteous recognises that they are not in control and in situations where it would seem that they are definitely on the losing side they still trust in the Lord and in the end they are rewarded for that trust. The wicked's wealth will come to nothing but the righteous will be delivered by the Lord. In the end their integrity will also advantage them over the way of the wicked.

The wicked will be caught in their own schemes. The mouth of the godless man is a source of violence. We might think of Paul's description of the mouth of the wicked in Romans chapter 3 verses 13-14.

Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive, the venom of asps is under their lips, their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. This verse is similar to the one that precedes it in verse 8. The godless man is a troublemaker from which the righteous need to be delivered. However the righteous will be delivered through wisdom and the troublemakers will be caught up in their own trouble.

Verse 9 functions as a transition between verses 3-8 which speak about the contrasting destinies of the righteous and the wicked and the way in which their characteristic behaviours set them on the path towards their divergent destinies and the verses that follow in verses 10-15 which concern the fate of the community that is influenced by the righteous and the wicked in different ways. Here the concern for the community is seen

in the city, the neighbour and the people more generally. Cities are built up when they have righteous people in their midst.

We might think here about the way that righteous people protect the city from judgement. As in the case of Sodom, if there were ten righteous people the whole city would have been saved on their account. The righteous are also concerned to do good to their neighbours, to build up the city around them.

Not only will they protect the city against the Lord's judgement, they will establish industry within the city. They will build up the walls of the city to defend it against its enemies. They will enact justice within the city and punish the evildoer.

They will show kindness to the poor and the destitute. In all of these ways they build up everyone else around them. By contrast the wicked are a great threat to the well-being of the city.

Their trouble making speech, their lies, their slander, their rumours, their backbiting and their incitement to violence all threaten the life and the peace of the city. They spread discord and hatred. Consequently when they perish the city rejoices, it has been delivered from a threat.

Verses 12-13 describe a particularly dangerous form of speech, bearing false witness against one's neighbour in the spreading of slander and the revealing of secrets. Those who do this are foolish and untrustworthy, but those with prudence and understanding can hold their tongues. They recognise the great damage that careless words can do.

A word rashly spoken cannot easily be taken back. Similar rashness and judgement can be seen in verse 15 in the person who puts up security for a stranger, putting himself in a position of considerable jeopardy. A recurring theme in the book of Proverbs is finding guidance and counsel and where one should look to discover it.

If you are simple, not yet having wisdom, how do you know where to look for actual wisdom? Here the situation of a people without wise counsellors and a people with an abundance of wise advisors are compared and contrasted. The discovery of wisdom requires guidance. However, when there are many guides saying different things, you need to know how to discern between them.

And one of the ways you do this is by having a multitude of counsellors who all give their different perspectives and can be weighed against each other. A person with an abundance of counsellors can take the strengths of various different positions and synthesise them into their own. Weaknesses of one person's position can be revealed by the stress testing of another.

Verse 16 is a complicated one to interpret. It might be something closer to synonymous parallelism. Michael Fox argues that the word translated violent in many translations

would better be translated as diligent.

That word is also given a more positive sense in the Septuagint, where the translation refers to virtuous men. Alternatively, it might contrast the gracious woman who gets honour and the violent men who get riches, but nothing more than riches. And as we will see in places like verse 13, even that gain will prove to be deceptive and short-lived.

The wicked often seems to get his rewards very quickly and easily, whereas the righteous may have to sow for quite some period of time before they reap their harvest. Nevertheless, the reward of the righteous is sure, but the riches of the wicked can soon vanish. Assurance of the certainty of the contrasting fates of the righteous and the wicked, of the fool and the wise, are also given to us in verses 19 and 21.

And while the wicked man might think that he is advantaging himself when he is cruel to others, and that the man who is kind and generous is being a fool, in the end the kindness of the kind man rebounds to himself, whereas the cruelty of the cruel man hurts himself. Verse 16 spoke of the gracious woman, and in verse 22 we have a contrasting woman, a woman who has beauty but no discretion. The most common way to read this proverb is to think of the woman as like the pig who wears her beauty like a gold ring.

Her attractive appearance is completely out of keeping with her inner character. Fox suggests an alternative reading, one directed far more immediately to the young man who is choosing a wife. He observes how the elements line up within the simile.

The ring is like the woman. The fact that the ring is gold connects with her beauty. The lack of discretion corresponds with placing this ring in the snout of a pig.

So what then is the pig? The pig, Fox argues, is the man who chooses such a woman for his wife. In such a situation the beauty of the ring is degraded and the pig only looks more ridiculous. As Proverbs 31 verse 30 says, charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

Such a woman is the wife that the wise man will seek. Verses 23 to 27 continue to contrast the fates of the righteous and the wicked, but here focus mostly upon their generosity and charity. Verse 23 is parallel to chapter 10 verse 28, the hope of the righteous brings joy, but the expectation of the wicked will perish.

Here however the goodness of the desire of the righteous is accented. The righteous man by giving away ends up gaining more for himself. In giving freely he becomes richer.

By blessing he is enriched. By watering others he himself is watered. By selling freely rather than hoarding he himself is prospered.

The wise and righteous man will not be niggardly in his dealings. He will be generous and charitable and not withholding. Like a farmer scattering his grain abroad, he will joyfully give, and when the time comes he will receive a bountiful harvest from the Lord.

As in verse 4 in verse 28 we see that riches are not something ultimately to trust in, they will fail those who rely upon them. The righteous person is compared by contrast to a green leaf, and then in verse 30 his fruit is compared to a tree of life. We might here recall the description of the righteous person in Psalm 1 who meditates upon the law of God and is like a tree planted by streams of water.

A similar verse to verse 30 that helps us to interpret it is found in Proverbs 13 verse 14. The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life that one may turn away from the snares of death. The second half of verse 30, whoever captures souls is wise, obviously has a positive meaning, although if we saw the words captures souls in isolation we would presume that it had a negative meaning.

Reading it in light of Proverbs 13 verse 14 we can see that the one who captures souls is one who is delivering souls, redeeming them from a point of peril. Once again the righteous person is someone who spreads life and goodness around them. Other people benefit from having righteous people in their communities.

Fools by contrast are troublemakers that bring conflict to their communities, and can also bring ruin to their households and their dependents. Their property will end up in the hands of the wise, and they will become servants to the wise. The final verse of the chapter is an a fortiori argument from the way that the righteous will be repaid on the earth, which might either refer to the way that judgement begins with the house of God, that the righteous are the first to receive punishment for their sins, or a reference to the way that God rewards the righteous with blessing.

Whichever of those two meanings is in view here, the punishment of the wicked and the sinner is far more urgent. If the righteous will be rewarded, how much more will they? A question to consider, what are some of the dynamics by which someone who gives freely will grow richer than the person who is withholding? Colossians chapter 1 verse 21 to chapter 2 verse 7 And you who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he is now reconciled in the body of his flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints.

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory, him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you, and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments, for though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. Therefore as you receive Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. Following on from the great hymn concerning Christ in verses 15-20, the end of Colossians chapter 1 moves on to unpack dimensions of its significance.

Paul has praised the majesty of Christ, both in the original creation order and in the new creation. The one by whom all things were created is the one by whom all things are reconciled to himself by the blood of his cross. The Colossians are part of this reconciliation.

Paul contrasts their former state as pagans to that which they were brought into by God's grace. Formerly they were alienated, hostile to God in their very thinking and evil in their actions. Mindset and action together were at odds with God and his holiness and truth.

However, now they have been reconciled by the body of Christ's flesh in his death, so that they can now be presented before him as holy, blameless and above reproach. The means of their reconciliation was Christ's body of flesh by his death. Christ, the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, assumed our flesh and not just flesh in general.

Christ came as a representative man, a new Adam and the Messiah and he bears in his body on the cross the full penalty of his people's sins. As we are brought into his body, sin has been decisively dealt with and we can be restored and transformed into his image, being remade in the one who is the image of the invisible God. The purpose of our redemption is that we might be presented holy and blameless.

Our setting apart by God in holiness is not merely an afterthought of our deliverance from the punishment of our sins, it is the point of it all. As God's redeemed people we are to be without blemish and without reproach, purified from the stain of sin and justified from its guilt. All of this requires that we continue in the faith, the work of the spirit by

which we endure in faith to the end is a necessary aspect of our salvation.

It is by the work of the spirit that we are brought from God's declaration that we are in good standing before him on account of Christ's work, to the reaffirmation of that declaration on the last day, when, in a judgement of our entire lives and works, God declares us to be in good standing with him. Paul speaks of the worldwide proclamation of the gospel to every creature or in all creation under heaven. Paul is probably speaking in an anticipatory sense here of the way that the gospel, the good news that the kingdom of God is established in the lordship of Jesus the Messiah, has been sent forth into the entire world through the ministry of Paul and other messengers like him.

The message hasn't yet reached everyone but it has been sent out. In the verses that follow Paul presents the Colossians, who have yet to meet him, with a portrait of himself as a minister of the gospel. In the most surprising statement in this section he claims that not only is he suffering for their sake but that he is filling up in his flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church.

Paul believes that Christians must enter into and participate in Christ's sufferings as part of the passage into the new age of the resurrection. Christ doesn't just suffer for his church but also as an example for and representative of his church and bride, and his bride must join with him in his suffering. Paul's sufferings are not the redemptive sufferings of Christ but the tribulation that Christ experienced and which he foretold would come upon his people.

As we share the fellowship of Christ's sufferings we join with him in tribulation. These tribulations are the birth pangs of the new creation. Christ has entered into this new creation ahead of us through the birth pangs of the cross and the rebirth of the resurrection.

We follow in his footsteps. Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, wishes to shelter those to whom he is ministering from the worst of the tribulation that is coming upon the church by taking as much as he can upon himself. Recognising that his sufferings aren't meaningless but indeed are part of the process by which a new creation is coming to birth, Paul can rejoice in them, knowing that they aren't futile or in vain.

The work of the proclamation of the gospel still needs to be completed and it is through the suffering and the labours of people like Paul that this work is taking place. Paul was made a servant of the church with a very special and particular mission. He was given stewardship of a great mystery of divine revelation that now in the fullness of time must be announced.

Paul isn't just one of many missionaries, he is someone with a special and unique calling in redemptive history. The key import of the mystery is the salvation that is being made known in Christ - a salvation given to Gentiles as well as to Jews - as Christ wells in his

people, assuring them of the fullness of salvation yet to be realised. Christ has reconciled God and man by the cross and now the news is being sent out to all.

Christ is what Paul is all about. The entire intent of his mission is to bring people into the Messiah and to bring them up to maturity in him so that on the last day they might be presented holy, blameless and without reproach before him. Paul works towards this end, labouring with a God-given drive and energy that is powerfully at work within him.

Paul is warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom. Not a hidden wisdom for a few privileged enlightened persons but a wisdom that is directed to and designed for everyone. Even though Paul has yet to meet them, Paul wants the Colossians to know that he has been struggling for them and for the church at Laodicea and other people that he has yet to meet.

How is he doing this? Well presumably first of all through prayer. He prays constantly for the churches. This is an introductory theme in almost all of his letters.

He is also building up the church in the wider regions. He is training, he is equipping and sending missionaries and teachers to these various churches even if he is not visiting himself and he is writing letters to be circulated around them. Paul is working to establish a larger church movement, a church movement that will strengthen every single individual church within it.

As the Apostle to the Gentiles he feels an especial responsibility to seek the up-building of all the different churches within these networks. His desire is that they will be encouraged and united so that they will achieve the full conviction of the knowledge of the mystery of God which is Christ himself. Everything is contained in Christ, all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

He is the key to the whole thing. Paul however is concerned that they are not misled, that they never lose sight of all that they possess in Christ, no matter what clever arguments people might put forward. He may not be there with them in body but he is with them in every other way that matters.

He is very concerned for their growth, constantly praying for them, seeking to do what he can to build them up, even from prison. And he is encouraged by the progress that they are making. In the last chapter or so he is presented the most dazzling portrait of Christ.

He is the one over all creation, he is the one through whom the new creation comes, he is the mystery hidden before all ages and the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. They have received this Jesus and they must walk in this Jesus. It is in him that they must put down their roots, it is from him that they must draw all of their sustenance and find their strength and their security.

A question to consider. The term Christ-centred is often overused as a sort of positive brand name to be attached to all sorts of different things. How might Paul's teaching to this point of Colossians help us to give a fuller and more substantial account of what being centred on Christ actually means?