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March 20th: Proverbs 18 & Ephesians 2:1-10

March 19, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Avoiding rash judgment. Raised from death by God's grace for good works.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 18. Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire. He breaks out against all sound judgment.

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion. When wickedness comes, contempt comes also, and with dishonor comes disgrace. The words of a man's mouth are deep waters.

The fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook. It is not good to be partial to the wicked, or to deprive the righteous of justice. A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating.

A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul. The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels. They go down into the inner parts of the body.

Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys. The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous man runs into it and is safe.

A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination. Before destruction a man's heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor. If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.

A man's spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit, who can bear? An intelligent heart acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge. A man's gift makes room for him and brings him before the great. The one who states his case first seems right until the other comes and examines him.

The lot puts an end to quarrels and decides between powerful contenders. A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle. From the fruit of a man's mouth his stomach is satisfied.

He is satisfied by the yield of his lips. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits. He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.

The poor use entreaties, but the rich answer roughly. A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Proverbs chapter 18 begins with a warning against the separatist.

Such an individual cuts himself off from a community that might check him in his desires. He seeks pretexts for quarrels and ends up being just an authority to himself. His proud wisdom in his own eyes leads him to cut himself off from the wisdom and the insight of the group.

Solomon describes this as his breaking out against all sound judgment or competence. Such a man is completely unteachable. He cuts himself off from the sort of community that might stress test his opinions, that might force him to reconsider.

Such a person might for a period of time throw in his lot with a particular teacher or some crank expert who supports his opinions, but before long he will differ with them too and cut himself off from them in their turn. Any wise leader of a community should know this type of person and be on the lookout for them. When an individual has a series of previous communities that they've been a member of before leaving those communities on account of pointless quarrels, the leader of the new community that they want to join should be aware that despite all of their flattery, they are a very dangerous sort of person to have around.

One of the things that this proverb highlights for us is the importance of community for wisdom. The separatist has a very narrow trust network, whereas the wise man tries to spread out his trust network very widely. He multiplies his counsellors and tests different

opinions against each other.

He places himself in the sort of community where people might correct him. In these respects, his humility greatly contrasts with the pride of the separatist who presumes that he has no need for a community around him. The pride of the fool is also the subject of verse two.

The fool, once again, is defined by his pleasure. If people don't have an appetite for wisdom, they won't pursue it, and the fool does not want wisdom at all. What he desires to do is to express his opinion.

He's always spouting off. He's the pub expert. He's not prepared to have his opinion tested or challenged.

All he wants is to have it flattered and affirmed. Of course, the opinion of the fool is a foolish opinion, and in the process of expressing his opinion, he exposes his character to any that are wise in the vicinity. One of the most notable effects of wickedness and folly is disgrace and contempt.

The fool who cuts himself off from others and their wisdom, who won't listen to them but will just spout his own foolish opinion, will end up being disgraced and dishonoured. No one will have a high opinion of him. Wisdom, by contrast, is compared to water, deep waters like those of a well, flowing waters like those of a fountain and a bubbling brook.

Deep waters suggest the refreshing profundity of good speech. The fountain and the bubbling brook suggest their outflow and their constant source. They constantly spring up from the depths of the heart.

Verse 5 might seem by itself to be a fairly banal statement, although Michael Fox observes that we should take the good in a more pragmatic sense. No good will come of being partial to the wicked or depriving the righteous of justice, while people might think in an abstract moral sense that it is not good to do these things. It's a different question when it comes to actual social expediency.

Maybe in some exceptional situations, it's more convenient to be partial to the wicked or deprive the righteous of justice. Maybe some good results will come from it. This verse makes very clear that no such good would result.

Verses 6 and 7 concern the mouth and the speech of the fool. The foolish speech of the fool is his own worst enemy, as we've seen elsewhere in the book. In chapter 14, verse 3, By the mouth of a fool comes a rod for his back, but the lips of the wise will preserve them.

The speech of the fool, whether it's lies, words inciting to violence, spreading rumours and gossip and slander, coarse jesting, scoffing, or some other form of foolish speech, it

will all too often end up boomeranging back to him and hurting him. He can set a trap with his speech, but he'll be caught in it. From the folly of the speech of the fool, we move in verse 8 to the folly of the person who listens to gossip.

Gossip can be enticing, and once you are exposed to it, it's very hard to prevent yourself from just gulping it down. It has a sweet taste, but it produces bitter fruit within. These little tasty morsels of gossip can feed our deepest vices.

As they go down into the inner parts of the body, they end up affecting us deep within. For this reason, the wise person is careful not to attend to gossip, not to allow his ear to be tempted by it. The active work of destruction can bring about great damage, but the sluggard, the lazy man, who is unprepared to work to keep up his property, for instance, can wreak all sorts of damage upon it simply by his neglect.

The forces of entropy at work in the world don't wait for him, and it doesn't take long for things to deteriorate, for houses to become dilapidated, for fields and gardens to become overgrown with weeds, for underfed animals to become emaciated or to perish. Recognizing the destructive power of the sluggard, one should be very careful of committing anything to his charge. Verses 10 and 11 deal with contrasting forms of security.

The name of the Lord, representing God's power and presence, is like a place of refuge, somewhere that people can run to for safety. The Lord placed his name among his people in the temple, so that the people would look to the temple and pray to him and seek his deliverance. When in need, the people of God call out to him in prayer, depending upon his name for security.

However, the rich man can trust in his wealth, for the rich man, his riches are his source of security, that he will look to for safety in the day of trouble. They are like a high wall for him. However, the end of the verse reveals that this is the case in his imagination.

It's not necessarily the case in real life. True security is to be found in the name of the Lord alone. A common theme in the Book of Proverbs is the importance of humility for the gaining of wisdom, and the danger of pride.

The statement of verse 12 is very similar to ones that we've encountered earlier. In chapter 16, verse 18, pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. This verse seems to have been merged with chapter 15, verse 33, to form the statement of verse 12.

Chapter 15, verse 33 reads as follows. The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honour. Rash and hasty speech is always a danger.

The wise person ponders before he speaks. Chapter 15, verse 28. The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.

We've already seen the hastiness of the fool in his expression. A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion. The fool is the person who always has the narrative ready to place upon events, even if he hasn't actually listened to what actually took place, and spent time to try and understand.

So eager is he to express his opinion, that he won't give himself sufficient time of silence to inform himself, and as a result, he can't prevent himself from revealing himself to be the fool that he actually is. This is a cause of shame to him, and over time his hastiness in expressing all of his hottest takes will lead any people of wisdom to place less and less store upon his words. His words will merely be for the other fools who want to be confirmed in their opinions and their prejudices.

Sadly, there is seldom a shortage of people who just want an appealing and affirming narrative, rather than attending to reality and to events, and gaining wisdom through careful reflection upon them. The importance of guarding one's spirit and heart is the subject of verse 14. We've seen this principle before in the preceding chapter in verse 22.

A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. A healthy spirit can bear one through the deepest forms of suffering and sickness, but there are few forms of trial that are harder than that of bearing a crushed spirit. Wisdom isn't just something that you're naturally born with.

A person has to acquire wisdom, and this occurs as you have a heart that is ordered towards wisdom, and an ear that's pursuing it. So much of the Book of Proverbs is concerned with those things that orient us towards wisdom, recognizing that it is the company that we keep, the people that we listen to, our willingness to accept rebuke and correction, the degree to which we honor the word of the Lord, whether we listen with respect to the instruction of our parents, whether we seek the counsel of the wise. Wisdom is obtained in such a manner, and if you want to get wisdom, you need to begin by making sure that your heart is receptive to it, and that your ear is pursuing it.

If those organs are not operating as they ought to be, your pursuit of wisdom will be utterly in vain. Verse 16 is a difficult verse to understand. Is it expressing a positive view of the bribe, something that has been described in far less favorable terms elsewhere? Is it merely giving a descriptive account of the ways that bribes can be effective? There are other statements of this kind elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs.

For instance, in chapter 21, verse 14, a gift in secret averts anger, and a concealed bribe strong wrath. It is by no means clear that what we are dealing with here is a gift intended to pervert the ways of justice, to ensure partiality to your cause in a dispute. William McCain argues that what is in view here is most likely a gift designed to win favor or an entree into the circle of a social superior who can assist you in your situation.

It can prove wise to win friends through gifts and favors. Through your generous attitude towards others, others may end up being more solicitous of your welfare in the longer term future. There are situations where legal proceedings may be almost interminable, and there is no way of deciding between two parties.

In these sorts of civil disputes, it may be most effective to settle a matter by means of lots. We've read about lots earlier in chapter 16, verse 33. The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

There are few situations that are harder to rectify than great trust betrayed. An offended brother is described in this way in verse 19, like a castle that's shut up against someone. The person who committed the offense is outside and has little hope of getting in.

Far better to ensure that you do not fall out with your brother in this way, to ensure that matters never reach that situation. Always deal with your anger before you get to the point of hasty words. Leave the room before the argument breaks out.

As you feel the first trickles of water coming through the dam of your failing temper, escape the situation before that dam bursts. When you have fallen out, do whatever you can to be reconciled as quickly as possible. Don't allow those fortifications to be built up between you.

People live and die by their words. This is the subject of verses 20 and 21. We've seen this expressed earlier on in many forms, particularly in places like chapter 12, verse 14.

From the fruit of his mouth, the man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man's hand comes back to him. Your mastery, or your lack of mastery of your words, will end up determining the course of your life. Hasty and foolish words will be a rod for your own back, and may ultimately lead you to death.

But a well-trained spirit and careful lips will win you favor and honor and life. Proverbs chapter 19, verse 14 declares, House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord. Here again we are told in verse 22 that a wife comes as favor from the Lord.

The goodness of the wise wife is expressed in several different ways and at several different places in the book of Proverbs. Finding such a woman is closely related to success in the quest for wisdom herself. The discovery of such a woman is never a sure thing.

Any man who has married such a woman is well aware of his fortune, of the fact that his enjoyment of such a wife is not a result of his own great insight, but as a result of the goodness of the Lord, who has brought such a woman across his path. It is right to see the kindness and the grace of God in bringing a good spouse into your life. Such a gift should be received with humility and gratitude.

Verse 23 makes a general statement about the world, the way that the poor have to speak in an ingratiating and deferential manner in order to get their case heard, whereas the rich answer them roughly and without concern. The rich are often presented in very negative ways in the book of Proverbs, ways that foreground their pride or their injustice or their cruelty to others. This is another instance of such a portrayal.

The chapter began with the character of the separatist. It ends by considering the person with many friends. It is possible that such a person, despite having many friends, may still come to ruin.

They may prove, in times of hardship, to be merely fair-weather friends, the man's companions abandoning him to his fate. However, there are types of friends that stick close in adversity. In times of trouble, family are the first people that you reach out to.

And there are certain cases of friends that stick even closer than these. Family and friends are also described in verse 17 of chapter 17. A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

The friend described in verse 24 is present at all times. He loves at all times, like the character in chapter 17. But like the good brother, he is also there in the time of adversity.

A question to consider. Verse 17 says, Ephesians chapter 2, verses 1 to 10 And raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Paul began with his great blessing of God and prayer of thanksgiving in Ephesians chapter 1. Now in Ephesians chapter 2 he develops some of the themes of the prayer further, continuing one of the greatest surveys of the grand picture of salvation that we have in the New Testament.

Paul begins by examining the previous condition in which the recipients of the letter once existed. They were dead in trespasses and sins. The various shifts in the pronouns are significant here, although they have occasioned much debate.

Paul is probably especially focusing upon the condition of Gentile Christians prior to their conversion. They were spiritually dead, and also outside of any relationship with God, alienated from and dead to God, both in their spiritual condition and in their exclusion from the covenant. This was a condition that they formerly walked in.

This death was their manner of life, a course of existence set by the general course of the world, all led by the prince of the power of the air, Satan himself, and by the spirits

still at work in those described as the sons of disobedience. The spirit here is probably a reference not to Satan himself directly, but to the pervasive, insidious and insistent influence that he exerts. Paul describes the way that their former way of life was determined by the threefold forces of the world, the flesh and the devil.

They followed the general course of the society around them, under the rule of the devil, and subject to the passions of the flesh and the desires of the body and the mind, and the general spirit of the age. In such suggested passages we get a sense of Paul's subtle and multifaceted account of sin, one that recognises various aspects to its operations in the world. Sin has structural, social and societal elements in the world.

It is part of the spirit of the age, is part of the zeitgeist. Sin has a personal power and agency to it, as it operates according to the overarching rule of the devil and his demonic forces. Sin is also a matter of our ungoverned passions and desires, and our fundamental mindsets and the ways that these play out in everything that we do.

Sin is those vices that have taken deep root in us, those habits that have become second nature for us, those desires that we never controlled and that now control us. It is about the inappropriate and sinful loves that motivate us, and that drive us to pursue after certain things rather than the things that we ought to. When Paul talks about salvation, he draws his picture of it against such a background.

Salvation deals with sin at each of these levels of its operations. We are often in danger of exalting one or two of these dimensions to the neglect of others, and losing sight of the more rounded portrait of sin and our deliverance from it presented in scripture. The shift of pronouns from you to we in verse 3 is probably designed to include Jews in the picture, showing that all, Jews and Gentiles alike, were under sin's sway.

Into this seemingly hopeless situation breaks the action of a merciful God. Out of his incredible love, a love not occasioned by anything in us, he made us alive. We were dead in our trespasses, unable to contribute anything, or to manifest ourselves as being of any inherent worth.

This all serves to underline the truth that we have been saved by grace. There are many aspects of divine grace that can be highlighted. We might think about the lavishness or the liberality of grace, or of the pure benevolence of the giver.

We might think of the efficacy of grace. We might think of the way that grace precedes anything that we have given. Paul has things to say about all of these aspects of grace at different points in his epistles.

However, for Paul, the one thing that most stands out about God's grace is the way that it is bestowed entirely without regard to the worth of its recipients. We were dead when we received his grace. Indeed, as Paul argues elsewhere, we were not only dead, we

were also God's enemies at the time.

There was no reason whatsoever to show grace to us. To our death, God responded with resurrection in Christ. Our deliverance from death is given through union with him.

It is in being bound up with Christ and his destiny that we are delivered. Not only have we been raised, however, God has also made us participants in all that Christ enjoys as the ascended Lord of all. As he said earlier in chapter 1, verse 3, with Christ we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

His purpose for us isn't completed, though. In the ages to come, he intends to demonstrate the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness. God wishes to manifest his character in his salvation of us.

People should be able to see the church and to learn something about God as his character is on display. This is a work in progress, though, with various stages yet to be revealed. We are awaiting coming ages for the complete unveiling.

There is much yet to look forward to. The recipients of Paul's letter are in the state of salvation purely by virtue of God's grace, and they stand in that state through faith. This isn't something that we have brought about ourselves.

It's a gift that we have received. Faith responds to God's free gift, not as something that merits it, or some trait that is worthy of it, or as something that is exchanged for it. Faith isn't really some sort of work.

It's not even a pseudo-work. It is a reception of a gift through a simple act of belief. As a result, boasting is nullified.

We brought nothing to our salvation. We contributed nothing to it. We didn't bring it about in any way.

It was purely the gracious act of God bestowed to empty hands. Our salvation wasn't and isn't a result of our works. However, it is for the sake of good works.

When we think of good works, with our often narrow focus on the question of whether we go to heaven personally, we can often think in legalistic terms of what good works entail, regarding them as strict observance of the law. Yet good works, as described in Scripture, are generally described rather differently. Good works are far more expansive in their vision.

They are works that heal and repair broken situations, works that bring light and hope where there was once darkness and despair, works that fulfil the law by making peace, spreading the love of Christ, and manifesting the grace of God. Good works are not so much strict colouring within the lines as the painting of beautiful new portraits of Christ

on blank canvases. They are creative acts.

We are God's great masterpiece, being created in Christ for a transformed way of life. It was always God's intention to realise his transforming purpose in us, that we might be a living testament to the greatness of his work. We, the very people who once were dead.

A question to consider. How does Paul's teaching here change the way that we relate to and perceive the Christian life?