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March 2nd: Proverbs 1 & Romans 14

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An introduction to the book of Proverbs. Not judging our brother or causing him to stumble.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 1. The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. Proverbs 1. The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. Proverbs 1. The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel.

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Proverbs 1. The Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel. The knowledge of God

as we see in the story of Solomon in 1 Kings chapter 3 is also a result of searching and listening as we will see in Proverbs chapter 2 and in chapter 3 verse 13. The practice of obedience is foundational for its attainment.

It is also realised in community with the wise as you spend time in the counsel of those who have already attained it. Wisdom is a prerequisite for just judgement and ruling. The knowledge of good and evil is associated with wisdom in various parts of scripture.

Wisdom is especially needed for those who act as kings. Wisdom is also something that acknowledges the riddle character of life, the patterns of human life that have to be puzzled out and understood over time. The book of Proverbs in Hebrew, Greek and English is named after its distinctive genre of the proverb.

There is abundant evidence that the book of Proverbs was considered authoritative from earlier on. Its ordering in our canon connects it with other books that are attributed to Solomon. The Hebrew canon divides the scriptures into the law, the prophets and the writings and in that canon the book of Proverbs is found among the writings.

The writings in turn are divided into three poetic books, Psalms, Job and Proverbs, five festival scrolls, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and Esther and then Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. The book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon in the superscription, as in Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Within the historical narrative King Solomon is synonymous with wisdom.

That there should be an association with Solomon and the book of Proverbs and its wisdom is as natural as the association between King David and the Psalms. Whereas the law in scripture presents people with a do this, don't do that pattern for behaviour, the wisdom literature works in terms of the categories of wisdom and folly, focusing not so much upon commandments but upon the rationale for behaviour and the consequences of good and bad courses of action. In the process it helps us to understand more of the logic behind the law, of the goodness of the law, that the law is not just arbitrarily imposed upon us but that it is reasonable and good and that those that follow it will typically prosper.

While the primary form of the law is a word imposed upon people from without that they submit to and acknowledge, wisdom is arrived at through reflection upon the world. The law itself already makes movements towards helping people to understand its inner rationale. In books like Deuteronomy we see the condensed form of the law in the Ten Commandments and then that expounded in the chapters that follow.

As the hearer of the law meditates upon the connection between these things and the connection between the law and the narrative, a deeper understanding will emerge. Deuteronomy 4, verses 5-8 give some sense of the wisdom that will arise as people live in terms of and seek to understand the logic of the law. See, I have taught you statutes

and rules as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people, for what great nation is there that has a God so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? Just as the law in its wisdom was supposed to draw other nations to look to and learn from Israel, so the wisdom literature was also something that should have drawn other nations to learn from Israel. The Queen of Sheba and various other people in the region came to learn from Solomon in his day. The wisdom of Solomon came from an insight into the world, from a knowledge of a natural law, the logic that God had built into his creation.

It is not directly dictated as the law is, rather it arises from the insight that the Lord gave to Solomon into his world and the way that it works. The revelation of the wisdom literature is not so much an object in itself, a body of special revelation delivered by God like the Ten Commandments, rather it is the result of the Holy Spirit opening people's eyes to see the revelation in the world. Consequently, there is a very strong empirical character to the Book of Proverbs.

This is the result of reflection upon God's world and upon society. On account of this empirical character and the fact that its character as special revelation arises more from the manner of its disclosure than from the truth disclosed, we can see a great many parallels between the Book of Proverbs and other works of wisdom literature in the ancient Near East. This shouldn't surprise us.

They are all looking at the same world. Wisdom is a sort of order imminent in creation. It is a matter not primarily of speculative reason, but of practical reason.

It is discovered as the art of living well. In scripture such wisdom can be seen in rule and the exercise of power. It can also be seen in the cunning of those who are in positions of weakness but manage to outwit those who are more powerful.

Some have suggested that the books of Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes can be related to different periods of the wise person's life. The Solomon of Song of Songs is the youthful Solomon, the Solomon of Proverbs is the father of the young man, and the Solomon of Ecclesiastes is the older Solomon looking back over his life. Although this is a speculative theory and many would dispute it, it does bring to light the importance of time and wisdom.

Wisdom is learned through experience, through passing through various seasons of life. As the wise person grows through these various seasons in life, they colour and help him

to grow in his insight. While the book of Proverbs is attributed to Solomon at the beginning, other people are mentioned as authors or compilers of it.

In chapter 22 verse 17 and 24 verse 23, the wise are mentioned as authors of some of the material. In chapter 30 verse 1, Eger is mentioned and King Lemuel is mentioned in chapter 31 verse 1 as passing on the teaching that his mother gave him. Advisers of King Hezekiah are also mentioned as exercising a scribal or editorial role in chapter 25 verse 1. Proverbs generally emerge in an oral context and then they are authored and collected.

Solomon did not write the whole book but he seems to be foundational to the collection. The historical account of 1 Kings chapter 4 verses 29 to 34 records the fact that Solomon was the author of many Proverbs. And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.

For he was wiser than all other men, wiser than Ethan the Ezraite and Heman, Calchul and Dada the sons of Mehal. And his fame was in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke three thousand Proverbs and his songs were one thousand and five.

He spoke of trees from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall. He spoke also of beasts and of birds and of reptiles and of fish. And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon and from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

Several Proverbs speak to situations that seem to be rather distant from the life of the court. Even in chapter 1 there is the warning to the young man against falling in with gangs, expressing a temptation that a young prince would probably not feel as keenly in the same form. Solomon is not necessarily the author of chapters 1 to 9 and various other parts of the book.

The book seems to have been open and added to for quite some time. There are various verses that are nearly repeated. Chapter 14 verse 12 is very similar to chapter 16 verse 25.

Verses 10 and 11 of chapter 6 to chapter 24 verses 33 to 34. Chapter 10 verse 1 to chapter 15 verse 20. It is important to recognise various editorial hands in compiling and gathering the material together and forming it into a unified work.

It is important, however, to pay attention to the final product and the context of this work. It is a canonical text with a unified character of its own. Its material is not ordered in a haphazard manner, but there is a logic and an overarching order.

The superscriptions of the text give us some indication of the structure of the book. Chapter 1 verses 1 to 7 is the preamble. That is followed in chapter 1 verse 8 to 9 verse

18 with an extended discourse on wisdom.

Chapter 10 verse 1 to chapter 22 verse 16 is a collection of Solomonic proverbs. Chapter 22 verse 17 to 24 verse 34 are the sayings of the wise. Chapter 25 verse 1 to 29 verse 27 are more Solomonic proverbs.

Chapter 30 verses 1 to 33 are the sayings of Eger. Chapter 31 verses 1 to 9 are sayings of King Lemuel. And then the final part of the book in verses 10 to 31 of chapter 31 is a great poem to the virtuous woman.

Although the main body of the book contains classic proverbs, there are genre distinctions. Chapters 1 to 9 contain discourses and speeches, whereas chapters 10 to 31 contain the more typical form that we think of as proverbs. And the proverbs themselves seem to speak to and come from various contexts.

Some speak to a court context, for instance chapter 23 verses 1 to 3. Others are more agricultural, as in chapter 10 verse 5. As in the book of Jeremiah, which was also compiled of various material over time, the book of Proverbs has an order difference between the Masoretic Hebrew and the Septuagint text. The later part of the book is ordered as follows. The sayings of Eger come first, followed by the further sayings of the wise, then the numerical parallelisms of chapter 30 verses 15 to 33, then the sayings of King Lemuel, more Solomonic proverbs compiled by Hezekiah's men, and then finally the poem to the virtuous woman.

Most of the proverbs that we have in this book are brief statements of truth. They can be observations, exhortations or other sorts of declarations. However, it is important that they be used properly, in the right time and circumstance.

There are conditions for the truth of a proverb that must be understood. Many hands make light work, and too many cooks spoil the broth, seem to have opposing meanings. But in the right context they are both true.

In the mouths of the wise they are powerful, but in the mouths of fools they are destructive. Improperly used, they can be useless or worse, something that the book of Proverbs itself highlights. Chapter 15 verse 23 speaks of the importance of the apt answer, the word that is spoken in season.

Chapter 26 verse 7 declares, Proverbs are typically poetic and usually terser in Hebrew than they are in translation. As we move forward in the book we will see different types. There are antithetical ones, there are better than proverbs, there are proverbs that compare things to others, saying that they are like them.

There are also number parallelisms, such as we see in chapter 30 verses 18 to 19. The prologue of the book, in chapters 1 to 9, largely contains speeches from the father to the son and from lady wisdom to young men. Within these chapters the fundamental lessons

are taught about the correct posture towards wisdom.

Young men are taught about the danger of evil associations, the importance of giving their heart to wisdom, the blessings and the goodness and the integrity of wisdom. The importance of being mindful of your path and guarding your heart, the danger of gangs and promiscuous women, the importance of the fear of the Lord over everything else, and the long term benefits of the way of wisdom. The chapter begins by introducing us to the source of the book, Solomon, who is the author and perhaps also compiler of some of the foundational material.

He is the son of David and the king of Israel, both things that qualify him as someone to learn wisdom from. It is not addressed to a particular named person, which perhaps, as Bruce Waltke suggests, gives it a more democratic character. Following the introduction of the author, there is a preamble containing the purpose of the Proverbs, to know wisdom and to understand its mode of expression, words of insight.

The submissive learner receives practical wisdom, mastery, the art and skill of living well, and the teacher gives prudence to the inexperienced, the immature and the morally unformed. This is also written for the sake of the wise, those who have already gained a great deal of understanding, can return to and reflect upon these Proverbs and these words of wisdom with great profit. Fundamental to everything is the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This is perhaps the great refrain of the wisdom literature, and much of the material of scripture returns to this theme. Job is described as one who fears the Lord, and in chapter 28, verses 23-28 of his book, we read, And he said to man, Psalms 111 and 112 are a great pair of wisdom psalms.

The last verse of Psalm 111 reads, The first verse of Psalm 112 reads, We find similar statements at many points in the book of Proverbs, We also find related statements in Ecclesiastes 12, 13 and Isaiah 11, 1-5. There are various facets of the fear of the Lord that help to explain why it might be the beginning of wisdom. It's associated with humility, a recognition of your place and your limitations, and a need to be subject to the teaching of the Lord.

It's associated with obedience, a commitment to follow the Lord's commands and to learn through that practice. It's associated with love, a desire to seek after wisdom and to pursue it until you've found it. It's associated with reverence, a posture of wonder and awe towards the Lord, true wonder that is not enthralled or enslaved by anything lower than God himself.

Wisdom is how God formed the world, and to live by wisdom is to live with the grain of God's universe. This posture of thought is a personal and a moral one. Out of the heart spring the issues of life.

For the Book of Proverbs, wisdom and folly are not primarily matters of the mind, but matters of the heart. The man with great intelligence but with a disordered heart will often only end up pursuing the way of folly with greater intensity. His intelligence can be used to rationalise more fully his folly to himself.

The book is framed by the address to the son by the father. Throughout, the figure of the young man is the most prominent and primary addressee. The book is especially concerned with the temptations and dangers, the duties and possibilities that present themselves to the young man.

Considering the prominence of the figure of the young man will also help us to appreciate the overarching theme of the choice of a spouse or female companion that runs throughout the book and gives it much of its order. The period of young adulthood is a time of sowing, for which the reaping will come later. Wisdom comes with time and experience, as people have passed through periods of sowing and reaping in their lives and realised the consequences of good and bad choices in those periods of sowing.

The father's voice, importantly, is not alone. The young man is told to hearken to his mother's teaching, and in chapter 31 we encounter teaching given to King Lemuel by his mother as the conclusion and the summation of the book's message. The authority of parents is of great importance in the communication of wisdom.

This is the fifth commandment, to honour father and mother second only to the fear of the Lord. We might recognise something of the logic of the Ten Commandments here. As people fear the Lord and keep the first four commandments and honour their father and mother, keeping the fifth, wise obedience to the rest of the commandments will follow more naturally.

In Exodus and Deuteronomy, the fifth commandment comes with promise, and this one does too. Hearing and keeping the words of father and mother result in a sort of adornment of the faithful son. When we think about character, we might think in terms of virtues and graces.

Virtues are particularly associated with characteristics of action, but graces, things that people can see in us, traits of character, these are attractive facets of our character. If the person obeys his father and mother, he will discover over time that his obedience to their teaching is a glory to him. Through his honouring of his father and mother, he himself has become honourable.

Heeding father and mother is prudent for various reasons. They are generally the people who most have our good in mind, they are best acquainted with us, and they have demonstrated their character and values to us in their own actions, making both the trust in them and emulation of them well-founded. All of this makes the posture of trust in them, as our initial guides, quite reasonable.

Contrasting with the path of the son who heeds his parents is the path of the son who heeds the call of sinners. It might be notable that the book of Psalms also begins with a similar juxtaposition of two paths, and warns against bad company. Psalm 1, verses 1-2 Verses 11-14 As in the case of the adulterous woman, who will later appeal to the impulses of his lust, the appeal of the gang is, as Mark Horne observes, the appeal to the desire to obtain something good without diligence, self-mastery, sustained effort, self-restraint, faithfulness or patience.

It is good for the young man to desire power, camaraderie, honour and wealth. His virility is not a bad thing in itself, but it requires self-mastery. Indeed, much of the book of Proverbs teaches such men how to obtain these things.

The father warns his son against the young men of the gang. Such men can easily be driven by a hunger for violence itself, for the expression of unconstrained power. Evil becomes attractive to such men, not merely as a means to some other end, as a shortcut to wealth and power, but in itself as an experience of lawless power.

High on their own testosterone, they desire the thrill of using their strength in service of their unchecked desires and to subdue others beneath them. However, in contrast to the man who has mastered his own strength and expresses it in a self-controlled manner, such men are running to their own ruin. Their chosen course is both evil and foolish.

It will bring their destruction upon their head. In Proverbs 4, verses 14-19, we read of this in more detail. Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil.

Avoid it. Do not go on it. Turn away from it and pass on, for they cannot sleep unless they have done wrong.

They are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble, for they eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence. But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness.

They do not know over what they stumble. The voice, the invitation and the warning of personified lady wisdom is an important repeated motif in the book, and here we encounter her for the first time. She is characterized as elsewhere in the prologue of the book, as a female figure at the gates and major thoroughfares calling to young men.

These are sites of entrance, of association and commerce. They are the places where the simple will be most likely to be led astray, to join the wrong company or to engage in unjust action. The concluding section of the chapter contains both her message to the simple youths, but also her reflection upon her message and its reception.

Bruce Waltke suggests that verses 22-33 follow a book-ended pattern. Verses 22-23

contain wisdom's exasperation with the unresponsive gullible and fools, and verses 32-33 which correspond contain the death of the gullible and all fools, in contrast to the security of the wise. The next section, in verses 24-25, contains the gullible being condemned for refusing her rebuke, and the same thing happens in verses 30-31.

In verses 27-28, as in verses 29-30, wisdom rejects and mocks these people at the time of judgment. Lady Wisdom observes the simple youth's love of being simple, the law of irresponsibility, of lack of accountability, of resistance to counsel and authority, an absence of self-control, the enjoyment of levity, and a disregard for rebuke. The simple take refuge in mockery and levity as a way of deflecting the gravity of truth and wisdom.

What Lady Wisdom offers to such people is a rebuke, and if they will accept this rebuke, the opportunity to turn before it is too late, before they have become so settled in the way of folly or doomed themselves to the bitter fruits of its harvest. If they respond appropriately, she will pour out her spirit to them like a fountain of truthful words that will bestow life to them. However, her speech ends with a denunciation.

They have rejected her words, and so she will mock them when calamity strikes. At that point it will be too late, and wisdom won't be anywhere to be found. Their key failure was their hatred of knowledge, and their rejection of the fear of the Lord.

They were proud, wanted to be flattered, and rejected rebuke and correction. The end of her speech reveals the inherent danger of the path of the wicked, whereas those who follow the path of wisdom will enjoy ease and will experience safety. A question to consider, why might the fools in the time of their distress not be able to find wisdom anymore? Romans chapter 14 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls, and he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person esteems one day is better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day observes it in honour of the Lord.

The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord, and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.

So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died

and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

So then, let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.

It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.

But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. In Romans chapter 14, Paul addresses issues of judgment and conscience.

Paul might have been speaking to specific issues of concern in the Roman church of which he had heard. However, there is every reason to believe that such issues were common in the churches to which Paul ministered. So it would not be strange to address them at this juncture.

The unity of the church as one body in Christ is a matter of particular concern for Paul. And he is especially alert to the way that congregations might divide along particular fault lines between Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, weak and strong, etc. Paul addresses similar issues elsewhere, in places like 1 Corinthians.

Paul begins by instructing them to welcome someone who is weak in faith, who might have scruples about all sorts of issues that a mature Christian would not. In welcoming such a person, however, they should be careful not to get involved in quarrels over adiaphora, things that are neither commanded nor forbidden, issues about which faithful Christians are permitted to differ. Paul gives the example of differences in belief

concerning dietary matters, what foods were permitted or forbidden to the Christian in various contexts.

We find examples of some of these differences in the area of idol food in 1 Corinthians. Such questions could be very difficult in situations with different modes of practice coming into collision. Some Jews, for instance, might still be observing kosher requirements.

Some converts from paganism might have very sensitive consciences about the slightest contact with anything that might have any association with idols. The fundamental principle that should apply in such cases is one of welcome without passing divisive judgment. As Paul says in chapter 15, verse 7, Therefore welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Paul is concerned that such matters don't become the cause of alienating judgment or division. There are matters concerning which judgment must occur. For instance, in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul is adamant that sexual immorality not be tolerated in the church, but that unrepentant offenders be removed from fellowship.

However, on adiaphora, we must recognize that it is not our place to judge our fellow Christians. This refraining from judgment goes in both directions. It isn't just the strong who must refrain from judging the weak, but also the weak who must refrain from judging the strong.

Judgment is to be left to the Lord, before whom we must all stand on the last day. The Lord is able to make both the weak and the strong brother to stand before him. Paul gives a second example of holding certain days to be holy.

Presumably, Paul chiefly has in mind Jewish Sabbaths and feast days. The important thing is that everyone act in good conscience, properly convinced that they are acting in integrity. Whatever practice is adopted, it is to be adopted in the sight of God, as those who will be judged by him, not primarily in the sight of others, as those involved in judging and being judged by our neighbours.

Christ has died and rose again, in order that he might be Lord of all. Consequently, all of our lives must be lived with reference to him. So often we are preoccupied with how we appear relative to others in the realm of human judgment.

We constantly judge and are judged whether or not we are doing so verbally. Paul challenges this entire way of life, calling us to live above all else in the light of Christ's judgment and not our neighbours. Recognizing that we are all subject to the judgment of God puts all of our attempts at judgment into a very different perspective.

Our judgment seat is petty and premature. Paul's teaching here resonates with that of our Lord in Matthew 7, verses 1-5. Judge not that you be not judged, for with the

judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, let me take the speck out of your eye, when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. When we are aware that we will have to give account of ourselves before God, we will be much less inclined to judge and condemn others. We might think here of the experience of being in the same room as a world-renowned expert when someone makes an obvious error in something related to that expert's field.

We will be much more hesitant about speaking up to judge that person, well aware that the expert can see much in us that is no less worthy of judgment. Playing on the verb, Paul says that rather than judging one another, we should rather judge not to put a stumbling block or offense before a brother. This, of course, is a far more modest form of judgment, and far better for the health of the people of God.

Paul claims that nothing is unclean in itself. The source of uncleanness is the heart, not objects in the world. He came to this persuasion in the Lord Jesus.

Perhaps Paul is suggesting that this is a particular teaching of Jesus which he had received from others. We might here be reminded of Mark 7, verses 18-23. And he said to them, All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

However, Paul develops this teaching even further. If someone's heart is wavering in unbelief or uncertainty concerning something, that thing is unclean for that person. It is the heart that makes the thing unclean, not vice versa.

If we act in ways that cause others to stumble, or to go against their consciences, even if something is clean in itself, we are risking great spiritual harm to them by encouraging them to go against their consciences. Perhaps most damning, for the sake of our liberty to eat what we want, we are putting little value upon the spiritual safety of someone that Christ redeemed at the cost of his life. Paul makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians 8, verses 10-13.

For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

For Paul this is very much a matter of priorities. Paul hardly ever speaks about the

Kingdom of God using that expression, although the reality of the Kingdom pervades his writing. However he does so here.

The Kingdom of God is about God's saving justice, by which we enjoy good standing with him. It is about peace with God and our neighbour. It is about rejoicing in the Spirit.

Anything that gets placed before this is a problem. Paul fleshes out this point further in verses 19-21. The work of God in our brother is of so much greater value than is our freedom to partake in whatever we want.

As Paul argues elsewhere, we should be prepared to surrender our liberties in such minor matters, for the sake of what really matters and has value. If saving our brother from stumbling involves refraining from eating meat or drinking wine, then so be it. Paul is concerned that people refrain from judging their neighbour, while acting in clear conscience themselves.

Our conscience must be clear, not merely in not believing that what we are approving is wrong for us, but also in being clear of causing any harm to our neighbour. When we act in bad conscience, whether concerning ourselves or in our duty of love to our neighbour, we are engaging in sin. A question to consider.

How do you believe Paul's approach enables us to distinguish between situations where people are genuinely put at risk of stumbling by our behaviour, and situations where people are imposing their scruples upon others as oppressive and illegitimate burdens?