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March 27th: Proverbs 25 & Ephesians 6:1-9

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A word fitly spoken. Masters and servants.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 25. These also are Proverbs of Solomon which the men of Hezekiah king of Judah copied. It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.

As the heavens for height and the earth for depth, so the heart of kings is unsearchable. Take away the dross from the silver, and the smith has material for a vessel. Take away the wicked from the presence of the king, and his throne will be established in righteousness.

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence, or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, Come up here, than to be put lower in the presence of a noble. What your eyes have seen, do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end when your neighbor puts you to shame? Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another secret, lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill

repute have no end. A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver, like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprove to a listening ear, like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him, he refreshes the soul of his masters, like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give.

With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone. If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you have your fill of it and vomit it. Let your foot be seldom in your neighbor's house, lest he have his fill of you and hate you.

A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is like a war club or a sword or a sharp arrow. Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips. Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda.

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you. The north wind brings forth rain, and a backbiting tongue angry looks. It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.

Like cold water to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country. Like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked. It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory.

A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls. Proverbs chapter 25 begins a new section of the book of Proverbs. It is a compilation of a number of the Proverbs of Solomon that were brought together in the time of Hezekiah.

Hezekiah was king of Judah from around 728-687 BC. He was co-regent with Manasseh for the latter decade or so of his reign. The Proverbs in this section, from chapter 25-29, are more thematic in their ordering, especially in chapters 25 and 26.

There are a lot of metaphor and simile Proverbs, far more than elsewhere. The section is introduced in a way that makes reference to a previous section of Solomonic Proverbs. These also are Proverbs of Solomon.

King Hezekiah's men were presumably transcribing Proverbs from various sources, editing them and collating them within a single text. This work may have been undertaken to consolidate the wisdom and the tradition of the nation. In 1 Kings chapter 4 verses 29-34, the wisdom of Solomon and his forming of Proverbs is described.

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 Mahal,

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.

Verses 2-7 of this section particularly focus upon the figure of the king. Verse 2 might remind us of Deuteronomy chapter 29, verse 29. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us, and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

The Lord's glory is seen in the concealed things, the mysteries of the creation that he has formed, the mysteries of his purposes. The glory of kings is seen in the way that they search things out within their kingdom, the ways that with their wisdom they disclose and speak to the affairs of the nation. The heart of the king himself is mysterious to the people of the land.

While the king investigates and discloses the hearts of others, he himself is inscrutable. This associates the king with the Lord in various ways. But we should recall Proverbs chapter 21, verse 1. Although the king's heart is inscrutable to the people of the land, the king's heart is like streams of water in the hand of the Lord.

He can turn the king's heart wherever he wills. The king's task is to forge a nation, and to do this he needs to be working with the right material. One of his tasks is to remove the wicked from his presence, an act compared to taking the dross away from silver.

A king who surrounds himself with the wrong people will be greatly weakened. He will not have an effective reign. One of the problems at the end of King David's reign was the influence of people like Joab in his court.

As long as he had the dross like Joab, he would not be able to rule effectively, and one of the initial tasks of Solomon upon coming to the throne was to purge out certain people from the old regime and to establish a new righteous one in its place. On a somewhat analogous level, if you want to form a good society, you need to consider the membership of the core group incredibly carefully. From the king's determining the members of his regime in verses 4 and 5, the question of advancement in the court is viewed from the other perspective in verses 6 and 7. Here the aspiring young person is taught to keep his ambitions in check.

If he keeps pushing himself forward above his proper station, he will be called to go down lower and will be humbled as a result. However, if he is modest in his approach, he may well find himself called up higher, granting him honour and a new standing. Jesus

gave a parable very similar to this in Luke chapter 14 verses 7 to 11.

Now he told a parable to those who were invited when he noticed how they chose the places of honour, saying to them, When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honour, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by them. And he who invited you both will come and say to you, Give your place to this person, and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, Friend, move up higher.

Then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. The verses that follow encourage prudence and discretion in the way that quarrels and disputes are handled.

We are warned about being litigious, or being precipitous in bringing forth complaints to court. Escalating matters in such a fashion, you may find yourself losing costly legal battles. Far better to address the matter privately and quietly if at all possible.

Don't go around spreading the word of your dispute. Keep the matter private if you can. You should also beware of being used in such a manner, with others divulging their disputes to you.

If you pass on such reports, you will end up being regarded as disloyal and untrustworthy. Jesus also teaches concerning these matters in the Gospel. Matthew 5 25-26 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.

Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. Matthew 18 15-17 If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.

But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. The principles here can be applied more broadly.

We should always be mindful of ways to avoid escalation of conflict. This involves dealing with many matters privately if possible. It involves doing our best to leave the door open for reconciliation.

Our concern should always be to de-escalate. We need to be careful not to act in a manner that will cause people to dig in their heels. Verses 11-15 speak about the character and the power of words.

One of the things that the Proverbs really accentuate is the importance of the right words at the right time. Words ought to be delivered in season by the man of wise speech to the man of the listening ear. This is expressed in verse 11 with the image of a beautiful piece of jewellery, golden apples set in a beautiful piece of silver.

And here the piece of silver is compared to the ear that hears, and the apples of gold to the words that are spoken. The need for a piece of jewellery to have the right setting is witnessed in the unfitting setting of the gold ring in the pig's snout in chapter 11 verse 22. Here however the setting is fitting for the word that is received.

The ear is a common place for jewellery, and in verse 12 the reproving word is described as if it were a piece of jewellery that could be set in the ear. If the ear will receive it, the word will adorn it. It would be strange indeed to have snow at the time of harvest in May and June.

Indeed it might even have been disastrous. What is described in verse 13 is most likely a situation where people in the heat of the day, in the middle of their labours, would long for the refreshing coolness of the snow. If one were to experience the refreshing coolness of the snow at that time, it would be similar to a faithful messenger.

A faithful messenger extends the capacities of the one who sends him. He brings relief from fears and anxieties. Proverbs chapter 13 verse 17.

A wicked messenger falls into trouble, but a faithful envoy brings healing. Empty boasts and promises are the subject of verse 14. Clouds driven by the wind promise the possibility of rain, and so does a man who boasts of a gift.

However exciting hopes only to dash them is far worse than never arousing those hopes to begin with. If verses 11 and 12 spoke of the fittingness of wise words, verse 15 speaks of the power of wise words. A person who speaks with patience and care, who speaks with gentleness, can be far more effective in his speech than the physical force of breaking a bone could be.

Elsewhere in the book of Proverbs the power and the might of wisdom has been discussed. Wisdom isn't merely beautiful, it is strong and effective. It is possible to have too much of a good thing, and supposing for the sake of argument that your company is a good thing, your friends can have too much of it.

Far better to leave well before they tire of you and to desire your return, than to linger around and have them desiring your departure. Verses 18 to 20 give us some examples of men who are deeply troublesome to their neighbours. The false witness is described as like a weapon.

The treacherous man is compared to a broken tooth or a foot that slips. You rely upon your feet and you rely upon your teeth, and when they fail you, it causes you deep

discomfort and can be a source of insecurity. So it is with someone whose friendship is only hypocritical.

A good friend will be attentive to his friend's spirit, yet a supposed friend who sings songs to a friend who is struggling with a heavy heart merely exacerbates his distress. This is like placing vinegar on soda, which causes it to aggressively fizz up. Proverbs has on several occasions warned us against envy, vengeance and schadenfreude.

Verses 21 and 22 provide us with further teaching in this vein. This teaching is also taken up in Romans chapter 12. Rather than being vindictive and seeking to avenge yourself upon your enemy, when you see your enemy in distress, take pity upon them and seek to ameliorate their situation.

Various suggested interpretations have been put forward for the burning coals of verse 22. While some have suggested that they refer to the punishment that the Lord will bring upon that person, it seems more likely that the burning pangs of shame may be in view here. Such gracious action towards your enemy may provoke him to remorse and later repentance.

There are certain people who unerringly produce discord within community. The gossip or the slanderer is a great example of this. By their simple activity of whispering in people's ears, they have a community-wide effect, sowing anger all around them.

Verse 24 is a repetition of chapter 21 verse 9. It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife. Like the gossip can produce conflict throughout their community, so the quarrelsome wife can make her entire household miserable. As the wife holds one of the greatest powers for producing harmony and unity, so she is in the most powerful position to produce disharmony and conflict.

Like verse 13 compared the faithful messenger to the cold of snow in the harvest, so verse 25 compares good news from a far country to cold water received by a thirsty soul. From the pure, cool water of verse 25 however, we move to verse 26 with a muddied spring or polluted fountain. A faithful righteous man who guards the boundaries, who stands up to error and wickedness, and does not give in or compromise, can be a source of encouragement and security to all around him.

But if such a man gives way or compromises, everyone is greatly weakened and disheartened. The righteous man is like the spring or fountain from which other people can drink. He provides life to those around him, and he does so by maintaining purity.

If he fails to maintain such purity, if he fails to stand up to and oppose the wicked, he ends up being worthless to everyone. Indeed, he may even become a threat. There are various translations suggested for verse 27.

Bruce Waltke renders it as, To eat honey excessively is not good, nor is it honourable to search out weighty matters. This would presumably bring us back to verse 2 at the opening of the section. Michael Fox renders it as, Eating honey too much is not good, and being sparing in speech is honourable.

William McCain points out that whatever we interpret it as, we need to follow the logic of the illustration. Eating honey is a good thing in itself. The danger is doing it to excess.

So whatever is referred to in the second half of the verse must be a good thing that should not be taken to excess. He suggests that it is to be sparing with eulogising words. Proverbs 16 verse 32 reads, Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

Verse 28 expresses this truth in a negative form. A man who lacks rule of his spirit, who cannot control himself, is like a city without walls. While a city with walls can continue its life even when it is surrounded by an enemy, the city without walls will be easily overrun and overwhelmed by any enemy.

Wisdom in large measure is found in learning how to respond rather than react. The walls are those boundaries that differentiate yourself from others. They are the boundaries that allow you to deliberate rather than merely reacting.

They are the boundaries that allow you to maintain your inner composure when everyone else is losing his head. They are also the boundaries that enable you to avoid taking on the character of other people too easily. A walled city can retain its own character even against those things that are around it.

The city without walls has no way of marking itself out from those things that surround it. The proverb here compares the city with walls to a person with self-control. Without self-control you will be controlled by your impulses, by your environment and the forces that are at work within it, by the movements of the masses around you, by whatever passions are in the air.

The self-controlled man has an inner core of agency. He can act in a way that is self-determined, not just determined by other factors. Another way of looking at this perhaps is to see that the self-controlled man is a man who truly possesses a heart, a realm within, distinguished from the realm outside, within which he can meditate, deliberate, weigh things, consider words and a fountain from which his actions can spring.

A question to consider. Verse 11 compares an ear that listens well to a setting of silver. What are some of the ways in which we can make our ears a fitting setting for wise words? Ephesians chapter 6 verses 1 to 9 As people please, but as bond-servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord, and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back

from the Lord, whether he is a bond-servant or is free.

Masters do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. In Ephesians chapter 6 Paul concludes his household code and gives a final exhortation to the recipients of his epistle. The fact that Paul addresses children directly with the instruction to obey their parents is probably notable.

Children, and there is little reason to believe that Paul isn't addressing boys and girls alike, are not just treated as those to be dictated to and controlled by their parents, but as persons to be exhorted to a willing obedience. The presence of such an instruction suggests that Paul expected children to be with their parents in hearing this epistle read. Christian teaching, a willing Christian obedience, is not just for adults.

They are to obey their parents in the Lord. One thing that we see in places such as the book of Acts, for instance, is the assumption that whole households would come under the reign of Christ, not just detached individuals one by one. Children are addressed as members of the Christian community and Paul will go on to instruct fathers to raise them in the instruction of Christ.

The expected norm is that as such children are raised in the faith, they will grow into a full, willing and mature ownership of the faith for themselves. This is why the honouring of parents and the faithful teaching of parents are so important. As in the Old Testament, these are the means by which children will grow into mature personal faith and into wisdom.

Paul supports his teaching with a reference to the fifth commandment, underlining the promise that is attached to it. Honouring of father and mother is seen in a particularly potent form in willing obedience to them. Such honouring of parents creates a firm bond between the generations that functions as the backbone of a people throughout its history.

A people lacking such a healthy bond will not last for long. Likewise, the honour between the generations is the means by which wisdom is passed on. It is primarily through heeding father and mother that the child is set upon the path of wisdom.

Fathers, for their part, must encourage rather than frustrate or provoke their children. There is a reciprocity here. The father is the head of his household but his headship is supposed to be something that builds up, strengthens, supports, encourages and gives security and peace to everyone else.

An overbearing, abusive or hypercritical form of fatherhood is opposed here. Fathers should direct and correct their children. But their strength must be exercised with gentleness and compassion.

From fathers Paul turns to servants. These servants are called to obey their masters with fear and trembling, to show respect and to act with sincerity, to act as to the Lord. This is not just acting as if to the Lord, but as to the Lord.

Their true master is not their earthly master, but their heavenly master, Jesus Christ. And so they act as one who will be seen by him, as one whose work will be judged by him. Whatever the cruelty or injustice of their earthly masters, they know that their heavenly master will see and honour their work as it is done in a way that glorifies him.

They are called to act for his honour and for his recognition, not for human attention. Such faithfulness could sometimes be costly. We can think of the story of Joseph, whose faithfulness to his earthly master, not as a people pleaser, but as one who was acting towards God, led him to be thrown into prison.

He was being faithful to Potiphar, not sleeping with Potiphar's wife, and he ended up seeming unfaithful to Potiphar as a result. Yet the Lord, his true master, blessed him and raised him up. Servants are assured that whatever they do, they will receive back from the Lord.

And this is something that is true for people whether they are born servant or free. The Lord sees and rewards those who do good. And there's an important point here about Christian vocation.

So often we can idealise those situations where people are not alienated from their labour in any way. They're doing exactly what they feel passionate about, in communities that they feel they really belong in, in situations where they feel highly rewarded for their efforts. But Paul here speaks to people who are servants, who might be beaten on a daily basis, who might find themselves routinely dishonoured in their labours, prevented from enjoying ownership of their labour and its fruits, or from finding true belonging and identity in what they do.

While all of these conditions of work are bad, and in an ideal society would be removed or minimised or even eradicated, for Paul none of these things prevent people from knowing the dignity of serving Christ. Even the humblest servant can find honour in his labour as he does his work towards Christ and not to man. Paul now addresses slave owners.

He introduces his remarks with a surprising expression. Masters do the same to them. There is a symmetry between the way that masters should treat their servants and servants should treat their masters.

This might be very unexpected for us. It's very easy for us to think of the relationship between masters and servants as the most unequal and imbalanced and asymmetrical relationship there is. But Paul can see a symmetry because both people should be acting

towards a heavenly master and treating their earthly counterpart, whether a master or a slave, in a way that recognises God's oversight of them.

One of the effects of all of this is to place the social order that currently exists in the light of how we all stand relative to God on the same level ground. While many would have sought to drive the current order down deep into the depths of reality to claim its grounds in fundamental being, Paul does quite the opposite. He presents a more fundamental reality that reveals the superficiality and transitory character of a society where there are masters and slaves.

We should also recognise the contrast between the way that he treats masters and servants and the ways that he treats husbands and wives. Husbands and wives are related directly to the gospel. The relationship between husband and wife is an anticipation of the gospel of Christ, the joining together of Christ and his church.

In the process, the fundamental goodness and divine intention of marriage is stressed. No such connection is made in the case of slavery, however. Paul makes similar points here to those he made in Colossians 4.1. Masters treat your bond-servants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven.

Masters are charged to stop threatening their servants. They must recognise that they too have a master in heaven. By this reminder, Paul is reconstituting the institution of slavery by the golden rule.

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the law in the prophets, and by Christ's principle of judgment. For with the judgment you pronounce, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Masters must act towards their servants as those who are themselves bond-servants of Christ, accountable to him and answerable for how they treat other persons made in God's image.

There is no partiality with God. The status of the slave-owner does not exalt him over others in God's sight, nor does it give him some greater dignity. A question to consider, how might Paul's teaching about masters and servants in this chapter be related to our own work situations?