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March 24th: Proverbs 22 & Ephesians 4:17-32

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The cosmopolitan character of wisdom. Put off the old man and put on the new.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 22. A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor meet together.

The Lord is the maker of them all. The prudent sees danger and hides himself, but the simple go on and suffer for it. The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life.

Thorns and snares are in the way of the crooked. Whoever guards his soul will keep far from them. Train up a child in the way he should go.

Even when he is old, he will not depart from it. The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender. Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail.

Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor. Drive out a scoffer and strife will go out, and quarreling and abuse will cease. He who loves purity of heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king as his friend.

The eyes of the Lord keep watch over knowledge, but he overthrows the words of the traitor. The sluggard says, there is a lion outside. I shall be killed in the streets.

The mouth of forbidden women is a deep pit. He with whom the Lord is angry will fall into it. Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.

Whoever oppresses the poor to increase his own wealth or gives to the rich will only come to poverty. Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise and apply your heart to my knowledge, for it will be pleasant if you keep them within you, if all of them are ready on your lips. That your trust may be in the Lord, I have made them known to you today, even to you.

Have I not written for you 30 sayings of counsel and knowledge to make you know what is right and true, that you may give a true answer to those who sent you? Do not rob the poor because he is poor or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the Lord will plead their cause and rob of life those who rob them. Make no friendship with a man given to anger nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare. Be not one of those who give pledges, who put up security for debts.

If you have nothing with which to pay, why should your bed be taken from under you? Do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set. Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings. He will not stand before obscure men.

Proverbs chapter 22 begins by teaching us that a good reputation is far more valuable than great wealth. Favor with the Lord and with one's fellow man is to be preferred over great riches. Although there may be great societal divides and economic disparities between the rich and the poor, when it comes down to it, they are both created by the Lord.

There is a fundamental equality in the biblical teaching here. Oliver O'Donovan writes, the equality of human beings is an aspect of the doctrine of creation. It locates every human being equally to every other as one summoned out of nothing by the Creator's will, one whose life is a contingent gift, created for fellowship with others and answerable to judgment.

Only when social differences, which may be inoffensive or even constructive, tend to deny that created equality do they expose themselves to such radical critiques as those which Christians have directed against slavery and more recently racism. To take two examples that commended themselves ecumenically to all Christian consciences, equality is something that is true about human beings. The language of ideals confuses

the most important distinction between equality as the reality of the relation between any two humans created in the image of God and equal treatment as the norm of behavior that gives some practical expression to this reality.

It is a demand of faith that we should lay hold and act upon the truth of human equality. It is in fact an aspect of the belief that God created the human race and without the one belief, the other must be undermined. But it is a truth beneath the surface at the metaphysical level, a truth that has to be seen through to, past the differentiated and complexified structures of human society.

Human society does not and cannot yield us a clear and unhindered view of our equality. To insist that it shall do so is to want to live metaphysically, that is to confuse the foundations with the superstructure of human existence and the result of that is to annul the created forms in which the elaboration of human society is possible. The fate of all revolutionary equalization is to make human life unlivable.

Proverbs is not at this point teaching such equalization, rather it is reminding us of that basic fact of creation, the fact that we must take by faith that whatever social and economic disparities may suggest, all persons are equally creatures of God and must be treated with dignity accordingly. The trouble or danger referred to in verse three may be a quarrel, the person who is simple runs straight into quarrels and gets himself enmeshed and entangled in them. The wise man by contrast knows better than to get himself tangled up in other people's affairs, he keeps his distance.

Humility and the fear of the Lord have been connected in the book of Proverbs on several occasions. Here it's possible that the reward for humility is the fear of the Lord and from that we have the reward of riches and honor and life. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the person who has humility is aptly disposed to receive this.

Wisdom herself rewards those who find her, riches and honor are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness in Proverbs 8 verse 18 and in verse 35 of that chapter, for whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord. The crooked, the sluggard, the fool and other such characters often believe that they are making their way easier by the way that they sin, however here we see once more that the way of the crooked is characterized by difficulty and pain and danger. The thorns on the way of the crooked are difficult and painful, the snares may be fatal dangers.

The crooked here is contrasted with the person who guards his soul, who will keep very far from such ways. Raising children is a common theme in the book of Proverbs and here again we are taught the duty of parents to set the pattern for their children. Once their children have been set in the right path, they will tend to continue in it throughout their lives.

Just as the rich man can rule over the poor man, the person who borrows can be the

slave of the lender, either by virtue of the demand that the lender has upon him or perhaps in the danger of his being reduced to actual slavery. What a man sows, he will also reap. Themes of sowing and reaping are common in the wisdom literature.

They give a sense of the fruits of particular actions, the seasonality of activity, the fact that you need to act at particular times if you're going to be effective and the fact that failures in the past can have great repercussions for the future. Human life is also characterized by seasons of sowing and reaping. Various seasons of our lives are defined primarily by sowing, by actions whose consequences are many years in the future.

There are however other seasons of life where we are primarily harvesting, where we're reaping the consequences of what we have done in the past for good or for ill. The person in verse eight is someone who has sowed injustice and what he has sown, he will receive back himself and at that point, the rod of his fury, the flail by which someone might thresh grain, will fail him. He won't be able to protect himself from the consequences of his actions.

The Lord is the patron of the poor. In Proverbs chapter 19, verse 17, we read, whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord and he will repay him for his deed. Here again, we are reminded the person who is generous will receive back bountifully from the Lord.

The Lord is no one's debtor. John Wesley was once asked if a particular campaign of preaching had produced many additions to the church. His response was a surprising one.

No, but there were some blessed subtractions. The presence of certain discontents within a community can affect everyone. Remove those discontents and quarreling and abuse and all these other problems will cease.

In scripture, there are a number of occasions where people are told to purge out certain people from a community that will corrupt it or lead it into idolatry or sin. We see this in 1 Corinthians chapter five, where the sinful man has to be purged out like the old leaven. Recognizing the scoffers in a community and dealing with them effectively is one of the means by which a community can be built up.

The king is on the lookout for faithful servants. Proverbs chapter 16, verse 13, righteous lips are the delight of a king and he loves him who speaks what is right. The person whose heart is pure and who speaks with wisdom and grace is exactly the sort of person that the king wants to have in his service.

The friend of the king here may not just be a particular companion of the king, but rather a more official counselor. The Lord makes sure that the words of knowledge do not fall to the ground, whereas he will overthrow the words of traitors. Once again, we should remember that what Proverbs is teaching is not just about the natural dynamics of the

world, but about the way that the Lord is involved in moral governance of his creation.

It is he who ultimately secures the victory of the wise. The sluggard is someone who gives excuses in order to avoid work and exertion. Here, a claim that there is a lion outside in the street.

The sluggard is often held up as a figure of ridicule in the book of Proverbs. We find a similar verse later on in chapter 26, verse 13. The sluggard says, there is a lion in the road, there is a lion in the streets.

His folly is obvious and mockery of him may be one means of rousing him to his senses. In verse 14, the mouth of the forbidden woman is described as a deep pit. Earlier on in chapter seven, verse 27, we're told that the way of the adulterous woman led down to death.

Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death. Later on in chapter 23, verse 27, we are told that the prostitute herself is a deep pit. For a prostitute is a deep pit, an adulterous is a narrow well.

Here, however, it is the mouth of the forbidden woman that is the deep pit. Earlier in the book, in the description of such women, their mouths and their speech were the primary means by which victims were hooked. Understood in this way, the speech of the seductress is the great pit into which people are in danger of falling.

The second verset of this proverb, he with whom the Lord is angry will fall into it, is important to consider. The Lord is the one who condemns such people to their doom. He's the one who exposes them to the danger.

In Ezekiel chapter three, verse 20, again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. While the Lord protects the righteous, he ensnares the wicked. He gives them the rope with which they will hang themselves.

As Christians, we pray, lead us not into temptation. Knowing our own weakness and the power that sin still has within us, we seek the protection of the Lord from such snares. Children left to their own devices will not end up walking in the path of wisdom.

They are attracted to folly from the outset. This inclination needs to be trained out of them. And careful discipline, including corporal punishment, is a means by which this can be achieved.

Once again, the importance of such punishment is to train the child, not as a form of parental vengeance or a way of terrorizing children into submission. Good discipline should yield understanding and should not provoke children to wrath. The interpretation of verse 16 is difficult.

Michael Fox suggests that it could be rendered, there is one who oppresses a poor man, yet he ends up giving him more. There is one who gives to a rich man, yet he ends up in need. If this is an accurate rendering, then it's speaking about the reversals that can occur, where the Lord can turn the tables upon oppressors and leave them in poverty, while the poor they once oppressed are raised up.

In verse 17, we arrive at a new section of the Book of Proverbs, and also at quite a surprise. The words of the wise here seem to be using as their background an Egyptian pagan text, the Instructions of Amenemope. This Egyptian text, which evidence suggests precedes the biblical text of Proverbs, is extensively employed and reworked.

The Egyptian text is not just lifted here, it's appropriated and refashioned by a faithful Israelite writer. The wisdom literature more generally arises from reflection upon the world, from learning about the patterns of life with an insight that's been given by God. It relies in large part upon there being patterns within reality that have been set up by the Creator, those who have been granted insight by God and those who have reflected upon the law of the Lord will be best equipped to perceive and to understand these patterns.

Wisdom is also something that is cosmopolitan. You do not have to have received special revelation to be able to perceive some of these patterns in reality. This is what is spoken of often when people talk about natural law.

Those with an instinctive grasp of this sort of natural law are able to practice it within the practical reason of living well. Wisdom, or the art of living well, is something that can be brought to greater articulation by some, but for many it is found primarily in sound patterns of life. And much reflection concerning such patterns of life had occurred in pagan nations.

In the story of King Solomon we see the cultural interchange that occurred through his wisdom. We also see that his wisdom is compared to the wisdom of men of the East. He is not the only person engaging in such exploration of the world in his time.

In the scriptural reworking of this pagan Egyptian text we're seeing something of the way in which pagan wisdom can be appropriated by the people of God. The early church would later learn from the wisdom of Athens. The Apostle Paul himself quotes pagan poets in the book of Acts and also in some of his epistles.

The faithful people of God do not have a monopoly on truth. There is much truth to be discovered outside of the pages of Scripture and outside of the company of the faithful. While we must be careful in the way that we appropriate these things, here and elsewhere we have biblical precedent, not just from learning from creation apart from special divine revelation, but also for going to pagans and non-Christians to see what we can learn from them.

The quest for truth is cosmopolitan. The quest for truth is the great quest that will traverse many different societies and cultures. It brings people together as fellow travelers from many different times, from many different places, and of many different walks of life and backgrounds.

Many Christians in recent years have tried to establish a Christian worldview, a sort of airtight Christian system of thought, hermetically sealed from all other belief systems and philosophies. Yet here and elsewhere I believe that the biblical text would actually propel us into receptive engagement and exchange with different cultures and belief systems, challenging us to discover those elements of truth that exist within different traditions of thought and testing everything by the standard of the word of God, incorporating what we can. The connection that biblical scholars have drawn between this part of Proverbs and Amenemope is witnessed in something like verse 20, which in many translations reads 30 sayings of counsel.

The word here translated 30 has also in older translations been translated as ancient or as noble or in the Septuagint as three. The fact that many translations now go for 30 is founded upon the connection that biblical scholars have seen between it and Amenemope that has 30 chapters of teaching. Verse 20 reads, Have I not written for you 30 sayings of counsel and knowledge? Amenemope writes, Look to these 30 chapters.

They inform, they educate. Bruce Waltke and others have tried to break down the 30 different sayings of this section, but their precise divisions and enumeration is not easy to determine. Identifying some particular affinities between this chapter and parts of Amenemope, we can see, for instance, in verses 17 to 18, compared with Amenemope, Give thine ear and hear what I say, and apply thine heart to apprehend.

It is good for thee to place them in thine heart. Let them rest in the casket of thy belly. They may act as a peg upon thy tongue.

With verse 22, Beware of robbing the poor and oppressing the afflicted. Of verses 24 and 25, Associate not with a passionate man, nor reproach him for conversation. Leap not to cleave to such an one, that terror carry thee not away.

In verse 29, A scribe who is skilful in his business findeth worthy to be a courtier. In verses 22 and 23, Once again we see the Lord as the guardian and the protector and the guarantor of the poor. The Lord cares for the weak, the oppressed and the afflicted, and he will act against all who mistreat them.

The danger of bad company corrupting good habits is seen in verses 24 to 25. The character of a man who is given to anger can be contagious. If you hang around with such a person, you can become an angry person yourself, and having gained their vice, you risk suffering its bitter consequences.

Once again we have a warning against putting up security for others. Chapter 6 verses 1 to 5 provided the most extensive warning along this line. Verse 28 warns against moving the ancient landmark.

A very similar verse is found in chapter 23 verse 10, just a few verses later. Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless. Cnut Haim observes that this is something that is repeated also in the text of Amenemope.

The repetition that we see here in Proverbs seems to be based in part upon a repetition within the source text of Amenemope. The concern here is particularly that of protecting the widows and the fatherless and other vulnerable figures from having their property taken from them by the rich oppressor. A society that did not honour the boundaries of property would swiftly become predatory.

A great deal of wisdom consists in being attentive to the world and the people around you. The final proverb of this chapter encourages people to be alert to those people who are competent and gifted in their orbit, to mark those people and see where they end up. People of great gifts will almost invariably rise up.

If you see a very skilful person, he is most likely destined to be elevated. A question to consider, where else in scripture might we find examples of the cosmopolitan character of wisdom? Ephesians chapter 4 verses 17 to 32. Now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him as the truth is in Jesus.

To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin.

Do not let the sun go down on your anger and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away

from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Having spoken of the oneness of the people of God in the body of Christ, in the second half of Ephesians chapter 4, Paul turns to address the change in life and behaviour that should occur in Christians. Like several other parts of Ephesians, we should notice the parallels between this section and corresponding sections in the book of Colossians, such as in chapter 3, verse 8 to 13. But now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave free. But Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Being in Christ should entail a radical and far-reaching transformation of life. Paul's teaching concerning the unity and character of the body of Christ, in which we are growing to maturity as we are formed by the Triune God, will lead to a radically different form of life from that characteristic of the Gentiles.

The Gentiles have a form of life that is shaped by the futility of their minds. Their minds are vain and lacking in substance. They are not acting in terms of the truth of reality in God's world.

They are out of touch with the weighty and substantial things of life. Having rejected God, no matter how smart they are, they are unable to gain mental purchase upon the things that really matter. Their understanding is shrouded in darkness.

They may be living in the real world, but they are living in it as if under the cover of thick blackness, clumsily bumping into things, stumbling over unseen obstacles, and wandering about they know not where. They are alienated from God due to the ignorance and stubbornness of their hearts. Their ignorance arises from a fundamental aversion and resistance to God.

This resistance has led them to become callous and to surrender themselves to growing forms of wickedness as they willingly enslave themselves to their own desires. This couldn't contrast more with that which should characterize the Christian. Paul describes the source of our new way of life as having learned Christ.

This is a very strange way of speaking. In what other case would you speak of having learned a person? You might well talk about having learned about a person, perhaps, but

that is not what Paul says here. Paul gives us a sense of what he means by this in the clause that follows.

We learn Christ by hearing about him, but more particularly by being taught in him. As Marcus Barthes powerfully expresses it, Jesus Christ is the headmaster, the teaching matter, the method, the curriculum, and the academy. Learning Christ is unlike learning anything else, which is why Paul speaks in such an unusual manner here.

The conclusion of verse 21 expresses something of this, as the truth is in Jesus, or since truth is in Jesus. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. If we are looking for truth, a proper way of behavior, and a new source of life, then we will find all of this in Jesus.

In him are truthful ways of life. From our knowledge of Christ as the truth, we learn to divest ourselves of the old ways of life that are contrary to him, ways of life that are no longer appropriate to us. They belong to our old selves and are ill-fitting upon us now.

They are corrupt and decaying on account of deceitful desires. The desires of this old self are themselves mired in lies and falsehood. They tangle us up in them in ways that we cannot easily understand or are not.

They catch us up in the snares of death. The first step is to put off the old self. Then we must be renewed in the spirit of our minds and clothe ourselves with a new and very different self, a new self that bears the likeness of God in righteousness and true holiness.

Paul is intentionally alluding back to Genesis chapter 1 here. God is restoring and perfecting us in his image. In Christ, humanity attains to its divinely intended form and destiny.

Christ is the truth and the model of this humanity, and we must inhabit his life as the place where we learn how to live. One of the most immediate results of this necessary putting off and putting on will be our abandonment of the falsehood fundamentally characteristic of our old lives. Such falsehood is not just an occasional feature.

It's something that lies at the very heart of the character of the old way of life. In its place, we must have a commitment to the truth. Paul makes a very similar point in Colossians chapter 3 verses 9 to 10.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. This practice and speaking of truth is informed and inspired by a new recognition of others in Christ. We are not detached individuals, but we are people who belong to each other, members of each other.

The golden rule has a deeper logic to it in the body of Christ. If we are members of each

other, what we do to each other in the body of Christ is in some sense indirectly being done to ourselves. Paul is likely quoting from Zachariah chapter 8 verses 16 to 17 here, which speaks of the appropriate behavior for the restored people of God.

This, of course, is to be seen in the church, where God is restoring humanity after exile and renewing us in his image. Quoting Psalm 4 verse 4, Paul recognizes the appropriateness and perhaps even unavailability of some forms of anger. However, we must carefully hold our anger within bounds, lest it get out of control.

One of the ways to do this is to settle matters before we go to sleep. Unaddressed anger can fester. It can cause breaches that cannot easily be healed.

Keeping short accounts with God and our neighbors is a way to lessen the dangers in this area. It also has the effect of closing off opportunities of which the devil will take advantage. He loves to use such openings to destroy relationships and render people bitter.

We must accordingly deal with anger swiftly and without delay. Paul's teaching concerning sin is not just basic instruction. It contains a lot of wisdom.

Not letting the sun go down on your anger is a very practical way to deal with our tendencies to anger. His teaching is designed to limit Satan's opportunities. With people tempted to steal, he encourages them to commit themselves to honest labor instead and to learn what it means to give as an alternative.

As in the wisdom literature, Paul is especially attentive to speech. Speech can corrupt. It can serve as a channel of death and the tearing down of others.

In its place, Paul wants Christians to learn to speak in ways that build people up, in ways that are suitable to the season, and in ways that function as a gift that lifts up and strengthens those who hear us, so that they might be blessed by our words. Christ has given us his Holy Spirit, marking us out for final resurrection and giving us a reality-filled promise of what we are to expect. However, it is possible to live in a way that grieves the Spirit.

In Isaiah chapter 63 verses 9 to 10, to which Paul is likely alluding here, Isaiah speaks of the Holy Spirit being grieved and God turning to oppose his people as an enemy. There are several occasions in the New Testament where the genuine possibility of the most devastating loss is hinted at or stated. We must not be presumptuous in our reception of God's grace.

Paul concludes the chapter by listing things to be put away and contrasting attitudes and behaviors to adopt. The old divisive patterns of life of the flesh must be abandoned. These are forms of behavior that led us to bite and devour each other.

In their place we must adopt new ways of life that we have learned in Christ, patterns of life that he himself has modeled for us. These divine traits, kindness, tenderheartedness and forgiveness, would not be the most prominent virtues for many of Paul's Greco-Roman contemporaries, if they would have been considered virtues at all. However, in the Gospel they are seen in Christ, and they are virtues that should be characteristic of those who have learned Christ.

A question to consider. The themes of truth and falsehood are prominent in this section. How does Paul's account of these things challenge typical ways of thinking about them?