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A righteous man knows the rights of the poor. Elders and deacons.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs 29. He who is often reprov'd, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing. When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan.

He who loves wisdom makes his father glad, but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth. By justice a king builds up the land, but he who exacts gifts tears it down. A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet.

An evil man is ensnared in his transgression, but a righteous man sings and rejoices. A righteous man knows the rights of the poor. A wicked man does not understand such knowledge.

Scoffers set a city aflame, but the wise turn away wrath. If a wise man has an argument with a fool, the fool only rages and laughs, and there is no quiet. Bloodthirsty men hate

one who is blameless, and seek the life of the upright.

A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back. If a ruler listens to falsehood, all his officials will be wicked. The poor man and the oppressor meet together.

The Lord gives light to the eyes of both. If a king faithfully judges the poor, his throne will be established forever. The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.

When the wicked increase, transgression increases, but the righteous will look upon their downfall. Discipline your son, and he will give you rest. He will give delight to your heart.

Where there is no prophetic vision, the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law. By mere words a servant is not disciplined, for though he understands, he will not respond. Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Whoever pampers his servant from childhood will in the end find him his heir. A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression. One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.

The partner of a thief hates his own life. He hears the curse, but discloses nothing. The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.

Many seek the face of a ruler, but it is from the Lord that a man gets justice. An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous, but one whose way is straight is an abomination to the wicked. Proverbs chapter 29 concludes the second section of Solomon's Proverbs.

At a number of points in the book of Proverbs, slow and gradual habitual processes with sudden ends are described. Here it is that of resistance to rebuke, the person who has given many reproofs and yet responds by hardening himself against them, will experience a sudden destruction. Having run through all of the warning signs that he has been given, he faces a final collision that he cannot avoid.

Verse 2 is the third of four related statements in chapters 28 and 29. Chapter 28 verse 12, When the righteous triumph, there is great glory, but when the wicked rise, people hide themselves. Chapter 28 verse 28, When the wicked rise, people hide themselves, but when they perish, the righteous increase.

Chapter 29 verse 2, When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan. And then in verse 16 of this chapter, When the wicked increase, transgression increases, but the righteous will look upon their downfall. The contrasting fortunes of the righteous and the wicked have ramifications for the whole society.

Verse 3 is another proverb speaking of the consequences of wisdom or folly in a son for his parents. The wise son is a cause of gladness in his father. The dissolute son who is the companion of prostitutes ends up bringing dishonor to his father and squanders his father's inheritance.

All that for which the father had sacrificed and labored is now going to waste in the most dishonorable of ways. Chapter 29 of Proverbs often moves between the household and the nation. Whereas verse 3 spoke about the household and the way that the foolish son would squander the family fortune, in chapter 4 we're talking about the building up of nations or their tearing down.

The righteous king builds up his nation by the practice of justice, by observing and enacting the law, acting on behalf of the oppressed and establishing righteousness. By contrast the corrupt ruler, the one who is gathering bribes or excessive taxes, will end up undermining and weakening the whole nation. Verses 5 and 6 should be read together.

In verse 5 we see the flatterer as one who is spreading a net for a person's feet. Whose feet? Is it for the neighbor's feet? It seems to be that way in a number of places in the book of Proverbs. It might also be, as we read it alongside verse 6, for his own feet.

He does not realize, but he will be ensnared in his own transgression. Those who are given to trickery and traps will often find themselves tangled up in them. The description of the righteous man, by contrast, is an arresting one.

He sings and rejoices. This is the song of the victorious person, of the person who has escaped the trap or been delivered from it. The principle of the wicked being caught in their own schemes is one that we encounter on several occasions in the book of Proverbs.

For instance, in chapter 1 verse 19, such are the ways of everyone who is greedy for unjust gain. It takes away the life of its possessors. The righteous person is not just righteous for his own sake, as a sort of private morality.

He is concerned for justice within the society at large, and he gives thought to the judgments delivered concerning the poor, the duties that people have towards the poor, the ways that the poor have been offended against, and the processes of law and society by which the situation of the poor is being ameliorated and the injustices committed against them being rectified. The wicked man, by contrast, is quite unmindful of these things. The responsibility to take an active interest in the rights of the poor is especially pronounced in the case of the king, as we see in Proverbs chapter 31 verses 4 to 5. It is not for kings or Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

The righteous man has an active social conscience, and is always mindful of what he can do to address the injustices of his own society. The wider social impact of the righteous and the wicked and their behaviour is again the subject of verse 8. The proverb there speaks of the impact of scoffers and of the wise. The scoffers cause conflict within the society and end up calling judgment upon it, whereas the wise turn away wrath.

The wrath being referred to here may be the conflict within the society more generally, or it may be the lord's wrath more particularly, or it may be both. The unteachability of the fool is the subject of verse 9. The fool's resistance to correction and his unteachability is a common issue within the book of Proverbs. Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

In Proverbs chapter 26 verse 4. Arguing with a fool can be like a fool's errand. You are not going to have any success. He will respond with mockery and laughter, and only be more confirmed in his position by the time that you are done.

Murderous men have a particular enmity towards those people who are blameless and upright. The righteous man exposes by contrast the character of the wicked, and those who are most wicked will express their enmity towards the righteous by seeking their very lives. Self-control and mastery of your spirit and your temper is a notable hallmark of wisdom in the book of Proverbs.

A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls. Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes the city. The folly of the fool and the wisdom of the wise can often most clearly be seen in the contrasting ways that they respond to aggravation.

The wise person is able to master his spirit and as a result to hold back from saying things that are rash and foolish. The fool by contrast possesses no such mastery and ends up giving full vent to his opinion. By the simple act of being able to hold his tongue in such a situation, the fool would have been considered very differently.

Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise. When he closes his lips he is deemed intelligent. Chapter 17 verse 28.

The corruption of a kingdom can go from the top down. A ruler who has listened to lies will end up forming a corrupt regime around him. We can think about this in the case of David.

As he sinned and lied concerning Uriah and Bathsheba, the corruption of his kingdom went all the way down. His officials started to be characterised by corruption, lies and unfaithfulness. Verse 13 should remind us of chapter 22 verse 2. The rich and the poor meet together.

The Lord is the maker of them all. However here it is referring to a meeting between a

negative character, the oppressor, and the poor man. Here the Lord is described not as the maker but as the giver of life.

It is the Lord who has given the light to the eyes of both the poor and the oppressor. Implied here is a sense of the seriousness of what the oppressor is doing. He is presuming upon the continued grace of the Lord who has given him life and is sustaining him in it.

Verse 14 also relates to the proper treatment of the poor and once more speaks particularly to the role of the king. The king who judges the poor with equity is a king who will find his own throne established forever. The Lord is the patron of the poor.

The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. The one who enacts justice towards the poor is the one who will receive the blessing of the Lord as he is doing the Lord's own work. The power of a foolish son to bring misery to his parents in their older age is frequently mentioned in the book of Proverbs.

Such a son wanting his inheritance right away might turf his parents out of their property. In his folly he can squander their wealth and bring dishonour upon the family by consorting with prostitutes and others. However a father who faithfully disciplines his son will find that when he is in his older age his son will give him honour and rest.

The father who fails to discipline may find quite the opposite. A lack of exertion in training his son in his earlier years leads to considerable misery down the line and damage that cannot easily be rectified. Prevention in such a case is so much better than cure.

Man should live by the word of the Lord and where there is no prophetic vision a people lack direction. However those who devote themselves to meditating upon the law can find clarity in dark times. Verses 19 and 21 speak to masters in the treatment of their servants.

The servant within the house could be subjected to corporal punishment. Unlike the hired worker he would not just be dismissed from his position and mere words of rebuke would be a very limited deterrent or corrective. The servant might understand the words of rebuke but he would be unlikely to heed them.

The person who just pampered his servants would find that he lost their respect and in the end overran his house. These verses might shock modern sensibilities. It is important that we read them alongside other biblical teaching concerning masters and servants which encourage a healthy relationship between the master and the servant to the extent that servants should often want to remain in the house.

A man and those people that surround him can both become the victims of his vices. In verses 22 and 23 we have two examples of this. The whole community of those

surrounding the man of wrath labour under the burden of his strife.

He is a cause of conflict and sin that can infect an entire community. In verse 23 it is the pride of a person that can bring him low. The very pride at the heart of a person's self assertion is the greatest threat to their well being.

By contrast the person who is lowly in spirit, a characteristic that comes with the fear of the Lord, is one who will ultimately obtain honour. The person who enters into dealings with a thief will find it difficult to escape being caught up in the thief's own crimes. The background to this verse can be seen in places like Leviticus chapter 5 verse 1. If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity.

And then in Zechariah chapter 5 verses 3-4 Then he said to me, This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land. For everyone who steals shall be cleaned out according to what is on one side, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cleaned out according to what is on the other side. I will send it out, declares the Lord of hosts, and it shall enter the house of the thief and the house of him who swears falsely by my name, and it shall remain in his house and consume it, both timber and stones.

The person who has dealings with the thief, perhaps buying stolen goods, will be reluctant to disclose what he knows. He has become a beneficiary of the crime and as a result he ends up covering it up and bringing the curse upon that crime upon himself. Verses 25 and 26 speak about the place to which we should look for deliverance.

Those with the fear of man are often looking primarily to rulers. They fear rulers and they look to rulers for deliverance. The person who fears the Lord and trusts in the Lord, however, is in a very different position.

Although it is not inappropriate to seek justice from rulers, indeed it is a positive thing to do, verse 26 reminds us that justice ultimately comes from the Lord. He is the one that we should look to primarily. Even when human rulers fail to deliver justice, we can still find justice from the Lord.

The final verse of the chapter concerns the enmity that exists between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, between the unjust and the righteous. This enmity exists on both sides and understanding the existence of, the character of and the purpose of this enmity is a crucial dimension of the task of wisdom. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the enmity between the righteous and the wicked plays out in society and history? First Timothy chapter 3 The saying is trustworthy.

If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled,

respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive.

For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, and let them also be tested first, then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own household well.

For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves, and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you, so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness.

He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. First Timothy chapter 3 continues First Timothy chapter 2's concern with organisation of the life of the people of God in their congregations. More especially, it speaks to the setting apart of persons to exercise specific roles within the Ephesian church.

The roles mentioned in this chapter, the overseer and the deacons, have excited considerable debate over the centuries. As the proper manner of church government has been a matter of dispute within and among denominations and different Christian traditions, the interpretation of passages like First Timothy chapter 3 has been a matter of great concern. In First Timothy chapter 3 we have a statement concerning the overseer.

We find a similar sort of statement in Titus chapter 1 verses 5-9. This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained in order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you. If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word

as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

There are great similarities between these statements but there are also some differences. The overseer seems to be spoken of as a singular character, whereas the elders are spoken of in plural ways. It seems that the form of church order within the early church was something that was evolving over time, perhaps most notably after the Apostles' death.

As the Apostles and other figures who had provided unity to the church on a broader organisational level were martyred or died or were imprisoned, other figures and roles had to take their place. By the time of Ignatius in the first half of the 2nd century, we see an order of the church with bishops, elders and deacons. However it is likely that this was not the order of the church in the Apostolic era.

Such an order seems to have been developing in certain parts during the Apostolic era but only became the universal norm later on and even then the evolution of church government from its initial form varied somewhat from region to region. During the Apostolic era, the church seems to have been organised primarily by households, with an order starting to develop at the city level. Such an order seems to have come more quickly in places like Jerusalem, where James would have occupied a role similar to that described later as that of the bishop or overseer, and also in cities like Antioch.

In other locations, perhaps especially in rural ones, the church mostly operated on the domestic level, perhaps with some interaction among the leaders of those churches on a local level. R. Alistair Campbell, in his book *The Elders, Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, writes *As the little congregation grows, others assist him, whether in teaching or in serving tables. It will be natural to call such people helpers or deacons.*

As the house churches multiply, the leaders need to confer. Perhaps a Paul or a James needs to address them. These are the elders of the Christian community, owing their prestige to their leadership of their households, as the elders have always done.

At some point, as when the Twelve ceased to be a force in Jerusalem, or Paul's personal supervision is removed from his churches, the need for a local overseer is felt, to safeguard the unity of the churches in the face of threats from inside or outside, and the congregations come together in one place under one overseer, with a consequent loss of status by the elders, who no longer lead their own meetings. We have a window into something of this organisation of the early church in figures like Gaius, who is mentioned in Romans chapter 16 verse 23 as a host to Paul and the whole church. The organisation of the church that we see develop is not something that seemed to arise from direct divine command, rather it seems to be a result of spirit-directed evolution of the church's structure, and human wisdom in organisation.

In the initial household structure, the elders would have had their role almost by default. They were the heads of a household hosting a meeting, the ones who in many cases would have started the church, and would naturally be the ones perceived to be its guardians. In the original domestic context of the church, the role of elders and deacons would be far more organic.

The elders wouldn't have a particular office, they would just be those recognised as the natural community leaders. This domestic setting also explains some of the challenges that Paul deals with in the preceding chapter. Where a wealthy woman, for instance, was the patroness of the church and the one who hosted the church in her house, it would be understandable for a situation to arise where one might find such a woman leading a domestic congregation.

As Alistair Stewart observes in his book *The Original Bishops*, the rare instances of women in church leadership in the early centuries of the church seemed to involve such domestic settings. As the church developed beyond the original domestic setting and started to assume a broader associational structure, such exceptional cases soon vanished. What we likely see in 1 Timothy chapter 3 is a stage in the development of the church beyond this initial household organisation to a form that is more locally centralised within a single city or something like that, where once you had a number of different house churches with their various leaders who would have been the elders who would occasionally assemble together as the broader church of the area, now the more formal office of the overseer emerges.

With the rise of the town church leader, you would have a decrease of the status of the house church leaders. Many of the house church leaders would now function more as presbyters under the leadership of the overseer. While a house church leader might be the de facto leader of that congregation by virtue of the fact that he hosted the congregation in his house, the overseer or town church leader is more of an office to which people must aspire, as we see in verse 1. Suitable men for this role were supposed to be people of good repute, well respected in their own household and in the wider community.

A leader without such respect would lack important moral authority. A suitable overseer was a sort of head of household for the local church, and the characteristics that would render someone suitable for such a role would largely be demonstrated in the context of his own household. The role of the overseer was a fatherly role, the role of managing a household, of ensuring that it is provided for, of upholding its good order, of teaching and training, and of exercising discipline where wrong has been done.

The role of the pastor, as we tend to think about it, tends to be quite narrowed from that of the overseer, in large part because churches no longer tend to think of themselves or to function as households. Like a good father, the overseer is in many respects someone

who leads his household by virtue of his character, by setting the tone for everyone else. For this reason it is so important that the overseer be of impeccable reputation, that he be noted for godly character, that his existing sphere of influence be one in which he has already proved himself to be good.

He should be gentle, not someone who uses his strength to domineer over others. He must not be a lover of money, someone who will be corrupt and accumulate wealth for himself, fleecing the flock. He must be self-mastered, he must avoid the vices of drunkenness and other things like that.

His family life matters too. He must have only one wife. Presumably this is speaking to a situation where some converts might have had a couple of wives.

Such persons would not be suitable for church leadership in the future. His children should be submitted to him, honouring him as a father. Where such honour is lacking, it might well be a sign that he is not a suitable leader for the church more broadly.

Verses 6 and 7 both mention the devil. Verse 6 speaks of the danger of pride for a recent convert, presumably in the reference to the condemnation of the devil, speaking of that vice which is most characteristic of Satan. The devil also has his eye upon such leaders.

He will seek to bring them down. It is important that church leaders have a strong reputation with outsiders, with non-Christians. Satan is seeking to destroy the church, and one of the best ways to destroy the church is to take down its leaders.

Consequently, the church should be very concerned about the reputation of those that are overseeing it. Similar instructions are given in verses 8 to 13 concerning the role of deacons. Deacons should be thought of as the assistants to the overseer.

As we see in verse 12, the deacons seem to be heads of their own households, which suggests that many of the former elders or house church leaders are now functioning in this diaconal office. It is not clear whether the deacons ordinarily taught, although we are told that they had to hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Like the elders, they had to be tested and prove themselves to be of blameless character.

Those who, having been appointed, acquitted their office well, would end up gaining a good standing. This is likely a reference to the honour that they would enjoy among the community of faith. One of the chief duties of the overseer was to be hospitable.

He had an economic role to play relative to the wider church, ensuring that people's material needs were provided for. The hospitality of the deacons is not mentioned in the same way, although some have seen in verse 11 a reference to their wives, suggesting that they would naturally have a part in their husband's ministry, mostly consisting of hospitality work. It is, however, interesting that apart from the instruction that he be the husband of one wife, there are no instructions given for the wife of an overseer.

This curious contrast between the instructions for the overseers and the deacons, coupled with the fact that the instructions for testing the deacons are the same as those for testing the women, in verse 11, has suggested to many that what we have in verse 11 are a reference to deaconesses. This seems quite likely to me. We should not presume that the deaconesses are interchangeable with the deacons.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, ministry is conditioned by gender. Furthermore, the role of the overseer seems to be exclusive to men, and many of the deacons, as servants of the overseer, would become overseers themselves in time. Verse 12 also singles out deacons as husbands, fathers, and heads of households, all of which emphasize male dimensions of their office.

Nevertheless, any healthy household has men and women involved, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, and so we should not be at all surprised to see the prominence of many women within the context of a church that is modelled after the household. The concluding verses of the chapter speak to this reality of the church as the household of God. Paul is writing to Timothy, hoping to come soon, but giving him instruction for how to organise this household.

If this is written in the window of time in Acts chapter 20 verses 1 to 3, Paul's visit might only have been a month or two in coming. However, he is not certain of his plans, and there is the possibility of his being delayed. The church is the household of the living God, and this household is founded upon the truth, is founded upon a great statement with which Paul ends the chapter.

The statement might be a hymn, which could be divided into three sets of two statements. These three pairs of statements join together elements, flesh, spirit, angels, nations, world, and glory. As a sort of Christological hymn, it describes salvation history, what Christ has wrought within his coming.

Great indeed we confess is the mystery of godliness might remind us of a statement that we heard earlier in the context of Ephesus, in Acts chapter 19 verse 28. When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Paul here gives us a counter statement, great rather is Christ.

The mystery of godliness is the mystery of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is a manifestation of God in the flesh. Flesh in Paul has all sorts of connotations, of weakness, mortality, the realm of sin and death, all experienced in our bodily existence.

It was this realm that Christ entered, and it was in this realm that God was seen in him. He was vindicated by the spirit. If the first reference is to Christ's existence under the condition of the flesh, the second is the reference to the resurrection.

We have a similar statement in Romans chapter 1 verses 3-4 concerning his son who

was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. The flesh spirit contrast also plays out in verses like Romans chapter 8 verse 11. If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his spirit who dwells in you.

Who are the angels? Are the angels a reference to human messengers, witnesses to the resurrection? That's a possible reading that some have suggested. Alternatively, it might be a reference to a triumphant appearance before the angelic powers, both good and evil. From this Paul moves to the proclamation of Christ and his gospel among the nations as the word went out by the power of the spirit.

The witnessing of Christ's glory by the heavenly hosts, by the angels, corresponds with the testimony born to his name before earthly powers. This testimony proved effective as many in the world believed upon him. Here the world is paired with glory, the heavenly realm into which Christ was taken, a realm in which he is seated at God's right hand until all of his enemies are placed under his feet.

A question to consider, what are some of the different terms and images that are used to describe leaders of the church in the New Testament?