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March 26th: Proverbs 24 & Ephesians 5:18-33

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Avoiding envy and schadenfreude. Wives and husbands.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs 24. Be not envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them, for their hearts devise violence and their lips talk of trouble. By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established.

By knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counsellors there is victory. Wisdom is too high for a fool, in the gate he does not open his mouth.

Whoever plans to do evil will be called a schemer. The devising of folly is sin, and the scoffer is an abomination to mankind. If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small.

Rescue those who are being taken away to death. Hold back those who are stumbling to

the slaughter. If you say, Behold, we did not know this, does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it? And will he not repay man according to his work? My son, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste.

Know that wisdom is such to your soul. If you find it, there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off. Lie not in wait as a wicked man against the dwelling of the righteous.

Do no violence to his home, for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity. Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles. Let the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.

Fret not yourself because of evil doers, and be not envious of the wicked, for the evil man has no future. The lamp of the wicked will be put out. My son, fear the Lord and the King, and do not join with those who do otherwise, for disaster will arise suddenly from them, and who knows the ruin that will come from them both? These also are sayings of the wise.

Partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the wicked, You are in the right, will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations. But those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them.

Whoever gives an honest answer kisses the lips. Prepare your work outside, get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house. Be not a witness against your neighbour without cause, and do not deceive with your lips.

Do not say, I will do to him as he has done to me. I will pay the man back for what he has done. I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold it was all overgrown with thorns.

The ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it. I looked and received instruction.

A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man. Proverbs chapter 24 begins with a warning against envying evil men. The righteous man should neither envy such men, nor desire to enter into their company.

The temptation would be their seeming prosperity. While it can be very easy to read the book of Proverbs as a book of empirical observations, at such points we see that it is very much about living by faith. The righteous man in such a situation needs to be aware of living by sight.

He needs to recognize the character of evil men, and their final fate. The temptation to

envy evil men is one that we see elsewhere in scripture. For instance in Psalm 37 verses 1-2, fret not yourself because of evil doers.

Be not envious of wrong doers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. And in Psalm 73 verses 1-5, truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped, for I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked, for they have no pangs until death, their bodies are fat and sleek, they are not in trouble as others are, they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.

The true foundation of a household is not in the might nor in the wealth of its master, but rather in wisdom. The wise person establishes his household with wisdom and understanding, and it is with knowledge that the house is not only formed but also filled with all of its glories. In chapter 31 we will read the description of the wise woman who establishes her house in such a manner.

It is easy to focus upon might and upon bravery when we think about the problems that face us in our world. If only we had the courage and the strength, we could overcome the obstacles that we face. In verses 5 and 6 however, we are instructed to think of wisdom as a source of great strength.

It is by wisdom that effective war is waged, that great plans are effected. Proverbs 20 verse 18. Plans are established by counsel, by wise guidance wage war.

Effective counsel is found in the multitude of counsellors, by getting many minds together on a particular problem, testing their positions against each other and weighing up many different suggested courses of action, you will have the best preparation for determining a prudent course. Proverbs chapter 15 verse 22. Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed.

We ought to attend to the discussion of wisdom here as a source of great might. There is a certain type of man of action that can fret at the deliberations of the wise. They are fed up of all of the talking and just want to get into the fray.

Listening to counsellors just complicates the mission. Far better not to have to weigh the voices of many different counsellors and just to have a very clear course of action and stick to it. However, much of the strength of war is found in wisdom, not in mere brute force.

The victor will be the person who can hold back the passions of the warrior for long enough to deliberate wisely concerning the course of action to take. Likewise in all other areas of our lives, if we are going to be people of strength, we must be wise people. A focus on might and bravery in action that dispenses with wisdom is not going to be mighty at all.

The fool cannot master wisdom nor can he understand it, and as a result, in the gate, in the place of rule within the city, he is silenced, he is unable to speak effectively because he lacks the wisdom with which to do so. Once again we see that the fool is rendered impotent by his folly. It is the wise man who is strong and effective in his action.

Verses 8-9 continue the theme of planning, but here it is the devising of sin. Such wicked schemers and scoffers end up reaping dishonour for themselves, just as the fool is silent in the gate, so they are despised by the members of their society. When the day of adversity comes, people's strength is tested.

Crisis humbles us, it shows us the limits of our strength. It also tests us, it shows our true mettle. A person can boast in times of ease, but when the time of testing comes, then we will see what he is really made of.

One of the ways that we are tested in the day of crisis is in our concern for and willingness to help our neighbour in distress. It is very easy to turn a blind eye, to say like Cain, am I my brother's keeper? Yet God, who looks after us, expects us to look after our neighbours. The strength and the resources that we have should be used to help and assist others when they need it.

If we fail to care for our neighbour, the Lord will judge and repay us according to our deeds. In chapter 16 verse 24 we read, Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. Honey is a source of both health and delight, and in verses 13-14 wisdom is compared to such honey.

In Psalm 19 verse 10 the word of the Lord is compared to honey. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Wisdom gives life and health and it should be a source of great delight to us.

The rising and falling of different groups of people is the subject of verses 15-20. The hearer is warned against acting against the righteous as a predator. The fall for the righteous man will always be followed by a lifting up again, death followed by resurrection.

The wicked however, when they stumble, they will stumble finally and completely. Continuing the theme of falling and stumbling, verses 17-18 warn us against schadenfreude. A vengeful delight in others' distress can bring the Lord's judgment upon us.

Vengeance belongs to the Lord and we should not seek evil against our neighbour in our heart. Proverbs 20 verse 22, Do not say, I will repay evil. Wait for the Lord, and He will deliver you.

Scripture does seem to legitimate a sort of rejoicing when the teeth of the wicked are

broken, when wicked people are brought down from their mighty thrones, when oppressors fall into their own snares, and the cruel are destroyed. Nevertheless, we are not to be vengeful in our hearts. While we can rejoice in deliverance and in the justice that God has brought about, we do not take a vindictive delight in others' distress.

A key feature of the righteous is that they are not preoccupied with the wicked. Their eyes are on the Lord, they trust in Him, and when they see the wicked prosper, their hearts are not fazed, nor are they obsessed with seeing the wicked's demise. Schadenfreude and envy are two sides of the same coin and both must be utterly resisted.

Verses 19-20 return to the theme of envy with which the chapter began. In its specific context here, it needs to be read in juxtaposition to the schadenfreude of the previous verses. It also fills out the message of verses 1 and 2, whereas verses 1 and 2 taught that the wicked ought not to be envied on account of their wickedness and their evil actions.

Here we are told that we should not envy them because of their demise that will come about. One of the features of the sin of envy is that it prevents us from focusing upon the Lord. In envy we are preoccupied with the state of our neighbour relative to ourselves.

However, the righteous man is not preoccupied with his neighbour, either seeking his downfall or envying his success, but rather looks to the Lord with confidence and seeks a blessing from Him. As he is confident the wicked will not finally prosper, he does not focus upon them. He is freed confidently to live a life of contentment, of thanksgiving and generosity.

The king has been connected with the Lord at various points in the Book of Proverbs. He is a servant of the Lord to the people. He represents the Lord's wrath against sin and is to uphold justice within the land.

The faithful king is a son of God and images the Lord to the people. We might here recall the way that the Lord and His king are closely associated in places like Psalm 2. The charge here is also related to Exodus 22.28. You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people. Political authority and divine authority are connected in various ways.

Scripture commonly warns against the danger of partiality in judgement. Exodus 23.2-3 You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit siding with the many so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit. You shall not be partial in judgement.

You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgement is God's. You shall not pervert justice.

You shall not show partiality. You shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of

the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Here we are taught that besides breaking the commandment of the Lord, the person who perverts justice will also be cursed by the people who will bring dishonour upon himself.

Conversely, those who exercise true justice invite blessing upon themselves, presumably both the blessing of the Lord and the blessing of the people around them. Kissing a person's lips would be a sign of honour and respect. In verse 26 we are shown that true honour and respect is seen in speaking with candour to people.

The difficult word, the challenging rebuke, can often be rejected by people. They can feel that it is an attack. But a friend that speaks with candour to you, who truthfully directs you towards wisdom, even when it may cost them to do so, is the real faithful companion.

He is the one who really kisses the lips, rather than the flatterers who will just tell a man what he wants to hear. Verse 27 teaches the importance of doing tasks in their proper time. The person who abandons the work of the field in order to build his house will find that there is nothing in his field when the time comes for harvest.

However, if he attends to first things first, he will be able to have both a house and a fruitful field. Bearing false witness against a neighbour is the subject of verses 28-29. Here the act of false witness is seen to be motivated by a desire for vengeance.

Such a litigious man uses the law as a weapon. His desire is not justice or deliverance, but revenge and causing hurt to another party. Proverbs chapter 6 verses 9-11 read, How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.

We are given a description of the property of the sluggard. A once fruitful vineyard has fallen into disrepair. It is overgrown with thorns and nettles, and the stone wall that once protected it is now broken down.

All of this is the result of the sluggard's laziness. The accumulation of many small acts of laziness, the little sleep, the little slumber, the little folding of the hands to rest, lead to the progressive deterioration of the sluggard's property. While the sluggard's movements may be slow, and the fall of his property into ruin may be gradual, when poverty comes it will come suddenly and unexpectedly, like a robber or a bandit coming upon him.

He will be utterly unprepared. A question to consider, what are the virtues that will help us to avoid either envy or schadenfreude towards the wicked? Ephesians chapter 5 verses 18-33 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and

making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour.

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, he who loves his wife loves himself, for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

In the second half of Ephesians chapter 5 Paul moves from more general moral teaching to Christians, to teaching specifically directed to different classes of persons within households, to wives, husbands, children, servants and masters. Here we find another example of the household codes of the New Testament. A very similar example of such a code can be found in Colossians chapter 3-4.

Indeed the very movement of Paul's argument here, from a discussion of God's indwelling through song to a household code, is the same as we find there. There is much in these codes that seems very similar to what one might find in non-Christian household codes of the time. However, while much might appear very similar on the surface, when one lifts the bonnet or the hood and examines what is beneath it, one can observe that the engine and much else has been completely switched out.

It works according to very different principles. Paul contrasts being drunk with wine with being filled with the Spirit. Both are things that change your state.

And he makes similar points here to Colossians chapter 3 verse 16. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. In both cases he is talking about a form of being filled.

And the parallels are instructive. Being filled with the Spirit is paralleled with the word of Christ dwelling in you richly. And in both cases this is achieved or expressed in the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

The expression of joy in our hearts, the way that the word of God in the form of song conscripts our heart's desires and encourages us to be people who meditate and memorize the word of God, who hold it within our hearts as something to delight in and to reflect upon. This, for Paul, is what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit. And in both cases continual and extensive thanksgiving is the purpose of it all.

In continual thanksgiving the self continually renders itself back to God in gratitude for God's gifts. Verse 21 is a transitional verse. It moves from Paul's teaching concerning being filled with the Spirit onto his instruction in the household code.

There's a reference to submitting to each other. While there might be a sort of mutual submission, it clearly isn't symmetrical. What it means varies by person and context and Paul goes on to explore this in the sections that follow.

The shape of what submission means for the child differs from what it means for the wife or the servant. However, there may also be the suggestion that husbands, fathers and masters also need to exercise a sort of submission appropriate to the nature of their relationships, relationships where submission would not usually be included as an element. Their authority is not denied, but it may be radically reconfigured.

Rather than lording it over others, they should act out of consideration for others, serving each other in love, following the teaching of Philippians chapter 2 verses 3-4. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

And of course, this follows the example of Christ. Submission to others occurs out of reverence for Christ. This is not grounded in the natural claims of the other party so much as in honouring our Lord.

Such mutual concern and privileging of the interests of the other party would completely transform the dynamics of the relationship, even when the essentially hierarchical structures are maintained and even positively affirmed by Paul. Wives are charged to be subject to their husbands as an expression of their appropriate service to the Lord Jesus. The relationship here is not just about, or perhaps not even primarily about, the private relationship of the couple themselves, but about the broader posture of the wife to her husband within the life of the household and its surrounding community.

She should honour and show deference to him in the way that she relates to him personally and privately and speaks of him to others. Mature persons who are under the guardianship of others should be concerned to show them due honour and deference, to be responsive to them, and through encouragement and respectful candour to help them to fulfil their duties to us well. Paul is not here teaching a slavish obedience, but a willing self-subjection.

And he draws a parallel between Christ's headship and the husband's headship. We should think back to Paul's earlier description of Christ's headship in chapter 1 verses 20-23. He raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

And he put all things under his feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. We can easily think of headship, without recognising its character, more as something exercised over us on our behalf. We are to be subject to our head, but our head's authority is exercised in a way that strengthens us, rather than suppressing us.

It makes all the difference that our head, Jesus Christ, is seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places, placed over all other rules, authorities, powers and dominions. This authority is exercised in a loving manner on our behalf. As we submit to it, we are empowered by it.

Paul draws a parallel between Christ being the head of the church and being its saviour as his body. As the saviour of the body, he is the one who acts on its behalf and delivers it, and provides for it. The husband has been charged to act towards his wife as Christ acts towards his bride the church.

Consequently, it is important that the woman, or the wife, respond to him accordingly. The husband's position relative to his wife is not merely by virtue of his greater power, but also by virtue of the Lord's intention, and she must honour that. Husbands must follow the example of Christ.

While Christ is clearly over the church, he willingly places the interests of the church ahead of his own and gives himself up for her. He does not lord it over the church. Note that Paul never says that the husband is to exercise authority over his wife.

Rather, the instruction is to love, an instruction that is repeated in three ways. The wife should give in her willing subjection what many unworthy husbands were inclined to demand and to coerce, and the husband in his initiative of love should give what many wives would be desperate to obtain and would try to manipulate. Christ is not subservient to the church, but he manifests humility in the way that he acts towards her.

He is the Lord of the church, but his lordship is one that ministers to the church. He is presented as washing his bride. His bride is not perfect, but his loving gift of himself and his service of the church will bring out the church's beauty.

Both wives and husbands should see themselves as loving servants of their spouse, seeking not to manipulate or to control, but through their respect and love accentuating and eliciting those virtues and those things that are good or glorious in their spouse. The

washing of water is a sort of washing of the bride to prepare her for her husband. Here Christ himself humbly performs this for his bride, and a reference to baptism should not be difficult to recognise.

The intense unity and intimacy of marriage should break down the competing interests that are so often pitted against each other within it, as Wendell Berry has powerfully expressed it. Marriage, in what is evidently its most popular version, is now on the one hand an intimate relationship involving, ideally, two successful careerists in the same bed, and on the other hand a sort of private political system in which rights and interests must be constantly asserted and defended. Marriage, in other words, has now taken the form of divorce, a prolonged and impassioned negotiation as to how things shall be divided.

During their understandably temporary association, the married couple will typically consume a large quantity of merchandise and a large portion of each other. The modern household is the place where the consumptive couple do their consuming. Nothing productive is done there.

Such work as is done there is done at the expense of the resident couple or family, and to the profit of suppliers of energy and household technology. For entertainment the inmates consume television, or purchase other consumable diversion elsewhere. There are, however, still some married couples who understand themselves as belonging to their marriage, to each other, and to their children.

What they have they have in common, and so to them helping each other does not seem merely to damage their ability to compete against each other. To them, mine is not so powerful or necessary a pronoun as ours. This sort of marriage usually has at its heart a household that is to some extent productive.

The couple, that is, makes around itself a household economy that involves the work of both wife and husband, that gives them a measure of economic independence and self-employment, a measure of freedom, as well as a common ground and a common satisfaction. Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies, recognising that they are one flesh with them. To love and minister to the needs of your wife is to strengthen yourself.

The married couple are to recognise that fundamental unity. The subjection of the wife to the husband is not the surrender of power to another party, but a willing yielding and deference to one by whom she is to be strengthened. The love of the husband is not the wasteful squandering of his strength and attention upon another party.

The husband isn't what some have called a simp. His loving ministering to his wife is ultimately a building up of himself as one flesh with her. Throughout all of this, Paul cannot help but show the gravitational force that Christ and his redemption exerts upon

his thinking concerning this and all other matters.

Even when talking about husbands and wives, he is constantly talking about Christ and his redemption. Our relationships are modelled after Christ and ordered to the service of Christ. Indeed, Paul suggests that the fundamental text concerning marriage in Genesis chapter 2 verse 24 is ultimately about Christ and the Church.

In Christ we discover that marriage was always a type of something greater, of the unity of Christ and the Church. The unity of husband and wife in marriage is not just a metaphor, but is a created type of the union of the son and his bride that comes at the very climax of history. A question to consider, Paul's vision of marriage is one of profound asymmetrical reciprocity, where husbands and wives stand in very different kinds of relationship to each other, yet both put the other before themselves and in the manner proper to their positions, are able to serve each other in love.

What are some of the ways in which the biblical teaching here and elsewhere challenges many of our cultural notions of marriage?