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March 7th: Proverbs 6 & Philippians 2:1-11

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Go to the ant, you sluggard! 'Let this mind be in you...'

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

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 6. Go to the aunt, O sluggard, consider her ways and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer, and gathers her food in harvest. 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.

A worthless person, a wicked man, goes about with crooked speech, winks with his eyes, signals with his feet, points with his finger, with perverted heart devises evil, continually sowing discord. Therefore calamity will come upon him suddenly. In a moment he will be broken beyond healing.

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him. Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one

who sows discord among brothers. My son, keep your father's commandment, and forsake not your mother's teaching.

Bind them on your heart always, tie them around your neck. When you walk they will lead you, when you lie down they will watch over you, and when you awake they will talk with you. For the commandment is a lamp, and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life, to preserve you from the evil woman, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress.

Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes. For the price of a prostitute is only a loaf of bread, but a married woman hunts down a precious life. Can a man carry fire next to his chest, and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals, and his feet not be scorched? So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife.

None who touches her will go unpunished. People do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry. But if he is caught, he will pay sevenfold, he will give all the goods of his house.

He who commits adultery lacks sense, he who does it destroys himself, he will get wounds and dishonor, and his disgrace will not be wiped away. For jealousy makes a man furious, and he will not spare when he takes revenge, he will accept no compensation, he will refuse though you multiply gifts. From the discussion of the adulteress woman in Proverbs chapter 5, Proverbs 6 moves to some examples of foolish or wicked men in verses 1 to 19, before returning to the adulteress woman again at the end of the chapter.

Bruce Waltke argues that these warnings against wicked men are connected with the warning about the forbidden woman in the previous chapter, in a way that encourages the readers to perceive parallels and the severity of the danger in both the cases. The opening verses deal with a situation where the son has acted as a guarantor for another, as surety all of the other person's debts could be demanded of him if they were an aid on their duty of paying. This is a very dangerous position to put oneself in, through careless benevolence or some other motive.

The figures of the neighbor and the stranger in verse 1 seem to be parallel to each other in the literary structure of the text, however as figures they would seem to be contrasting. Perhaps stranger is a way of describing the neighbor whose character and reliability the guarantor has not adequately judged. Rash vows are dangerous things to make and the son must beware of making them.

The person who makes such vows is caught in the snare of their own words. In such a situation matters are urgent and no time must be wasted. The son must immediately go to the neighbor for whom he has pledged himself a surety and must pester him until he

pays the debt, lest the son be ruined on account of his neighbor's failure to pay up.

Until the debtor pays the debt, however, the son is like a great peril of being caught and killed. Verses 6 to 11 warn the sluggard, the lazy man, against the consequences of his inaction. He is instructed to get up and go to look at the ant, learning a lesson from its industriousness.

It doesn't require direction or rule from some other party in order to gather its grain. While ants may have social organization, they don't need leaders to press them into action. The ant does the necessary work in the necessary season.

The sluggard, by contrast, is difficult to rouse. The sluggard is always putting off what should be done immediately. He just wants a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands, putting his duties off for just that little bit longer, an indefinite period of time.

Time slips away from him, but then, all at once, the bitter consequence of his abandoned duties comes upon the dozing sluggard like a bandit, stripping him of all that he possesses. The sleep by which he puts off responsibilities and relaxes leaves him without the vigilance to guard himself, and poverty and want strike him unawares. In Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, one of the characters is asked how he went bankrupt.

Two ways, he answers, gradually and then suddenly. This is the experience of the sluggard. The process of falling into poverty comes slowly, and perhaps barely perceptibly, as he inches towards the precipice in his careless inattention, and then all of a sudden he is falling headlong, with rock bottom rapidly approaching.

Verses 12 to 19 describe another figure whose doom comes suddenly, this time the trouble-making rabble-rouser. He is a worthless fellow, a son of Belial, language that is used of various wicked men in Scripture, especially those who stir up strife and conflict. His primary mode of dealing is crooked speech, devious and deceptive language that distorts the truth and incites conflict.

His speech is accompanied by veiled motions, designed secretly to disclose his true intentions and beliefs to his fellows, or to dishonour authorities in their sight. His heart is perverted and set on malicious plans, for which the secret instigation of conflict is generally key. He unleashes discord, purposefully setting it loose and allowing it to do its mischief, while hiding his own hand.

However, like the sluggard, the downfall of such a man will be sudden and unexpected. We are not told how his downfall will come about. It could be one of a great many ways.

Perhaps he is caught in the act of causing his trouble. Perhaps others conspire against him in the ways that he has conspired against them. Perhaps he is caught up in the discord that he has created and he has destroyed within it, as he hadn't realised the

danger of the forces that he was playing with.

Perhaps what is in view here is a divinely delivered judgment. Whatever it is, he is not prepared for it, but it is certainly coming upon him. Verses 16-19 describe this figure of the troublemaker, taking up much of the language of the preceding verses, describing the perverse anatomy of such a man, the form of the saying, there are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him, is designed rhetorically to amplify the hero's sense of the Lord's abhorrence of the things about to be mentioned.

Perhaps we can see a movement down through the body, in verses 17 and 18, with the whole figure being summed up in verse 19. For this troublemaker, the parts of his body have been so consistently devoted to these wicked activities, that the wicked uses to which they have been put have twisted and determined their basic character. The troublemaker's core sin is the breaking of the ninth commandment.

He bears false witness against his neighbour, seeking by his words to encourage disputes and conflicts among brothers, to set people against each other. The concluding section of the chapter returns to the theme of the adulterous woman, with which the larger passage opened at the beginning of chapter 5. Here the son is charged to attend to the commandment of the father and the teaching of the mother. It is important to note that the father and the mother are a unity.

Both of them are involved in the training of the son. Both of them are active teachers, not just leaving the task to the other. We probably ought not to put much weight on the different words used for their teaching here.

That said, paying attention to the bigger picture, there do seem to be important differences between the two. Although modern people may often think that speakers are interchangeable, the same message given by different persons can have a very different force to it. When the father speaks to his son, he speaks to his son as one who was himself a son once, and he is speaking to one who will be a father in his own turn.

The gendered character of that teaching is even more important on this particular subject. The father is likely speaking as one with first-hand experience of the temptation and the resistance of the forbidden woman, and choosing the wife of his youth instead. The teaching of a father is an apprenticeship in manliness for his son, part of the son's initiation into the world of men, a training in virtue which the mother isn't equipped to give in quite the same way, despite the great importance of her particular input.

The mother, on her part, speaks to her son, as she does at the end of the Book of Proverbs, as one with greater personal insight into the character of various types of women, a sort of knowledge that the father does not have to the same degree. The father does the overwhelming amount of the direct teaching of the son in Proverbs, but on several occasions we hear him supporting the teaching of his wife, strengthening her

words both with his added witness and by his support for her instruction. The picture that emerges is one in which both parents actively collaborate in the moral training of their child, supporting each other in the task, while each speaking with a force that is particular to themselves in their motherly or fatherly capacity.

At a few points in the Book of Proverbs, the son is instructed to have a close and constant relationship with the teaching of his parents. In chapter 3, verses 1 to 3, my son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you.

Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart. And in verses 21 to 23 of that chapter, my son, do not lose sight of these.

Keep sound wisdom and discretion, and they will be life for your soul and adornment for your neck. Then you will walk on your way securely, and your foot will not stumble. If you lie down, you will not be afraid.

When you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. All of this recalls the command of Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 6 to 9, concerning the Torah. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The son who commits himself to his parents' teaching will be protected by it, even if he has not yet fully internalized it in the form of deeper understanding. Wisdom begins with fearing the Lord and honoring our parents, from which postures, insight can slowly arise. The teaching of the good parents will form the child to the point where the lessons have become part of him.

These lessons will protect him from the wicked woman, and their words from her smooth and seductive speech. In verse 25, the father charges his son not to desire the beauty of the adulterous woman. We should observe the deepening of the command at this point.

It is not merely walking after the adulterous woman that is being warned against here, but desiring her. We are dealing with the tenth commandment here, the prohibition on coveting, not merely the seventh, the prohibition on adultery. The warning against desiring such a woman is followed by several reasons.

Desiring such a woman is actually desiring your own destruction, if you see what it all entails. The first rationale for not desiring such a woman involves the contrast between the cost of a prostitute, who might in some cases be haggled down to the price of a

single loaf of bread, and the adulterous woman, whose favors are seemingly freely given, but who may well cost a man his life when her husband discovers. It is worth recalling that Israel had a death penalty on adultery.

This argument definitely doesn't legitimate the use of prostitutes. Rather, it is highlighting the unconsidered costs of adultery, in particular the vengeance for wronged husband. The man who has relations with such a woman is, as the verses that follow make clear, playing with fire.

He will unavoidably be burned. The illustration of a thief is then brought forward. The severity of a thief's crime can be mitigated by a sense of his economic desperation.

If a starving thief steals food, people won't judge him that harshly. However, even such a thief may be required to pay back the full measure of what he has stolen, and much more besides. He may well be ruined by the restitution that he is expected to give.

If the consequences for such a thief's crimes are bitter, how much more those for the one who commits adultery? If he's lucky, he might get away with a severe beating. However, he may well lose his life, and while the starving thief won't face that strong of a moral judgment, the man who lies with the adulterous woman will be utterly shamed and disgraced. A betrayed husband is not the sort of person who will lightly forgive.

No matter what compensation the adulterous man offers, the vengeance of the betrayed husband will not easily be assuaged. A question to consider. The seventh commandment prohibits the committing of adultery.

The book of Proverbs takes that commandment and unpacks it, relating it to the desiring of the forbidden woman, and explores all of the ways in which that sin grows from its first seed to its full expression and its bitter harvest. How might this fuller description help the wise son to put up guards against this sin, and more effectively to resist it? Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 to 11. So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

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. Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should

bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. The first half of Philippians chapter 2 is one of the most famous passages in all of Paul's writings.

Many regard verses 5 to 11 as a sort of a Christological hymn. Although it clearly has a pronounced poetic character, whether or not it was actually a hymn is uncertain, and there are various competing theories of the hymn's supposed origin. Paul begins the section by appealing to the Philippians.

Do they enjoy encouragement in Christ? Do they find comfort in his love? Do they know fellowship in the Spirit? Do they know affection and compassion in him? Paul doesn't make the source of this encouragement, comfort, fellowship, affection and compassion plain. However, while the primary source is clearly Christ, it probably also includes what they experience from brothers and sisters in Christ too. If they do have these things, they should go even further and make Paul's joy complete.

They have already brought him great joy, as he has made clear, but they could raise his joy to even greater heights. They can do this by pursuing unity of mind and love with each other. By mind, Paul is referring to mindset and attitude.

In unpacking what this united mindset should involve, Paul contrasts selfish ambition and conceit to a humility that puts others ahead of themselves and which is mindful of and concerned for others' well-being. The success of the Christian understanding of virtue can be seen in part by the fact that we are probably not startled by this exhortation from Paul. In the Roman culture of the Philippians, humility would not be regarded as such a virtue.

Rather, it would be regarded as weak and servile. To many minds, this passage is the very height of the sort of slave morality that Friedrich Nietzsche identified as subverting the master morality of nobility, strength of will, pride, power and courage. Until we have some grasp of the mindset of the typical Roman, the shock of Paul's teaching here won't hit us.

This passage is a direct assault upon the fundamental morality of the society Paul was living in. The importance of Christians recognising, being attentive to, serving and not exerting their strength at the expense of others is a recurring theme in Paul's writing. Rather than vaunting themselves over others, pursuing their own rights, advancing themselves ahead of others, acting without regard for others or putting others down to privilege themselves, the Philippians are to act out of a humility with regard to themselves and an attention to the value of others.

Just how revolutionary this vision of morality was is difficult for us to grasp in a society that has inherited the world that it transformed. The historian Tom Holland has recently written about the way in which the entire world of Rome was built upon systemic

exploitation and brutality and an extreme master morality. Millions were killed and many millions more enslaved and that was something to boast in.

It was a sign of might, a sign of the Roman will to power achieving its ends. Sex, for instance, was about the free Roman man and the eclipse of the concerns of the parties that they exerted their dominance over. Paul's teaching here goes for the jugular of such a society, rejecting and disqualifying it outright.

In this message and the good news of a king that, as we will see, exemplifies this humility and meekness, this entire Roman way of perceiving the world would be brought down. In the section, or perhaps the hymn that follows, Paul presents the example of Jesus himself, an example in which, as we will soon see, humility is presented as something divine. You can imagine the Roman man responding to the notion of humility as a virtue by claiming that such a virtue might perhaps have a place for slaves and women who need to put some positive spin upon their weakness and lowliness.

By suggesting that humility is a virtue, the unavoidable state of servility can be made somewhat less alienating. However, the free Roman man is above such morality. He has strength, power, status, and humility is just for those who lack such things.

However, the biblical understanding of humility is not just the lack of power, will, or greatness. Humility can be seen in God himself, as God displays his power and greatness, not in self-aggrandizement, but in service of the weak and dependent. In Jesus the Messiah, the Lord of the Universe is revealed to be a humble God.

When we are called to adopt the mindset of the humble, we are not being called to act as slaves, crafting a vision of morality around the unavoidable condition of our powerlessness and our resentful frustration at the master morality of those who lord over us, but as those who are imitating our master, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, following in his path. The hymn, if we are to call it that, divides into two parts, verses 6-8 tell of Christ's humiliation, and verses 9-11 of his exaltation overall. The focus of the first section is upon Christ's voluntary humiliation.

From the outset, we can see that Paul is working with an extremely high Christology. Christ pre-exists his birth. We have hints of this elsewhere in Paul, in places like 2 Corinthians 8, 9, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

However, it is at its clearest here, and in Colossians 1, 15-20. Christ isn't just sent by the Father, he voluntarily empties himself and comes. Various commentators have suggested that Paul is drawing a contrast between Christ and Adam, much as he does in Romans chapter 5. The connection with the servant of Isaiah, that some have proposed, is weaker, if it is present at all.

Adam had been made in the image of God, and had grasped at equality with God in the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. By contrast, Christ, being the very image of God, did not regard the equality with God that he already possessed as something to be exploited, or used for his own advantage. The translation here is difficult, and even when scholars agree with the general sense of the passage, the more precise sense is a matter of some lively debate.

The translation in the form of God might remind us of Colossians 1, 15. He is the image of the invisible God. The word the ESV translates, a thing to be grasped, is even more debated.

Some have suggested, for instance, that the word translated as robbery, or a thing to be grasped, or something to be exploited, might have a more particular reference to something to be exploited for rape and robbery. At the very least, this would sharpen the contrast between Christ and the false gods of the pagans, whose divine power was used precisely for such self-aggrandisement and exploitation of others, often involving rape of human women, as in the case of Zeus, on numerous occasions. This is what divine power looked like to the Greeks and the Romans.

Christ stands out, then, not only from Adam, but also from the false gods and idols. While Adam was made in God's image, but sought to grasp at equality with God, Christ had equality with God, yet did not exploit it. Rather, he voluntarily forwent all his prerogatives and assumed the position of a slave, someone without any of the honour that he possessed by right.

Many have speculated about what it would have meant for Jesus to empty himself, an act referred to as his kenosis. Some have argued that he gave up his divine power and other divine attributes, ceasing to be truly God in order that he might become truly man. This, of course, must be rejected, not merely on the grounds of Christian orthodoxy, but also on the basis of a proper reading of this passage.

The full force of Paul's teaching cannot be appreciated unless we recognise that Christ's emptying of himself was, far from a departure from divinity, a true manifestation of it. Christ, who was in the form of God, took the form of a slave. The seeming contrast could not be sharper.

But the contrast is a revelatory one, and isn't fundamentally opposing. The character of God is revealed in Christ's assuming the character of a slave. What the form of a servant involved becomes clearer when we are told that he was born in the likeness of men and was found in human form.

However, this wasn't the measure of the depth of Christ's self-humbling. He, like a slave, took the path of obedience. The path of obedience to the cross itself, practically the most humiliating death imaginable, the annihilation of all dignity, status, honour, glory,

belonging, all these sorts of things.

In his disobedience, Adam had taken from the tree to grasp at equality with God. In his obedience, Christ went to the tree, not merely to reverse Adam's action, but also to reveal what God is truly like. In John's Gospel, for instance, it is in the cross that Christ is lifted up.

This is the beginning of his glorification. God is not as we expected him to be. The hymn concludes with a movement of exaltation that responds to the downward movement of the first half.

Christ did not exalt himself, but God highly exalted him. Indeed, God exalted him to the greatest degree imaginable. His name is above every name.

Every knee everywhere must bow before him, and every tongue must confess his lordship. The name that Christ receives is the name that is above every name. There is only one such name, the name of God. In his exaltation, Jesus' divinity is openly proclaimed.

When we baptise, for instance, we do so in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Not three different names, but the one name of the Triune God. Of course, Jesus doesn't become divine in his exaltation.

Rather, his divinity is openly declared. And as it is declared, the way of the cross that led to that exaltation is declared to be the way of God himself. In bestowing the name that is above every name, upon Jesus, the Father sets him forth as the one to whom the worship of all is due.

Every knee must bow and every tongue confess. There is an expression taken from the Old Testament here. Isaiah 45, verses 18-23 reads, For thus says the Lord who created the heavens, He is God, who formed the earth and made it, He established it, He did not create it empty, He formed it to be inhabited.

Let them take counsel together. The one true God was unique in creating the world. The one true God is unique in his rule over the world.

And the one true God will demonstrate his uniqueness over against the idols through the great salvation that he will bring about. This is what the Lord is speaking of in this passage in Isaiah. And the proof of all of this is that the day will come when every knee will bow to him and every tongue will swear allegiance to him.

Read against such a background, Philippians chapter 2 could not be more astonishing. Paul's startling message is that the uniqueness of God has been revealed in Christ. And if that wasn't remarkable enough, it has been revealed in the self-emptying way of the cross.

God will not give his glory to another, but the Father is glorified in his Son who lives and reigns with him in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Glory and God-likeness is found not in self-aggrandizement, but in humility and in the path of service to others. If the Philippians take on the mindset that Paul wishes them to, they will be formed according to the character of the Lord of all, according to the character of God himself.

A question to consider, how might knowing that God's true character is seen in Jesus challenge some of our preconceptions about God and about virtue?