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March 25th: Proverbs 23 & Ephesians 5:1-17

March 24, 2021



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The danger of unmastered appetites. Walking as light in the Lord.

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

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Transcript

Proverbs 23. When you sit down to eat with a ruler, observe carefully what is before you, and put a knife to your throat if you are given to appetite. Do not desire his delicacies, for they are deceptive food.

Do not toil to acquire wealth, be discerning enough to desist. When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven. Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy.

Do not desire his delicacies, for he is like one who is inwardly calculating. Eat and drink, he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the morsels that you have eaten, and waste your pleasant words.

Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the good sense of your words. Do not move an ancient landmark, or enter the fields of the fatherless, for their

Redeemer is strong. He will plead their cause against you.

Apply your heart to instruction, and your ear to words of knowledge. Do not withhold discipline from a child. If you strike him with a rod, he will not die.

If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol. My son, if your heart is wise, my heart too will be glad. My inmost being will exult, when your lips speak what is right.

Let not your heart envy sinners, but continue in the fear of the Lord all the day. Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off. Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way.

Be not among drunkards, or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags. Listen to your father who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old. Buy truth, and do not sell it.

Buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding. The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice. He who fathers a wise son will be glad in him.

Let your father and mother be glad. Let her who bore you rejoice. My son, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways.

For a prostitute is a deep pit, and adulteress is a narrow well. She lies in wait like a robber, and increases the traitors among mankind. Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine, those who go to try mixed wine.

Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things.

You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. They struck me, you will say, but I was not hurt. They beat me, but I did not feel it.

When shall I awake? I must have another drink. In the Gospels, Jesus often sets his teaching concerning the disciples' proper behaviour in the context of feasts. Such feasts were contexts in which group membership, inclusion and exclusion, one's place in the social order, and all these other things were very much in view.

Everyone would want a place of honour at the table, and some people, being proud, might assume a place that exceeded their status, and end up being humbled by being told to sit down lower. The subordinate invited to a meal, in verses 1-3 of chapter 23 of

Proverbs, is in a similar position. He needs to bear in mind that the meal table is not merely a place for satisfying appetites, it is a place where the ruler who is the host will be testing and judging his guests.

If he is unable to master his appetites in that context, the ruler will certainly be paying attention. The saying that follows in verses 4-5 warns against a too eager pursuit of wealth. Perhaps this would lead people into unrighteous behaviour, like robbery and other things like that.

The warning is that such wealth does not last. It does not offer the certainty that people think. Moth and rust corrupt, and thieves break in and steal.

The wealth, to use the analogy here, sprouts wings and flies off. This section, like many of those that surround it, excerpts a series of statements in the same order as they are found in the Egyptian book, the instructions of Amenemope. However, whereas the image that is used in Amenemope is that of a goose, here in Proverbs it is that of an eagle.

The wise person is prudent with wealth, but he does not pursue it in the same way as others, giving himself to it entirely. Wealth is fickle. It is like a vapour.

It can vanish. It is insubstantial. True wealth is found in pursuing wisdom.

Those who pursue wisdom more directly will often find that it is attended by the blessings of honour and riches. Verses 6-8 bring another warning about behaviour at meals. Here it concerns the begrudging host.

While the begrudging host may offer things as a matter of social formality, he does not really want to share his wealth, or invite people to his table. Although on the surface he may show the expected politeness and hospitality, in his heart he is deeply resentful and his words are merely hypocritical. Accepting such a man's invitation and eating his meal will have no effect in improving relations.

All the pleasantries and the compliments that the guest gives will be wasted, and the food might as well be vomited back out. Many fools have reached the point where they are so opposed to wisdom that any wisdom declared in their presence will merely solidify them in their folly. They will react against it.

They will double down in their errors. In such situations it may be better not to speak any wisdom in the presence of the fool at all, rather than confirming him in his folly. Being alert to the degree to which people are teachable is an important aspect of wisdom.

If you are not careful you may be placing pearls before swine. The warning of verses 10-11 is very similar to that found a few verses earlier. In chapter 22 verse 28, do not move the ancient landmark that your fathers have set.

At this point the focus is more explicitly upon those who are fatherless, persons who are vulnerable to exploitation, who lack the defense that a father or husband would give. The warning here goes back to places like Deuteronomy chapter 19 verse 14, you shall not move your neighbor's landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to possess. Verse 12 is an exhortation to application of one's heart and attentiveness of one's ear.

Wisdom does not just get passively absorbed, you have to devote yourself to searching it out. It requires discipline and it requires diligence. It requires a disposition of the heart and of the body's functions.

The heart that is inclined to instruction will be a humble heart, a heart that loves the truth and will pursue it wherever it is to be found. Verses 13 to 14 bring another encouragement to disciplined children. The striking with the rod here should not be limited to merely corporal punishment.

Symbolically it would include all the different modes of parental correction. The meaning of verse 13 is not that the rod won't kill the child, but rather that proper parental discipline will save such a child from death. This is confirmed by the verse that follows.

A child that has been well disciplined early on will be set on the right path and in the long term such a child will avoid the far more painful and indeed deathly consequences of folly. A son who has been receptive to such discipline and who has grown in wisdom will be a cause of pride for his parents. They will delight in his wisdom and they will be honoured by it.

This of course should be a further inducement to the son to devote himself to wisdom's way. Psalm 37 verses 1 to 6 exhorts us, Fret not yourself because of evildoers, be not envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good.

Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him, and he will act.

He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday. Faced with the seeming prosperity of the wicked, like the psalmist it is very easy for one's foot to slip, to be tempted to envy them. Yet trusting in the Lord, living by faith not by sight, you can continue in the fear of the Lord, knowing that their final outcome will not be good.

However, even if they currently suffer poverty and oppression, the righteous will finally be vindicated. Their hope will not be cut off. The conclusion of this chapter from verses 19-35 is mostly concerned with avoiding the sinful and decadent excesses of appetite.

These verses begin with a warning against keeping bad company. The paradigmatic

rebellious son in Deuteronomy chapter 21 verse 20 is a drunkard and a glutton. Here the son is warned against keeping company with such people.

Their fate as long as they continue in that path is apparent. They will squander what wealth they have and they will end up in poverty. Their vigor and their motivation will soon escape them.

Drunkards become sluggards and as a result become poor. Those who keep their company will share their destiny. Observance of the fifth commandment is a great protection against all of this.

The honouring of father and mother is a great pillar of the house of wisdom. In this honouring a son looks back to his origins. He recognises that he has come from his mother and father.

It is also a lifelong honouring. The son must continue to honour his father and mother even when they are old, when their mental and physical faculties might start to fail them. This honouring would include things like providing for them, taking them into his house and developing and maintaining a character that reflects well upon them.

The exhortation here to pursue wisdom is similar to that found in Proverbs chapter 4 verses 5-7. Get wisdom, get insight. Do not forget and do not turn away from the words of my mouth.

Do not forsake her and she will keep you. Love her and she will guard you. The beginning of wisdom is this.

Get wisdom and whatever you get, get insight. Having already warned the son against the company of gluttons and drunkards in verses 19-21, in verses 26-28 the son is warned against the prostitute and the adulterous woman. Such warnings are common in the book of Proverbs.

The adulterous woman is someone whose ways lead down to death. Her mouth is compared to a pit that someone can fall into. Here the prostitute and the adulterous are compared to a deep pit and a narrow well.

Such imagery for women is found at various points in scripture. Elsewhere in Proverbs it can be seen in chapter 5 verses 15-20. Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well.

Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. A lovely dear, a graceful doe, let her breasts fill you at all times with delight.

Be intoxicated always in her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman, and embrace the bosom of an adulteress? Michael Fox also raises the possibility that the deep pit and the narrow well may also be a euphemistic way of speaking of the woman's sexual organs. Proverbs 22 verse 14 read, The mouth of forbidden women is a deep pit.

He with whom the Lord is angry will fall into it. The powerful temptations of the woman's seductive mouth and the allure of her hidden sexual parts are disclosed in their true character here. In the case of the prostitute or the adulterous woman, these are deep pits, they're wells that someone can fall into and never be able to get out again.

In some cases folly can be clearly perceived, and one of the powerful ways to warn against such folly is by lampooning the foolish. Verses 29 to 35 contain such ridicule of the foolish drunkard. The one who has given himself to wine is not a happy person.

He has sorrow and woe, and has constant conflict. He's complaining and grumbling. He has bloodshot eyes.

He and his companions hunch over their wine, inspecting it, swirling it in the cup, looking at their reflections in the glass. He delights in all of its sensuous qualities, its colour, its taste, the way that it swirls, the way that it goes down so smoothly. Yet it acts like a deceptive serpent to him.

It makes him look foolish. He sees things that aren't there. He engages in coarse, drunken speech.

When he lies down, he's like a landlubber at sea, like someone on the top of a mast of a vessel during a storm at sea, the floor that he's lying on reeling beneath him. Although he hasn't been in a fight, he'll wake up the next morning feeling as if he had. But even despite all of the ways that drink is making a fool of him, the only thought that he has when he comes to his senses is where the next drink is coming from.

A question to consider. This chapter speaks a lot about the dangers of being mastered by one's appetites. What does a healthy way of relating to one's appetites look like? What are some of the practices by which appetites can be better mastered? Ephesians chapter 5 verses 1 to 17 Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous, that is, an idolater, has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God

comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partakers with them, for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true, and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them, for it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Ephesians chapter 5 continues Paul's presentation of the new form of life that should be characteristic of Christians, the sort of behaviours that they must put off, and the sort of behaviours that they must put on.

In exhorting the heroes of the epistle to be imitators of God, Paul is reinforcing the statement of chapter 4 verse 32. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. God himself forgave us, and so we must follow in his example.

Paul's charge to be imitators of God is also a practical form that his earlier point about putting on the new self, created after the likeness of God, can take. Those in the image of God are his children, and the appropriate way to behave as such is to walk in the footsteps of our Father, imitating him. A true child's connection to the image of their father is not merely in the unchosen ways that they reflect their father's appearance, or even the ways that they naturally manifest behavioural traits or mannerisms that resemble those of their father, but also in their purposeful commitment to follow the pattern of their father, and become more and more like him.

The good father gives his child a model to look up to and to follow, so that the child can take after his father, not merely in those unchosen ways, but also as a willing commitment. Paul's teaching here has much in common with our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where Christ connects sonship with following the pattern of our Heavenly Father in Matthew chapter 5 verses 44-48. Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.

For he makes his Son rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect. Christ of course is the Son, the one who is the image of God.

He is the one in whom we see the Father fully and truly revealed. If we are called to imitate the Father, we will be taking the example of the Son himself, who faithfully does the works of the Father in all respects. Those who see the Son have seen the Father.

Those who see us should see something of God in our imitation of him, in the way that we manifest the image of God, in the way that Christ can be seen in us. Christ's model of walking in love is of course most fully seen in the sacrifice of the cross itself, in which out of his love for us he willingly gave himself up for us. This was a pleasing sacrifice to God, because among other things it was a manifestation of mature sonship.

If they are to act as true children of God, the people that Paul is writing to must abhor and totally reject behaviours that are at odds with or opposed to his character. Paul lists a number of the sins from which we must distance ourselves. This distancing is to be seen in the way that such sins must not even be named among you, or perhaps, must not even be hinted at among you.

In the first case, the point would be that we don't merely avoid such sins, but also firmly resist the salacious preoccupation with such sins that one finds in many quarters, the sort of preoccupation that sells gossip magazines, that drives much online traffic, and that makes us hungry for reports of other scandalous sins. Even if we don't sin in these particular respects ourselves, we have an appetite for and a delight to hear of the sins of others, finding it titillating to reflect upon people's sexual wickedness for instance. By contrast, the Christian community must be a place where there is no appetite for or delight in hearing about such things.

Not only are they displeasing to God, they have also become displeasing to us. The other possible translation is that Paul is referring to sins that are rumoured to exist within a community. Christians must not just desire to be righteous, but to be transparently righteous, not giving any fuel to gossip.

Paul begins by speaking of sexual immorality and impurity. These terms cover all sorts of illicit sexual behaviour outside of appropriate sexual relations in the context of marriage. It doesn't matter whether or not it is consensual.

If people engage in sexual behaviour outside of marriage, they are guilty of sexual immorality. This is one point where the teaching of scripture comes into direct collision with the values of modern society. Impurity is another broad term.

It refers to anything that is morally unclean, anything that stands opposed to holiness and the moral purity that should characterise us as God's people. Paul pushes against our society's norms in the way that he often foregrounds sexual immorality in his vice-lists, for instance in 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 3-7. For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles

who do not know God, that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you, for God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.

To sexual immorality and impurity Paul adds covetousness, the avarice and the desire that drives so much sinful human behaviour. Greed is diametrically opposed to what should be our willingness to give up things for others, as Christ gave himself up for us. Paul often shares the wisdom literature's close attention to sins of speech.

The church should not be a place of obscene talk, foolish talk or coarse jesting. All of these sorts of speech are shameful and dishonourable. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and to engage in such speech is utterly opposed to everything that we are supposed to be, as holy to the Lord.

If we are the people of God, our speech must be congruent with this. If we habitually use our speech in careless and foolish ways, consistently speaking with levity, not controlling our tongues, employing obscenities and filling our mouths with filthiness, not only will our speech be given very little weight, it will be a source of dishonour and corruption to everyone that we speak of and to. As the people of God, we should be guardians of our tongues.

Knowing that people who do not weigh their words, control their speech and keep their lips pure will not be taken seriously. Our tongues routinely betray the character of our hearts, and impurity of speech is a characteristic expression of an unguarded heart. The alternative to this is thanksgiving to God, a form of speech that is weighty and glorious.

Like the prophet Isaiah, we should be acutely aware that we are people of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips. We must seek the cleansing and purifying work of the Lord, so that we can bear his glorious name on lips that are suited for that purpose. People who are sexually immoral, impure or covetous have no inheritance in the kingdom of God, they lack the character of sons, and so they also lack the privileges and the promises enjoyed by sons.

Somewhat surprisingly, Paul identifies covetousness and idolatry here. Covetousness replaces God with the objects of its desire, and with our desire itself, which become our supreme goal and God. These things are not just unfitting and best avoided out of a sort of Christian propriety.

They are fundamentally at odds with God, and God is fundamentally at enmity with them, and those who give themselves over to them. Such people are not the sons of God, but the sons of disobedience, and the fierce wrath of God will come upon them. Christians must be holy, maintaining distance from all such sinful behaviours and avoiding aligning ourselves with people who practice them.

We must not enter into communion with them. Bad company corrupts us. Paul develops his point using the metaphor of the opposition of light and darkness, a common metaphor in scripture and elsewhere.

They were once darkness, and engaged in the unfruitful works of darkness, but now they have become children of the light. However, Paul's point here goes further than he does elsewhere. He does not merely argue that we are now in the light, or even just that we are now sons of the light.

Rather, now we are light in the Lord. Our light bearing is a participation in the light of Christ himself. We must conduct ourselves accordingly.

Paul speaks here of the fruit of light, whereas later he will speak of the unfruitful works of darkness. Perhaps Paul is thinking of the contrast between the character of light, which conveys itself to other things, with darkness, which lacks the power to act in such a manner. Light produces its fruit in things that are good, right, and true, in contrast to all of the practices and desires that Paul has earlier condemned.

As children of light, we will be eager to shine more brightly, bearing the light of the Lord, as we diligently seek to convey his character to others by discerning what is pleasing to him. We must eschew the works of darkness, which stand opposed to everything that we are supposed to be, not participating in them. Light is at odds with darkness.

Where light comes, the darkness is driven away. There can be no truce between these two principles that are so fundamentally at odds. We don't just negatively avoid the unfruitful works of darkness.

We positively expose them. We bring them into the light, or bring the light to them. As we live as the light of Christ, our lives should expose the sinful character of the world that surrounds us by contrast.

This will have the effect of exposing the darkness, which is seldom welcomed by the darkness itself. The darkness does not want to be revealed for what it is, or to be expelled by the advent of the light. Certain persons and actions have a natural attraction to the darkness, and the cover and the secrecy that it offers.

To such persons and actions, our presence as light will be deeply threatening and unwelcome. As light-bearers, Christians transform the societies in which they live. Sins that are exposed for what they are will need to assume a different character.

Either their power or appeal will be dispelled or diminished by the light, or they will become more high-handed in character, involving an explicit resistance to, and antagonism with the light. The long-expected light of the Messiah has dawned in Jesus. The day is breaking, and we are to act as people of the day.

Paul's teaching about darkness and light is not merely a teaching about timelessly opposed moral characters, but about the coming of a new age, where light is in the ascendancy and darkness will be driven out. In this time between the times, we must be the light-bearers heralding a new dawn, manifesting the fact that the time has arrived for everyone to wake up. This point is more directly made in places such as 1 Thessalonians 5-6.

But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night, or of the darkness.

So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. Christians are to be awake, alert, and mindful, characterised by the sort of sobriety that belongs to the day, in contrast to the actions of the night, as Paul expresses in Romans 13, verses 12-14. The night is far gone, the day is at hand.

So then let us cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light. Let us walk properly, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires. Such circumspection in our behaviour is characteristic of wisdom, as is close attention to what the will of the Lord is.

We are to redeem the time, because the days are evil. In times of wickedness, Christians are called to rescue the time from the rule of darkness, and bring it under the rule of the light. Paul's point here goes so much further than many suppose, who think that it is merely a matter of filling our time with Christian activities, or even not allowing our time as Christians to go to waste, perhaps suggested by the translation making the best use of the time.

By bringing the light of the age to come to bear upon our age, bringing the light of the longed-for day of the Lord to bear upon our dark times, wickedness is exposed and it shrinks back into the shadows, while others step forward into the light. Time is not just quantitative, it's also qualitative. Our duty is to make the times that we live in, whenever they may be, daytimes, by bearing the light of Christ within them.

A question to consider, where else in the New Testament do we see the metaphor of light and darkness explored?