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March 13th: Proverbs 12 & Colossians 2:8-19

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Discerning people's character in their words and actions. We have the fullness in Christ—don't retreat to the shadows!

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

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Transcript

Proverbs chapter 12. Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid. A good man obtains favor from the Lord, but a man of evil devices he condemns.

No one is established by wickedness, but the root of the righteous will never be moved. An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones. The thoughts of the righteous are just, the counsels of the wicked are deceitful.

The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood, but the mouth of the upright delivers them. The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous will stand. A man is commended according to his good sense, but one of twisted mind is despised.

Better to be lowly and have a servant than to play the great man and lack bread. Whoever is right has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel. Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.

Whoever is wicked covets the spoil of evildoers, but the root of the righteous bears fruit. An evil man is ensnared by the transgression of his lips, but the righteous escapes from trouble. From the fruit of his mouth a man is satisfied with good, and the work of a man's hand comes back to him.

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice. The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult. Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness utters deceit.

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment. Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan peace have joy.

No ill befalls the righteous, but the wicked are filled with trouble. Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight. A prudent man conceals knowledge, but the heart of fools proclaims folly.

The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor. Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad. One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, but the diligent man will get precious wealth. In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death. Proverbs chapter 12 continues the second section of the Book of Proverbs and the main collection of the Proverbs of Solomon.

It opens in verses 1 to 3 with some fundamental truths about wisdom and the action-consequence nexus. The first concerns the relationship between wisdom and the reception of discipline. The fool in his pride will not accept correction, whereas the wise person loves discipline, he is humble enough to receive it, and he knows that the correction received from the wise will deepen his grasp upon knowledge.

He isn't just willing to receive discipline, he loves it. Presumably this will lead him to pursue proper discipline. He will want correction when he goes astray.

He will open himself up to being rebuked. He will invite people to speak harder words to him. He will do whatever is in his power to lower people's sense of trepidation in saying something that might offend him.

He is not offended by correction, he delights in it. He regards those who give such

correction to him as his true friends. He will keep them close by.

He will gather honest counsellors around him, and he will be very vigilant against the flatterer. In these and many other ways, the person who loves discipline is at a great advantage over the person who will just grudgingly receive it. Verse 2 reminds us once again of the Lord's moral government over the affairs of man.

Ultimately, beyond the natural consequences of people's actions, we should see the way that the Lord's hand is at work in bringing the consequences of people's sin upon their head and rewarding the righteous. Verse 3 continues to explore the consequence of wickedness. Wickedness may look to prosper.

It grows up and flourishes for a period of time, but there is no root, and when the time of testing comes, it does not remain. However, the righteous are firmly grounded, and as a result, they will remain. Our actions and character reflect upon and affect other people, and theirs reflect upon and affect us.

The righteous and wise son is a glory to his parents. Likewise, the excellent wife is the crown of her husband. This point is taken up in Proverbs chapter 31.

In verse 10 of that chapter, an excellent wife, who can find? She is more precious than jewels. And in verse 23, her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. The wise wife here is described as the greatest source of her husband's honour and standing.

Her excellence equips her husband to exercise rule and enjoy social standing within his community. People often talk about the biblical teaching concerning the headship of the man, as if it were primarily internally focused within the life of the married couple. However, in scripture, the headship of the man is primarily directed out into the society more generally.

And here we see that it is not a headship in which the man is alone. Rather, his capacity to exercise headship is profoundly dependent upon his wife. The wife is the glory of her husband, and a wise wife can build up her husband within the community, and both of them prosper together.

Rather than primarily thinking of the headship of the man being over the woman, we should think a lot more about the way that the woman is the one who crowns the headship of her husband. Without such a wise wife, a man is robbed of his greatest counsellor, he is robbed of his glory, of the one who gives him standing and honour within the community. There are few things more debilitating, as the second half of this verse makes clear, than a wife who brings shame.

She compromises her husband's standing in the community, she is rottenness in his bones, greatly weakening him, and causing him significant pain. Verses 5-7 consist of

contrasts between the righteous and the wicked. It moves from their thoughts and counsels, to their words and mouth, to their station and house.

From deceitful counsels we get to lying in wait for blood, to persons that are overthrown, and on the other side we have just thoughts, leading to the protection of upright mouths, to a house that will stand and endure in the time of testing. In verse 8 we see that people's social standing depends upon their known character, whether they are foolish or wise. The theme of social standing continues in the next verse, where those who are inordinately concerned with social appearances are seen to be foolish.

It is far better to prosper within one's means, than to put on a great display of wealth that one does not actually possess. There are forms of behaviour that can reveal the character of a person. How a man treats those who are providing him with service, or those who are under his authority, can be very revealing.

Perhaps also how a man treats children, who cannot offer him any great honour in return for his attention. Here Solomon focuses upon the way that a man treats his beast. The law of the Sabbath commands Israelites to give rest to their ox and donkey.

Elsewhere they are commanded to show compassion for an animal in distress. The righteousness of a person then is revealed in the small mercies that they show to the people and animals around them. By contrast, the wicked lacks mercy.

Even what the wicked might imagine to be merciful, turns out to be cruel. As an example, we might think of the way that in some supposedly morally advanced societies, children with Down syndrome will be aborted rather than being allowed to be born. It is presumed to be a kindness to rob such a person of their life, and to deny that their existence has the dignity to justify it.

Some people are always in search of a get-rich-quick program, some way to find a shortcut to the gaining of wealth. However, the person who diligently works their land, and does not try and take the shortcut, will find that they have plenty of bread, while the person who is always looking around for such schemes will come to nothing. The interpretation of verse 12 is a difficult one.

The word rendered spoil could also be rendered as net, or snare, or maybe stronghold. Bruce Waltke argues for the final rendering, suggesting that the meaning is that the wicked desires the fortification that is enjoyed by evildoers. They want this external defence.

However, the righteous has firm roots, and that will be their defence. There is an intrinsic defence in righteousness that the wicked does not have in their wickedness. Something of the intrinsic reward, defence and security of righteousness is seen in verses 13 and 14.

The evil man's lips are his worst enemies. The evil man can tell lies and get caught out by them. The evil man can incite violence with his lips, and it can boomerang back to him.

The rash or impetuous words of an evil man can also catch him out. However, the righteous man escapes from trouble, and while the words of the evil man typically turn upon him in the time of trouble, the words of the righteous man are his greatest defence. Indeed, from his righteous speech, the righteous man is blessed.

It is like a tree that bears fruit, and then he gets to eat that fruit. What a man sows, he will later reap. The work of a man's hand comes back to him.

The second half of the chapter begins with another proverb concerning formation, that might remind us of the proverb with which the whole chapter began. Once again, it concerns the contrast between the wise man and the fool's attitude towards advice and counsel. The fool is inured against teaching.

He cannot receive it. He is right in his own eyes, so he will seek out the flatterer. He won't hear contrary advice.

He will instinctively gravitate towards people who confirm him in his existing way. Verses 16-23 are concerned with sins of speech. They are stitched together by the alternation between negative followed by positive verses, and positive followed by negative verses.

One of the hallmarks of a fool is his inability to control his spirit. He gives immediate vent to his temper, and cannot master it. You will always know when a fool is angry.

By contrast, the wise and prudent man is the master of his spirit. He is able to ignore an insult. He is not bound up in a reactive relationship with other people.

By responding peacefully to provocation, he is able to de-escalate situations. He gives people the opportunity to climb down. How many times in an argument do people utter rash words that they wish they could take back, but because the person with whom they are speaking cannot master their spirit and ignore an insult, they are pressed to double down on words that they would gladly retract? The person who can ignore an insult in this manner is the master of the situation.

He is not determined by the anger of others, or by the heat and tension of situations. The connection between character and action is one that is often underlined in the Book of Proverbs. Here we see that the person who speaks the truth gives honest evidence, and false witness utters deceit.

If you perceive people's actions, you will have a sense of their character, and likewise if you have a sense of their character, you will have a sense of their characteristic actions.

In situations of uncertainty and in clarity, this gives us a principle by which we can judge how much to rely upon the words of people. While it may seem banal or tautological, it is an important principle to grasp.

The liar, for instance, will lie even when he doesn't have to. It is characteristic to him. When you have no way of immediately ascertaining the truth of a person's statement, you can nonetheless judge by their characteristic actions whether they are to be relied upon.

The person who speaks the truth is discerned in a similar manner. If someone tells the truth even when they don't have to, or even to their own harm, we have good reason to rely upon them when things are otherwise uncertain. In verse 19 we see that the truthful lips endure, whereas lying tongues are soon silenced.

Perhaps we could see this as being silenced in judgement, or maybe they are silenced by being confounded or condemned. While this is primarily a promise of blessing to the righteous and judgement upon the wicked, it also serves to illustrate the principle of time, the way that time reveals the character of people. The words of fools and liars rapidly depreciate in value, whereas the words of the wise will greatly appreciate in people's estimation over time.

By the same principle, we should be wary of giving too much weight to novel words, and should pay far more attention to words whose wisdom has been tested by time. When people are always chasing the latest fad, they will be very susceptible to being led astray by lying tongues. When reading the Proverbs, it is important to pay attention to their form, and what it reveals about their meaning.

For instance, the antithetical parallelism of verse 20 suggests a contrast between the deceit that is in the heart of the wicked, and the joy known by those who plan peace. The implication is that the deceit with which the wicked are preoccupied is something that brings no joy at all. It is a miserable obsession that brings them only bitterness.

The righteous are protected against evil. Whatever happens to them, the Lord ultimately shepherds them towards their good. All things work together for good to those who love God to the called according to His purpose.

No such protection is enjoyed by the wicked. They are filled with trouble, they make trouble, and trouble will come back upon their own heads. Once again in verse 22, we are reminded of the moral government of the Lord.

Lying lips are an abomination to Him, but those who act faithfully are His delight. Seeking the praise of the Lord, and trusting in His moral government, it is not foolish to pursue an honest path. Verse 23 forms a bracket with verse 16.

Verse 16 begins with a fool who cannot help but reveal his internal state, and then

describes the prudent who is able to cover it up. Verse 23 reverses that order. The heart of fools proclaims folly.

The fool cannot constrain his lips. He gives full utterance to his character. If you spend any time with a fool, he will want to tell you about his folly.

He cannot help but broadcast it. Not appreciating just how shameful his folly is, he cannot easily help but reveal its presence to those around him. If you really want to discover if someone is a fool, just listen to them, give them time to speak.

They will soon declare themselves. Verses 24-27 are bracketed by statements about the diligent and the slothful. Just as the words of the truthful appreciate in value, so the hand of the diligent will make him rich over time, while the slothful will come to nothing and be reduced to forced labour.

In verse 27 we see that the slothful man will not even begin the task of pursuing gain perhaps, or will not bring it to its proper completion. He will waste the resources that he has to hand. The power of words is an important theme in the Book of Proverbs.

In verse 18 we see the power of rash words to cause damage, and the power of wise words to bring healing. The careless sword thrusts of rash words are easily applied, but words of healing reveal wisdom. In verse 25 we see something similar.

The power of a good word, fitly spoken in season to revive the troubled or anxious spirit. Righteousness and wickedness are contagious. They provide patterns for others to emulate.

In verse 26 we see this. The person who is righteous is not just righteous for himself, he serves as a pattern and exemplar for others. When people see the righteous they are spurred to righteousness.

Verse 28 sums things up in describing the path of righteousness. It is a path of pure life, or as we see earlier in the Book of Proverbs, it is a path of rising light. A question to consider.

Proverbs chapter 12 is concerned at many points with the way that people's words and actions, even ones that might seem otherwise insignificant, reveal their characters. If we want to discern people's character, what are some of the key things in the immediate situation, in the medium term, and in the long term that will help us to discern what type of persons they are? Colossians chapter 2 verses 8-19 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

He disarmed the rulers and authorities, and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. In the heart of Colossians chapter 2, Paul presents a series of warnings against false teachings and unhelpful practices. In particular, he addresses the way that the Colossians and other Christians are in danger of lapsing back into a form of religion that remains thoroughly bound to this present age, a bondage that can take either a pagan or a Jewish form, and failing to enter into all the riches that are ours in Christ.

In verse 8 he gives a summary statement, there is a danger of being taken captive. The word translated, takes you captive, is not unlikely a pun upon the word for synagogue. It suggests that one of the great dangers here are Judaizing teachers who might want to capture them, to imprison the Colossians within Judaism and its human traditions, which stand opposed to the word of God and lay heavy burdens upon people.

What Paul means by the elementary principles of the world is a matter of some debate. They are also referred to in Galatians chapter 4. Some have argued that they are rudimentary principles, others that they are elemental spirits. However, it seems to me that the strongest case is that they refer to the physical elements.

The elementary principles are referring to the physical cosmos. Old covenant religion was religion ruled by, ordered around, and focused upon physical elements, upon times and seasons, upon matters of diet, upon various physical rites such as circumcision and the various sacrifices. These things are not bad in themselves, and properly used, they can still have some place in worship and broader Christian practice in certain cases.

However, they represent a religion under the rule of the natural elements of the physical world, composed of sacrifice, principles of unclean and clean, calendrical feasts. In this respect, faithful Jewish religion had much in common with the religions of the pagans. This was religion in the flesh, religion under the guardianship of fleshly elements.

Israel had to relate to God in terms of physical sacrifices of specific animals, a physical building and its furniture, and other things like that. The system constructed of the elementary principles guarded and guided Israel in its childhood. However, in the new covenant, there is a move from the shadowy elements to the substance, which is Christ.

We don't come under the rule of a physical temple, but we relate to the body of Christ. We don't have the same physical sacrifices. We perform spiritual sacrifices on the basis of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ.

Our worship still involves symbolic mediation, where physical elements can function as effective symbols of the spiritual acts that we are performing. But we no longer engage in spiritual intermediation, where physical elements stand in the place of the spiritual realities, so that we relate to the spiritual realities less directly. Paul's challenge to the Colossians is essentially, why settle for empty philosophy and human tradition when you have the fullness of God and his authority bodily present in Christ? Christ is the bodily substance of what the elementary principles foreshadowed.

Christ is over all other powers. They should not satisfy themselves with lower principles when they have Christ, who is above all. The fullness of deity dwells in him.

Christ is God dwelling among us. We have the full reality of God in him and should not allow anyone to pawn off a lesser substitute to us. While the Judaizers might want to perform a physical circumcision upon the Colossians, Paul speaks of a circumcision made without hands, putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.

What might he mean by this? Circumcision in the Old Testament was about the symbolic removal of the flesh, that flesh that called out for judgment. As God comes near to judge, the flesh of his people is symbolically removed in a place where it has particular symbolic associations. It's associated with the generative principle of man.

It's also associated with the phallic drive of man, the libido and the desire to dominate and rule. Circumcision then was about the symbolic removal of the flesh, protecting people from divine judgment and marking out the seed. The full reality of this, however, was performed in Christ's crucifixion, when he dealt decisively with the body of the flesh.

Christ's death was a literal cutting off of the flesh. Are we entering into the fullness of this in baptism, which unites us with Christ's death and his resurrection? This doesn't mean that we need baptism in order to be saved on the last day. That's not quite the point that Paul is making.

Rather, there is something about the social body here that I think is in play. The social body is part of what it means to be in the flesh. The flesh is not just my physical body.

It's the larger social order that I am part of. My body becomes part of the social order, where it is formed in a distinctive way of life and oriented towards reality. As the social

order addresses my body and subjects it to its formation, I am guided into particular ways of perceiving, thinking and acting within the world.

This incorporation into a social body occurs through the social body's co-option of our physical bodies and there is a claim with obvious and immediate relevance to the rite of baptism here. Baptism is a rite performed upon bodies. It's a ritual connected with the fate of the body, death and resurrection in Christ.

The social body of the Church is forged, identified and characterised in large measure through the practice of baptism. It makes and it represents a social reality that we become part of. The meaning of baptism is not just a meaning for me as an individual.

It's a meaning for us as a group as we live out a new form of life as a new body, a body that is defined by the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism forms people in many ways from the outside in. It forms us by making us part of a society.

It embeds us within a social order and a world, rather than just treating us as detached thinking individuals. N.T. Wright comments upon this dimension in his treatment of verse 11. As a result of their baptism into Christ, the Colossians now belong first and foremost to the family of God, and not therefore to the human families and their local rulers to which they formerly belonged.

Body can in fact easily carry the connotation of a group of people, needing further redefinition to make it clear which group is envisaged, as in body of Christ. In that context, flesh can easily provide the further requisite definition, since it can carry not only the meanings of sinful human nature, but also, simultaneously, the meanings of family solidarity. The phrase can thus easily mean in the stripping off of the old human solidarities, the convert in stripping off his clothes for baptism, the baptismal reference in the next verse has coloured the language, leaves behind, as every adult candidate for baptism in say a Muslim or Hindu society knows, the solidarities of the old life, the network of family and society to which, until then, he or she has given his primary allegiance.

Baptism, then, is an event of unplugging. We are taken out from the old solidarities of the flesh to which we belonged. We are united with Christ.

In his death, in which his body was cut off from the old solidarities. People often resist a strong account of baptism, believing that it gives the impression that we need baptism in order to be saved, thinking by that that salvation means being saved on the last day. However, salvation is a broader term than that, and if we are to enter into the fullness of life in fellowship with God and his people here and now, baptism is most definitely a part of that.

Baptism is the means by which we leave old solidarities behind and are joined to a new

one, in which we should live in newness of life. It is also a means by which we have an anticipatory seal of our being raised on the last day, so that we might persevere in the faith with greater confidence. A king who has acceded to the throne but never received a coronation is a king nonetheless, yet he fails to enter into the fullness of what that means.

Likewise with baptism. Baptism may not be absolutely necessary to be saved on the last day, but it is the means by which we enter into fellowship with God and his people here and now, and by which we most appropriately anticipate and are assured of the full salvation that is yet to come. Gentile Christians were formerly dead in their sins and outside of the covenant people of God, yet God made them alive together with Christ, forgiving them all of the sins that separated them from him.

He achieved this through the cross. We should consider the parallel passage in Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11-16 here. Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands, remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. Here, as in Ephesians chapter 2, there is a reference to the law. Here it is the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

In Ephesians chapter 2 it is the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. The law was an obstacle in two distinct ways. As Wright notes, it shut up the Jews and shut out the Gentiles.

The impasse represented by the law is decisively dealt with as Jesus takes its burden upon himself in his cross. Not only does he deal with the law, he also deals with the principalities and powers, the angelic authorities that reigned over the old world order. Christ may have been stripped naked on the cross, his enemies triumphing over him, but yet, Paul teaches, this is what Christ was doing to his enemies at the point of the cross, if only they knew.

Christ was really stripping the ruler of this present age and his powers of their might, undermining the hold that they have. Once this has all been appreciated, the idea of going back to the old practices of the old age is unthinkable. The substance that the elementary principles of the old covenant pointed towards has arrived in Christ.

There will be various people trying to capture the Colossians, trying to bring them back to the observances of the old age. However, they must courageously stand against the temptation to retreat, whether to the old fleshly observances or to a subservient preoccupation with the angelic rulers of the old creation, rather than Christ himself. Clinging to the old practices and angelic rulers is not faithfulness.

Rather, by rejecting the substance for the shadow and the rightful king for the temporary stewards, they would make themselves rebels. Christ is the substance of the shadows. Christ is the ruler over all other rulers.

Christ is also the source of all growth, the one in whom we must ground ourselves and from whom we must grow. The whole body, the whole church, finds its source and its life and its sustenance in him. Our growth is found not in submitting to human traditions and these practices of the old age, but by looking to Christ and drawing upon God's strength that is active in him.

A question to consider. What might have been some of the motives of those who wanted to retain or retreat to the practices of the old age?