

A Devotional Resource for the 40 Days of Lent

Meditations on the Book of Proverbs

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread,
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.



Our Lenten Challenge for 2016

As my dear Lord Jesus went to Golgotha to endure the agony of the cross and separation from God, and there died for my sin to free me from hell, I would like to walk more closely with him.

I can do this by:

- Trying to attend worship each Sunday during Lent.
- Setting aside a small amount of time each day for a devotion and prayer.

May the Holy Spirit inspire me with the love of Christ to draw near to him as he has already come near to me, so that I am walking with Jesus. Amen.

Walking with Jesus through the Book of Proverbs

Dear Reader,

You are about to enter a fascinating and uplifting section in the Holy Scriptures called the book of Proverbs. Though a proverb for the Hebrews and for Australians is a pithy statement about life or human behaviour, for the people of Israel, it had to be interpreted within the framework of her relationship to the Lord and his saving and providential work among the people of God. The wise counsellors who wrote these proverbs combined reason, observation of the world and their faith in God to arrive at a deeply practical book.

Solomon and non-Israelite authors such as Agur, Lemuel, and the wise counsellors of 22:17 were the Proverbians, perhaps with contributions from Hezekiah's counsellors (25:1), who may have edited the book and provided introductions. This covers a period of three hundred years beginning approximately from 900BC. What is interesting is the inclusion of proverbs from outside of Israel. Indeed, the Egyptian work, "The Wisdom of Amenemope" displays some striking parallels. And why not? The Lord is God over all the earth and has granted wisdom to other peoples, for as they observe his created world, they too see an order and intelligence providing boundaries, laws, and principles governing life on earth.

The Proverbians correctly believed that the Lord infused his wisdom into the world while he carried out his work of creation. Wisdom was his tool, a personified expression of himself, his character and values. And here comes the really interesting thing: his wisdom is portrayed as a lady or like a mother who encourages her sons, people like you and me, to follow her rather than to go after the lady fool, who entices faithful sons into sexual immorality or lures them into crime through other scurrilous young men. It is no accident that having given wisdom a female gender (1:20; 8:1), this wonderful book ends with a chapter on the wise, noble woman who is the wife of a very lucky man.

This book is for the young, to guide them on their course in life, how to choose a good wife or husband, shun the temptation of wicked friends, fear the Lord and trust him, act with integrity in the law court or royal court, work industriously, and care for the poor whom the Creator protects. Its scope is wide; it encompasses all of life with one foot firmly placed in God's saving work and the other in his governing work on earth. Proverbs is the forerunner of the university and the scientific enterprise; but for all of us, it is a simple guide to finding the Lord's pathway through the many choices and bad turns of our existence.

that is pornographic or looking away from something our eyes might want to feast on. The more keeping the feet, the eyes and hands doing the right things the easier it gets. In fact, I have found that abstaining from gossip or giving generously, praying often during the day or doing any other righteous thing eventually becomes a habit and reinforces the good desires coming from the Holy Spirit.

The mouth is the most difficult member of the body to control as the book of James reminds us. Mine sometimes runs away and I say too much, or I let out a rough word or say something irritably. Our Lord Jesus said that ‘what is in the heart spills over in the mouth’ (Luke 6:45). Our Lord is suggesting that we nurture good thoughts, peace, love, acceptance in our hearts. It means dealing with anger or bitterness stored there or insecurity or jealousy. If we work on our hearts, then, what comes out of the mouth will improve.

The word I take with me today is: Aim for an upright and loving way to act.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, help me to follow you today and not those who are going off-road. Help me to be like my Lord Jesus and do those things that you approve of and are right in your eyes. Amen.

Proverbs has challenged our team of writers, which now includes an extra member, Pastor Nathan Hedt from Pakenham. We are very appreciative of his efforts. We hope that the variety of authors will add some spice to the devotions. So, on behalf of Eva Dabasy, Christine Wilksch, Pastor Nathan, with assistance from Phil Wilksch, who collated the material, I wish you much enrichment from our dear Holy Spirit.

Wayne Muschamp

CALENDAR 2016

The number in **bold** type is the day number

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
14 Feb 1	15 Feb 2	16 Feb 3	17 Feb 4	18 Feb 5	19 Feb 6	20 Feb 7
21 Feb 8	22 Feb 9	23 Feb 10	24 Feb 11	25 Feb 12	26 Feb 13	27 Feb 14
28 Feb 15	29 Feb 16	1 Mar 17	2 Mar 18	3 Mar 19	4 Mar 20	5 Mar 21
6 Mar 22	7 Mar 23	8 Mar 24	9 Mar 25	10 Mar 26	11 Mar 27	12 Mar 28
13 Mar 29	14 Mar 30	15 Mar 31	16 Mar 32	17 Mar 33	18 Mar 34	19 Mar 35
20 Mar 36	21 Mar 37	22 Mar 38	23 Mar 39	24 Mar 40	25 Mar Good Friday	26 Mar

Day 1: Discipline

Proverbs

3¹¹⁻¹² My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

13¹ A wise son heeds his father's instruction, but a mocker does not listen to rebuke.

15³¹⁻³² He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.

25¹² Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear.

Wise teachers have a relationship with those in their care. They respect, educate, investigate, check, test and when needed also correct their charges. Wise teachers have a loving relationship with those in their care. The wise teacher teaches, defines and explains boundaries of behaviour so that their charges can see the wisdom and good sense of their advice and so accept them. In contrast, good students are perceptive, attentive, listen and accept advice, boundaries and recommendations from their teachers, trusting that such advice is for their higher good.

However, some “wisdoms” might be seen by some students simply as boundaries of behaviour until those students mature. Some may stray and so require discipline in the form of corrective advice or action to get back to “the straight and narrow” path again. As students mature, they take up appropriate attitudes, values and boundaries making them their own. Discipline heeded, in time they become responsible and respected members of society and a credit to their teachers.

How much more do these principles apply to responsible parenting? And indeed, how much more do these principles apply to our relationship with our Father, our Provider?

As children of our wise, loving Father, we heed his voice. But, as children occasionally do, we stray and experience our Father's corrective action, his discipline. In our inner being, we know that His discipline is for our highest good. It makes us better. It helps us listen. It makes us be more attentive. It builds character. It builds love between us and our Father. And learning to be more loving and wise, we pass this love on to others. Indeed, we become examples of love and wisdom.

In baptism, we Christians have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 10:44-48; 11:16). We are all advised and taught by the Spirit (Jn 15:26; 1 Jn 2:27). However, within us exists a tension. We are “divided,” people of split loyalties. We are split between the flesh, meaning all that is opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit of God (Gal 5:16-21). However, whilst we may have choices, our stances and actions are to be informed by advice from the Spirit. The advice is timely and is the finest we can be given.

The word I take with me today is: I am indeed grateful that my life is directed by the Holy Spirit. I dedicate myself to seeking, listening and heeding the advice received.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, please help me be Spirit directed in all that I do. Amen.

Day 40: Righteousness

Proverbs

4²⁴⁻²⁷ Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

The other day I was in a procession of cars travelling through the city from the church to the cemetery. It was a case of follow the leader. Unfortunately, the leader in this case got too far ahead of the followers. A driver, behind a number of cars, indicated left when he should have kept going straight ahead. Those behind him followed even though it was a wrong turn.

Our Lord Jesus said to seek the kingdom of God first and to put God's righteousness above everything else (Matthew 6:33). Having entered the kingdom through faith in Christ and holy baptism, Christians wish to grow up to be like their Lord. In him is goodness, wisdom, love, truth, purity, faith and obedience. If someone suggested ‘cooking’ the books or telling some lies we would not follow. That would be like following someone taking a wrong turn. But it is amazing how what others are doing puts pressure on us to do the same. ‘Do not turn from the right or the left’ is good advice.

‘Follow me’, our Lord Jesus said (Matthew 4:19). First, this means to receive him and his salvation by grace through trusting in him and not in anything we do. Then it means being righteous, following in his step and being like him. Sometimes it can literally mean keeping our eyes from looking at something

from inner peace through injustice, strife, plunder, or other forms of unrighteousness, that price is excessive. The wise choose having little.

The word I take with me today is: My priority is inner peace. I choose to have little if having much costs me my inner peace, through breaks in my relationships with God, self and others.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank You for Your blessings. Help me choose wisely so that I grow in inner peace. Amen.

Day 39: Advice

Proverbs

12¹⁵ The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.

25¹¹ A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.

Most eighteen-year-olds enter adulthood thinking “I’m an adult now. I know everything I need to know. I can handle anything I need.” In time, they realise their limitations. Some seek the advice of others. Over time, they become wiser.

Actually, there are many elements important in taking advice. Asking for and receiving advice usually involves the ability to recognise that advice is actually needed. This comes with not only knowledge, but also humility. Secondly, one needs to know where to look for advice and how to source it.

Additionally, advice needs to be timely. Then there is the need to establish the quality of the given advice through listening, discernment and questioning. The task of competently taking on board the advice follows. Finally, there is matter of assessment of the effectiveness of the advice after the task or circumstance has been addressed using the advice given and noting the lessons learnt. We might apply these steps to help with a task or circumstance as simple as buying shoes or as complex as moving house or choosing a career.

We are not the only ones in need of advice from time to time. Scripture informs us that the prophets of the Old Testament, seen as God’s spokespeople, were consulted for advice by Jewish kings. Occasionally they offered their advice unasked, at other times as veiled communication. The advice was timely and wise in each case. Scripture gives us many examples where the kings took and acted on the advice given. It also gives examples when they did not (See 2 Sam 7:3-15; Jer 29:4-22; and Isa 38:1-22 for examples).

The word I take with me today is: My heavenly Father watches over me in the abundance of his everlasting love. His discipline is for my highest good.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, you are everlasting love, everlasting wisdom. As I try being obedient to you word, your advice and your directions in my daily life, please help me open my ears to hear your advice and have the courage to act on it. Amen.

Day 2: The Wise Person

Proverbs

9⁹ Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.

24⁵⁻⁶ A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength; for waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers.

28²⁶ He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe.

Oh how I yearned to be wise in my childhood! “See, there goes another wise person,” I would say to myself. They seemed to be everywhere. Being around them was inspiring. I was blessed indeed. But it was my father who was the wisest of them all. He was a man of unusual learning, judgment, insight. He was very perceptive. He was also very kind, very ethical. He had the ability to perceive the elements of a circumstance, judge what was true and right and that truth informed his actions, with his kindness integrated. He seemed to be able to see far into the distance of time and so could make strategic decisions. He seemed to know the inner workings of a human being, and so he was also supremely understanding. Wow! What a person! What a model!

As I got older, I also saw that dad was drawn to the company of wise people, those he respected. Is it that ‘birds of a feather flock together?’ In need, he asked for their advice or opinion, considered the advice and implemented what he assessed as sensible. He avoided the inauthentic, the dishonest, and the “empty vessel.”

Dad passed away a long time ago. But my model is still with me in spirit and in many beautiful memories. So who is it that is worthy of being my model today? I cannot look at the colloquial wisdom of the day as I see that God’s wisdom is seen as folly to the worldly wise (Mt 11:25; 1 Cor 1:18 - 2:5). I recall the parables Jesus used like the parables of the unjust steward (Lk 16: 1-8) and the wise and foolish virgins (Mt 25:1-12). I see his wisdom in them.

And so, as true wisdom comes from God, I turn to Jesus, our supreme model, the wisdom of God (Isa 11:2), the eternally pre-existent Son of God (Prov 8 22-31).

The word I take with me today is: Jesus is the wisdom of God. It is his advice example and that should inform my life.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, you are everlasting wisdom, everlasting love. I ask that you help me value your wisdom ever more deeply. Help me to see, hear, understand and have the courage to implement your wisdom in my daily life. Amen.

Day 3: The Righteous Established

Proverbs

- 12³ *No one can be established through wickedness, but the righteous cannot be uprooted.*
- 12⁷ *The wicked are overthrown and are no more, but the house of the righteous stands firm.*
- 12²¹ *No harm overtakes the righteous, but the wicked have their fill of trouble.*
- 13²⁵ *The righteous eat to their hearts' content, but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry.*
- 15⁶ *The house of the righteous contains great treasure, but the income of the wicked brings ruin.*

By and large, putting aside the financial struggles of my parents’ household, our lives as a family and couple have been blessed by the Lord. Our income may not be as high as others. As a pastor, the work is based on dedication rather than as a pathway to monetary success. But we are secure, and I thank God for that. What I say can be said of the majority of the members of the congregation, and indeed, would apply to most members of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. We are after all, a middle class to lower middle class bunch.

The writers of Proverbs were not contrasting the lives of believers and unbelievers. Theirs was not a secular society and it would have been impossible to find an atheist in the modern sense. Therefore, the groups described here are the wicked members of a worshipping community and the faithful ones. Righteous is an old fashioned term but it cannot be replaced with a phrase such as “good people”. Anyone can be good but only those who trust in the Lord can be righteous. These are the people who actually believe there

The word I take with me today is: Parents and children start by loving each other.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, you designed the family unit to be the basis of society. Support and protect our families so they can support and protect each other. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who grew up in a loving family in Nazareth. Amen.

Day 38: Having Little

Proverbs

- 16⁸ *Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.*
- 16¹⁹ *Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.*
- 17¹ *Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife.*

We all have our priorities. They might range from having a flourishing family life, being comfortably well off, being totally independent of others, or enjoying high social status, a good reputation. Some make inner peace their top priority.

Jesus greeted people with the word *shalom*, meaning peace in Hebrew (Lk 24:36, Jn 20:19, 21). The greeting spoke to a fullness of peace and wholeness permeating every facet of life. The earliest Christian communities received letters from Paul. These letters begin using various forms of the greeting: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” See for example Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; and 2 Cor 1:2.

For those early Christians, receiving the peace of Jesus meant more than personal wellbeing. Jesus’ own peace included Jesus’ ways of peacemaking. To be children of God meant a peacemaking way of life “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matt 5:9). Peace meant love of God and others. It is an approach to life, an approach which forms the basis of inner peace, inner stillness. It is important because it is in this stillness that in prayer we experience the depth of our true self and the depths of God.

Given choices, who chooses little? Nearly nobody! It’s distinctly countercultural. Our culture encourages our having more or better commodities, reputation, and many other things. When that price results in unease due to an unsettled conscience, when that price involves moving away

Day 37: Parents and Children

Proverbs

*10¹ A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son grief to his mother.
23²² Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old.
23²⁴ The father of a righteous man has great joy: he who has a wise son delights in him.
23¹³⁻¹⁴ Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish him with the rod, he will not die. Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death.*

A friend of ours spent twelve months in the US as an exchange student when he was a teenager. He stayed with a Christian family and it was a revelation to him. For the first time, he realised that it was possible to live without hurling pots and pans and abuse at each other; that parents and children could show each other respect and courtesy; that parents didn't have to be dictatorial and children didn't have to be defiant.

One of the great tragedies of today's society is the disappearance of the loving family unit. The evidence is in, and has been for some time, that children do better with two responsible parents in charge. Certainly they do better financially. To have a child in a single parent family is almost surely to condemn that child to a life of comparative poverty. But they do better in other ways as well, not least because their parents simply have more time for them.

The aim of the wisdom literature was to teach people how to behave so as to create an ordered and peaceful society. Wisdom was knowing how to behave in a social structure; how to conduct yourself when faced with temptation; how to follow the paths of the righteous. The writers clearly recognise the role that both parents play in passing on this knowledge to their children. We tend too often nowadays to hand that role over to external educators, but any teacher can tell you that if the parents don't respect the educative process, then their children will not learn. And it doesn't hurt occasionally for a parent to remind the more recalcitrant offspring that they are not in charge! Parents have the responsibility to correct and discipline their children, and that shouldn't be taken away from them.

The key is love. The aim of Christian parenting is to lovingly raise our children to be independent, Christian adults. We're human, therefore by definition less than perfect, so we are occasionally going to get it wrong, but that's where forgiveness comes in. And I might as well put it in writing; my children have brought me great joy.

is accountability, that God sees what is done in secret and judges everyone. They also hold onto another truth, which means everything to them: God rewards those who trust in him and follow his word, not doing what comes naturally but doing those things God requires of his people, even when it meant some initial disadvantage.

The wicked have no compunction about acting in their own interests from the small thing such as accepting the money from the checkout chick who has mistakenly given the incorrect change to fibbing about the value of deductions claimed in a tax return. Yes, one gets ahead at first, but wickedness will be severely judged in this life and then again when Christ returns to examine everyone's life.

As quaint as it might seem, I actually believe that not only does the Lord foster good and just actions in communities, but he particularly looks out for his children. This might not mean wealth, which was the simpler view of these Proverbians, but also his help, his support, his blessing of good teaching, good nurturing and good upbringing. He establishes his baptized children in this life because they consider these things as the work of the Spirit acting through them. They delight in doing what God is truly interested in.

The word I take with me today is: The Lord looks after his righteous people.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, I love to do what you would be proud of. Thank-you for making your presence known to me so that I can believe that everything I do is done before you and has a special meaning to you. Amen.

Day 4: The Industrious Worker

Proverbs

*6⁶⁻¹¹ Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!
It has no commander, no overseer or ruler,
yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.
How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest –
and poverty will come on you like a thief, and scarcity like an armed man.*

This Scripture and the many other passages like it in Proverbs, are close to my heart. I like work, especially when I am motivated by the task at hand. Laziness just isn't in my DNA. Relaxing and switching off are my challenges and might be for some reading this devotion too.

It is quite clear that our Lord blesses work, as indicated when he gave Adam and Eve the garden and the animals to look after. Our Lord Jesus was initially referred to as a tekton, which meant he was a builder of bridges, temples etc and general repairer. Later, he was a rabbi or teacher, then of course, our Lord and Saviour. So, he was a good example of an industrious worker.

The diligence of the ant displayed in its organisational instinct and the ordering of ant society, is truly a remarkable sign God has placed in nature to remind us to work diligently. The apostle Paul said that a person who does not work should not sponge off the Christian community (2Thessalonians 3:10). Everyone has a duty to contribute to the functioning of the country and the church and should consider his or her work as a service to the Lord.

The Proverbians mentioned in other passages that a non-worker is lazy, is a sluggard, talks about a job but never does it, chases useless fantasies, is slack, likes to sleep, makes excuses for not working and is wise in his or her own eyes.

In contrast, an industrious person works hard, is awake to the needs of the household, carefully plans the business to be carried out, puts off immediate gratification to lay down a foundation for long term security, is a conscientious saver, pays attention to facilities and carries out maintenance of property, and aims for a surplus for more difficult times.

Christian parents give their children chores and expect them to contribute to the family resources, which is a fine thing. Our temptation is to indulge and hover over them to rescue them from difficulties. But a little work harms nobody, as my mother would say, whether it be study, mowing a lawn, saving some pocket money, or hanging out the washing.

The word I take with me today is: Work is God’s gift.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, please forgive me when I put off important tasks. Give me joy in what I do each day and find you in my place of work. Amen.

A cheery disposition, whether it is inborn or the result of personal discipline, is like being at a nonstop feast. Within a person, it promotes and maintains positive feelings. These feelings of love, warmth, and deep friendship are in turn shared by those this person meets. The entire ambiance is one of delight. Compare this with the opposite, that of broken relationship, which can only lead to downheartedness, even depression and disease.

Love is about right relationship. It is a choice we make daily. We choose our relationship with ourselves. We choose our relationship with God. We can choose the way of love each time we meet friends, colleagues, and the people we might find “difficult” for whatever reason. Our proverb goes as far as to say that it is far better to have less materially and be in a state of love than to have riches but with animosity in our heart.

But for us humans, love is frequently a very hard call. Solomon realized that many people claimed to be wise and righteous (that is, live in personal integrity) but never really demonstrated it. This is because most people have deep feelings, but only truly wise people have the willingness to sort through those feelings to “draw out” significant truths about themselves. This is the hard call to self-knowledge. But once a person is able to learn to live in personal integrity, righteousness, others in contact with this person also receive positive benefits. The righteous become wonderful examples of love.

Daily examination enables us to walk with increasing integrity. We might ask: “Am I really a faithful friend?” “Is my diplomacy often at the expense of truth?” “Am I honest in expressing my real feelings?” “In daily life, where gross violations are controlled, and myriads of petty offences that break the barrier between sin and duty are allowed, where do I sit with respect to God’s standard?” We could go on.

The word I take with me today is: My Heavenly Father gives me all I will ever need. I focus my attention on my heart feasting on the joy, fear, and love of the Lord. I choose the way of authenticity and love in the relationships I have with myself, God and others.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, you sent Jesus, my model of love. Help me grow in righteousness so that I can truly love. Amen.

your own list. A prime example in the Old Testament is Rehoboam, whose confidence in his own power led to his downfall. (1Kings 12: 1-20).

Twenty-first century arrogance isn't very different. Our achievements are extraordinary. We have world-wide communication, jet planes, spacecraft, and technology that would have looked exactly like wizardry to the Proverbians. We don't need God. In fact, we've decided He doesn't exist. We are powerful and clever enough to do without Him. There's the pride. I'm wondering what the fall will be like.

As Christians, when we start feeling proud of ourselves, we can't do better than to go to Paul's words in Ephesians 2: 8-10, but I want to put a slightly different twist on them. "When we start to think about how wonderful our human achievements are, it is as well to remember that we need salvation, and that comes only through Christ".

The word I take with me today is: All our achievements fade to nothing before God.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, keep me from arrogance and from relying solely on my own works. Grant me that true humility which comes from knowing that you are my great God and Lord and that I can only do good through you. Amen.

Day 36: Love

Proverbs

15¹⁷ Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred.

20⁶ Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?

Have you ever faced a beautifully prepared meal when you were stressed, when relationships were out of kilter? As beautiful as the meal might have been, its enjoyability becomes substantially restricted during stressful times. Healthcare professionals often remind us that our emotions affect our health. They inform us of the many negative biochemical and other changes to our health as a result of mental and emotional stress. The ancients observed these connections too. The Old Testament observed the link between emotional states and bodily changes millennia before modern science documented the same phenomena. I find this amazing!

Day 5: Wise Lips

Proverbs

*12¹⁸ Reckless words pierce like a sword,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

15⁷ The lips of the wise spread knowledge; not so the hearts of fools.

15²³ A man finds joy in giving an apt reply-- and how good is a timely word!

*20¹⁵ Gold there is, and rubies in abundance,
but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel.*

*23¹⁵⁻¹⁶ My son, if your heart is wise, then my heart will be glad;
my inmost being will rejoice when your lips speak what is right.*

We experience who we are in many ways. One way is through our speech, our lips. This is because the source of our speech lies deep within our heart and so, the contents of our hearts are brought into view through what we say and indeed, how we say it. We have all experienced a "slip of the tongue," being "tongue-tied", "bitten our tongue", and "held our tongue." A few of us have even been on the other end of some "tongue lashing" or "wagging tongues," not a pleasant experience of love or friendship. We are catapulted into the realisation that "lips" and relationships travel hand in hand! And so we realise that prudent silence is golden, and eminently better than truth spoken without kindness and compassion.

Some people seem naturally wise. They know when to speak and when to remain silent. They seem to have the knack of "dead-on judgement," and knowledge of the human condition. They are strategic, prudent, just and resilient. The wise think of the potential outcomes of their speech on their audience before they speak. Their thoughts, their motivations incorporate the highest good of all concerned. They are guided by the Holy Spirit through regular reading of Scripture. They are attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible. They are observant to context, the dynamics of their environment: they are mindful. They use their intelligence, their reason to critique, discriminate, assess and come up with appropriate solutions. They identify an appropriate course of action, and then decide to action their decision. The wise then critique these decisions based on experiencing outcomes and revise courses of action based on the evidence before them. In this sense, wisdom grows in self-reflection, critique and experience.

Jesus is the wisdom of God. As Christians, we follow him and in doing so we too can think, understand and act according to who we truly are, as people baptised into Christ (Phil 2:5). Jesus calls us to loving kindness. As we connect

to each other through how and what we say, i.e., our lips, may what passes from them be truly wise.

The word I take with me today is: The contents of my heart come forth in my words. They display my wisdom.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank you for sending us Jesus, your Son, Your Wisdom. Please help me follow him daily. Please help me use my lips with wisdom. Please help me see and repent when I fall. Amen.

Day 6: The Fool

Proverbs

7²¹⁻²² With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk. All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter ...

7²³ like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life.

12¹⁵ The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.

17²¹ To have a fool for a child brings grief; there is no joy for the parent of a godless fool.

When reading Proverbs, it becomes necessary to distinguish between “simple” and “fool.” The word simple means naïve, untutored, in need of wisdom, possibly immature. Those who are simple have a lot to learn and the book of Proverbs, like other wisdom literature of the time, is there to provide the necessary instruction.

Fools, on the other hand, are “wise in their own eyes” (26:5, 12). They know it all. They find pleasure in wicked schemes (10:23), they are hot-headed (14:16), they delight in airing their own opinions, answer before listening and find no pleasure in understanding (18:2, 13). Fools spurn instruction, are wilfully wayward and don’t know when to shut up (17:28).

The story told in chapter 7 sounds like a real incident which the narrator/observer has adapted for the purposes of moral instruction. It’s probably not a good idea to get too hung up with the concept of woman as temptress in this account, although it is quite shocking that she has seen fit to use her temple offering as bait. No, the focus of this story is the choice made by the simple youth. He could choose the way of wisdom and turn away from the prostitute but he doesn’t; he chooses the way of folly and heads for destruction.

God’s protection. They see that walking with God brings joy and that walking with God is connected to their good health. As their spirits are high, they inspire and cheer up those around them.

The word I take with me today is: My Heavenly Father guides, helps and protects me. I choose to walk with and in Him.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank you for Your grace: your guidance, help and protection. Please help me to guard my heart and help me to bring joy to others. Amen.

Day 35: Humility

Proverbs

3³⁴ Towards the scorers he is scornful, but to the humble he shows favour.

11² When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.

18¹² Before his downfall a man’s heart is proud, but humility comes before honour.

26¹² Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

27² Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips.

Reyburn and Fry’s handbook on translation says that there are two different words translated as ‘humble’ in Proverbs. The first, used in 3:34 and elsewhere, comes from a root meaning bowed or bent, and conveys the sense that one is deferring to a greater or even hostile force. The second, in 11:2, has a meaning more like ‘modest’, and the suggestion is that we should think before we flaunt our achievements to the world. “Don’t blow your own trumpet,” would be the modern advice, and that is exactly what is said in the last text above.

It’s quite interesting to read through Proverbs looking for the writers’ take on humility, because in most places they treat it as a tool of statecraft or as an effective social strategy rather than a true emotion or state of mind. The emphasis is on effective behaviour; “Do this because it works.” The ancient world was a dangerous place, and keeping your head down and your mouth shut was prudent advice.

The other saying we get from our texts is “Pride comes before a fall,” and we only have to look around us to see the truth of that. Far too many of our politicians are presenting us with textbook examples, and I’ll let you make

approached on the cross, he offered his life to his Father and asked him to receive his spirit (Luke 23:46). Because the Lord's love for us in his Son Jesus is so strong, death cannot dissolve his relationship with us. It cannot tear us away from him even if we die in the cruellest of circumstances.

The word I take with me today is: There is no death for those who take refuge in the Lord.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, there is no part of my existence that you are absent from. Thank-you that I can find you with me in hospital, in the car accident, if someone is attacking me or any other way in which I might meet my end. I shall be with you in death. Amen.

Day 34: The Heart

Proverbs

4²³ Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

12²⁵ An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.

15¹³ A happy heart makes the face cheerful, but heartache crushes the spirit.

15³⁰ A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones.

17²² A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

We have all heard maxims involving the heart. Examples include “he is basically a good hearted fellow,” “she has a heart of gold,” “he died of a broken heart,” “after the tragedy, her heart hardened” and “he had a heart of stone.” There are lots more! Scripture uses the concept of the heart in a special way.

The heart symbolises the centre, the core, the locus of our personal being. It is the locus of our affectivity, freedom and consciousness. It is the place where we accept or reject the mystery of ourselves, our human existence and God. It is also the seat of our will and moral purpose. The heart is sacred space. There we get in touch with the truth of our being and are open to the presence of God in our lives. So when the Book of Proverbs refers to the heart, it is not referring to the physical organ but to our mind, our whole personality and person, our innermost self. The heart is our wellspring of life.

The wise consider the guarding of their hearts to be top priority. Whenever possible, whenever a choice is theirs, they choose to go with life. They choose God, they realise their life to be a gift, that their life is graced, and they walk in

The purpose of the writings collected in the book of Proverbs is to provide a moral basis for behaviour. If simple youth were not to become fools, they needed to know how to behave wisely. The ancient writers didn't believe in the innate goodness of humanity. As far as they were concerned, wisdom, that is, right thoughts leading to right action, was firstly grounded in the fear of God.

The word I take with me today is: Fools think they have all the answers, but the wise listen to advice.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, grant me both a discerning heart, so I can distinguish wisdom from folly, and the willingness to follow the wise path. Amen.

Day 7: Good Government and Diligent Leaders

Proverbs

11¹⁴ For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.

*14²⁸ A large population is a king's glory,
but without subjects a prince is ruined.*

*16¹² Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through
righteousness.*

*20⁸ When a king sits on his throne to judge, he winnows out all evil with his
eyes.*

*20²⁸ Love and faithfulness keep a king safe; through love his throne is made
secure.*

*21¹ The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse
wherever he pleases.*

There are many contexts in which we assume leadership, either formal or informal. We don't have to be the Prime Minister or President of a very large country to be a leader. We lead as role models, as parents, as participants in a workplace, as consumers ... We could all add our other roles to complete our personal list.

Scripture has lots to say about leadership. In reading scripture, we quickly see that there is leadership and there is leadership and that the qualities of an exemplary leader are not only numerous, but multidimensional. Think of the qualities of leadership provided by, for example, Abraham, Moses, Solomon and David. In contrast, good books on leadership in business and politics contain similar advice based on principles of common human wisdom. But they are on another plane, generally written for a world that strives for

corporate and personal promotion and in a place where the powerful collaborate to amass increasing power, often at the expense of the less influential.

Diligent leadership is connected with good government. Our texts identify the elements comprising good leadership as the ability to influence and so to have loyal followers. Good leaders seek wise counsel. They realise that they don't have to have all the answers but can seek out expert advice when they need it. Good leaders motivate. They do not manipulate. They have high ethical standards and so detest their own wrongdoing or that of others. They are firmly based in righteousness, have integrity, are authentic, have good control of their emotions, deal wisely with troublemakers, strive for truth and love, and look to and submit to God. What a tall order! Is it any wonder that we can identify so few outstanding leaders in real life!

And so we look to Jesus as our leader. His person and consequent leadership meets all these criteria and more. His leadership is marked by justice, compassion, friendship and service. He lived in the kind of community he wanted to build.

The word I take with me today is: I look to Jesus as my model, my leader.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, please help me be the best leader I can be through constant contact with you. Amen.

Day 8: A Truthful Witness

Proverbs

11²² The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in those who tell the truth.

19⁵ A false witness will not go unpunished, nor will a liar escape.

24^{26, 28-29} An honest answer is like a kiss of friendship. Don't testify against your neighbours without cause; don't lie about them. And don't say, "Now I can pay them back for what they've done to me! I'll get even with them!"

25¹⁸ Telling lies about others is as harmful as hitting them with an axe, wounding them with a sword, or shooting them with a sharp arrow.

26¹⁸⁻¹⁹ Just as damaging as a madman shooting a deadly weapon is someone who lies to a friend and then says, "I was only joking."

The old saying 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me' is patently untrue. Words have great power, and all of us have experienced that power, for good or ill. Truthful and loving words have power to heal, while hurtful or dishonest words have power to wound deeply, even to

Day 33: Deliverance from Death

Proverbs

12²⁸ In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality.

14³² When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down, but even in death the righteous seek refuge in God.

Proverbs does not have much to say about eternal life and nor does the Old Testament in fact. It may seem surprising that the Proverbians do not speak of the resurrection here but rather immortality, or literally, "no death". When I became aware of this feature in the Old Testament, I thought it very strange. However, there are some beautiful and powerful scriptures that speak of immortality and the resurrection before the time of Christ. See Isaiah 25:7; 26:19; Daniel 12:2; Psalm 16:10; 49:15; 73:24. Enoch and Elijah were taken from the earth to be with the Lord, which supports the claim that the Holy Spirit had given this understanding to some of the Bible's early writers. The Lord did not see fit to reveal his ultimate plans to all of his people until a later stage, and most clearly and definitely in the resurrection of Christ and his victory over death.

Certainly, living wisely according to the good ways of the Lord, to make a generalisation, will lead to a healthy, safe and financially self-sustaining existence. You would not be mixing with schemers or acting dishonestly so that you get into trouble, lose your job or are apprehended by the police. Drugs or drunkenness will be shunned, most definitely unhealthy and prohibited activities. Because the Lord gives his word and promises for our good, living by his word can only mean blessing and bring about a life-enhancing result.

But the writer or writers here go a bit further. Along the path of the Lord is immortality, or no death. To say there is life is one thing; we have already discussed this. But he is saying death will not touch such a believer in the Lord. Everyone will die so he must mean an existence with God beyond death. He could mean a premature death but the expression "no death" is very strong. If a person puts trusts solely in the merits of Christ, in his victory over death, then for such a person, there is no death. This is what our Lord Jesus said so beautifully to Martha: 'whoever lives and believes in me will never die.'

In the next verse, the writer is aware that disaster and even evil can happen to God's children. They are not spared the calamities natural to all human beings. However, he says something that should be very precious to us all: in death, God is our refuge. Our Lord Jesus acted this way himself. As his end

I hope you have not been the victim of schemers. There have been three occasions when people have devised ways to manipulate or harm me. Two of those occasions involved stirring up others against me by gossip and lies. The third example involved a fellow pastor who was later forced to resign because of other misdemeanours. His scheming revolved around offering to help me but later revealing what he expected me to do in return.

‘Whoever plots evil will be known as a schemer’ (24:8) is a pretty good definition of the schemer. A person who devises a plan to hurt others is a very dangerous individual; a danger to people mentally, financially or physically. How wise our Lord is to give us warning of such people.

It is interesting to note that the holy gospels record the scheming Herod the Great, who plotted to kill Jesus shortly after his birth, and another Herod at the end of our Lord’s life, who murdered John the Baptist. The scheming of the chief priest Caiaphas, who succeeded in killing our Lord Jesus, is also recorded. It is a great comfort to know that our Lord has been the victim of schemers but has won the victory over them.

According to the book of Proverbs, schemers will hurt people with what they say; devise corrupt plans; create dissension, have evil intent and can be charming in how they speak. A practical strategy can be suggested here. Listen continually to what God says to us in his word so that a foundation of truth, strong character and morality are developed, which will ward off the enticing behaviour of schemers. Never attempt to fight back using the same methods but use legal and ethical channels. Pray! Seek the support of wise and experienced people who can advise you. Get legal help if necessary.

Finally, let us remind ourselves of what is being said here: ‘they only ambush themselves’. The three people who treated me in a nasty way, God dealt with using his righteousness and power. One became disliked in her circle; one often got himself in trouble at work because of his aggressive manner and the third lost his job.

The word I take with me today is: Let the Lord deal with schemers.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you utterly abhor all sin and corruption. Help me to be honest, open about motives, ready to admit responsibility and innocent in speech and action. Amen.

kill. It’s not surprising that words have such power. God’s word is living and creative, and our human ability to communicate is part of the creative image of God. Like all God’s good gifts, the power of words can be twisted or corrupted.

The book of Proverbs pulls no punches when it comes to telling the truth and telling lies. Those who lie or bear false witness are compared with madmen or people armed with deadly weapons. On the other hand, an honest answer is like a kiss of friendship. This startling contrast draws out both the positive and negative aspects of the commandment ‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.’

Consider for a moment: how do you use words? Do you pause to consider the negative impact of harmful or dishonest words, or the positive power of truthful and loving words? As Christians, we are urged to ‘speak the truth in love’ and to ‘let our words be seasoned with salt.’ I find that I am sometimes tempted to ‘speak the truth’ without much love, to ‘let people have it’ with a verbal assault or cutting words. There is a fine line between ‘speaking the truth to hurt’ and ‘speaking the truth in love.’

Jesus’ words, like his life and actions, are full of both grace and truth (John 1:17), and are always aimed to bring people to repentance and the grace of God. During Jesus’ trial he was charged under solemn oath to speak the truth about his identity and relationship with God (Matthew 27:62-64). Jesus had the chance to save himself by speaking untruth, or even simply remaining silent, but he boldly spoke the truth. He let himself be condemned for blasphemy, but his truth speaking opened the way for us to be saved and forgiven. That forgiveness includes the times we have been less than honest, or used words to hurt and wound others, or stayed silent out of fear or expedience. Jesus’ honesty and truth telling was God’s kiss of friendship for us.

The word I take with me today is: ‘An honest answer is like a kiss of friendship.’

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you always spoke the truth – and it was seasoned with grace and love. May you bring to mind how damaging hurtful or dishonest words can be – and stop my tongue from saying them. May you bring to mind how healing and saving honest, graceful words can be – and fill my mouth and heart with them. Thank you that your truth-telling led to your condemnation – and my forgiveness. Amen.

Day 9: A Noble Wife

Proverbs

31¹⁰⁻¹¹ *A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.*

31¹⁶⁻¹⁷ *She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.*

31²⁰ *She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.*

31²⁶ *She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.*

31²⁸ *Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:*

31³⁰ *Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*

Many Christians have a negative view of the Bible's statements about women but really they shouldn't have. It is true that it was written in a patriarchal period of history but many of its ideas about women are revolutionary. In most societies of the time, women were often considered another species, actually sub-human. Not so in Scripture, for in the act of creation, God gives her an equal standing amongst men: **in the image of God he created humankind; male and female he created them** (Genesis 1:27). It is not surprising that unlike other cultures where marriage was simply a matter of convenience and men treated women as baby-producing machines rather than as partners to love, marriage is extolled by the Proverbians.

A husband should only seek love and sexual intimacy from his wife; another radical idea that can be found in Proverbs 5:15-19. Even by today's sexual standards, this is a revolutionary teaching. And so we hear in these verses how Christ-like a woman of 'noble character' is as a spouse. She truly is God's blessing to her husband.

Do we husbands thank the Lord for our wives? Do we praise them in public and wish to see her promoted and lifted up in the eyes of others? There is much food for thought here. A wife who displays a Christian dignity produces confidence in her family members. No one at home could consider her an embarrassment in public. On the contrary, even the leaders of a community (those who sit at the city gate) can recognise her virtue and great value.

Not all wives will be business women, 'buying property' or 'selling merchandise'. Not everyone will be successful in the eyes of the world. But every Christian wife can be a hard worker, industrious, and a wise instructor of God's deep truths. Above everything else, she fears the Lord, which means

emission standards, so a decree went out from the CEO that the problem should be fixed. And it was. The computer program governing the engine was carefully tweaked so that it would give the correct readings when the engine was being tested by the emission control testers. Problem solved! Profits maintained. Except that the whole process was a lie and the VW engine was exceeding legal standards by a multiple of ten. Sadly, it's not the only example I can think of where money has trumped morality. Tetra-ethyl lead. Asbestos. Channel Ten this week capitalising on a disgusting piece of moral stupidity on the part of a sportsman by showing it on prime-time television.

After a while, our sensibilities become blunted. We become so accustomed to dubious images and morally questionable behaviour in all areas of society that we hardly notice, but how can we teach our children what is upright and pure if we don't question its opposite? You can't dip clean water from a muddy stream, nor can you learn upright behaviour from a tainted society.

Paul has good advice in Philippians 4: 8-9. "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right ... if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things." We can also talk about such things, teach them to our children and each other and publish them abroad. We can display moral integrity at work and at home. We can encourage wholesome literature, wholesome entertainment, and wholesome relationships. So let's just get out there and do it.

The word I take with me today is: How are we going to explain all this to God?

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, keep my heart pure for the sake of your Son, who lived without sin for me. Amen.

Day 32: The Schemer

Proverbs

1¹⁰⁻¹¹ *My son, if sinful men entice you, do not give in to them. If they say, "Come along with us; let's lie in wait for innocent blood, let's ambush some harmless soul;*

1¹⁵⁻¹⁸ *my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into evil, they are swift to shed blood.*

How useless to spread a net where every bird can see it! These men lie in wait for their own blood; they ambush only themselves!

There are many more proverbs such as the group in Chapter 30 that begin, ‘two things...three things, four things’. But my favourite, which I end with here, is this one:

30¹⁵ The leech has two daughters. ‘Give! Give!’ they cry.

It certainly applies to the spongers we meet; always wanting but never contributing. However, the writer goes on to speak of the grave, a woman unable to have children, drought stricken land and fire. Unhappy people or desperate situations consume and tax our spirit. But we do not need to be cynical and meet life with bitter humour. We can trust, which is a beautiful state, a condition that brings hope and peace.

The word I take with me today is: In the follies of life I trust in Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, fill my heart with lightness when there is much I can be bitter about. Amen.

Day 31: Sin

Proverbs

6¹⁶⁻¹⁹ There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.
10¹⁸⁻¹⁹ He who conceals his hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool. When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.
20⁹ Who can say, “I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin”?
21⁶⁻⁸ A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapour and a deadly snare. The violence of the wicked will drag them away, for they refuse to do what is right. The way of the guilty is devious, but the conduct of the innocent is upright.

It is very difficult for a secular, humanist society such as ours to define sin. The novelist Dick Francis defined it as “an offence against God.” It’s a good definition, but if you don’t believe there’s a God, then you can’t offend against him, whatever you do. Sexual sin has almost ceased to exist, replaced by the concept of “consenting adults”. And in the business world, the sin of veniality is fine, as long as you don’t get caught. Greed far outweighs God.

I’ve mentioned Volkswagen before, but it’s interesting to have a closer look at what the company actually did. Their diesel engines did not meet USA

that she trusts the Lord and reverences him as the Saviour. You cannot get a greater treasure than that.

The word I take with me today is: I thank God for my wife.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, may I never forget the blessing of a Christian wife and mother. Help me to see past her faults, recognise her many gifts and love her as she deserves. Amen.

Day 10: Wine and Beer

Proverbs

20¹ Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.
21¹⁷ Whoever loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and olive oil will never be rich.
23²⁰⁻²¹ Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.
23²⁹⁻³⁰ Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.

After reading these verses we could add a few of our own. Who wears long sleeves to cover the track marks? Who has sudden rages and drug-induced psychotic episodes? Those who subject themselves to drugs, who live only for the next fix.

Once again, the writer of Proverbs takes an intensely pragmatic view. The advice is based on practical wisdom. If you spend too much time drinking and not enough time working; if you spend all your money on luxurious food and abundant wine, you’ll never be wealthy. This is most certainly true, but there’s something a bit awkward about these rules in a Christian context.

There’s nothing wrong with preparing a delicious meal from all the bounty of God’s creation and washing it down with a good wine or a cold beer. We’re not going to get to Heaven any quicker if we confine our intake to bread and water, unless we die of malnutrition, of course, and not to partake of God’s generosity looks to me more like ingratitude than Christian behaviour. We should enjoy what God has provided and be thankful for it.

The real issue here is where our priorities lie. What do we live for? What rules our lives? The choice offered to Christians is between the pleasures of the

flesh, physical delights, and the joy of the spirit and passion for spreading God's word. We don't abstain from alcoholic binges and other excesses simply so we can work longer hours and become rich, but because drunkenness and drug-taking and gross over-eating mean that we are no longer in control of our own choices. And if we live only for our own pleasure, we have fallen into idolatry.

We can celebrate our good food and wonderful wine. We can heap the plates, fill the glasses, invite the neighbours around, and tell them about God, who is responsible for all this bounty.

The word I take with me today is: Let's not abuse the generosity of God.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, do not let me be led astray by the pleasures of earthly delights, but fix my sight on the pleasure awaiting me in your heavenly glory. Amen.

Day 11: The Promiscuous Person

Proverbs

5³⁻⁵ The lips of an immoral woman are as sweet as honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil. But in the end she is as bitter as poison, as dangerous as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave.

5⁷⁻⁸ So now, my sons, listen to me. Never stray from what I am about to say: Stay away from her! Don't go near the door of her house!

6²⁵ Don't lust for the beauty of an immoral woman. Don't let her coy glances seduce you.

6²⁷⁻²⁸ Can a man scoop a flame into his lap and not have his clothes catch on fire? Can he walk on hot coals and not blister his feet?

6³² The man who commits adultery is an utter fool, for he destroys himself.

In the culture of ancient Israel, sexual temptation was hidden, private, and secretive. In twenty-first century Australia, it's right out in the open, with photoshopped images of women in skimpy bikinis pouting at us with plumped-up lips from billboards, or the ripped abs of male underwear models on our TV screens. We are surrounded by, and immersed in a culture of sexualisation, adultery, casual sex, and promiscuity. Just look at any TV sitcom – and measure how many seconds it takes before there is a joke based on sexual innuendo. Pornography has become normalized. People can access it at any time, with a device that they carry everywhere with them. In such an environment, how are we to heed the words of Proverbs to 'stay away' from

Day 30: A Wry View of Life

Proverbs

*16¹ To humans belong the plans of the heart,
but from the LORD comes the proper answer of the tongue.*

We often make wry observations of life, such as, "only the incompetent get to the top." There is a sarcastic or sardonic sense of fun in all of us. Rather than providing direct advice, like us, the Proverbians enjoyed poking fun at the people in a cynical way. Their humour had an edge. Here are a few examples of the many verses in Proverbs that reveal a wry view of life.

*10¹⁵ The wealth of the rich is their fortified city,
but poverty is the ruin of the poor.*

Christ told a story of poor old Lazarus placed at the gate of a rich man who cared nothing for his poor neighbour's fate except when it was too late and he was suffering in hell. It is true that today money does seem to be the answer to everything but the injustice human economic systems create will be judged one day. Read 19:7 as well.

*20¹⁴ "It's no good, it's no good!" says the buyer—
then goes off and boasts about the purchase.*

Some people have a gift at haggling and softer-hearted persons who have dropped their prices because of a hard-nosed buyer will know how true this is. As Christians engaged in buying and selling, the win-win approach is surely the correct one. This way, God blesses both purchaser and seller.

A number of verses in chapter 25 are similes, with one thing compared to another. Here are a few.

*25¹⁴ Like clouds and wind without rain
is one who boasts of gifts never given.*

*25¹⁷ Seldom set foot in your neighbour's house—
too much of you, and they will hate you.*

*25²⁰ Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day,
or like vinegar poured on a wound,
is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.*

Christ prophesied about his self-giving and then actually did it. And when he visited Zacchaeus' home he brought salvation and became a most welcome guest. His compassion, the feeling for victims of life came from deep within him, inspired confidence in people so that the neglected crowds, people who were like sheep without a shepherd, were convinced that they had a true Saviour.

Volkswagen. Sepp Blatter and FIFA. The Russian Athletics Federation. Vladimir Putin. Kim Jong Un. Bashir Assad. ISIS. James Packer and his gambling empire. Essendon Football Club.

What do all of these have in common? In the terms of our text, they have all strayed from the paths of the righteous. We defined “the righteous” on Day 3. They are the ones who put their trust in God. The people on the very incomplete list above have put their faith in other things. Money. Power. The need to win. Self-aggrandisement. Fame.

I admit to feeling a bit sorry for the Essendon players. (For those who missed it, most of the team have been banned from playing for twelve months for injecting banned, performance-enhancing substances.) The young blokes on the team were probably in very much the same situation as the simple young man of Proverbs 7:7. They were naïve, untutored, in need of wisdom, and they were not offered it. It doesn’t sound as though they got much support to make the morally correct choice. The pressure to conform was much greater than the pressure to do the right thing and a lot of the responsibility must be placed on the heads of the Club leaders.

Money and power are very seductive. Just imagine being able to have anything you want or doing just as you please whenever you like! We can see the consequences of those precise capabilities every time we open that glossy magazine in the dentist’s waiting room or watch tabloid television. All too often, the results are not pretty. And the damage and bloodshed that can ensue during the fight to achieve wealth and power are less pretty still.

Money and power are only good if they are used for good purposes. They are tools, just like spades and eggbeaters and laptops are tools. Their best uses are those laid out for us in God’s word; to help the poor, to bring justice to the oppressed, to spread the glorious news of salvation throughout the world.

The word I take with me today is: Do not envy the rich and powerful. Think of their responsibilities!

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, empty my heart of envy and covetous thoughts. Thank you for providing for me all that I need, every day, and keep my feet on the paths of righteousness, for the sake of Jesus, who died and rose to create righteousness for me. Amen.

sexual temptation and ‘not go near the door’ of its house? How are we to hear and heed Jesus’ words in the beatitudes that even looking at someone lustfully means we have committed adultery in our hearts (Matthew 5:27-28)?

As ‘good Christians’ most of us would never consider going to a prostitute or getting involved in an extramarital affair. But the sobering truth is that up to 30% of Christian men are caught up in addiction to pornography, and an increasing number of Christian women are getting trapped as well. Many women are addicted to the ‘relationship porn’ of soap operas or romance novels, fantasizing about ‘the perfect man’ who would fulfill all their needs and wants in relationship.

Psalm 119:9, 11 has been a powerful verse for me in shifting my thinking patterns in regard to sexual temptation. “How can a young man (or woman) keep his (or her) way pure? By living according to your word...I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” If you are caught in a cycle of sexual temptation or addiction, seek confession and absolution with a pastor or trusted fellow Christian – knowing that Jesus even forgives sexual sin AND gives the promise of restoration and a new life. He says to the woman caught in adultery: ‘Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more’ (John 8:11). But don’t stop there. Don’t get caught in the cycle of sin-confess-sin-confess, but rather, sin-confess-renounce-renew-resist. *Renounce* the images, fantasies or temptation. *Renew* your mind by the living word of God and *resist* the repeated temptation by speaking the Word of God.

Proverbs says: *Do not go near the door of her house* (i.e. the place of sexual temptation). God has given us a way out from sexual temptation – and it comes right at the beginning (the door) of temptation. Recognize your triggers to temptation. Call on the name of Jesus. He has been tempted in every way as you are, yet without sin. Use the living word of God. Hear the gospel and renew your mind.

The word I take with me today is: ‘How can I keep my way pure? By living according to your Word.’

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you have been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Protect me, and all your people, in this culture of overt sexual temptation. Help me to keep my mind pure, keep me from the door of temptation, forgive me when I fall, and restore and renew me in your grace and power. In your powerful name I pray. Amen.

Day 12: The Poor

Proverbs

*14³¹ Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.*

*23¹⁰⁻¹¹ Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of
the fatherless, for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against
you.*

*29⁷ The righteous care about justice for the poor,
but the wicked have no such concern.*

What a marvel it is that the Holy Scriptures say so much about the poor and how those better off are to think of themselves and respond to those less fortunate than they. Frequently, our Lord Jesus encouraged his followers to sell everything and give their wealth to the poor (Luke 12:33) or to invite the poor to the parties they hold rather than invite friends (Luke 14:13). Behind these words was the gospel ethic: since God saves us by an act of grace and not by our religious or social standing, then both poor and rich are on the same scale. Both are children of God by being justified by faith and are spiritual equals. What we have to remind ourselves is that where there is spiritual equality, there will also follow economic and social equality (read Galatians 3:28).

Now, in a heavily stratified community and culture, the Lord took a very critical view of the rich and a very sympathetic view of the poor. That was not normal. Usually, religion served the power structures in the ancient world and things became so corrupted that in Egypt and Rome, the kings called themselves gods. But in the Old and New Testament community governed by the true Lord of heaven and earth, people were instructed to consider the poor and treat them well because of God. God was righteous, uncorrupted by the lust for power and wealth, but driven by compassion and justice.

Behind the poor stands their Maker. We forget how incredible these words are. The Lord does not despise them because they have nothing but rather loves them because they are made in his image and are his 'off-spring'. To hurt them is to hurt God himself – strong reminder here of Matthew 25:40! The fact is, poor people do look inferior in a superficial and arrogant way of seeing things. A skinny person, in rags, eating off a dirt floor, with flies all about, or scratching around in a rubbish dump is degrading. But a person degraded by poverty ought to elicit our care and a sense of shared humanity.

People without money are without power. That is an awful reality but it is the truth. Big corporations, mining companies, local governors and so on, exploit

must be received as a gift from the Lord Jesus. He said this because in God's sight, even the saints fall short of what Christ expects of them and cannot meet the standards that would lead to eternal glory.

It is very interesting that the Proverbians were thinking of the impact on the social order, the economy and international policy that righteous people can have. Cities and nations cannot reach their potential unless people are godly and revere Jesus as the Lord. This might seem an audacious thing to say. But consider the impact Christians have had on our own nation. Following Christ has led to trust in business, the honouring of agreements and financial propriety. It has created organisations for learning such as schools and universities, institutions for welfare and health such as Life-Line, the Royal Flying Doctor Service etc. The union movement had as one of its slogans, Matthew 10:10, 'the worker is worthy of his wages', a word from the lips of Jesus because Christians were prominent in establishing rights for workers. I could go on but you see the point: Christians get organised. Clubs, associations, political parties and institutions are the way we work in society and if we adapt the principles of Christ in the political sphere, great blessing for the country will be the result. But that will depend on whether you want to lead a righteous life.

The word I take with me today is: Aim for righteousness.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, you know what will bring me honour and will lead to an inner nobility. My Lord Jesus has shown what a true human being is. Help me today to reach the potential the Holy Spirit wishes to bring out in my speech, in goodness, just actions, patience in suffering, and service of others. Amen.

Day 29: The Plans of the Righteous

Proverbs

*4¹⁸⁻¹⁹ The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter
till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do
not know what makes them stumble.*

*12⁵ The plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is
deceitful.*

*24¹⁻² Do not envy the wicked, do not desire their company; for their hearts plot
violence and their lips talk about making trouble.*

quote Luther, “God richly and daily provides us with all that we need to support this body and life.”

The word I take with me today is: God provides for his faithful people.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, there are so many things around us that can harm us, physically and spiritually. Remind us that you always do protect us with your mighty power. Amen.

Day 28: God Exalts the Righteous

Proverbs

- 10⁶ Blessings crown the head of the righteous,
but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.*
- 10¹⁶ The wages of the righteous is life,
but the earnings of the wicked are sin and death.*
- 10²⁵ When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone,
but the righteous stand firm forever.*
- 11¹⁰ When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices;
when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy.*
- 14³⁴ Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people.*

I know plenty of righteous people who have difficult lives, struggling to pay bills or enduring chronic illness. There are many Christian people who suffer persecution. They are kidnapped, sold as sex slaves or languishing in prisons awaiting execution for apostasy or breaking blasphemy laws. However, though there are many saints facing great hardship and death, these passages still hold true. Generally speaking, those who follow the Lord are looked after by him, cared for, shepherded, supported, corrected, forgiven and blessed.

On the other hand, those who choose to follow crime, tell lies, slander people, scheme, act unjustly and oppress others, eventually their approach to life catches up with them. Many evil ways of living have within them a built-in punishment. A hoon driver hits a power pole, a drug addict lives miserably, a sexually immoral person suffers divorce or feels degraded and used by others. The apostle Paul may have had these verses in mind when he said, ‘the wages of sin are death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.’ (Romans 6:23). Flouting the Lord’s commands comes at a great price. But Paul is not thinking exactly as the Proverbians were. For them, living according to God’s will brought a reward in this life, which, as I have said, will generally lead to a secure, prosperous and blessed life. Paul was thinking of a forgiven, restored and redeemed life that cannot come from anything we do but

the poor. How often do we not hear of people in bonded labour or slaves in Dubai? We, who are the baptized, we must fight for justice against the fat cats of our society and in other countries. Heaven forbid that we should admire the rich. Our desire ought to be for the powerless because they have a defender who is Christ himself. If we do this, we shall be on the winning side.

The word I take with me today is: God cares about justice for the poor.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, I thank-you that you have blessed me with opportunities and a steady income. Help me to care for the disadvantage and to share the surplus I have with the poor of the world. Amen.

Day 13: Instruction

Proverbs

- 6²⁰⁻²³ My son, keep your father’s command and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. Bind them always on your heart; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you. For this command is a lamp. This teaching is a light, and correction and instruction are the way to life.*
- 13¹⁴ The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, turning a person from the snares of death.*
- 19² Desire without knowledge is not good – how much more will hasty feet miss the way!*

The RSV translation of the introduction to Proverbs states that the book’s purpose is “that men may know wisdom and instruction.” The word translated as “instruction” can also mean “education”, “correction” and “reproof”.

The writers of Proverbs equate wisdom with knowledge, and folly with the deliberate and wilful refusal to acquire knowledge. To acquire knowledge, their hearers must also accept correction and reproof. (And just in passing, mothers were equal with fathers in handing on life lessons to their sons and daughters.)

Nobody likes being told that they are wrong. Very few people care to have their behaviour corrected. Our political landscape is littered with the metaphorical corpses of those with more ambition than sense; who have refused to abide by the normal social rules, or thought that the rules somehow didn’t apply to them; who have arrogantly broken the law, thinking no-one would find out; and who have been brought down by their own foolishness. I could provide some current examples, but by the time this booklet is published,

others will doubtless have presented themselves. And of course, by refusing to admit their mistakes, they look even more like idiots when their deeds finally catch up with them.

Even in our secular society, those who humbly and graciously accept correction or who are willing to admit they may have made a mistake look a lot better than those whose arrogance won't allow them to abase themselves. The writers of Proverbs understood this very well. Their advice is intensely practical, but the intent of the book is not Machiavellian. They aren't recommending a moral course of behaviour simply because it works and will allow their listeners to get ahead in life. The teachings of this book are founded on the knowledge of the will of God. They firmly believe and teach that God will look after His faithful people.

The word I take with me today is: Live in the light of the wisdom of God.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, I don't like being told I'm wrong. Help me to accept correction gracefully, so I can live a life more pleasing to you. Amen.

Day 14: The Fear of the Lord

Proverbs

1¹⁻³ These are the proverbs of Solomon, David's son, king of Israel. Their purpose is to teach people wisdom and discipline, to help them understand the insights of the wise. Their purpose is to teach people to live disciplined and successful lives, to help them do what is right, just, and fair.

1⁷ Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

3⁷⁻⁸ Don't be impressed with your own wisdom. Instead, fear the LORD and turn away from evil. Then you will have healing for your body and strength for your bones.

15¹⁶ Better to have little, with fear for the LORD, than to have great treasure and inner turmoil.

'The Fear of the Lord' is not a phrase we hear very often these days. Perhaps we hear a lot about God's love and grace, or about how God wants good things for us...but *fearing* God? What does that mean? Should we really be afraid of God?

Proverbs insists that 'the Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge.' It's part of true humility. 'Fear of the Lord' recognises God's true identity – and my own. It means recognising that *God is God*, and *I am not*. Sounds pretty basic, doesn't it? But getting this wrong – failing to fear God – is at the

Day 27: Salvation

Proverbs

3⁵⁻⁶ Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight.

18¹⁰ The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.

28¹³ Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

29²⁵ Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.

Proverbs is not a book of prophecy. It deals more with ordinary, practical matters of behaviour than with what will happen in the future. So when the writers of Proverbs think of salvation, they are not really looking at salvation as we understand it; that is, life eternal with Christ; they are more concerned with preserving life in a purely bodily sense on earth.

Charles Pellegrino is an archaeologist who describes himself as an agnostic. He has written a fascinating book called *Return to Sodom and Gomorrah* which looks at the Biblical landscape from an historical and archaeological point of view. In this book, he studies the long, ongoing history of violence which has shadowed the landscape in this part of the world, and which continues to do so, and comes to the conclusion that it is an inevitable result of the geography of the region. The inhabitants have never known lasting peace. My point is that the people of Biblical time needed an earthly saviour and a bodily refuge as much as they needed those things in the spiritual sense. Their lives and well-being were always at risk.

The same was true in Luther's time. In 1529, Suleiman the Magnificent was laying siege to Vienna, capital of Austria, and the Christian inhabitants needed earthly, physical salvation, right then. If they prayed, "Deliver us from the hand of the Turk," as one contemporary source records, then their prayers were answered, because Suleiman's failure turned the tide of the Ottoman conquest and meant that the German states did not fall into Moslem hands.

We are so accustomed to "spiritualising" salvation, thinking about it only in terms of eternity, that we forget, I think, that God also wants to look after our physical well-being and safety right here and now. In the prayer Jesus taught us, we pray "Give us this day our daily bread," and "Deliver us from evil." That's today's bread and today's deliverance and today's salvation. And to

Proverbs says that friendship goes beyond simple shared interests or ‘You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours’ type acquaintance. There are elements of loyalty even in the midst of adversity; of sticking to each other in the tough times. A real friend, says Proverbs, sticks closer than a brother. There is a bond that is forged in friendship that can be even stronger than the ties of family.

Who are your friends? Who are the people you would call or text when the chips are down, when the news is not good, when you’re under temptation, or when you have some great news that you just need to share with someone? Take a few moments to thank God for those people in your life right now.

On the other hand, who are you friends to? Who has your number and is not afraid to use it in times of trouble or joy? Pause again and pray for those people in their need, sorrow and joy.

Real friendship and real community takes work and effort, trust, honesty, shared experience, shared suffering, shared enjoyment. But the rewards of genuine friendship and authentic community are impossible to box or measure. They make us more fully human, more alive, and draw us deeper into the image of God.

God’s word assures us that God wants us to be his friends too. In John 15 Jesus says, ‘Greater love has no one than this: that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command...I no longer call you servants...instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I have learned from my Father I made known to you.’

What an amazing joy and privilege that we should be called friends of God through Jesus! What a great blessing to be able to share friendship with others and deepen their humanity!

The word I take with me today is: There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Prayer: Triune God, I humbly thank you for the gifts you give me through genuine friendship. Thank you for my friends (you might like to name them) and thank you for those who consider me their friends. Through Jesus you have called me to be not only your servant, but your friend. Jesus, my friend, thank you for sticking closer than a brother to me. May I be a friend to others who draws out, evokes, and enhances their humanity. In your name I pray. Amen.

heart of the first and ongoing temptation that Satan offers human beings: ‘You will be like God.’ It is also at the heart of the first and most important commandment: ‘I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before (or beside) me.’ In all of Martin Luther’s explanations to each of the Ten Commandments, he begins by saying, ‘We are to *fear*, love and trust God so that ...’

Fearing God means knowing and acting on the truth that God is the greatest and most important Being. It means holding God’s view on something as the most important. It means being more afraid of, and paying more respect to, what God thinks about something than what anyone else thinks about something. So often, I am more afraid of what *others might think of me* for doing something, or refraining from something, than about *what God thinks* and *what God’s word says*.

Fear of the Lord recognises that God is holy, powerful, awesome, and good – far beyond anything we can imagine or grasp. The only proper response in the face of God’s identity and God’s attributes is awe-filled wonder, trust, fear, and love. At first glance, the fear of the Lord sounds like something demeaning. But ultimately, it is liberating. If I fear God, I don’t need to fear others’ opinions, or what might happen, or guilt, or accusation. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Author Tim Chester put it this way:

God is great – so we don’t have to be in control.

God is glorious – so we don’t have to fear others.

God is good – so we don’t have to look elsewhere for our satisfaction.

God is gracious – so we don’t have to prove ourselves.

The word I take with me today is: ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.’

Prayer: Lord, you are Holy, awesome, powerful, and actively good. Increase in me a proper fear of the Lord. Help me know and recognise who you are and who I am. As I grow in the fear of the Lord, please reduce my fear of people and of circumstances. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Day 15: Patience and a Bad Temper

Proverbs

- 14²⁹ *Whoever is patient has great understanding,
but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.*
15¹⁸ *A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict,
but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.*
19¹¹ *A person's wisdom yields patience;
it is to one's glory to overlook an offense.*
25¹⁵ *Through patience a ruler can be persuaded,
and a gentle tongue can break a bone.*

We all have some unattractive features, which our sinful nature exploits mercilessly. If this is confession time then I have to admit that impatience and a bad temper are mine. However, that it is not so obvious to many, family excluded of course, is that with the Spirit's help I do try to exercise some self-control. It is an amazing thing that many problems resolve themselves simply through the passage of time and therefore waiting and avoiding a hasty action leads to a happy result.

Impatience often leads to foolish errors of judgement. A more understanding person will seek further information, look for advice and be more thoughtful about long term plans and consequences. These things lead to a much more considered action.

It is how the Proverbians thought of patience and its role in relationships that is really intriguing. Our Lord Jesus did not retaliate when he was slapped by the High Priest or respond when soldiers blind-folded him and began to throw punches at him. He was the perfect example of self-control. When his disciples, especially the inner twelve, began to argue about the desirable ministerial positions in Jesus' government or to seek revenge on unresponsive towns, our Lord exercised tremendous patience with them. He instructed them in the dangers of power and how in his kingdom the least should be served as the greatest are, and that the pathway to achievement is through sacrifice and humble service. Our Lord was the great reconciler when tempers were frayed and people felt provoked.

When we exercise patience we have a calming effect on others. It is tempting to take sides and chastise the hot-headed person but in a dispute, the person who has learnt self-control can win people over by gentleness and calling for moderation. We have our sensitivities but perhaps avoiding an overreaction will give us time to reflect on how important the dispute really is.

accusation, often with very little evidence. Gossips don't build each other up; they tear each other down. Gossip can destroy reputation and undermine social standing, frequently without the victim even being aware that they are being targeted.

The writers of Proverbs were familiar with the pernicious consequences of gossip. It's no new scourge. The question is: what do we, as Christians, do about it?

When it comes to discussing someone else's behaviour, we have to remember that we're all in the same boat. We all have the same problem with sin. As Luther said, we all daily have to fight the "Old Adam" within us. Given that, there are a few things we can do, depending on the circumstances.

First of all, the story stops with us. We don't pass it on. We might tell the disseminator that we didn't want to know that. We might even, as lovingly as we can, point out the consequences that can arise from that sort of careless talk. And with the help of God we can try to turn evil to good, because gossip, nasty though it might be, can offer a very valuable pointer as to where our care and prayers can be best directed.

The word I take with me today is: Where gossip leads, unhappiness is sure to follow.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, Jesus your Son had a lot to say about the damage that our tongues can do. Help me to say only words that are kind, loving and beneficial to others. Amen.

Day 26: Friendship

Proverbs

- 17¹⁷ *A friend is always loyal, and a brother is born to help in time of need.*
18²⁴ *There are "friends" who destroy each other, but a real friend sticks closer than a brother.*
19²² *Loyalty makes a person attractive. It is better to be poor than dishonest.*
27¹⁰ *Never abandon a friend—either yours or your father's. When disaster strikes, you won't have to ask your brother for assistance. It's better to go to a neighbour than to a brother who lives far away.*

Friendship is one of God's good gifts to people in the realm of creation! We are created to be fulfilled in relationships, in the image of the triune God who has always existed as the Community of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

about “me, myself and I.” In this state we are disconnected from God, ourselves and others.

We have all seen examples of pride. We might have been proud ourselves at one time or another. We are told that pride is a bad thing. But why is this so? It is because in pride, people try to take up the status and position of God refusing to acknowledge their dependence upon Him. They go so far as to contest Him for supremacy. In doing so, they cut themselves off from God. Consequently God does not support and sustain them. Hence the fall so commonly seen after pride.

But God, being the loving God that he is, brings us back to Himself through disgrace, humbling us. We eventually understand that the source of our lives and all else is God. We go inwards, in humility evaluating our motives, ensuring that as far as humanly possible, we are in God, in Christ. Today’s texts tell us that these steps will eventually lead to wisdom and honour.

The word I take with me today is: My heavenly Father is all loving. He alone can sustain my life and lead me where I need to be.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank you for all that you have done for me. Help me to be humble, consciously depending on you alone in confidence. Amen.

Day 25: Strife and Gossip

Proverbs

10¹² Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs.

17⁹ Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.

26²⁰⁻²¹ Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down. As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome person for kindling strife.

There’s a form of conversation which conveys what I like to think of as necessary social information. It occurs when a small group of people sit down to discuss the activities, reprehensible or otherwise, of someone who is not present. Parents, families, teachers, social workers and anyone in the business of pastoral care have this sort of discussion all the time. Its intention is benevolent and the results are often helpful to the person concerned.

Then there’s gossip. The mechanism of gossip is exactly the same but the results are very different because the intention is malicious. Gossip is

I have learnt how powerful patience with people is. It brings people together and unifies a group of Christians. Rather than demanding, threatening, or yelling, the person who displays this gift of the Spirit is able to persuade and influence people. A warrior can storm a city and I think hot tempered people believe this is the way to get somewhere with others. A wise and patient person will gently persuade and get others to come out from behind their walls.

The word I take with me today is: God give me patience; straight away!

Prayer: Dear heavenly Spirit, you fill your children with fruits of faith such as love, joy, peace, self-control and faithfulness. Grant me patience so that I do not become irritable or flare up over little things. Help me to avoid short cuts with others and seek a quieter, patient and gentle way with them. Amen.

Day 16: Being Careful

Proverbs

6¹⁻⁵ My son, if you have put up security for your neighbour, if you have shaken hands in pledge for a stranger, you have been trapped by what you said, ensnared by the words of your mouth. So do this, my son, to free yourself, since you have fallen into your neighbour’s hands: Go—to the point of exhaustion – and give your neighbour no rest! Allow no sleep to your eyes, no slumber to your eyelids. Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter, like a bird from the snare of the fowler.

14¹⁸ Plans are established by seeking advice; so if you wage war, obtain guidance.

21²⁰ The wise store up choice food and olive oil, but fools gulp theirs down.

22³ The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.

I once heard it said that ‘There are only two types of pleasure in this world: true pleasure and false pleasure. The only difference is that with *true pleasure*, we pay the price *beforehand*, and with *false pleasure*, we pay the price *afterwards*.’ (This might include, for instance, paying a price in guilt, shame, or broken relationships for false pleasure.) This saying has always stuck with me, and try as I might, I can find no exception to it.

Yet in an era of instant gratification, when tangible money often doesn’t change hands during a transaction, it’s easy to lose sight of the distinction between true pleasure and false pleasure. The true cost of purchases on a credit card, for instance, often only comes at the end of the month or even later. In

such a culture, the values of prudence and carefulness are often mocked or disparaged.

Are our spending habits different as Christians from the culture around us? One Christian man I know suggests having each credit card in a ‘credit card condom’ – a little envelope or similar that has ‘**Do I really need this?**’ written in bold letters on the outside, kept apart from the wallet so it is hard to access, in order to break the connection between the *desire to purchase* and the *action of purchasing*.

The Book of Proverbs suggests that if we have fallen into a cycle of debt (which comes from what I have defined as false pleasure) we should work tirelessly to get out of it. Otherwise we will be entrapped like a bird in a net.

It’s not only money. Sometimes the consequences of our *other* actions can take a long time to catch up with us too. But they inevitably will. The virtue of prudence (or carefulness) takes into account much more than *momentary desires* when considering whether to do something or not. Have I taken into account the advice and wisdom of others? Do I have the long term view in mind? Will my action have adverse consequences in my life or others’ lives? Is this action going to bring about good for people other than myself, as well as me? When do I pay the price for this action – beforehand, through careful planning, preparation, or saving, or afterwards, through debt, guilt, shame, or broken relationship? In short, will my action be consistent with true pleasure or false pleasure?

The word I take with me today is: The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me think carefully and prudently about my actions and decisions. Let it not be that my momentary desires draw me in to acting carelessly, but help me take account of the bigger picture. Give me the humility to seek advice and look more broadly. May my life reflect true wisdom and my actions and decisions lead to true pleasure. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

incarnation Jesus brought that wisdom to dwell amongst us, teaching and healing us. He came as the authoritative teacher of Wisdom.

He sent us the Spirit. Through the gift of wisdom, the Holy Spirit enables us to see how good the Lord is, to have a taste of the things of God, to sense the divine in all things. Passing up this banquet is really not an option!

The word I take with me today is: I have been invited to the banquet of life by Wisdom herself. I respond to her invitation with immense gratitude.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank you for inviting me to your banquet. Help me realise the immensity of your invitation. Amen.

Day 24: Pride

Proverbs

11² *When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.*

16¹⁸ *Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.*

16²⁵ *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*

18¹² *Before his downfall a man's heart is proud, but humility comes before honour.*

21²⁴ *The proud and arrogant man--"Mocker" is his name; he behaves with overweening pride.*

27¹ *Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.*

29²³ *A man's pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honour.*

In everyday speech the word “pride” denotes a feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one’s own achievements, the achievements of one’s close associates, or from qualities or possessions that are widely admired. Pride can include consciousness of one’s own dignity, self-respect or value. In these forms of pride we feel connected to others and to ourselves. However the word “pride” can also refer to an inflated sense of one’s personal status or accomplishments. It is in this sense that it is often used synonymously with hubris or arrogance.

Pride was the sin that transformed Lucifer, an anointed cherub of God into Satan, the devil (Ezek 28:12). It was the sin of pride which first led Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, helped on by the devil (Gen 3:4-6).

The sin of pride is bottomless fixation with the self, the ego. It is dependence on and confidence in self alone. It seeks to take all the credit. Pride is all

The word I take with me today is: God has given generously to us so that we can give generously to others.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, your generosity is overwhelming. Grant me the grace and the opportunity to pass it on in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Day 23: Wisdom

Proverbs

9¹⁻⁶ Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn out its seven pillars. She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table. She has sent out her maids, and she calls from the highest point of the city. "Let all who are simple come in here!" she says to those who lack judgment. "Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding."
9¹⁰⁻¹² "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. For through me your days will be many, and years will be added to your life. If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you; if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer."

Have you ever been to a banquet? I have. It was memorable for many reasons. Not only was the food and wine superb, but I felt welcomed. I was nurtured in every way: not only through the food and drink, but also through the company. The experience was nutrition for the mind, body and spirit.

Banquets are special meals celebrating important events. They are never mere mealtimes. There is a formal guest list, an “in” group. Others are not invited, not included. In years past, and even today, being placed close to the host and the quality of the food and wine are indicative of status. Refusal to attend sends a powerful negative message defying the influence and honour of the host.

In scripture banquets often mark God’s intervention. They demonstrate His abundant provision. Today’s text tells us that we are invited by Wisdom herself. She is to be our host. She has prepared food, wine and table personally, attending to every detail. She calls the simple, the less discerning, us, to Wisdom, to her. And, as in secular life, the appropriate response to an invitation from a person of high station would be acceptance. So when Wisdom calls, acceptance is top priority, completely non-negotiable.

Jesus, the Word of God, is the total and adequate expression of the wisdom of God since where God’s Word resides, there also is his Wisdom. In his

Day 17: Kindness

Proverbs

14²¹ He who despises his neighbour sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.
14³¹ He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.
22⁹ A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor.

Our text calls us to kindness.

I recently heard someone say “the magic of kindness has the power to change the world.” I thought about that firstly for a minute and then was compelled to think about it for a very long time. I looked, listened, and pondered. I looked for examples of kindness in the people around me, in scripture and in e-media. There I saw examples of kindness, but also anger, division, poverty, hopelessness, war, and bullying. I also saw “shades of grey” encouraging me to ask: “What is kindness anyway?”

Dictionaries tell us that kindness is the quality of being friendly, generous and considerate to another. Kindness acts out of concern, affection, and goodwill. Paul identifies kindness as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Kindness is about relationship. Through kindness a person might offer help or support to a person in need. So the practice of kindness requires that we are present to the circumstances facing others. We take our focus from “self” to “the other.”

Recently I heard of a school project calling students to practice kindness. The teacher distributed “Acts of Kindness” cards. Each card suggested a specific act of kindness with a simple set of instructions. The student was asked to perform the act and pass the card on to someone else to keep the kindness going. In time, the school community noted that participants became cheerier and felt more powerful. They observed the infectious nature of kindness. They realise that people see opportunities for doing kindness everywhere once they are conscious of it. They see that sometimes it is like a boomerang, coming back to them when they need it most. They realise that one act of kindness can have unknown and profound consequences. The extraordinary effects of ordinary kindness can change this world and it is accessible to everyone.

The word I take with me today is: In practicing kindness our hearts open, our relationships with others grow and we become closer to God.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, you call me to kindness. Help me open my heart to the needy. Help me see the needs of those around me. Help me respond with kindness. Amen.

Day 18: How You Speak

Proverbs

15¹ A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

15²⁸ The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.

16²⁴ Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.

The handbook for first-year Business Studies used to contain a little model of behaviour called the seesaw principle. It works like this. When two people are on a seesaw, only one person can be up at a time. The other person has to be down. So, if you are not feeling very good about yourself; if your self-image has taken a battering for whatever reason; one way to put yourself up again is to put someone else down. Hence; bullying, bitchiness, gossip, rumour, slander, defamation, lying, plagiarism, cheating and taking credit which doesn't belong to you. And on and on and on.

Our job as Christians is to build each other up, not tear each other down. Unfortunately, tearing other people down is often not only more effective in a purely worldly sense but also a lot more fun. Oh the joy in watching the poor victim cringe!

And how hard do we find it to apologise? Business, politics and many secular cultures see an apology as a sign of weakness, a chink in the armour. So they insert the blade. The fear of being ridiculed is a very powerful incentive not to return a gentle answer, but an even more powerful incentive is the fact that we don't like diminishing ourselves in our own eyes. All too often, our ego and sense of self-worth are strongly allied with being right, which makes it very difficult to admit that we might have been wrong.

An object lesson in the value of a soft answer is provided in 1 Kings 12: 3-10, where we see Rehoboam, who was the son of Solomon and should have known better, returning a harsh, unwise answer to the people of Israel. He thought he was being clever, and he drove the northern kingdom into rebellion.

Day 22: Money and Greed

Proverbs

*15²⁷ The greedy bring ruin to their households,
but the one who hates bribes will live.*

*28⁸ Whoever increases wealth by taking interest or profit from the poor
amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor.*

*28²⁰ A faithful person will be richly blessed,
but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished.*

This section isn't just about exploiting the poor. It's also about living your financial life with integrity, and that isn't always as easy as it sounds. For example, we've been doing some renovating. The young tradie who fixed the ceilings offered us a discount for cash but we said we'd rather pay by direct debit into his bank account. So he sent us a revised bill with 10% added, which wouldn't have been any more money for him but covered his GST, which would have to be paid on a bank transaction. In other words, what he offered us wasn't a true discount but an opportunity for theft from the government, and he probably didn't even realise. Anyway, we paid it, but I suspect he thought we were nuts.

Probably, most Australian Christians have an ambivalent attitude about money, because by world standards we are all very well off. Nobody in the country needs to starve, or remain illiterate, or die of preventable disease, because there is a public welfare system set up to take care of that. And although a lot of modern, politically correct scholars would like to forget it, that same public welfare system was set up by our Christian forebears who believed that the wealthy among us had, under God, a duty to care for the poor. I know that the system is far from perfect and is subject to rotting and so on, but it is nevertheless fundamentally well-meaning and appropriate and should be supported.

And that brings me back to where I came in. In this country, we care for the poor indirectly by paying our taxes, which means I will front up for the GST. But my responsibility doesn't actually end there, because, regardless of what the ads might say, it isn't my money. It's God's money, and he expects me to be a good steward. I'm not suggesting I should cry "Corban" (Matt 15:5) and neglect my responsibilities to my family. It's just that I also have responsibilities in the wider community. It is right that I should contribute to charity, donate to the church and be hospitable and generous to other people at all times, because I do those things for Christ.

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:20,21)

We can see the problem. It was not bad planning that would undo the farmer but his selfish life that had no place for God and the divine quality of compassion for the poor that would bring him to a sticky end.

Seven out of the nine references to planning in the book of Proverbs have to do with the Lord’s purposes, his plans and will. The other two have to do with the advantage of many advisers and the need for a wise person to help you formulate a sound plan from the vague promptings you might have deep within the heart. The farmer in our Lord’s parable didn’t reckon with God’s ultimate purposes for his life. He imagined he did not need to consult with anyone and could act like a little god of the universe.

The positive message here is to talk over one’s plans with our heavenly Father. Lay out all your ideas and dreams before him because he wants to bless our lives and guide them towards his good ends. Prayer is thus, not a process to exert our will on the Father but to be open to his leading, to discern what he is doing with our lives and work within the boundaries and constraints we happen to be in.

The Proverbians are advocating a humble attitude to life and to God. The Holy Spirit has a bigger picture of the universe and can see a good end when that is not clear to us. In our thinking of the future we need to be careful we do not end up fighting against the Spirit and forcing situations and people to fit in with our ideas of how things should turn out. Of course we should have a strategy for a business, the mission of the church and the direction of our own lives. However, the outcome rests with the Lord. It is true, in prayer we can ask the Father to adapt to us but we also must be ready to adapt to him.

The word I take with me today is: Commit your way to the Lord!

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, you have bought my life with your own life. Since you have purchased me from death and God’s judgement, help me to live for you. May every thought, every good idea, and every plan of my life be given to you and be carried out under your guidance and blessing. Amen.

Our Saviour did not see gentleness as weakness, or humility as shameful. So before we criticise, or push our own agenda, we need to stop and consider and as Paul says, “encourage each other in love.”

The word I take with me today is: Think before you speak.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, grant that I may speak only words that are pleasing to you and that will advance your kingdom. Amen.

Day 19: Judgement and Discipline

Proverbs

3¹² For the LORD disciplines those he loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights.

28⁹⁻¹⁰ God detests the prayers of a person who ignores the law. Those who lead good people along an evil path will fall into their own trap, but the honest will inherit good things.

29¹⁷ Discipline your children, and they will give you peace of mind and will make your heart glad.

How are we to understand the ‘law of God’ and God’s judgement?

Is God a fearsome judge, just waiting to ‘catch us out’ in some sin or mistake – something like a ‘cosmic parking inspector’ waiting to slap us with a penalty for doing the wrong thing? This view is not uncommon, even among Christians, when you scratch the surface. Or, on the other hand, does the universe operate on the law of karma, so that bad things we do will come back to bite us in this or some future life?

God’s *law* in the Old Testament refers to the word *torah*, which means ‘instruction.’ The Old Testament makes it clear that God’s law is a reflection of the character of God, and that his giving of the Law, especially the Ten Commandments, comes out of a context of loving *relationship* with a people that he has rescued and made his own. Exodus 20:1 introduces the Ten Commandments in this way: ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the Land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.’ The law of God is not an arbitrary set of rules dropped from heaven by a distant God, but is designed to express, protect and enhance relationships and human wellbeing. As a loving parent disciplines a child in order to help that child to grow, be safe, and develop, so God gives shape to human existence through his law.

So what about judgement? Proverbs 28:9 says that ‘God detests the prayers of a person who ignores the law.’ Proverbs declares that people who intentionally

lead others into evil will themselves be destroyed. The law of God does have an objective reality. Because it reflects God's character, it cannot simply be dismissed or ignored without genuine, deathly consequences. Someone has said, 'You cannot break the law of God. You can only break *yourself* on the law.'

As Christians, we know and understand that God himself has taken on the genuine, deathly consequences of all lawbreaking, all sin, and all evil. He has done this in the atoning death of Jesus. Now, as children of God, God disciplines us, forms us and shapes us, so that we may not continue in evil – with all its deathly consequences – but live in a way that delights in God's instruction, his Torah, his law.

The word I take with me today is: For the Lord disciplines those he loves, just as a father corrects a child in whom he delights.

Prayer: Lord, if your law were not an expression of your loving discipline and relationship, I could expect nothing but fearsome judgment from you. And yet you have taken the depth of that judgment into yourself through Jesus. Discipline me and shape me to delight in your instruction. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 20: The Eyes of the Lord

Proverbs

5²¹ *The LORD sees clearly what a man does, examining every path he takes.*

15³ *The LORD is watching everywhere, keeping his eye on both the evil and the good.*

5¹¹ *Even Death and Destruction hold no secrets from the LORD. How much more does he know the human heart!*

16² *People may be pure in their own eyes, but the LORD examines their motives.*

In the fantasy cycle *The Lord of the Rings*, the powerful evil enemy Sauron is represented as a single malevolent Eye (yes, capitalised!) which can turn its gaze in any direction. The Eye of Sauron has the power to see people's intentions and thoughts, and bend their will to Sauron's (which is ultimately a will to power and destruction). Some of the most frightening scenes of the book and the movies are when the Eye of Sauron is seeking out individuals to try to corrupt or terrify them.

The idea that the Lord sees everything, including the thoughts and intentions of the heart, could likewise be a terrifying one if we paused to think. Not only our public actions, but also our motives and desires, are open to the Lord. Hebrews 4:13 says 'Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.' There is indeed an element of judgement in God's omniscience. The Lord knows and sees the human heart, according to Proverbs. Evil and sin have nowhere to hide. However, unlike Sauron, the 'eyes of the Lord' – God's vision of what is really true in the spiritual realm – are not malevolent. The Lord's will is not to destroy – but rather to call to repentance, to restore and renew, to turn people from evil, to bring them to do good. 1 Peter 3:10-12 says: "The *eyes* of the Lord are on the *righteous*, and his *ears* are attentive to their cry, but the *face* of the Lord is against those who do evil." Because of Jesus' atoning death and life-giving resurrection for us, we are 'righteous' in God's eyes, right with him. The eyes of the Lord are *for* us – they are the eyes of a loving parent, seeking to discipline, protect, correct and encourage.

The word I take with me today is: The Lord is watching everywhere, keeping his eye on both the evil and the good.

Prayer: Lord God, help me be conscious that nothing is hidden from your sight, and that I will have to give account of my actions, motives and thoughts on the day of judgment. You see my heart. I give thanks to you that through Jesus, you have changed my heart, and that your eyes look on us with favour. May my motives and actions reflect my identity in Christ, this day and each day. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Day 21: Your Plans

Proverbs

16¹ *To humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the proper answer of the tongue.*

16³⁻⁴ *Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans. The LORD works out everything to its proper end—even the wicked for a day of disaster.*

16³³ *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.*

Our Lord Jesus told a parable about a rich farmer who did not have enough space to store his surplus grain. He pulled down his old barns to build bigger ones. Seems perfectly sensible until you hear the punch line: