

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Proverbs 4:10-23

September 5, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

School starts Tuesday. Which means Tuesday morning there will be pride, pictures, and parental admonitions: "Listen to your teacher." "Be nice to others." "Eat the food I packed for you." Some of these bits of advice become general nuggets of wisdom shared by a society. "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." "Don't put all your eggs in one basket." "You can't judge a book by its cover."

Our parochial school at Immanuel is the best thing around, but there's a problem common with any parochial school: some parents send their children not from the conviction of a Christian worldview, but out of a desire to inculcate good morals. Of course, good morals are a good thing. And we even find this sort of thing in the New Testament. 1 Cor. 15:33, "*Bad company corrupts good morals.*" Eph. 5:16, "*Make the most of your time, because the days are evil.*"

This is the stuff of Aesop's fables, which end with little proverbs like "Self-help is the best help," "Slow but steady wins the race," and "Fair weather friends are not worth much." Everyone should read Aesop's fables. Every child should learn good morals.

But good morals are not Christianity. Muslim and Mormon, Buddhist and Baptist can all have good morals. But good morals are not Christianity.

Thus the worst thing we can do is dive into the Old Testament book of Proverbs, from which we heard today, and simply find there a program for personal improvement. There is good advice in the book. It's the kind of advice a father gives to his son, heading off to school. "**Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many.**" In other words, "Listen to your parents." That's good advice. Things will go better

for you. But you'll still die. And if you come away a moralist, that is, somebody convinced he's a "good person," then you'll die a hypocrite.

Everybody thinks he's a good person. Catch virtually anyone redhanded committing a crime, and they will tell you, "That's not me; I'm a good person." How easy to say, "What a hypocrite! I'm not like that."

But you? You've probably learned enough of the Word of God to know the Scriptural confession, "I am sinful and unclean." Learn a little more and you know you're supposed to confess that you, like St. Paul, are "chief of sinners." How then can you still harbor grudges? Why do you lie awake resenting the person who lied to you, betrayed you, harmed your reputation? Admit it: you think you are better than *that* person, the one who did you wrong. Repent.

Repent, and see too that the answer is not in being a better moralist. Today's section from the Book of Proverbs is titled in one commentary I looked at, "Advice for Living a Righteous Life." Wrong! If that were even possible, then there would be no reason to even bother with reading the Epistle lesson. We certainly wouldn't need the Gospel. We could gather each Sunday and simply listen to the Proverbs. Smash the crucifix and put up two tablets with the Ten Commandments engraved upon them. Put the law up there. But Christianity is not moralism. Christ crucified is the answer to the Law's impossible demands.

At the heart of the book of Proverbs is this saying: "**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.**" Worldly wisdom may be found in eating a healthy diet, exercising, being nice to other people, showing up on time, working hard, keeping your word. Yet do all these things and you may still suffer; meanwhile, others will succeed precisely through dishonesty and manipulation. None of this is the wisdom of which Proverbs speaks. "**I have taught you the way of wisdom,**" says the father to his son in Proverbs. What is this way of wisdom? The way of wisdom is the way of repentance. "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" The fear of the

Lord is regarding God's judgment as greater than man's. The fear of the Lord drives us to repentance, to the cry for mercy.

Consider all that in light of today's Gospel lesson, the encounter between Jesus and the Ten Lepers. These dreadfully diseased men happen upon Jesus. And what do they cry out? "Good Teacher, have you a fable for us, that we might be the best lepers we can be?" No, they cry out for mercy.

What of you? No lepers here, I presume. But suffering, we have plenty. It might be evident. More likely, your suffering is hidden. Few know. You seethe with resentment. You are lonely. You feel isolated from God and the world. You feel no love from your spouse. Or maybe he left. You have no children. Or the son you do have disrespects you. You are stuck in a dead-end job. Your hands have developed a pain that will not go away. Your feet hurt, your feelings hurt, your head hurts, your heart hurts, literally or metaphorically – which is worse?

And here comes Jesus. They, and you, see Him at a distance. *Iesou, epistata, eleison! Jesus, Master, have mercy!* And He says, "Good friends, listen, here is a Bible commentary. Let us read together the section entitled, 'Advice for Living a Righteous Life.'" And the lepers reply, "Precisely what we need. If we become more righteous, our leprosy will be cured."

To quote St. Paul, "I speak as a madman." Is it not just as mad to imagine that your life would be improved if only you were more righteous? An apple a day may keep the doctor at bay for awhile, and verily things will go better for you if you show up on time. And if you don't tell lies you'll definitely be better off. But you will never be righteous, not the kind of righteousness that counts before God, not the kind of righteousness that cures leprosy, not the kind of righteousness that rescues from death, not the kind of righteousness that drives away depression, not the kind of righteousness that resurrects bodies from their graves.

Listen again to the Proverbs we already heard: **"My son, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Let them not escape from your**

sight; keep them within your heart. For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh." This is not fortune-cookie stuff. This is not even Aesopian moral wisdom. Jordan Peterson can't forgive your sins. Aesop can't bring healing to your flesh. Not even the best health insurance can do that. All the doctors do is hold the corruption of your flesh back another few years.

What you get from Proverbs, what you get from Jesus, is not good advice but goodness itself, or rather goodness *Himself*. The moral of the story is not "Be thankful" but "Can you believe Jesus heals leprosy? What does this mean?" And along comes Jesus and says, "Not only that, but those who eat My flesh—My crucified yet living flesh—have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."

Definitely go and be nice. Listen to your mom. Eat your vegetables. Be well, do good work, and keep in touch. Slow and steady wins the race. Human wisdom is good.

But God's wisdom is different. It's not ethics. It's not good behavior. It's bad people, immoral people, people with broken hearts and broken dreams, people with broken marriages and broken lives, bad sins and bad attitudes, coming to Jesus and crying out, "**Jesus, master, have mercy!**" And He replies, "I baptize you, I forgive you, I welcome you to My table, I will be with you through every dark day and the darkest night of death, and you will rise again. Keep this Word within your heart, for if you have this, you have life, and even the healing of your flesh." +INJ+

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.