

## PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 5, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,  
and favour is better than silver or gold.*

<sup>2</sup> *The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord is the maker of them all.*

<sup>8</sup> *Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,  
and the rod of anger will fail.*

<sup>9</sup> *Those who are generous are blessed,  
for they share their bread with the poor.*

<sup>22</sup> *Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate;*

<sup>23</sup> *for the Lord pleads their cause  
and despoils of life those who despoil them....*

### I.

As we end summer, return to school earlier than people in the area have traditionally returned and hope the in-person nature of the return lasts, and as we buckle up for what may prove to be a longer road trip through the Delta than we had anticipated making this Fall, a trip akin to one we are *obligated* to take after getting home from vacation on a trip we have *chosen* to take.

Our Old Testament lectionary passage for today is one of the rare selections from the Book of Proverbs in the three-year cycle of readings. Proverbs is the book in the Bible that contains almost exclusively wisdom literature, the literature the late scholar R. B. Y. Scott defined as arising out of the “*moral experience and trained intelligence of genuinely religious people.*”<sup>1</sup>

- Proverbs begins with nine chapters of a father in a relatively affluent, urban home seeking to train his son in the humility and respect for God the son will need for life as an adult.<sup>2</sup>
- As Chapter Ten opens, it is as if the son has graduated from high school, left the safety of home, and is now in the world on his own. One of his tasks is to sort out from among the many wise sayings he has received from his upbringing which ones are appropriate for which situations he faces away from hearth and home.
- By the time we arrive at Chapter 22, portions of which are our passage for today, the subject turns to how one is to live as a person of privilege with appropriate and faithful responsibility for the world, specifically for the many people whose privilege is much less apparent or real than that the young man has inherited at birth.

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<sup>1</sup> R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Christine Roy Yoder, *Proverbs* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

As Chapter 22 addresses privilege and responsibility, it speaks to us.

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I need not remind you of the privilege nearly all of us in our congregation enjoy in our personal and professional lives.

- When I moved here in 2004, I learned that the Congressional district in which we live and worship is typically ranked well into the top ten in terms of both educational<sup>3</sup> *and* income level.<sup>4</sup> That was true before Amazon and it will be true after Amazon.
- Many of us – and our children and grandchildren who live in this area – have access to some of the best schools in the country and because of our financial resources we can afford to make choices about schooling that fits their needs.
- While we are not New York or Paris, the Arts we enjoy in this city offer us beauty, rest, intellectual stimulation, and moral challenge. They can lead us to laugh with comic relief and cry with personal introspection.

We are people of privilege.

- Very few of us have to be nervous about, fearful of, or even careful around police whether we are stopped for a traffic violation or for no particular reason, if in fact we ever are stopped.
- If we face trouble personally or professionally, we generally know who to call, with some not insignificant “juggling” of funds, we can usually manage to pay for the services we need to protect or advance our interests, even when we have made serious mistakes. Our safety net – almost all private and familial – often provides nearly unlimited “second chances.”

We are indeed people of privilege.

- I was recently startled to read that in the Presbyterian Church, only 2.1% of congregations have over 800 members.<sup>5</sup> At a thousand members and holding, we are somewhere in the 1-2% of Presbyterian Churches by size. I have never considered myself a large church pastor, but I suppose this means I am, and it gives new meaning to the phrase “1%.”
- On top of all this, it was only two and three years ago, in what seems like decades ago, that our city finally saw sports championships as the Nationals, the Capitals, and the Mystics all rewarded us with the joy of victory.

We are in so many ways people of privilege.

## II.

But we would not be in this sanctuary or on this livestream if we didn’t already know that with privilege comes responsibility. The verses selected by the framers of the lectionary for our reading today all speak to such responsibility. Several are timely.

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<sup>3</sup> Available at [https://measureofamerica.org/file/Congressional\\_District\\_Maps-At-A-Glance.pdf](https://measureofamerica.org/file/Congressional_District_Maps-At-A-Glance.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Available at <https://www.yahoo.com/now/midterms-one-party-controls-wealthiest-184200649.html>.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2020\\_comparative\\_stats.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/2020_comparative_stats.pdf).

(a.)

Verse Two reads:

*The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord is the maker of them all.*

Despite the vast differences in economic circumstances – differences which have come to bear the title “income inequality” and which have increased during COVID – wisdom literature reminds us of a simple tenet of our faith, namely that “the Lord – YAHWEH – is the Creator of *us all*.” It is a theme Proverbs repeats several times,<sup>6</sup> nearly always enjoining the rich to be generous to the poor. One verse even eloquently proclaims: “The Lord gives light to the eyes”<sup>7</sup> of the *rich* and *poor* alike. At birth, and in the eyes of God, we are *equal*.

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Last week at the Chautauqua Institute in western New York, a place of privilege in and of itself, Maggie and I heard Evan Osnos, a journalist with *The New Yorker*, a magazine of privilege as well. Osnos, who is in his early forties, shared that he had lived for thirteen years covering events in major hot spots around the world – Cairo, Baghdad, Beijing – and in the past eight years has lived back in our nation’s capital with his wife and children.

All those years overseas, he said, he continued to find himself “making a case for the United States.” He said: “For all the failings of our country, we stand for some *basic commitments*, some *deep moral commitments*, including *the rule of law*, *the force of truth*, and *the right to pursue a better life*. We believe in these *big ideas*.”<sup>8</sup>

He then quoted F. Scott Fitzgerald:

*France was a land, England was a people, but America [was] ...a willingness of the heart.*<sup>9</sup>

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” our Founders wrote, “that all men are created equal.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike land or blood or soil or ethnicity or religion that define so many other nations, America is founded on an *idea* – that all people are *created equal*. And we survive only as our hearts continue to give “willing” assent to that idea.

*The rich and the poor have this in common:  
the Lord is the maker of them all.*

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<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 14:31, 17:5, 19:17.

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 29:13.

<sup>8</sup> Evan Osnos, “American Bedrock: Renewing the Ties That Bind US,” lecture at Chautauqua Institute, 8/26/2021. Available at <https://assembly.chq.org/chautauqua-lecture-series-cls/season:1/videos/evan-osnos>.

<sup>9</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up* (New York: New Directions, 1945). The particular essay first appeared in *Esquire*, February 1936,

<sup>10</sup> *The Declaration of Independence*, 1776.

(b.)

This leads to a second proverb before us: Verse 9.

*Those who are generous are blessed,  
for they share their bread with the poor.*

In Hebrew, the word “generous” literally means “good of eye.”<sup>11</sup> It is not just “the writing of a check, the transferring of stock, the opening of a pocketbook” (all of which are very important, so keep doing them!); but also it is “seeing” – *really seeing* – someone else’s life and experience.

Fleming Rutledge, a name you will hear several times this Fall, writes: “Trying to *understand someone else’s predicament* lies at the *heart* of what it means to be a *Christian*.”<sup>12</sup>

“Goodness of eye” is what we develop when we “try to understand the condition in which other people live, the experiences they have had or inherited as individuals or as a people, the struggles they know, they beauty they behold, the humanity that they share among themselves and with us, their hopes, their dreams, their aspirations.

When we become “good of eye,” we cannot help but share our bread, because we have come to know others as people *created* by the *same God* who *created* us, born into the same light into which we were born.

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My friends, even though we are a largely white church, there are ways we can develop more goodness of eye, ways we can learn what people of different colors and backgrounds experience in this world, so that we might part of a new day in our church and in our country. We have myriad opportunities to develop and stretch our goodness of eye:

- Our adult education programs that start next Sunday
- A play we will attend at the end of the month
- A civil rights pilgrimage to Alabama this spring
- Opportunities to be involved through several of our mission programs to work alongside people from all different races and backgrounds in Arlington and Alexandria, in Appalachia, on the Spirit Lake Reservation in North Dakota, at Moi’s Bridge, Kenya

And there will certainly be ways emerging in our community and perhaps our church in which we can help with the welcome and resettlement of thousands of people from Afghanistan in our country.

In addition to such programmatic and volunteer response, nearly every day where we work and live, where we teach or write, where we or our children go to school, and where we render service to our nation through military or civilian service or the many other jobs related to the governing of our country, we have the opportunity to try “to understand someone else’s predicament” and respond – “the heart of what it means to be a Christian.”

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 287.

<sup>12</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 107.

*Those who are of good eye are blessed,  
for they share their bread with the poor.*

(c)

And finally, a third proverb in our reading for today – in verses 22-23 – provides a word of warning to us:

*Do not rob the poor because they are poor,  
or crush the afflicted at the gate;  
for the Lord pleads their cause  
and despoils of life those who despoil them....*

In the urban society in which Biblical wisdom developed, “the gate” refers to the public square where all matters of justice are settled, where all matters of civic import are decided.

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One of the most compelling black writers I have been reading over the past year is Jesse McCarthy, a junior faculty member at Harvard. In much of his writing, he exudes a *realism* about how deep and longstanding problems in our criminal justice system have existed and negatively impact people of color in our country. But he also is cautiously optimistic that all we have seen since Trayvon Martin, Ferguson, George Floyd, is leading more and more Americans to *see* certain things about black history and life in America that can lead to more “goodness of eye” and “generosity of spirit” in working together. Speaking of and to black people in America, but implicitly to us all, McCarthy writes<sup>13</sup>:

As in past struggles, our principled defense of an *ethical civil code* has attracted others with its *moral force*.... Even many of those who do *not* agree that [the current problems in policing, prisons, and courts] are the result of actively racist policies and attitudes *no longer deny* that our *exceptionally poor record* cannot plausibly be unrelated to a long history of anti-black violence and antagonism. For this same reason [he continues], likeminded people around the world are hoping for a *decisive* break with the past, taking to the streets to demand...that we can and should *work together* to design a *new social contract* that will restore the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement and criminal justice in the eyes of *all* citizens and not just some...

McCarthy concludes:

All the uncertainties that govern the question of what *can* be done, what *will* be done, and the *difference* between the two remain in *our* hands....we are [not] at an impasse against an implacable enemy...[We can] *lift* each other and *rise* together with the spirit of history at our backs. We have done it before. Every time we do it's a *new* day.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jesse McCarthy, *Who Will Pay Reparations On My Soul? Essays* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021). The following excerpts come from pages 219-222.

<sup>14</sup> The italics are mine. I am following McCarthy's lead in not capitalizing “Black,” a conscious choice he makes and explains on pages xi-xiii.

### III.

In his speech, Evan Osnos told a story about John Gunter, who after serving as a war correspondent in World War II returned to the United States and travelled all over the country asking people “What do you believe in most?” He characterized his most frequent response as: “*The people – if you give them an equal break.*”

Seventy years later, today, in local precincts and halls of justice, in school boards and legislatures local and state, in all arms of the federal government –the Lord “pleads the cause of the poor at the gate.” The “goodness of eye” God has toward the afflicted can be our own goodness of eye as we *truly* see the predicament in which they live. We can believe in “the people” and the “break they deserve” for the Lord is the *maker* of us all, and we are all born into the same light.

Our church, like our country, is a “willingness of the heart.” We can lift each other and rise together with the spirit of history at our backs and the Spirit of the Lord infusing all we do.

All it takes is “goodness of eye.”

Amen.

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