

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Proverbs.³

“My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly. He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of his saints. Then shalt thou understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea, every good path.

“When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul; Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee: To deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things; Who leave the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness; Who rejoyce to do evil, and delight in the frowardness of the wicked; Whose ways are crooked, and they froward in their paths: To deliver thee from the strange woman, even from the stranger which flattereth with her words; Which forsaketh the guide of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God. For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead. None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life. That thou mayest walk in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous. For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it.”

Or,

Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Proverbs.⁴

“My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man.

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

“Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil. It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones. Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.

“My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth.

“Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her. The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens. By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew.

“My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep

shall be sweet. Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. For the LORD shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken.”

Or,

Here beginneth the twenty-ninth Verse of the second Chapter of the First Book of the Maccabees.⁵

“... Then many that sought after justice and judgment went down into the wilderness to dwell there: Both they, and their cattle; because afflictions increased sore upon them. Now when it was told the king’s servants, and the host that was at Jerusalem, in the city of David, that certain men, who had broken the king’s commandment, were gone down into the secret places in the wilderness, They pursued after them a great number, and having overtaken them, they camped against them, and made war against them on the sabbath day. And they said unto them, Let that which ye have done hitherto suffice; come forth, and do according to the commandment of the king, and ye shall live. But they said, We will not come forth, neither will we do the king’s commandment, to profane the sabbath day. So then they gave them the battle with all speed. Howbeit they answered them not, neither cast they a stone at them, nor stopped the places where they lay hid; But said, Let us die all in our innocency: heaven and earth shall testify for us, that ye put us to death wrongfully. So they rose up against them in battle on the sabbath, and they slew them, with their wives and children, and their cattle, to the number of a thousand people. Now when Mattathias and his friends understood hereof, they mourned for them right sore. And one of them said to another, If we all do as our brethren have done, and fight not for our lives and laws against the heathen, they will now quickly root us out of the earth. At that time therefore they decreed, saying, Whosoever shall come to make battle with us on the sabbath day, we will fight against him; neither will we die all, as our brethren that were murdered in the secret places. Then came there unto him a company of Assideans, who were mighty men of Israel, even all

such as were voluntarily devoted unto the law. Also all they that fled for persecution joined themselves unto them, and were a stay unto them. So they joined their forces, and smote sinful men in their anger, and wicked men in their wrath: but the rest fled to the heathen for succour. Then Mattathias and his friends went round about, and pulled down the altars: And what children soever they found within the coast of Israel uncircumcised, those they circumcised valiantly. They pursued also after the proud men, and the work prospered in their hand. So they recovered the law out of the hand of the Gentiles, and out of the hand of kings, neither suffered they the sinner to triumph.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.⁶

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on Quinquagesima Sunday, 2013.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 44 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xl (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxix (CIPBC 1963).

³ Proverbs 2:1-end (KJV).

⁴ Proverbs 3:1-26 (KJV).

⁵ I *Maccabees* 2:29-48 (KJV).

⁶ I Corinthians 13:1-13 (KJV).

⁷ I Corinthians 13:8-10 (RSV).

⁸ HERBERT G. MAY & BRUCE M. METZGER, eds., THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 1392 fn. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁹ *Norman Hillyer, 1 Corinthians*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, eds., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED, 3rd Ed. 1068 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

¹⁰ Genesis 3.

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But there is also a third lesson here, one that comes both from implications we can and should draw from the first two and also that, sadly, comes inescapably from our own experience. It is that, just as God has given us aids and helps to assist our journey toward perfection, so, too, there are on that same journey other influences, obstacles and traps, that work to retard our progress and even to frustrate it entirely.

Conclusion:

It does not require a degree in theology to understand what these hindrances may be. The moment that we consider that they are the things that make it difficult—sometimes impossible—for us to draw near to God, then it is obvious that when we speak of these adverse influences, we are speaking of sin.

For the essence of sin is that it is what separates us from God. That is the teaching of the account in Genesis¹⁰ of the Fall of Man: sin is disobedience of God’s will for us and that disobedience, when too profound or prolonged, constitutes a barrier between us and God.

So on that journey toward perfection to which St. Paul referred, that quest for the presence of God which will make irrelevant all intermediaries and aids such as spiritual gifts, the most important part for us is the struggle to overcome those barriers that we ourselves erect against God. Christ died to make it possible for us to be saved; no one but we ourselves can prevent His sacrifice from being effective for that purpose.

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister, JD¹¹
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through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[A]s for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.”⁷ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Development:

Throughout Scripture, Prophecies—at least true prophecies, the ones that come as the result of divine inspiration—are regarded as good things. After all, real prophecies are messages from God and we can never hear enough from that source. Knowledge is similar. And “tongues”—by which, of course, St. Paul means *glossolalia*, the phenomenon sometimes known as “speaking in tongues”—is likewise traditionally regarded as good, for it is also seen as something that happens only under the inspiration of the Third Person of the Trinity, that is, of God the Holy Spirit.

From this perspective, the principal difference between prophecy and knowledge, on the one hand, and speaking in tongues, on the other, is that prophecy and knowledge edify the whole people of God while speaking in tongues, uplifting and comforting as it may be, is of use primarily to the person who experiences it.

But these observations about the natures of prophecies, knowledge, and “tongues” themselves raise a question. For if

these things are, in essence, good, then why does St. Paul tell us that we experience these things only in an imperfect state and when true perfection comes, they will pass away?

The answer is that here, St. Paul is discussing *spiritual gifts*.⁸ In doing so, he compares the more dramatic and therefore obvious gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and speaking in tongues with the less obvious, but even more essential, gift of love. It is precisely because each of his three original examples, prophecy, knowledge, and speaking in tongues, occurs only at the express instigation of the Holy Spirit that each of them is a gift from that Spirit to us. In fact, these are among the several benefits of the Spirit to which, we are taught, we will receive special access in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

And love, although in some ways less obvious than those three, or, indeed, than any of the other “sevenfold Gifts of the Spirit”, is similarly the product of a divine spirit. It is, moreover, preëminently a gift that works to build up the Body of Christ, for it is love that is the most characteristic Christian virtue and that most significantly distinguishes committed Christians from the world around them.

But if that is so, then why does Paul say these gifts are destined to pass away? And why does he tell us that, important are as prophecy, knowledge, and the gift of tongues, the gift of love is greater? The answer to those questions lies in the implications of the whole passage that forms today’s Epistle.

That implication is that most of the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy, knowledge, and “tongues”, are given for our strengthening and uplift in this present world, to assist us on our journey toward *perfection*, or, to paraphrase the Army’s onetime recruiting slogan, our quest to “be all we can be”. But these are *mediate*, not *immediate* goods. That is, they are means to some other ends, not ends in themselves.

When Paul tells us things are presently imperfect but that they will one day be perfect, he is telling us that we are engaged in a process of perfection. When and if that process reaches its intended end, we will find ourselves living forever in the presence of perfection, which, along with ultimate love, is what God is.

Thus, where prophecy, knowledge, “tongues”, and the other typical Gifts of the Spirit are temporary in nature, intended to uplift us in this first, preliminary, earthly phase of our existence, love is permanent in nature. It will be a prominent feature of the later, heavenly phase of our existence. And then, at that point in our development, no intermediary forms of assistance will be needed for us to reach toward God. In other words, when we have achieved what theologians call “the beatific vision”, we will have direct, that is, immediate, access to the source of all goodness, so we will have no need of props or aids.⁹

In my father’s youth, in the very early years of the 20th Century, there was a humorous colloquialism that expressed the ultimate state of something: “than which there is no than which-er”. If ever that phrase applied accurately to anything, it certainly applies to the prospect of dwelling in eternity with the divinity, something so perfect that there can be nothing else more perfect than it is.

So that is the first lesson I would have you remember from today’s Epistle: if we are doing what God wishes us to do, that is, if we are doing what Christians are meant to do, then we are on a journey toward ultimate perfection.

The second lesson I would have you remember here is that God has given us certain means of support or assistance to help us along that journey. Among these helps or aids are the Gifts of the Spirit to which we have already had reference.