

**Sermon for Morning Prayer  
The Third Sunday After Trinity**

**Lessons:**<sup>1</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the sixteenth Chapter of the Proverbs.<sup>2</sup>

“... Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud. He that handleth a matter wisely shall find good: and whoso trusteth in the LORD, happy is he. The wise in heart shall be called prudent: and the sweetness of the lips increaseth learning. Understanding is a wellspring of life unto him that hath it: but the instruction of fools is folly. The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips. Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones. ... He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the twenty-seventh Verse of the first Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Philippians.<sup>3</sup>

“... Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; And in nothing terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God. For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake; Having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

“If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels

and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the First Lesson: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”<sup>4</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

### **Introduction:**

The opening words of today’s First Lesson are among some of the most familiar in the entire Bible. Many people who cannot accurately recall any other Bible verse can quote this one – or, at any rate, can come pretty close to accurately quoting it. That this should be so is evidence of the mental traction possessed by the short, pithy, and very true-to-life observations in Proverbs.

There are thirty-one Chapters in this book and I have known people who found them so charming – and so useful as guides in life – that each night they read one of those Chapters before going to sleep. In this way, in the course of a normal month, they read their way through the entire book.

Today’s text, with its pregnant warning about how arrogance and conceit set one up for some disastrous happening, is a prime example of this *genre* of the Bible’s “wisdom literature”. In fact, the book entitled “The Proverbs of Solomon, Son of David, King of Israel”<sup>5</sup> is, in its finished form, very probably the oldest of the wisdom books in Scripture.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Fontaine, op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> St. Luke 18: 11a (RSV).

<sup>8</sup> Article IX, Of Original or Birth-Sin, *Articles of Religion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928).

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This is not surprising as the proverb itself is one of mankind's oldest literary forms.

### **Theme, and Development:**

But what is it that makes today's opening proverb so memorable? Perhaps it is that we all have within us a touch of that glee at others' misfortunes, particularly at the misfortunes of those who are visibly full of themselves, that the Germans call *Schadenfreude* [**SHAH-den-froy-deh**], which literally means "injury joy". Why else are our supermarket tabloids, our television talk shows, and the blogosphere so full of the mischances that have just now befallen the powerful, the wealthy, or merely those who are famous for being famous?

And if the Israelites of twenty-six centuries ago had observed how gratifyingly often the mighty are brought low, just think how they would have relished our immeasurably expanded means of communicating those misfortunes. They had to wait for the whispers in the market squares and in friends' houses where we have almost instantaneous digital paraphernalia to bring us the slightest whiff of mischance. And those whiffs are no longer confined to kings, lords, or high priests; our spectrum of celebrities has broadened to include golfers, politicians, actors and actresses, televangelists, corporate figures, and anyone whose name has ever appeared, however briefly, in the news media.

But why do the leaders of government, finance, and industry, or even those of just taste and opinion, seem so frequently, and often so unaccountably, to fall from grace? What is the real message behind Proverbs' observation about pride and haughty spirits?

I suggest to you that it is simply a variation on the ancient Greeks' *dictum* that "Those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad." The readiness with which

public figures plow ahead with self-destructive behavior, when they must know that the news media are constantly scrutinizing them, suggests at least a mild form of insanity. Just recall, if you are old enough, how Gary Hart, when an actual candidate for the presidency of the United States, openly challenged the Washington press corps to catch him out.

What, except overweening pride, could ever have possessed him to have issued such a challenge? It is no wonder the reporters seized it and did, indeed, catch him out; what is a wonder is that, having been so idiotic as to have dared them to do so, he ever permitted someone to take his photograph on the deck of a lobbyist's yacht, holding on his lap a woman who was, most definitely, not his wife.

Surely, he, like the Pharisee in the Temple of Jesus' parable, must have been convinced that he was "not like other men".<sup>7</sup> And the same must apply with equal force to Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, John Edwards, Mark Sanford, Tiger Woods, and all the others who have had their fifteen minutes of infamy. It is a great mistake to believe that one is somehow fundamentally different than other people.

That is the madness the ancient Greeks diagnosed in the rich and powerful – and had they had such things as celebrities, they would also have diagnosed it in the well known. As soon as one forgets the fundamental fact that we are all equal in the most important respects, one sets oneself up for disaster.

There are two particular ways in which we are all alike. The first is that we are all children of God and, therefore, are all loved by God, no matter how unlovable we seem to our fellow men and women. This means that we all have essential and irreducible value just as the result of our existence and, in the face of this fundamental value, all of which comes from the same source, that is from God's love for us,

it is absurd for any one person to feel he or she is somehow worth more than any other person.

The second such way is that we are all, by nature, hopeless sinners.<sup>8</sup> The hope we have is, in its origin, completely external to us: it is infused in us through the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus where we are "very far gone from original righteousness", it is pointless for us to split hairs trying to compare our personal degrees of sinfulness with those of others. ALL sinners are lost without the freely-given redemption that comes only from God.

The frustrations we ourselves feel in our daily lives are really what make us so gleeful when those who seem to be better off are embarrassed or destroy their public careers. But when we think of how small our frustrations and envyings are compared to where we would be without that Grace of Christ, then the differences between us and those we both envy and chortle over recede into nothingness.

After all, neither we nor those disgraced celebrities have suffered anything that is even a fraction of what Our innocent Lord freely suffered for us and for our salvation. Let us never be too proud and haughty-spirited to remember that and to be grateful for it.

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June 20, 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (PECUSA 1928).

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 16: 18-24, 32 (KJV).

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 1: 27 -- 2: 4 (KJV).

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 16: 18 (RSV).

<sup>5</sup> *Carole R. Fontaine, Proverbs*, in JAMES L. MAYS, ED., HARPER'S BIBLE COMMENTARY 495 (HarperSanFrancisco 1988).