

# The Living Word

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The Bible readings for Sunday, Sept 23, 2018, with commentary notes

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **Sunday, Sept 23** in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand - read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: **The Lord's route to true greatness**

Proverbs 31:10-31 - Greatness comes through character and diligence

Alternative OT reading (C of E option) Jeremiah 11:18-20

Mark 9:30-37 - Greatness comes through being able to defer

James 3:13-4:3,7-8a - Greatness comes through humility, not pride

Also set for this Sunday: Psalm 1

**Proverbs 31:10-31** » Greatness comes through character and diligence

## Wisdom's voice on character and respect

Last week's reading, at the beginning of the Book of Proverbs was about wisdom personified and wisdom's voice - as it happens, a woman's voice.

Here at the end of Proverbs we meet the wife of noble character. This wife, who fears the Lord v.30, is also like the personification of wisdom. This chapter was not written by Solomon but King Lemuel, Prov. 30:1, not an Israelite king but a foreigner who had come to know the Lord.

10-12 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. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.

"Noble character" - moral and spiritual, but also very able. Elsewhere the term is used for the military exploits of men. Her husband can trust her because she is godly.

13 She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.

"Wool and linen" - wool spun from the fleece, linen woven from flax fibres. A linen garment sold for half a month's wage, a woollen garment four times that.

14 She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.

15 She gets up while it is still night; she

provides food for her family and portions for her female servants.

"Like the merchant ships" - she is enterprising; remarkable in a male-dominated culture and "provides... portions" - also considerate, the opposite of Proverbs' sluggard, Prov. 6:9-10, 26:14, not having servants attend her in bed.

16-19 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. She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.

"Considers a field... sees that her trading is profitable" - showing independent judgment and financial wisdom, not the norm for women of that time. "Her lamp does not go out" - not working through the night but a sign of a well-run house where the lamp was kept burning all night as a sign of life.

"Sets about her work" - establishing a vineyard planting and press in stony ground was an arduous undertaking. By contrast, drawing wool thread from the distaff stick on to the spinning wheel was skilled work undertaken by women.

17-18 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

"Peace-loving... considerate" - the list parallels the character qualities of the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 with more than a nod towards the Royal Law already mentioned, James 2:8.

4:1-3 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

"Desires that battle within - the life produced by

the Spirit and characterised by the peace-loving and fruitful unity He brings, contrasted dramatically with the bitter church conflicts and character assassination that result from rivalry and desire to control.

7-8 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

"Resist the devil" - the opportunities given to the devil by unholy attitudes have been set out forcefully. Similarly the remedy - recognising the rule and reign of God in willing submission to His values. This 'repent and resist' teaching is paralleled by Peter, 1 Peter 5:8-9, in His letter written to churches at a different time, adding to the gravity of this essential teaching.

**For further study:** the foundational 'wearing holy attitudes' teaching by Paul, Ephesians 6:10-18.

**IN PRACTICE** This week's teaching follows a familiar pattern. The principles are set out in the Old Testament passage, but at this point it's more theoretical than practical. In the Gospel passage, Jesus brings the principles alive in His own life and teaches the values to the disciples. It still needs to be earthed in everyday spiritual life. The epistle is written to believers in the churches who are learning to live in their new life and new identity, as those who are new creations "in Christ Jesus" and who have the Spirit of Christ Jesus in them. They are empowered, they are guided, they have the original Scriptures and the new records of Jesus' teaching BUT they have to make it work in their lives and their relationships, with all the tensions of a community.

They have new life, but as we all find, the test is whether we can avoid being pulled back into what the Bible calls the flesh, or selfish nature. In this case it's rivalry, envy and desire to control and like the weeds in your garden, it's ready to spring up in every church fellowship to be a vehicle for the conflict and the disunity the devil wants to sow. That's his well-used tactics to disable the advance of the kingdom of God. We need a strategy to disable the devil, and that is the active choice to repent of pride, embrace again utter dependence on God and recognise that whatever we have of worth, is only from Him.

**QUESTION** What do you feel entitled to control? Where do you have the need to be in charge? Where is the lordship of Jesus - over or under those perceptions?

**PRAYER** Lord, help me to grow to see myself as You see me - a precious child, with a good self-image but free of ego and self-importance.

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

21 When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

*"Clothed in scarlet" – implies dyed wool and good quality. She makes good clothes for her household and at the same time shows generosity to the less-well off, a characteristic of wise people.*

*For further study: generosity is characteristic of wisdom and emphasised in Proverbs, Prov. 11:24-26; 21:13; 22:9,16,22-23; 28:27.*

22 She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.

23 Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.

24-25 She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.

*This woman's hard work and good judgment brings*

*security and respect to the household and husband, respected as a decision-maker "at the city gate".*

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

27-29 She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all."

30-31 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Honour her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

*"A woman who fears the Lord" – the poem, an A-Z of wisdom, builds to its conclusion that the reward of wisdom, personified as the woman of wisdom, is about where that wisdom is rooted: in the fear of the Lord, a simple but profound statement, Prov. 1:7, 9:10, 15:33. Being willing to listen to and defer to the Lord is perhaps a more feminine trait, as in this depiction, which men who are wise acquire.*

**IN PRACTICE** In a hard-nosed world which prizes knowledge and puts a high value on information, something called wisdom looks like a 'soft skill'. Perhaps in a different way, it is – set in largely male-centric stories and events, the word for wisdom is feminine. Proverbs begins and ends with wisdom, which it explains in terms of personality and character – a God-fearing, submitted, spiritual woman. It is more than having skills, it is having the character and sense of direction to know what to do with them. This is what brings that elusive quality we call success.

**QUESTION** *Out of the many attributes of this 'woman of wisdom', which particularly speak to you? Should you ask God for wisdom or just rely on Him to provide it?*

**Mark 9:30-37** | Greatness comes through being able to defer

### **The disciples argue about status**

30-32 They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because He was teaching His disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill Him, and after three days He will rise." But they did not understand what He meant and

were afraid to ask Him about it. "

*"He was teaching His disciples" -- they still couldn't accept His teaching about His death and how it formed part of God's plan. The resurrection of an individual was a new concept to them – they expected the resurrection of mankind at the final judgment foretold in Daniel 12:2. Luke's explanation is that "it was concealed from them so that they could not grasp it", Luke 9:45.*

33-34 They came to Capernaum. When

He was in the house, He asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.

*"Capernaum... in the house" – probably the one belonging to Peter and Andrew, Mark 1:29.*

*"But they kept quiet" – they expected disapproval of the argument. It would surface again, Mark 10:35-37. Because they had not yet understood Jesus' destiny, they didn't grasp the implication for themselves.*

35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."

*"Sitting down" – rabbis sat down to teach.*

*"Want to be first... last... servant" – (here and below)*

**IN PRACTICE** The disciples belonged to a Jewish society that had many levels – aristocratic and common, rich and poor, politically powerful and oppressed. Status and hierarchy was discussed a lot in their culture. For us (depending on what newspaper you read) there's a lot of emphasis on 'being a celebrity'. But all of this flies in the face of God's kingdom order, which turns man's order upside down, twists it around and shakes it for good measure. Jesus was a servant, a suffering servant to the cause of providing a salvation path for mankind – at the immense cost of His life and reputation. His life on earth made Him the greatest human being who has ever lived. True greatness, in His terms, has nothing to do with our ideas of status, but is found by conquering human pride and self-sufficiency, and embracing dependence on God and a true servant spirit.

**QUESTION** *Think of someone who is different – you can see Jesus in them. Why is that? What part of status and position would be costly for you to say 'no' to?*

**James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a** | Greatness comes not by pride but humility

### **Teaching about dealing with ambition and embracing godly dependence**

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

*"Humility" – literally 'meekness', prautes. 'Gentleness' in Gal. 5:23. Greeks considered it a weakness but Jesus made it a fundamental virtue, Matt. 55, 11:29. It is not passive or timid but an attitude of trusting God and therefore having no need to self-promote.*

*"Humility that comes from wisdom" – true wisdom has nothing to prove. James writes to*

*rank and status were important in Jewish society at this time. Jesus confronted those assumptions by teaching that in God's kingdom, true greatness comes through being the servant, not the master. He demonstrated this conclusively in His death as the Suffering Servant.*

36-37 He took a little child whom He placed among them. Taking the child in His arms, He said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the one who sent Me."

*"Whoever welcomes one of these" – Children had no status. Welcoming a child was putting yourself last in an dramatically unexpected way.*

*Spirit-filled believers in the churches about deeds done in fruitful faith resulting from humility in their day by day experience of God.*

14-16 But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

*"Selfish ambition... disorder" – worldly teaching based on man-centred values is unspiritual and invites the conflict and division that is the hallmark of the devil, James 4:1-3 below.*