

# Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

WHEN LOWER IS HIGHER

Proverbs 25:6-7 [2-10]

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)

Analysis by Bill White

6 Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence  
or stand in the place of the great,  
7 for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"  
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

Author's Note: Clearly, this lection was chosen with the gospel reading for the day in mind. As to context, this proverb appears to be instruction to young scribes desiring "to move up the ladder" in the royal court. The instruction? Wait on the king's command before making a move. So, how might this proverb apply to us?

DIAGNOSIS: SEEKERS WILL BE PUT IN THEIR PLACE

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Seeking Recognition and Reward

Can we be honest with ourselves? Have we not spent most—if not all—of our lives striving to stand "in the place of the great" (v. 6b). We've done this by working the system—whether ethically or unethically—to move up the social, political, economic, and/or professional ladder. We seek honor, meaning, purpose and blessing in this life by striving to become the one who is summoned to "come up here" (v. 7a) by the "king or queen" of our little part of the world—whoever or whatever that may be. We may

even seek to become the queen or king of our vocation.

Who among us does not have at least some desire to be invited to the front of the banquet hall to be recognized and rewarded? Who among us would not enjoy receiving public praise from our boss, our favorite professor, our government leader, or our bishop? Who among us would say no to the invitation or instruction to “come up here”: to a prime spot on the platform with our favored political candidate, to the corporate luxury box for the ball game, to travel on the company plane with the CEO, or to sit at the head table at a banquet attended by movie stars, famous athletes, politicians and business folk?

Here the counsel from Proverbs is practical and wise; Do not seek these things by scheming or asking; wait to be invited lest you do more harm than good and embarrass yourself.

So is there a problem here? After all, there is nothing wrong in and of itself with being told or invited to “come up here.” Yet there may be a problem here. The problem is in the seeking. The problem is in the “putting yourself forward” or “standing in the place of the great” without being invited or instructed so to do.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Relying on Self to Reap Rewards

Of course, the problem is worse than simply seeking recognition and advancement. The heart of the problem is the question of motivation. When we are seeking recognition and/or advancement by serving and impressing a “great” one (v. 6), it is clear we are not humbly following and serving Jesus Christ. In reality this is nothing less than idolatry, worshiping and serving the false god of self. The very act of seeking reveals that our faith is in our own efforts and ability to do what is necessary to be recognized by “the king” and to “stand in the place of the

great.”

### Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Self-Serving Seekers Put Lower

The day is coming when The King of kings is coming to judge the living and the dead. This will not be a pleasant day for those who have spent their lives seeking to please and serve the authorities of this world (the “great” of v. 6b) with no faith in The Authority (The Great One of all that exists). When that day comes, those seeking to save themselves by putting their actions and achievements forward before the judgment of God’s Law will be condemned to the lower place. Those who seek to put themselves forward to stand in the place of The Great One by relying on their own asking, doing and cunning will be “put lower” (v. 7b). And it will not be a very noble place....

### PROGNOSIS: SEEKERS SOUGHT BY JESUS

### Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Going Low to Save Sinful Seekers

Jesus the Christ, who is The King of kings and The Authority for all eternity, is The Great One coming to judge the living and the dead. And when he comes, how can anyone hope to be saved since all have sinned and are inclined to rely on putting themselves forward?

The hope is in the fact that Jesus is like no other judge. His judgment will not be based on God’s Law. His judgment will not be based on the effectiveness of the seekers’ seeking. His judgment will be grounded in his death on the cross and his glorious resurrection. Jesus himself fulfilled the demands of the Law. Though he is God, Jesus did not regard equality with God as a thing to be used to his own advantage. But instead he sought the lower place, as Saint Paul sings out, “... though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as

something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”(Phil. 2:6–11).

The Good News for us is that Jesus willingly went to the lower place, giving his life on the cross, descending into hell, and rising again so that he might seek us out and invite sinful seekers to “come up here” to be saved from sin, death and the devil, and to be recognized and rewarded with the eternal life he offers. Jesus went lower so that we might go higher.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Relying on Jesus The King of kings, The One who is truly Great, Jesus Christ comes to sinful seekers with the graceful offering of a free gift, namely, faith. Jesus offers to exchange saving faith in the gospel for our misplaced faith in self. Having received this gracious gift of faith in Christ we now rely on Jesus instead of seeking recognition and advancement through our own efforts and ability.

Trusting his promise that we are forgiven our past sinful seeking, and believing when the Judgment Day comes he will say to us, “Come up here and stand in the place of the great that I have prepared for you,” is all the recognition and reward we need.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Serving Jesus is Recognition and Reward Enough  
Moreover, our gratitude for what God has done and continues to

do for us through faith in Christ moves us to serve and honor Christ our King. In fact, we are so grateful to Jesus we strive to humbly follow him and serve him with no need of recognition or reward. We are blessed to stay and serve in the lower places.