

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
June 18, 2017

Give Me a Wise and Discerning Heart

1 Kings 3:1-15

This is the time of the year when wisdom is being dispensed all over the place. At graduation exercises near and far, commencement speakers are doling out guidance and advice to students who are completing one leg of their journey and reflecting on what comes next. Everyone from Oprah Winfrey to Mark Zuckerberg has some insight and direction to offer. Here are a few samples of commencement wisdom: "It is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well have not lived at all—in which case you fail by default" (J. K. Rowling). "Just remember you can't climb the ladder of success with your hands in your pockets" (Arnold Schwarzenegger). "Don't treat your life like an action figure wrapped in plastic and never used" (Amy Poehler). "Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do but never gets you anywhere" (Erma Bombeck).

If Solomon had been invited to deliver the commencement speech at the College of Jerusalem, I wonder what he might have said. After all, his name is virtually synonymous with wisdom. When we think of Solomon, we think of someone who possessed insight, understanding, and discernment. We think of someone who was able to look at a situation, analyze it, and then quickly come up with a solution that no one else could conceive.

For many of us, the story of Solomon's judgment in the case of the two prostitutes, both of whom claim to be the mother of a single infant, is the quintessential story of the king's wisdom. Who can forget how King Solomon calls for a sword and orders that the baby be cut in two and each half be given to one of the women. Immediately, the real mother of the child yields, because her tender emotions have been stirred up for her son. So just like that the matter is settled. Case closed. In a world like ours, where federal investigations proliferate, Congressional hearings dominate the news cycle, and legal cases get stretched out through months, and sometimes years, of judicial hairsplitting, Solomon's swift and effective justice is often remembered as the classic example of his insight and discernment.

Whatever you think about Solomon's method of deciding cases, there's no question that his ability to govern God's people wisely was something he didn't come up with on his own. Early in Solomon's reign, we're reminded that his administration is part of God's agenda for his people. In other words, Solomon has not made it to the throne by his own cleverness, shrewdness, or determination. He's there because God had promised that his father David's throne would endure. Now David is dead, but God's promise is not. So Solomon comes into power, not by his own might, but by the will of God.

And now, the God who has willed Solomon's time in office pays the new king a visit. While Solomon is in Gibeon offering sacrifices, God reveals himself in a dream, and gets right to the point. "Solomon," says God, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." What an amazing offer. At first glance, it looks like Solomon's God is a genie who erupts from a bottle with an unbelievable promise: "Your wish is my command." Is that what God is trying to tell Solomon?

No, the Lord isn't here to be Solomon's personal servant. Actually, Solomon is the servant in this relationship. That's unmistakable when you listen to Solomon's response to God's invitation: "Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (vv. 7-9)

Here's a man who knows that he's been given a God-sized job. The One who is the source of all authority has placed an enormous amount of it in Solomon's hands. Remember that in Solomon's context, there aren't three co-equal branches of government. There aren't any checks and balances. There's no separation of powers. There's simply the king's power, and not much else. To do this God-given job, Solomon will need more than just adrenaline, willpower, and a can-do attitude. He'll need the Lord himself, who's the ultimate ruler of all.

The story is told about an angel who appears at a faculty meeting and tells the dean that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, the Lord will reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, wisdom, or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selects infinite wisdom.

"Done!" says the angel, and disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. Now, all heads turn toward the dean, who sits surrounded by a faint halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispers, "Say something." The dean looks at them and says, "I should have taken the money."¹

When the Lord shows up in the middle of the night with an open invitation, Solomon asks him for wisdom. He doesn't ask God to give him a long, healthy life and a generous government pension to make him as comfortable as possible in his old age. He doesn't ask God to give him an undefeated record in his battles with Israel's enemies. At this particular moment, Solomon isn't worried about how history will view him. Most of all, he's concerned about how the God of history will view him. He realizes that he's been handed an assignment that's beyond his abilities. So he rightly asks God to give him wisdom.

Isn't that where wisdom often begins, on our knees, asking for God's help when we're in over our heads? We frequently think of wisdom as a kind of accumulated knowledge that individuals acquire as they go through life, passing through all kinds of circumstances and events. In other words, wisdom is something that comes with time and experience. The longer you live the more of it you have.

In one respect, there's a lot of truth in this definition of wisdom. The more that you've seen and heard during your years on this earth, the more opportunities you've had to grow in your understanding of the deeper things of life. But this definition of wisdom also has its limitations. Abigail Van Buren, otherwise known through her widely read column "Dear Abby," once noted, "Wisdom doesn't automatically come with old age. Nothing does—except wrinkles. It's true, some wines improve with age. But only if the grapes were good in the first place."

Though wisdom can come with time, the Scriptures remind us that wisdom is also more than just the accumulation of knowledge and experience. James Billington is the Librarian of Congress Emeritus. The Library of Congress was established in 1800. In 1815, the Library accepted 6,487 books from the library of Thomas Jefferson. As of a few years ago,

the Library of Congress had a collection of more than 155 million items, which included more than 35 million cataloged books and other print materials in 470 languages and nearly 120 million additional items in various formats. And yet, in the midst of managing this enormous collection, Billington stressed that it's even more difficult for our nation to know what to do with all of this information. In fact, Billington described the contemporary world as "an info-glut culture." So he asked a probing question: "But have we become any wiser?"²

I'm guessing that if Solomon had delivered that commencement speech at the College of Jerusalem, he would have highlighted three essential elements in living wisely. They're captured in verses six through nine of today's text. First, Solomon would have stressed the necessity of praising God for his actions, actions that reveal God's steadfast love and faithfulness across time. Solomon remembered God's goodness and how God had kept his promise to provide David with an heir for the throne. Second, Solomon would have emphasized the importance of a posture of humility before God. "But I am only a little child," said Solomon, "and I do not know how to carry out my duties" (v. 7b). Being inexperienced and knowing that God had come to him with this assignment drove Solomon to recognize his lowly status before God. And third, Solomon would have underscored the need to acknowledge our own inadequacy for the tasks that we're often called to in the work of God's kingdom. "For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (v. 9b).

When we understand wisdom in these terms, the good news is that whatever stage of life you're at, young or old, you can grow in wisdom. The boy or girl sitting on the front pew, worshipping God by listening intently to the children's sermon, exemplifies wisdom. The recent graduate prayerfully seeking God's guidance and direction about what path to follow into further education and work, exemplifies wisdom. The middle-aged or senior adult looking back over their years with gratitude to God, while also looking forward to what God will do through them in the time that's still ahead, exemplifies wisdom. If wisdom means praising God for his faithfulness, walking humbly in his presence, and recognizing our need for his grace and power to do the things he wants us to do in our lives, then the wise aren't an elite group of the spiritually perfect, but rather a broken yet faithful community of those who have placed their hope in the Lord.

Mahatma Gandhi once observed, "It is unwise to be sure of one's own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err." The strongest might weaken and the wisest might err. This truth is certainly reflected in the story of Solomon. As I noted earlier, the name Solomon is virtually synonymous with wisdom. Yet this hero of the faith, like so many others in the Bible, often resisted and disobeyed the will of God. Though he was a wise man who loved the Lord and whose reign was long and prosperous, Solomon also acted selfishly and carelessly at numerous points in his life.

He endangered the integrity of the kingdom by bringing it into alliance with Egypt. He was slow to build the defenses of the city, primarily because he was more interested in his marriage to the Egyptian princess. He offered sacrifices and incense in places that violated holy law. He even planned to construct the Lord's house only after he had built his own. So while we remember Solomon as a wise, pious leader, we also do well to recall the times when his wisdom was mixed with foolishness.

Maybe this, in a strange sort of way, is why he still stands as a model of wisdom for us. As we try to discern and do the will of God in our own lives, it helps to know about people, even those in the Bible's hall of heroes, whose sinful, finite, imperfect lives were still precious and useful to God, the God who is still accomplishing great things through broken human beings. The person who realizes this and lives by it is wise indeed.

There is no greater demonstration of wisdom than to seek first the good of God's reign in the world, not just your own private interests, and to be responsive to whatever ways God wants you to participate in his just and righteous rule. God has things for you to do in his governance of the world that he has redeemed through Christ. I like the way that Ellen Davis has put it when she says that wisdom is about desiring the things that God desires for us and for the world. To that end, she says, "I will hunger and thirst for righteousness. I will be wise when I truly see my talents, my energies and resources as God sees them: as means, not to secure my own position, but to strengthen the weak, comfort the downcast, empower those whose lives mine touches."³ May God give each of us a wise and discerning heart.

¹ Betsy Devine and Joel E. Cohen, *Absolute Zero Gravity: Science Jokes, Quotes and Anecdotes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), n. pag., quoted in *Reader's Digest*.

² Adapted from Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014) n.p.

³ Ellen F. Davis, "Wisdom, Desire, and Holy Love." *The Living Pulpit* (July-September 2000) 9.