

Seeking Wisdom

In the name of him in whom the Father has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, dear friends in Christ: From ancient times scholars and philosophers have recognized what have become known as the four cardinal virtues. These are the noble qualities that everyone should seek to cultivate in themselves. The list includes justice, that is, the capacity to be fair and objective when making judgment; temperance, the ability to exercise restraint and self-control over one's own person; and courage, which is the strength to stand up to fear, uncertainty, and intimidation without faltering. These are good qualities to possess. But always ranking top on the list of the four cardinal virtues is wisdom, defined as the ability to think and act with a proper combination of knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense, and insight. And there's a reason wisdom comes first on the list. Without wisdom, the other virtues are not very helpful. What good would it do to be unwisely just? Or foolishly temperate? Or recklessly courageous? None at all. Wisdom is an essential element to making the others work; therefore wisdom is the virtue we should pursue the most.

And we should do so recognizing that no one is born wise. Nor is it merely a question of being knowledgeable, intelligent, or quick to learn. There are lots of people who are very bright and who have studied widely and possess all kinds of advanced degrees from prestigious universities, and yet remain fools. And I've known people right here who didn't go to school beyond the 8th grade – except for the school of hard knocks – who could be described as truly wise. The virtue of wisdom transcends its component parts. It isn't just knowledge or experience or understanding or common sense or insight. It's all of them working together in harmony. And again, it's not an innate quality, something that comes naturally. No, wisdom needs to be acquired. It comes from the outside. And that raises the question: Where do you go to find it?

In answering the question, we have to be careful. Recall that our first parents fell in part because they were seeking wisdom. The serpent promised them that eating the forbidden fruit would make them wise like God, knowing both good and evil. And that much was true. They already knew good. What they didn't know was evil. When they ate the fruit they found out about it. They became acquainted with evil, and they discovered that they had become it. So, in one sense they became wise like God; but I don't think any of us believes that it was a wise decision that they made. And now we are stuck with the consequences of their unwise action.

The point with respect to wisdom, though, is that there are different kinds of wisdom, and not all of them are beneficial. Satan possesses a crafty sort of wisdom in the ways of evil. Unless you happen to be a James Bond type villain, you don't want that. No, the Bible tells us that with regard to evil we should strive to be innocent and unlearned. Scripture also tells us to be wary of the wisdom of this world. The world's wisdom is not overtly evil. It appears good and right on the surface. It has a ring of truth to it. But its end is destruction.

Allow me an example. One of the greatest tenants of modern worldly wisdom is that personal happiness is the greatest good. Whatever makes you happy, that's what you ought to do, and no one has the right to tell you otherwise. So, you think having sex with this person will make you happy and they're agreeable? Don't ask questions. Don't think about consequences. Just do it. Whoops. One of you got pregnant and you think that having the baby will make you unhappy? No problem. Abort it. There, now you're all happy again. Tired of your spouse?

Think you'd be happier with someone else? Go on, divorce the one to whom you pledged lifelong fidelity and marry the other one. Oh, and don't worry about the kids. They'll be all right. It's up to them find their own happiness. And it's their fault, not yours, if they don't find it. Or maybe you think you'd be happier if you were the opposite gender of what you are now. Go for it. Change your wardrobe, take the hormones, have a little surgery, and presto change-o! It's done. Well, not really ... but you're better equipped to go on pretending if it makes you happy. Wait, what? Not happy with the quality of your life? Find yourself depressed most of the time and think you'd be happier dead? Okay, go on and kill yourself. Or better yet, get a doctor to help you. Have him perform one of those physician assisted suicides on you.

I recently read a news article that shows where this kind of "happiness is the ultimate good" wisdom leads. It was the story of a 52 year old Canadian man who is not only transgendered but also trans-aged. What makes him happy is thinking of himself as a 6 year old little girl. So he quit his job, left his wife and family, and got himself adopted by an understanding older transgendered couple. He calls himself Steph-on-knee (as in Steph on someone's knee) and he spends his days playing with dolls, watching cartoons, and dressing like a princess or a school girl – which is hard to pull off because he's over six feet tall and weighs upwards of 280 lbs. Got news for you, Steph: you ain't sitting on my knee. But now here's the thing: the article I read spun all of this as if it were perfectly normal behavior, and that readers should be thrilled to know that this guy pursued his dream and found his place of happiness. But has he? I can only imagine the heartbreak he will suffer when the other genuinely six year old girls in the neighborhood don't invite him to their birthday parties – the big mean bullies. And make no mistake: that's exactly how it will be painted. Anyone who does not play along and indulge him in his fantasy will be labeled a backward, bigoted, hater. No one dare be the kid who points out the fact that the emperor has no clothes.

There are any number of other forms of worldly wisdom we could examine. We could look at naturalism, the philosophy that lies behind so much of modern scientific theory, which begins with the unscientific assumption that there is nothing supernatural and therefore there is no God. Or we could look at that popular bit of contemporary wisdom that asserts that all religions are equal and lead to the same place – even though these religions clearly differ in regard to the nature of God, mankind, sin, grace, human participation, salvation, resurrection, and eternal life. Still, they're all the same. We could look for wisdom in the scores of self-help books that are published every year, each espousing its own sure fire method to straighten out your life and help you to attain your goals. We could on looking, but all we would find are other forms of worldly wisdom. And because this world is fallen and under the curse of sin, that's the kind of wisdom we would get: wisdom that is inherently flawed. Just as we cannot find wisdom in our sinful selves, we will never find it in this fallen world. We need to look for wisdom in a source beyond this world.

And that is what we find young King Solomon doing in today's Old Testament reading. He was likely in his mid to late teens when he inherited the throne of his father, David. David had chosen Solomon to rule in his place even though he had several other older sons, half-brothers of Solomon, who had long time experience working in Israel's government administration. Surely Solomon knew that too, that among David's sons he was the least qualified for the office he now held. Thus we see him approaching the task before him with humility and an appropriate trepidation. He knows he's not up to this on his own. He knows he's going to need help. And so it happens that after a day spent offering sacrifices of thanksgiving, when the Lord appears to him in a dream at night and tells him to ask for whatever his heart desires, Solomon requests an understanding mind and the ability to properly discern between good and evil. Unfortunately, the translation we heard there is not the best. Instead of

an understanding mind, what Solomon actually asks for is a *heart that listens to judgment*. This is key. Solomon did not request that the Lord miraculously implant his famed wisdom in him in an instant – “Poof! Now you’re wise.” No, he was requesting that the Lord fill him with wisdom as he continued to listen to God and his judgments. What Solomon was saying was, “Lord, let me keep on listening to you so that the judgments I make as king may reflect your own.”

And it’s important to note why Solomon requested this. It was not so that he’d become rich and famous for being such a smart guy. It was not to glorify himself. He wanted it so that he could rule over the Lord’s people well in his office as king. And this is what pleased the Lord so much: that Solomon wanted a gift that would enable him to better serve others. This is the purpose for all the spiritual gifts the Lord bestows, to equip and enable his people to serve the needs of others. So the Lord was only too happy to grant Solomon’s request. And as long as he continued to listen to the Lord and his Word, Solomon did rule wisely and well. Later in his life when he stopped listening to the Lord, he didn’t do so well and he made a lot of foolish mistakes. So the life of Solomon proves the point both ways. Wisdom comes from hearing the Word of the Lord.

The boy Jesus knew that too, as we see in today’s Gospel. And that may be surprising to us. Our inclination is to think that because Jesus is God in the flesh, already at 12 years old he is perfectly wise and that he knows all things. Not true. I said before that no one is born wise. That includes the Lord Jesus. And today’s text says clearly that Jesus increased in wisdom over time – which means he wasn’t all wise to begin with. What we’re dealing with here is the mystery of Christ’s humiliation. It’s the biblical truth that during his earthly life and ministry Jesus did not make full use of his divine attributes and truly lived as one of us – except without sin. He had to. In order to be our substitute and impute to us his righteousness, he had to live a perfect life as one of us with all of our human limitations. So as a child he had to learn how to walk and talk and dress himself and read and write just like everyone else. He also had to be filled with true wisdom from its only source: God’s Holy Word.

We’re told that the holy family came to Jerusalem each year for the Passover celebration; but this would have been a very special trip for Jesus. Up to this point he would have had to stay with his mother, Mary, and his younger brothers and sisters on the court of Jewish women while only Joseph went forward onto the court of Jewish men to offer the paschal lamb as a sacrifice. But now at age 12, Jesus would have been recognized as a young man and could accompany his father deeper into the Temple. Here for the first time he would have seen the sacrifices actually being made – the sacrifices that foreshadowed his own Messianic mission: to give his life as the atoning sacrifice for sin. And here too he would have had access to the areas in which the great rabbis and religious scholars taught and discussed the Holy Scriptures. For Jesus, hungry for God’s Word, it would have been like going from Sunday School to the seminary. He couldn’t get enough of it.

This explains why he’s apparently unaware that his family leaves Jerusalem without him. He’s too caught up in hearing the Scriptures being taught to notice. For the family’s part, they suppose he’s with their group – probably with the cousins or other members of the extended family. It’s not until they settle down and make camp after a day’s journey that they discover Jesus is not with them. We can well imagine the sense of panic that Joseph and Mary experienced as they retraced their steps back to Jerusalem the next day. But what’s interesting is that it took them yet another two days to find him. Why? It’s because they looked for him in all the wrong places. They looked for him in the kind of places where you’d expect to find a 12 year old boy. It didn’t occur to them to seek him sitting among the scholars in the Temple and listening to them teach. When they finally did find him there, Mary gives her son a piece of her

mind. “Do you have any idea what you put us through? Your father and I have been searching for you in great distress.”

What follows are the first recorded words of Jesus. And I believe them to be intended for us just as much as they were for Mary and Joseph. Jesus says, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in these things of my Father?” Jesus means that there was only one place on earth where he could have been. The moment they knew he was missing, they should have known that the Temple where the Word of God was being taught was the first place they should have looked. Why? Because that’s where Jesus always is: he is where God’s Word is being taught and explained. He is, after all, the Word of God made flesh. He is the sum and substance of divine wisdom. Mary and Joseph were seeking divine wisdom and didn’t know it. They had forgotten who he was. They were used to thinking of him as only the eldest of their children. And so they were seeking a 12 year old boy using a worldly way of thinking.

This is the take home for us today. Wisdom is a virtue we should all be seeking, for it makes us better people and empowers us to better serve others. And there is only one place to find it: in the person and work of Jesus who fills the pages of Holy Scripture. But sometimes we forget or fail to appreciate what we’ve got here in the Bible that God has given us. It becomes a bit too familiar, like the boy Jesus was to Mary and Joseph. We think of it as a collection of old stories suited for children but not for grownups. It’s not. It is Jesus in written form. Through it we come to know him who is divine wisdom. And knowing him, learning of him, listening to him – these are the ways God makes us wise unto salvation and equips us to do his will. Therefore let this be our New Year’s prayer: that our heavenly Father would order our steps and direct our hearts to seek his wisdom where it is found. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!