

Live Wisely!

Ephesians 5:15-20 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa August 16, 2009

The Apostle Paul instructs the Ephesian congregation, "**Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.**"

In my first draft of this sermon, a few days ago, I had followed up that statement with a litany of some of the unwise things I have done throughout my lifetime. While this would have been a good object lesson, filled with humbling and sometimes humorous revelations about my own unwise choices in life, I decided yesterday that sharing such things about myself from behind a pulpit might, in the long run, be itself unwise.

So instead, I'll simply ask if you have ever done any unwise things in your life, and leave it at that. Perhaps, like myself, you have some regrets about some of the consequences that resulted from those unwise choices. I have to admit, however, that I am wiser today partly because of previous unwise decisions. That just seems to be part of the process of maturing and growing in wisdom.

What is wisdom, and how do you get it? How should people, especially in leadership positions, exercise wisdom? What does the Bible have to contribute to this discussion? What is the difference between human and divine wisdom? **These aren't just rhetorical questions. The answers may indeed help you and I to live life more fully.** For wisdom is really an approach to life. As people of faith, from ancient times to today, **wisdom is a way of living out in very deliberate, rational ways our commitment to God.**

To help us get into this discussion, let's start with scripture. That's always a good place to start – and very Presbyterian. The Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures, is considered by biblical scholars to be divided into three literary sections. First, there's the Torah, also known as the Pentateuch or the Law, and it contains the first 5 books. There's a large section that falls under the heading Prophets. And the third is simply called **Writings**. This third section contains a sub-category called **Wisdom Literature**, and it includes the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

This morning's Old Testament story from **1 Kings 2**, however, is actually included in a different sub-category often labeled Historical Literature. But this passage also sheds some light on this topic of wisdom.

It begins with the report of King David's death and the succession of Solomon, David's son with Bathsheba, to the throne. Solomon's first act is to go to a "high place" of worship. Since the Temple had not been built yet in Jerusalem, he goes north to a town called Gibeon and offers sacrifices to God. Solomon then falls asleep, but it's not just because he's tired. In ancient days there was a practice called "incubation." A person would intentionally sleep in a sanctuary or sacred place in hopes of receiving a divine revelation. (Somehow I doubt that's the reason why people often fall asleep in churches today.)

As Solomon dreamed, God came to him in a vision and said, "**Ask what I should give you.**" What an awesome statement. How would you answer if God were to ask what you wanted? Haven't we all, at some point or another, thought about that old-

time favorite genie-in-a-bottle story and wondered what 3 wishes we would wish for? Again, **what would you ask God for?** Let us just remember that God *isn't* a divine genie!

Solomon answers God, "Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil." In other words, **Solomon asks for wisdom**, in particular the wisdom to govern and lead God's people. In this context, wisdom is the capacity to serve God and the people with an eye focused on justice and fairness, and the ability to make appropriate decisions. These are decisions based not so much on a clear cut scale of "right and wrong," but rather on that which is the wisest and most appropriate course of action to take in any given situation and circumstance.

May we never fail to pray that God blesses those in leadership positions with wise and discerning hearts and minds – whether they be political, religious, business, or family leaders.

Carrying that particular understanding of wisdom with us, let look at just a few brief examples in the New Testament. Though it's not part of today's Bible readings, I would like to direct you to the **Book of James**, which is often referred to as the "Proverbs of the New Testament." It is filled with practical guidelines for wise and ethical living.

James may even have been thinking of Solomon when he wrote, **"If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you."** (James 1:5)

James later asks, "Are any of you wise and understanding? Then show it by living right and by being humble and wise in everything you do... The wisdom that comes from above [from God] is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds; it is free from prejudice and hypocrisy." (James 3:13, 17). What a great measure of living wisely.

We also find a plea for wisdom in today's Epistle lesson from **Ephesians 5**. Here, like in James, the biblical understanding of wisdom is expanded to include daily living. The Apostle Paul opens with a word of caution, **"Be careful then how you live"** (v. 15). The readers of this text, including you and I, are called to **exercise appropriate discrimination concerning our own behavior**. Now, telling people how they should behave is not something I mention very often, primarily because I don't believe it's anyone's right to dictate to others how they should live their lives. That being said, however, **as Christians we are indeed called to live in a responsible, appropriate and wise manner in all areas of our lives.**

Paul goes on to admonish us to behave **"not as unwise people but as wise"** (v. 15). He then rephrases it this way, "So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (v. 17). In this biblical passage, the opposite of being foolish isn't simply being smart or intelligent or clever, but rather it is the ability to be discerning with respect to knowing and doing God's will. We have to be very careful with this one, because **there are way too many folks out there who claim to know the will of God, when what they are actually promoting is their own will.** I could do a year's worth of sermons on that.

As I often add, however, that I think we can at least agree that **"knowing and doing God's will" involves the always easier-said-than-done act of loving God, loving one another, and loving ourselves.**

The Apostle Paul then presents a somewhat poetic example when it comes to living wisely. He cautions against being filled with wine, and instead "being filled with the Spirit." In other words, **wise living should lead to spiritual intoxication, not physical**

intoxication. In Paul's context, he includes the example of meaningful worship – especially singing – as an appropriate alternative to inebriation.

Today's overarching message, then, is simple: strive to lead a careful life, marked by wisdom not foolishness, making the most out of the opportunities you face. To live wisely is a call to decency, common sense, and an eye toward reasonable and appropriate conduct. But it is also more.

John Calvin, to whom we as Presbyterians trace our roots back to the Protestant Reformation that began in the early 1500s, and whose 500th birthday is being celebrated this year, began his enormous theological treatise, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, with these words:

True and substantial wisdom principally consists of two parts: the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves.

Calvin then admits, "But while these two branches of knowledge are so intimately connected, which of them proceeds and produces the other, is not easy to discover." This is an important concept for us as Presbyterians: **Wisdom involves knowing both God and yourself. Attending to these two pillars of wisdom, therefore, should become a priority for us.**

Wisdom, then, can be defined as the trait of utilizing knowledge and experience with common sense and insight. That helps explain some of my earlier unwise decisions in life – because in many instances I neither had the knowledge or life experience, and often not the common sense and insight, to make wise choices.

No sermon on the topic of wisdom would be complete without at least a brief mention of the Old Testament **Book of Proverbs**. The book itself begins this way:

*The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:
For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.
Reverence of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.*

Let me leave you with these questions: **How have you learned to live life more wisely as you have grown in years? What areas of your life could still use an extra measure of wisdom?**

I encourage you to follow Solomon's lead and James' instruction: **ask and pray for wisdom - it's always a wise thing to do! May God help us all to live wisely!**

Amen.