

“WISDOM IN A VAIN WORLD”

We are in the midst of a larger section in Ecclesiastes, a section that began back in chapter 7, in which the Preacher is giving a variety of insights on wisdom and folly in our fallen world. Wisdom is an important theme throughout this book, which is one of the reasons why it is classified as part of the Bible’s “Wisdom Literature.” The biblical wisdom writers typically express their ideas in two main ways: (1) by giving exhortations about what to do or what not to do; and (2) by making observations about life. We see both of these things throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. There are commands, such as this one from our passage today: “If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place.” And there are observations, which are typically introduced by words like, “I have seen...” These two features of wisdom literature, instruction and observation, help us to understand the nature of biblical wisdom. In the Bible, wisdom is not just theoretical knowledge, though that is certainly an important component of wisdom. Rather, biblical wisdom is about understanding the way the world works and, as a result, knowing the best way to conduct your life in this world.

Wisdom is a critical virtue for God’s people to cultivate if we are going to know how to live a life that is pleasing to God. Merely knowing a set of rules to live by, or the kinds of character traits to cultivate, is not enough. Rules can never be exhaustive. They cannot anticipate every possible situation that we might face in this life. Wisdom, however, enables the person who possesses it to know how to apply God’s laws and how to practice Christian virtues in all sorts of circumstances. And because the fear of the

Lord is the beginning of wisdom, the way to obtain wisdom is by immersing yourself in the Word of God. The more you read and hear and ingest the Bible, the more will your imagination be trained to see how all things fit together in light of what God has revealed about his purposes for this world. And this will help you make wise choices as you live out your days in this world of vanity.

Wisdom is a valuable asset. As it says in Proverbs, “How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver.” [Prov. 16:16] This is why the Lord was so pleased with Solomon when he responded to God’s offer to give him anything he wanted by asking for wisdom. The Preacher clearly sees wisdom as something good. Yet he also wants us to understand something about the nature of wisdom. Because wisdom has to do with life in this “under the sun” world, life in this present fallen age, there is a sense in which wisdom itself is subjected to the vanity of this world. Like the created order in which it is put into practice, even wisdom has been subjected to frustration. This is the point that the Preacher is making in the passage we are studying today: *while wisdom is clearly better than folly, it is not always appreciated and rewarded in this life under the sun.*

The first thing that we learn about wisdom in this passage is that wisdom is often spurned in this world of vanity. This is the theme of 9:11-10:1. This section begins with a paragraph in which the Preacher makes a number of observations about the apparent randomness of life. Now, he is obviously looking at life from a human point of view here, not from a theological point of view. As we have seen a number of times in our

study of Ecclesiastes, the Preacher affirms the doctrine of divine providence. He says in chapter 7 that God makes both the day of prosperity and the day of adversity. [7:13-14] And there are several places where he says that everything that takes place under the sun is “the work of God.” [7:13; 8:17; 11:5] The Preacher believes in providence, not chance. Nevertheless, God’s providence operates in secret, and this makes it appear, at least from a human point of view, that life is ordered by chance. Things do not always work out the way we think they should. The best man does not always win. Doing the right thing is not always rewarded. People of high moral fiber are not always respected. Hard work, skill, and integrity are important, but they are no guarantee of success. Time and chance are like wild cards, factors that make things unpredictable and take matters out of our hands. As commentator Derek Kidner so eloquently expresses it,

“In the sea of life we are more truly the fish... taken in an evil net, or else unaccountably spared, than the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls.” [*The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 84]

At some point in our lives, each one of us is confronted by the fact that we are not in control of our lives. There are forces operating upon us that are beyond our control. And while it is not actually the case that this world is governed by chance, but it certainly looks that way from a human point of view.

In the next paragraph, beginning at 9:13, the Preacher considers the fact that though wisdom is of great value, it is not always held in high regard by the people of this world. Wisdom is not only spurned by time and chance; it is also spurned by people. The Preacher tells us about a lowly wise person who saved the day during a time of crisis, but was then quickly forgotten once the crisis passed. Wise people often bring great benefits to those around them, but their service is often unrecognized and unappreciated. Wisdom is a quiet virtue. It does not call attention to itself or promote itself. And this is one of the reasons why the world is not much impressed by those who possess it.

The next way in which the Preacher speaks of wisdom being spurned is by noting how a little bit of evil can undo a great deal of good. Like dead flies in a tub of ointment, it only takes a little sin to ruin something. There are so many ways in which we see this principle at work in our world. The false teaching of a minister, the ungodly example of a parent, a word carelessly spoken, one immoral act – each of these can have ruinous effects that extend far beyond the individual or the individual act. This is why it is so important for us to keep watch over our hearts. As the Preacher shows us in 10:2-3, our character will be revealed in our thoughts, our words, and your actions. And as Jesus said, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.” [Mt. 12:34-35]

The second thing that we can learn about wisdom in this passage is what it has to say about the relationship between wisdom and politics. Politics is the general subject of

10:4-7, and the subject comes up several more times in the collection of proverbs that make up the rest of the chapter. In verse 4 the Preacher says: “If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.” This is very similar to the counsel that he offered back in chapter 8, warning us of the danger of being disrespectful towards people in positions of power. And he expresses the same idea again at the end of this chapter, where he says, “Even in your thought, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.” The Preacher’s point is clear. Be very careful when it comes to dealing with people in positions of political or economic power. The wise person knows that such people are not to be trifled with. He gives due deference to them, even when he does not agree with them.

As I said in my sermon on Ecclesiastes 8 two weeks ago, this is an important lesson for contemporary Christians to take to heart. While there may be times when it will be impossible for you to avoid the wrath of powerful people without compromising your faith, you want to do your best to avoid offending them.

As we can see by the other things that the Preacher says about political figures in this passage, he is well aware of the fact that power is not always in the hands of those who are wise and upright. Power can be misused and abused. Rulers are sometimes irresponsible. They can be self-serving. They can be foolish. One of the great benefits of our political system is that we citizens can use our voting power to hold our leaders accountable. We are even entitled to speak out against our leaders when we disagree with

them. Still, this does not mean that we should feel free to curse our leaders. As our Westminster Confession of Faith says, “Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrate’s just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them.” [WCF 23.4] We should be cautious of speaking lightly of the faults of those who govern us, just as a son or daughter should be cautious of speaking lightly of the faults of his or her parents. People in positions of authority do have faults, and sometimes their faults are severe, but we need to be very careful in how we respond to these things. We can be easily tempted to respond to the faults of our leaders with a rebellious heart. And it is certainly not wise for us to respond to the follies of our leaders by giving our hearts over to the folly of a rebellious spirit.

The third thing that we can learn about wisdom in this passage has to do with the relationship between wisdom and our speech. The use of the tongue is a frequent topic in the Bible’s wisdom literature. The wise person is someone who knows how to hold his tongue, someone who takes the time to listen and think before speaking. Consequently, when he does speak, his words have value. As the Preacher says, “The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor.” The fool, however, is someone who cannot keep his mouth shut. He “multiplies words.” He says whatever comes to his mind. As commentator Charles Bridges writes,

“it is generally found, that those who have the most discourse have the least knowledge. Words are too often the substitute for thinking.” [*Ecclesiastes*, Geneva Commentaries, 251]

Think about the people you know or have known that you would consider as wise. I doubt very much that they are the kind of people who “multiply words.” The wise person measures his words carefully. He understands something of the limits of human knowledge, and this causes him to be long on reflection and slow to speak. Moreover, he knows, as James warns us, that the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. And as the Proverb says, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” [Prov. 10:19] If you would be wise, do not be the kind of person who multiplies words. Strive instead to be the kind of person who takes time to listen and think before you speak. Then your words will bring refreshment and life. “The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense.” [Prov. 10:21]

These are the three main lessons that this passage teaches us about wisdom. Wisdom is often spurned in this world. Politics do not always operate according to the principles of wisdom. And many of the people in this world would much rather listen to their own foolish opinions than make the effort to acquire wisdom. This is the world in which we live. How are we to avoid succumbing to frustration as we seek to live a wise life in a world that does not always value or reward wisdom? Perhaps the best thing we can do is to keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. For, as the

apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1-2, Jesus himself is the Wisdom of God. And to those of us who are being saved, the cross of Christ is the ultimate demonstration of the wisdom of God. It is the power of God for our salvation. But to the people of this world, the cross is perceived as foolishness. It is a message of weakness and humiliation. If the wisdom of God is despised and rejected by this world, is it any wonder, then, that a life of wisdom is not always respected or rewarded in this world? Wisdom does not always have a this-worldly payoff. But this is okay, because this world is a world of vanity, a world that will not last. As Paul says later on in 1 Corinthians, we are not running to obtain a perishable prize, but an imperishable one. And for this reason, we can be certain that we are not running aimlessly when we strive to keep to the path of wisdom in this world of vanity. [see 1 Cor. 9:25-26]