

“Wisdom: the Foundation of Virtue”

Date: July 19, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: virtue series

Texts: Proverbs 9:10-13; 3:5-6

Themes: Wisdom,

A wise person once said, “Fools learn nothing from the wise, but the wise learn much from fools.” Wisdom has always been the first of the virtues. It holds this distinction, in part, because it grounds all of the other virtues. As we will see throughout this sermon series, *all* of the virtues are interconnected, each adding and enhancing the value of the others; each needing the others to make it what it is.

Yet, wisdom appears to provide a foundation for all of them. Wisdom is the stage upon which the roles of the other virtues are played out. Courage is laudable, but it is mere rashness without wisdom to steer it toward a moral cause. Patience is important, but it becomes sabotage without wisdom to help us discern when the time for response is right. Love is the more excellent way, but it becomes mere sentimentality without wisdom to guide us as we seek to put love into action.

The Bible has much to say about the virtue of wisdom. Job 28:18-19 says, “The price of wisdom is beyond rubies; it cannot be bought with gold.” In other words, wisdom is more valuable than money or things; it is highly treasured and to be sought after.

Solomon is said to be the wisest man of the world; he was certainly respected as a wise man in his day. He is credited with writing at least two books of the Bible, Ecclesiastes and many of the proverbs in the book by that same name. Our two scripture lessons this morning come from the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is essentially a book of wise sayings, lessons that will guide a person to living a good life.

Proverbs 4:5-6 says, “Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom and she will protect you; love her and she will watch over you.” Verse seven goes on to say, “Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom, though it cost you all you have.” Do you see how highly valued wisdom is considered in scripture?

Paul writes in Colossians 1:9, “For this reason, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” Did you hear that? Knowing God’s will comes through spiritual wisdom.

James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” That’s good news, don’t you think? If we want wisdom, and if we ask God, there is the promise that He will give it.

In the biblical sense, there is more to wisdom than simply having knowledge. For the Christian, you can be wise without a great deal of knowledge; but you will never be wise if all you have is intellectual knowledge, a collection of a body of facts alone.

Wisdom also involves practical and moral reasoning. It is the art of taking the time necessary to think things through and anticipate what might happen. It is that spiritual reasoning which is able to tell the difference between what is good and what is best. Wisdom, according to Paul, is the ability to know the will of God: what does God want in this situation?

We live in a world of chaos, of diverse and competing ideologies each claiming to have the truth. It is in *this* world that we must rediscover wisdom and when we do, we draw closer to God and the mystery of goodness.

One of the great myths of the modern era is that humanity can experience endless progress through the application of scientific reasoning

alone. If we look back at all of the progress in the last century – the harnessing of electricity, the invention and development of more and more sophisticated aircraft, the creation of rocket science that not only put a person on the moon, but also sends space ships beyond our solar system, organ transplants, polio vaccines and others that have almost wiped out once crippling and deadly diseases, the invention of computers and how they have revolutionized our world today – consider all of that, and you might think the world a better place.

But with all of that progress, with all of the new technology that seems to be appearing every day, we still have not been able to create a better human being. Human beings are still plagued by the age-old problems of hate, anger, jealousy, greed and a hunger for power.

In this post-modern era, the myth of endless progress has some things to teach us. For our purpose today, the important lesson is this – *knowledge isn't enough*. In spite of all science has accomplished, and it has done much good for humanity, we still are unable to bring justice to the oppressed, reconciliation to the estranged, and hope to the broken-hearted.

Knowledge isn't enough. Wisdom begins where knowledge ends. Someone has said, "Wisdom is our intelligence *plus* God's love, presence and purpose." Proverbs 9:10 says, "Reverence for the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." That thought is echoed in Psalm 111:10, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow God's precepts have good understanding."

Proverbs 3:5-6 puts it this way: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." In other words, true wisdom begins when

we recognize the limits of our own human wisdom and we understand our need for God's guidance, direction, and sustaining presence in our lives.

In some translations it says *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. I prefer the word "reverence" instead of fear. Fear does not invite trust. But reverence calls forth an admiration and a desire to know more of what God wants for me and my life. Wisdom begins when we turn to God in reverence. And it flowers, when we follow God in obedience.

Wisdom needs knowledge, but wisdom surpasses knowledge. When we open ourselves to God's direction in our lives, when we follow the promptings or the urgings which God plants in our hearts, we come close to living a life of wisdom.

When we use our knowledge for the sake of love, we are living wisely. That kind of wisdom can then guide us and strengthen us as we seek to incorporate the other virtues into our lives as well. Wisdom guides us into the spiritual life, and the goal is a renewed relationship with God, spiritual health and wholeness.

The Bible is one of the main tools available to us as we seek to use wisdom to bolster our spiritual health. The Bible is both a roadmap, showing us the way we are to go, as well as a hedge of protection from the wrong and evil of the world. If we read and interpret the Bible wisely, if we obey God's commandments we will keep our feet on the narrow way that Jesus talked about. If we don't, then we wander off the path and find ourselves in places and situations that often end badly.

Too many people today want to set their own agenda. Too many of us think that we know best; we want our personal freedom to do whatever it is we want to do. People aren't worried about the consequences; they're not worried if their choices will hurt other people; they simply want to

exercise their freedom of choice. Many people have a rebellious spirit that seeks only what they want.

Wisdom is not doing what we want, or even what we think is best or right. Wisdom is doing what we hear God telling us is best and right. This means, we have to develop a way of hearing God's voice, of learning what God wants. This means we need to have a relationship with God.

Wisdom understands we need more than a good motive for doing the right thing. Wisdom understands we need more than consequences for our behavior. Wisdom knows and understands we need a moral compass to guide us, and to keep us on the right path.

Reverence for God is the beginning of wisdom. When we move from feeling that we *ought* to obey God to actually *wanting* to obey God, we have begun to cultivate wisdom. We then see the Bible not as a rule book that spoils our fun, but a road-map which keeps us on the straight and narrow path.

Jesus told a parable about two men who built homes, one on solid rock and one on sand. He said the wise person builds their home on the rock, by not only listening to my voice, but also obeying. Wisdom guides us to build our homes on solid ground, the ground of faith with guidance from God. We must seek that wisdom. Our lives depend on it. Amen. Let us pray

Teach us your ways, O God of Wisdom, for you are righteous and just. Plant your Word in our hearts; water it from the streams of your ever-flowing mercy, that it may bloom and produce in us the fruit that is a blessing to you and pleasing in your sight. Thy will not ours be done. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from *The Workbook on Virtues and the Fruit of the Spirit*, by Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Dunnam Reisman, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998, pp. 35-40.