

Wisdom vs. Knowledge

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

When I started thinking last Spring about doing a sermon series called “Why I Believe” I went through my usual planning process – pray, write down ideas, let them sit, edit, repeat. After a few weeks I came up with the outline that we finished last week, a seven-week series. There are certainly other areas of Apologetics that we could have delved into – and, obviously, no twenty / twenty-five minute ‘talk’ is going to get into too much depth on any of these vast subjects; entire books have been written on all of them.

As the series progressed, I began to specifically talk about some commonly heard ‘objections’ to faith (‘you can’t trust the Bible’, doubts about the Resurrection, the existence of suffering, bad things that Christians have done, etc.) I didn’t get into *all* the questions that people have... truly, the series was about why *I* believe, and to be quite honest, I considered the philosophical arguments, and the questions about science and morality very important, (because they’ve been part of my faith journey) but I never really struggled with psychological objections to faith (although I know some do – and there are good books on that, too), or political objections, or some others. So they didn’t ‘make the cut’.

The general idea of the series was to share and give examples of a couple important concepts – one being that while faith is not always a completely rational process (i.e., we cannot explain *everything* about why/ what we believe) at the same time, it is not an *irrational* thing, either. I like the term *super-rational* – that faith at times accepts things that are clearly *beyond* our limited ability to understand and discern. I’m very comfortable with that. As I continued to write, read, and think about the things I was sharing with you in this series, another ‘broad’ concept emerged in me that I felt was rather important, but it was hard to put into words.

It was something about the limitation of knowledge; something that I could see in action, but couldn’t quite describe as I would read quotes from brilliant men and women, people of incredibly high learning, and intelligence - *super brains*, if you will - arguing both *for* and *against* believe in God. Faith issues, apparently, fall into some portion of our intellect other than our mere ability to learn. It became obvious to me that there is no direct correlation between intelligence and either faith or the

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lack of it. I find that interesting, because so many of the ‘angry atheists’ who are writing today make a basic assumption that any intelligent person would just *have* to agree with their reasoning.

But the fact is, not everyone does.

At the same time, I had a number of people this week asking me, “Where do you possibly go from here?” (No pressure or anything.) Well, I had purposely left an open week at the end of the series, with the idea that I may want to use this week to fill in some details, or pick up something I didn’t get to, or the like. But, I decided against doing that. I’m going to stay with my original plan, for better or for worse. And leave it at that. The series is over!

So, not knowing where to go next, I turned to this week’s Lectionary. And, wouldn’t you know it, there *was* a plan! I saw how I really wanted to end this summer’s series. Today’s message isn’t by any means, Part VIII of ‘Why I Believe’, but it *is* connected. It’s something of an *epilogue*. And it addresses that issue that I was just trying to describe to you a moment ago, that observation. “*There is no obvious direct correlation between intelligence and either faith or the lack of it.*”

Our Scripture reading today may be enlightening on that matter.

In 1 Kings 3 we read of God himself speaking with King Solomon, after a particularly fervent worship service. Solomon had just sacrificed 1,000 bulls. And God says, “*Ask me for anything you wish.*”

[Now, honestly, this picture of God is very foreign to me – and to most of Scripture. It sounds a little genie-like, and there are other issues raised by this whole process that I have a hard time getting. But, as we talked about a few weeks ago, we’ll take it in its historical context, focusing on the point of this exchange, which is the most important thing. And, if you want to be very literal, God never actually says to Solomon, “Ask for anything you want...*and it is yours.*” He just says, “Ask for what you want me to give to you”...almost like a test...”]

And Solomon says something like this: You’ve blessed my father David on this throne, and the Kingdom is thriving. Now I’m realizing how big those sandals are to fill, and I’m worried. So here’s what I really want: “...*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?*”

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Solomon could have asked for anything at all, but he chose to ask for wisdom. And the Word says, “*The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this.*” This was the right answer, you see. He had *so much* but he realized that there was one thing he lacked. Wisdom. And for this, he needed to ask God.

Again, back to the summer series; what I was seeing in thinking about knowledge and belief was perhaps the divide between knowledge and wisdom. You can have a lot of knowledge and be completely devoid of wisdom, or you can be blessed with both knowledge and wisdom (as are so many of you, and certainly many of the scholarly writers that I’ve been reading). And conversely, there are people (again many right in this congregation) that have very little formal education, degrees, or scholarly learning, and yet you are people whom I deeply respect because you have something more important: wisdom.

There was a preacher from the ‘old school’ (H. A. Ironside) who was right on target when he said, “*Scripture nowhere condemns the acquisition of knowledge. It is the wisdom of this world, not its knowledge, that is foolishness with God.*”¹ People like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, and Bertrand Russell and many others have achieved great knowledge in their fields of science and philosophy and other disciplines; but when they try their hand at wisdom, in interpreting that knowledge into advice and direction for a person’s life, when they try to say, ‘therefore... this is what all this *means*’, they come up woefully short; their ‘answers’ are not only unsatisfying, but in the bigger picture they are – I believe – unsustainable.

God says in the Scripture “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.” (1 Corinthians 3:19). There are just some things that we *can’t* figure out on our own. We need to be taught, we need to be instructed. And this true wisdom comes from God, our Creator. Psalm 111: 10 –

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding.

¹ H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on Colossians*. Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 8.

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These words appear in various forms at least eight times in the Old Testament. The word ‘wisdom’ itself appears well over 200 times in the Old and New Testament. The general idea throughout is that wisdom is a gift from God. If we lack it, we should ask. If we think we don’t need it, we are lying to ourselves. Wisdom comes from God.

God’s instructions – God’s wisdom – fills in the details of life, it sets a framework for our knowledge, it gives us a context and a direction for our lives, and sets boundaries – all of which are necessary to be all that we were intended to be as beings created in ‘the image of God’. So many of our difficulties in making sense of the world come when we mistake knowledge for wisdom. Or we think that because we have knowledge, we have wisdom.

Gordon McDonald wrote about that passage from 1 Corinthians 3, relating it to his personal experience as a pastor in downtown Boston:

I used to struggle with [overconfident intelligentsia] while living in Boston. I would leave the town of Lexington, where my family and I lived, and I would drive past the towers of Harvard University. Another mile down the road, on the left, sits the campus of MIT, and to the right, the campus of Boston University. Straight ahead were the towering headquarters of many great multinational corporations.

There were moments when I was tempted to be intimidated by these unmitigated, unadulterated symbols of power. Here were great world leaders being trained in the business school at Harvard. Over at MIT, signals bounced off Mars every 30 seconds. In those towers, decisions were being made that created and destroyed ... economies all over the world. And who was I? What was our congregation with this Christian gospel trying to preach?

That’s what was happening in the Corinthian church. They were intimidated by all the talk of so-called intelligent people who said the Cross is silliness. Paul tells us not to buy it. It has never been true, and it’s not true today. God is going to show the wisdom of men and women to be rank foolishness. For the wise, the Cross must be in its central place.²

There is a place where knowledge stops and wisdom begins.

² Gordon MacDonal, “The Centerpiece of the Gospel,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 137

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I read an interesting comment in the feedback section of Leadership Journal about the limitations of intelligence:

*The greatest mistake of education has been to assume that intelligent people are automatically good thinkers. High intelligence does not ensure effective thinking--it may actually make a person a poor thinker. For example, a highly intelligent person can take any view on a subject and then use his intelligence to defend that view. The more perfect the defense, the less chance the thinker has of actually exploring the subject. Other aspects of the intelligence trap include the need to be right, the need to show oneself to be more clever than others, critical rather than constructive thinking, and reactive thinking rather than projective thinking.*³

Intelligence is not the same thing as wisdom.

The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

I love what Walter Wangerin (someone with a highly creative mind, and a wonderfully imaginative intellect, by the way) had to say about 1 Kings 3:

*At the beginning of his reign, King Solomon prayed one superior gift from God. Not wealth, not long life, but something far more valuable – he asked for “an understanding heart,” which translated, [is] a hearing heart. He asked, we say, for wisdom. But the genius of wisdom ... is the ability to open a room in one’s heart for the talk– and so for the presence– of another. Wisdom is none other than the ability to listen.*⁴

Which is why the 19th century English poet William Wordsworth was so on the money when he observed that “Wisdom is oftentimes nearer when we stoop than when we soar.” Perhaps even more so when we kneel.

Amen?

³ Feedback. Leadership, Vol. 6, no. 3

⁴ Walter Wangerin, Jr., in *As for Me and My House*. Christianity Today, Vol. 34, no. 2