



11 February 2018

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh. (Jas. 3:1-12 NRSV)

20 Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. 21 At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: 22 "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? 23 Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you. 24 Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded, 25 and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, 26 I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you, 27 when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. 28 Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me. 29 Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, 30 would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof, 31 therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices. 32 For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them; 33 but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster." (Prov. 1:20-33 NRSV)

1

One of the early lessons any driver of a car learns is the importance of knowing when to use what. A high school friend of mine got into her car that was parked in front of a delicatessen in South Roanoke. She put the car in reverse and pressed down on the accelerator...but the car didn't move. So she pressed harder on the gas...and the car jumped the curb in front of her, smashed through the pane glass of the deli, and came to rest between the counter and table two. She wasn't in reverse, after all. Let's just say she was embarrassed.

Attention to detail is fairly important when operating a car. Take knowing when to use the dome lights or the headlights. Dome lights certainly have their use...but are not much use when you are driving at night. If you want to see where you are going, you better turn on your headlights.

Racecar driver Al Unser Jr. says, "At 200 miles per hour, you're covering a football field every seconds. You have to know where you're going before you get there."²

This all seems like common sense, doesn't it? But you know there are plenty of people who stumble through life using only the dome lights - people who give no thought to where they are going. A friend describes a fellow minister this way...as "one of those guys who just falls forward certain someone is going to catch him - and so far so good."

What do we say of such folks? We may say they are really lucky. But we may also say they are **foolish**.

The wise are not so. Those who are wise have good sense. They know when to speak and when to hold their tongue. People who are wise are observant. They are mindful of where they are headed. They may or may not be particularly intelligent by worldly standards...but they know something about how to live according to God's way. They realize their actions, decisions, and deeds have consequences...and they are willing to accept those consequences.

According to the Bible, wisdom is the art of living skillfully in whatever actual conditions we find ourselves. It has virtually nothing to do with information as such, or with knowledge as such. Evidence abounds that a college degree is no certification of wisdom.³

Nathan Pusey made that point in an interesting way while he was president of Harvard. He is alleged to have quipped, "The reason the University is such a vast reservoir of knowledge is that the freshmen bring so much in and the seniors take so little out."⁴

The Bible tells us wisdom begins with "the fear of the Lord." Sounds quaint, doesn't it? The operative cultural axiom today is that all things including wisdom have little to do with "fearing the Lord." In our day, what passes for "wisdom" represents a variety of choices that are all equally valid because they boil down to individual preference. Perhaps my *alma mater* Hampden-Sydney College should change its motto from "know the truth" to "pick your own truth."⁵

2

The writer of our passage from Proverbs personifies wisdom. Wisdom is a person, a prophetess, who calls God's people from their "waywardness" and "complacency." It is worth noting that from the point of view of the Bible, wisdom is always in the service of God. Wisdom always conveys God's message to the people.⁶ Wisdom invites you and me to use the headlights of faith and obedience - to become skillful in honoring parents and raising children - to be good stewards of money and our sexuality - to use words well and treat others with kindness and respect - to eat and drink healthily and responsibly - to cultivate emotions within ourselves and attitudes toward others that make for peace.⁷

Wisdom is common sense, really...but how many people can you think of you would call wise?

So, assuming we are interested, how can we become wiser? The text tells us to stay awake – pay attention to the world around us because God displays the wise path everywhere we turn. One of my favorite theologians says God has given us “eyes made for glory” and that when we use those eyes, we discover God everywhere.⁸ Every bush is aflame with God's glory.

Though some people think otherwise, this ability to perceive God in all things do not necessarily imply a pantheistic notion that God and the creation are identical thereby denying the personality and transcendence of God. Rather, God can be perceived in creation in the sense that creation points to its immanent yet transcendent creator. We can know something about God through observing God's handiwork. With a God-saturated awareness, we are able to look at the world around us and observe all we see by the brighter light of this awareness. We can perceive the heart of God in each patch of earth and our daily bread. God envelops us at every turn with his influences.

A wise sage has said God works on our behalf through the external world of nature and events. All things in God's earth are “visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.”⁹ Using this phrase in this way may startle you...because we traditionally use the phrase to refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper. But I think the scriptures lead us to see all of life is sacramental – that is to say, all of life points us to God. Everything on God's earth is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace – in the sense that all circumstances and objects that surround us on any given day are invested by God with the potential to speak to us.¹⁰

Another wise sage has pointed out, though, that paying attention is no simple matter. Paying attention asks that we not jump to early conclusions...that we think before we speak or *Tweet*...and that we remain open to surprise. She also points out that wisdom comes most easily to those who have the courage to embrace life without judgment and are willing to **not** know, sometimes for a long time.¹¹

The work God gives to the prophetess Wisdom in and around us is to arouse us to choose life in him. Human wisdom is about discerning God's influences, choosing life, and sharing that life with others.

3

There is an old Jewish prayer that goes like this...

Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns, unconsumed. And we, clay touched by You, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder, “How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it.”¹²

The Wisdom of God invites us to such sight...such attentiveness...such awareness...such awe. Wisdom invites us to embrace the love God sent in the form of his only Son, our Lord. Wisdom invites us into life as we are drawn in gratitude to feast at this Table upon the meal our Lord has prepared.

Let us pray: Our eyes have seen your glory, O God. In the splendor of a spider's web, in the wood pigeon's song, in the breath-taking beauty of Rockbridge County, in the thrill of

a lover's kiss, in the gentle touch of a child's up-reaching hand, in a Summer tomato's astonishing taste. We have seen your glory, O God...but we have also not seen. We grieve when we consider all we have not seen...and ask that you, who can keep us from falling, would keep us from being so careless, unobservant, and unwise. In your mercy, may it be so. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Sweet, Leonard. 1999. Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millennium Culture. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub., 92.

² Sweet, 76.

³ Peterson, Eugene H. 2002. The Message. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1093.

⁴ Gillespie, Thomas W. 1997. "Wisdom in a Motto," in *The Princeton Seminary Journal*. Vol. XVIII, No. 2. Princeton: Princeton Seminary Press, 195.

⁵ Gillespie, 198.

⁶ Brueggemann, Walter. et. al. 1993. Texts for Preaching: Year B. Louisville: WJK Press, 505.

⁷ Peterson, 1093.

⁸ MacDonald, George. 1994. Diary of An Old Soul. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 21.

⁹ Hein, Rolland. 1999. The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald. Chicago: Cornerstone Press, 18. Quoting George MacDonald.

¹⁰ Hein, 66.

¹¹ Remen, Rachel N. 2000. My Grandfather's Blessings. NY: Riverhead Books, 81.

¹² Remen, 72. Quoted from *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayer Book*, copyright © by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Augsburg Fortress, 21.

¹² Hein, Rolland. 1999. The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald. Chicago: Cornerstone Press, 18. Quoting George MacDonald.

¹² Hein, 66.

¹² Remen, Rachel N. 2000. My Grandfather's Blessings. NY: Riverhead Books