



Prayer for Wisdom

I Kings 3:5-15

TRINITY PULPIT

✠ think one of the hardest things to do is not to choose between wrong and right or good and bad but to choose between good and better. In fact, many times the choices we have before us are not choices between good and evil but between choices that may not necessarily have a moral element. We make a choice between one college and another college, or to pursue a certain degree, or to not go to college, or to join the armed forces. All of those choices are not in any way evil or good. They are the choices we make trying to decide what is the best choice for us in any given moment. We might be making a choice between which boy and girl to see or the choice of which house to purchase. We might be making a decision about a job and there really is no moral or spiritual difference between the two. They might be similar companies, fields, and compensation, and we want to make a wise decision.

In my life there have been moments when we had to make a decision regarding staying with a congregation or leaving and going to another congregation. There have been times when I have been pursued and when I have pursued another opportunity. However, when I look back on my own ministerial career, I can truly say I could have stayed in every congregation and, with God's help, been effective. That does not mean that I don't think I was called to be your pastor – I do. But before I was called to be your pastor, I was called to preach. So, as long as I am preaching and serving, then I believe God will use my gifts. I could have said no and yes a few times in my own ministerial career and I would not have been doing anything wrong or right. I might not have the same opportunities or challenges but it would

not have been sinful.

I would suggest to you that most of the decisions we make are not good vs. evil, sinful or not sinful, but simply decisions where we want to know what is the best. The truth is, we do not know the future and if we only make a decision when we are sure about the future, well then, we are never going to make a decision. It is interesting that I have met some people who are overwhelmed by making a decision. They are so afraid of making the wrong choice, and that this wrong choice will change the direction and trajectory of their lives beyond redirection, so that they make themselves sick trying to make a decision. So they make their lists, the pros and cons and they investigate, and make their lists and then still sometimes struggle to make a choice.

Then we know others who just go by their gut. They go by the feeling and they make their decision quickly. They trust their instincts and even if it does not go well, they don't fret it.

Throughout the Bible, people pray for wisdom and they pray before making choices. Jesus even prays before certain choices that he makes. Paul, also, is found praying before making certain choices of where he will go and who will go with him.

The Old Testament story of Solomon contains a prayer of Solomon where Solomon — who is said to be the wisest man ever to live — asks for wisdom. In our text today we find this famous request. Solomon was King David's son, and Solomon was able to fulfill and complete what David could not complete – the construction of the temple. However, before Solomon completes the construction of the temple, Solomon, we

are told, is worshipping the Lord and following the Lord just as his father, David, had done.

Solomon was in the process of building his palace, the temple, and the wall around Jerusalem. Solomon, we are told, showed his love to the Lord by walking according to the way of the Lord as his father, David, did, except Solomon offered sacrifices at high places. Now high places were places where people would go to worship. Some of them would be considered pagan and then others might not have been pagan. We are told that Solomon went to one of the most important high places that is called Gibeon. There, Solomon offered an over-the-top sacrifice to the Lord. At the most important high place Solomon offered 1,000 burnt offerings on the altar. Solomon was extravagant in many ways and that included his offerings and sacrifices. We don't know why Solomon offered so many sacrifices; maybe, because he could. It might have been Solomon's way of saying to God, "I am serious about following you. I am serious about being pleasing to you."

We have to wonder why Solomon would offer such a gift. Solomon's life, we discover, is like ours in much of the time. There is a part of us that wants to please God and we are serious about pleasing God, but then there is a part of us that goes astray from time to time. Solomon is the same. It could be that this story of his great sacrifice follows his marriage to the foreign unnamed wife from Egypt, of all places, to remind us that Solomon made some choices that were not very wise, just like David, and that Solomon also had a desire to please God, just like David. In these very short verses we find that marrying a foreign wife would begin his struggle to be committed to God, and he made 1,000 sacrifices to show that in his heart he wanted to please God.

God comes to Solomon in a dream after this great sacrifice and says to Solomon, "I am willing to give you whatever you ask." Wow! Solomon has hit the jackpot: it took only 1,000 burnt offerings and now he gets whatever he wants from God. I don't think we are to read this as God has a price for answered prayer. Instead, I think it is a testing of Solomon's heart. Solomon has come to the most important high place, offered an over-the-top amount of sacrifices, and now God says okay, let's see how serious you are. What do you want most of all?

What would be your request? Some of us would say money or riches. We might not say that in church but we would say it in every place but church. Because the truth is we sometimes believe that riches will solve all of our problems. Now let's not act like having money does not make life easier – it does. To not worry about the basics of life, to be able to enjoy recreation or a vacation, etc., of course that makes life easier and enjoyable, but to think that it solves all of our issues is just not true.

Some of us might say fame or power. If we could make the world the way we would like it then all would be right with the world. In other words, if we were God and God were not.

Some of us might ask for certain pleasures. We might say, "Let's eat and drink for tomorrow we die. Live life to the fullest. Cram in as many experiences as you can."

Interestingly, we know that Solomon had all of these things. In fact, God gives him all of these things as well as wisdom, but did they bring him happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment? No. In fact, when Solomon writes the book of Ecclesiastes he would say, of all of these things they are meaningless... utterly meaningless.

So when faced with this request Solomon asked for wisdom. Solomon asks for a discerning heart to distinguish between right and wrong. Solomon does not ask for knowledge in the sense of knowing information. Solomon does not even ask for wisdom in the sense of what we might call "street smarts." The word that Solomon uses when he makes his request is a word that means a listening and obedient heart. Solomon asks that his heart be one that will listen to the Lord and that he will be able to follow. In many ways Solomon, just like David, is a man who is after God's own heart.

Solomon, in this moment, realizes what is important. What is important is a heart that listens to God and is obedient to God.

How do we gain a heart of wisdom? Let me suggest that before Solomon makes his request he recognized how his relationship with God is the basis for wisdom. The Psalmist writes that the fool says in his heart there is no God. God is the beginning of wisdom.

How do we have a listening and obedient heart?

First, Solomon confesses that God is faithful. Solomon begins by acknowledging God has been faithful to him. “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on the throne to this very day.” (v. 6)

Solomon begins by saying God is faithful. God has been faithful to David and God is now faithful to him. Solomon knows that all he has is the result of God’s faithfulness in his life. Solomon also reveals that he has faith that God’s faithfulness continues. It is not just for some, but God is faithful to all of us.

This is the beginning place for a listening and obedient heart. We begin by believing that God is faithful and if God is faithful, then God speaks and is working. Remember, I said that we could find peace in the decisions we make because when we are seeking to please God, we can know that God will not leave us, forget us, and write us off just because we might make the wrong decision. God is faithful. Solomon begins by admitting that God is faithful. So if God is faithful, then God is speaking.

One of the reasons we struggle to know how to choose and make decisions is that we either don’t believe God still speaks or if we believe God does speak, then we might say, “God does not speak to me.” The third option is God speaks but we don’t know how to listen. Solomon believed that God was faithful and so Solomon wanted to learn how to listen. So, he asked for a discerning heart.

How do we listen for God? In his book, *The Art of Prayer: a Simple Guide to Conversation with God*, Timothy Jones has a chapter on listening for God in our lives. In this chapter he suggests that we should learn to listen in three ways.

First he says we must learn to listen to God in our life. What he means by this is that we must read life backward. That is, when we look back on our lives, we begin to see God at work. We cannot know the future, but we can search the past. We can look back over our lives and there we can see how God has worked. In that exercise we can begin to learn to listen to what God might be saying about the future.

We have a decision to make and we need wisdom and we ask God for that wisdom. We want a discerning heart. So we might begin by listening backward. As Jones puts it, attending to not what is yet to happen but to actually what has happened. What experiences have indicated a direction or a trajectory that informs this decision? Jones comments that keeping a journal helps him. When over the years he notices patterns and themes being repeated, he knows that God is speaking and he needs to listen.

Sometimes it might come through an experience or it might come through a friend. I am not sure I would have ever been a pastor if it were not for people in this church who said, “You have this gift. I could see you doing this.” What have others said about you and to you about your gifts? Where have you sensed God’s pleasure and the satisfaction of work? How does this inform your decisions? Listen backward.

Listen through the pain, Jones writes. In other words, it is not just in moments when things go well that we might hear from the Lord; we also hear from the Lord in our moments of pain and struggle.

Madeline L’Engle, in dealing with her husband’s slow death, quoted the words from William Butler Yeats that said, “But love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement.” (“Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop”) In her journal she wrote, “This summer is not the first time I have walked through a place of excrement and found love’s mansion.” Many times it is at the worst times in life when we are walking in excrement that love – God’s love – speaks to us in a powerful way. We must listen.

We must listen, Jones writes, to revealed truth. Jones means scripture. We listen by reading God’s written and preserved word to us. When we open the Bible we do not believe we are merely reading for information but for formation. So when we read we ask God, “What does this say to me? What is it that you want me to hear from your word?” One of the great exercises you can do spiritually is to pray the scriptures. What I mean by that is to read devotions or a daily scripture reading and then, reflecting on what you just read, you pray, “God, speak to me.” What does the passage say to you or call for you to do? Listen to God in revealed truth.

Solomon begins by acknowledging God's faithfulness, for he knew that God still speaks. We find wisdom by listening.

Second, we find wisdom with humility. Solomon is the king at this time and yet he confesses that he is overwhelmed. "I am but a child." (v. 7) It is a confession of humility. We find a listening and obedient heart when we confess we need it. When we come to the place we admit to God we don't know it all and we are not okay on our own, then we have placed our self in the place to receive wisdom.

The Bible reminds us that our ways are not God's ways. We are instructed not to lean on our own understanding but to trust God instead. Let's commit our ways to God and God will guide our paths.

It is humility to ask for wisdom that creates the opportunity for God to then speak and lead. Jesus would say, "You do not have because you do not ask." How many decisions do we make without taking God's way into consideration? Then we wonder why we feel out of step with God. We pray for wisdom by knowing God will speak and by asking for God to speak.

The third quality I see in Solomon's request is that Solomon asks not for himself. Notice Solomon says that he wants wisdom so he can do what is right for the people God has given him to rule. When it came time for Solomon to ask God for whatever he wanted, he considered how it was going to be for the good of others. If every decision we make is selfish and does not consider the good of anyone else, then we can be pretty sure we are not gaining wisdom and living with a discerning heart. Because we are called to love others as a sign of loving God, then we must consider that when we ask for wisdom and guidance we will be asked to consider others.

How do we pray for wisdom? We begin by confessing God is faithful and will speak. So we listen. We humble ourselves and we ask. And we know that our choices cannot just be selfish but must consider others.

Here is one more thing about Solomon's prayer and that is Solomon failed. In this moment, Solomon seems like the model for wisdom and a discerning heart. Yet, like I mentioned, Solomon had a heart for God, but he also had a heart that was led astray. We find sometimes he was selfish and built his palace before he built the Temple. He married the foreign wives and they led him astray because they worshipped other gods. So, yes, Solomon built the Temple but he also built other places of worship for other gods. Solomon had right intentions but not always the right actions.

So, here is what I would say to end our time. The prayer for wisdom and a listening and obedient heart is a lifelong prayer. Wisdom does not come in one dose. In fact, the prayer of Solomon has the sense of an ongoing process. Solomon's prayer is, "Give me a heart that is always listening and always being obedient." Solomon listened sometimes and sometimes was obedient. In other words, he was just like you and me.

If we are going to live with wisdom, we must seek it every day of our life.

This is the way C.S. Lewis wrote it:

It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. (*Mere Christianity*)

To gain wisdom...to know a listening and obedient heart is a daily prayer. ▲

