

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

Deuteronomy 18:15–20

Psalms 111

1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Mark 1:21–28

Text: Psalm 111:10

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practise it have a good understanding. His praise endures for ever.

Introduction

A [news story](#) last November told how a Michigan golf course employee was surprised to discover that an Amazon driver making a delivery to the golf course took a wrong turn or two and wound up wedged in a tunnel designed for golf carts. The driver said his GPS led him there. The employee who discovered the incident observed that the driver “had no place to go. He was between a rock and a hard place.” Our technologies have placed loads of information at our fingertips, even so, it still takes a good deal of wisdom to navigate our way in life.

1. In the opening sections of the older testament book of Proverbs, Solomon extolled the value of wisdom for navigating life. He recalled the advice his father gave him as a young boy, “Son, the beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight.” (Proverbs 4:7) But where does one look for wisdom? How is it acquired? Solomon, in the maturity of his life, would write this general life maxim with regard to his father’s counsel, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” (Proverbs 9:10) The Psalmist, writing years later, reiterates this line from Solomon as he pens this beautiful Psalm of praise for God’s wonderful works; the Psalm we know as the 111th. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practise it have a good understanding.”

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. “Fear” in this context is the sense of awe, reverence, respect; acknowledgement that God is God and is not to be trifled with. God is creator; he has fashioned the creation in such a way that we can live in harmony with his plan and purpose and will. The foundation for wisdom is to embrace the truth of our reality; that we are God’s creatures made to live in relationship with him; that the world is the theatre of God’s engagement with us humans.

Rabbi Martin Cohen, in his commentary on the Psalms, poses this series of questions with regard to the fear of the Lord being the beginning of wisdom. “Is the human mind like an enormously sophisticated computer that, for all its theoretical power, still needs to be switched on, booted up, and made operative by an outside agent? And is the agent of wisdom, then, the deep respect in which God is held by the faithful? Can one be wise without God? The poet's answer is clear, but what will his readers be?”

We must never assume that wisdom is only found among Christians. God, the creator of the human with faculty to live wisely, is generous with wisdom for life. God is not stingy, but open handed. Wisdom is found among different peoples in every era. Luke tells us that “Moses was

instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians.” (Acts 7:22) Two things stand out here. One, there was genuine wisdom in Egypt; two, the wisdom Moses acquired in Egypt was surely put to good use when he led the Israelite people (who were non-Egyptians) out of Egypt and then led them through the wilderness years.

Scripture maintains, for example, that wisdom is especially needed in any society in the art of government. Unless a society possesses wisdom with respect to governing, that society will collapse into chaos. Since social existence is impossible amidst chaos, people will rush to end the chaos by submitting to tyranny. Tyranny may be unpleasant, but at least it permits survival. In a word, unless some people in any society are wise in the art of governing, oppression will ensue.

John Wesley, having understood the importance of that Egyptian wisdom which Moses acquired, used to urge his 18th century Methodist followers to “plunder the Egyptians.” By “plunder the Egyptians” Wesley meant that sensible Christians will be grateful for wisdom they come upon anywhere. To be sure, the wisdom we come upon anywhere at all we shall modify and adapt in light of the light which Jesus Christ is.

2. Our gospel reading for today takes place on the Sabbath and we find Jesus, as was his custom, attending synagogue service, this day in the town of Capernaum. Jesus entered the synagogue and taught, Mark tells us. The people there “were astounded at his teaching.” The word translated “astounded” here means to be struck with astonishment. The word connotes an emotional impact; Jesus spoke directly to the deepest longings of the human heart. His teaching was unlike anything they typically heard from their scribes on a Sabbath day.

What stood out to them above all else was that Jesus taught as one having authority. The fact of this authority with which he spoke has everyone talking about it; Mark, the gospel writer, mentions this twice in this rather short story. He does so to emphasize something distinctive about Jesus. He doesn’t say that Jesus spoke as an authority as if to say that Jesus had a great command of his subject matter, though he surely had great knowledge of his subject matter. The people said he taught with authority—he needed no authentication by some outside source.

This Greek word for authority, (exousia), is related to the Greek verb (exesti), meaning “it is free” or “it is permitted.” In other words, authority is the “sovereign freedom” of one who acts without hindrance. Jesus’ teaching in sovereign freedom is contrasted with the teaching of the scribes. The difference is that the scribes’ teaching authority depends on their knowledge of and adherence to tradition. Whatever authority a preacher’s message carries, it is in so far as the preacher is consistent with the gospel. Jesus is the gospel. He is the Word made flesh. Preachers are heralds of the truth that is Jesus. Jesus is the truth. And when Jesus taught you could tell. And the people there heard this authority as he spoke and remarked on it even before the obedience of the unclean spirit confirmed the same. The exorcism was like the exclamation mark on what they already detected about Jesus.

You must keep in mind that the older testament stories of God’s encounter with his people Israel loom in the minds of the gospel writers as they write their stories of Jesus. Mark may not make this connection as explicitly as the other writers, but the fact that Mark emphasizes, right out of

the gate, Jesus' teaching as remarkable, calls to mind the promise we read of from Deuteronomy; a promise God made to Moses. "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command." In the minds of the Apostles, Jesus is the long-prophesied prophet like Moses.

I noted with you a moment ago that the wisdom that starts with the fear of God encompasses the regard for God as creator; he has fashioned the creation in such a way that we can live in harmony with his plan and purpose and will. In sinfulness we can try to live against it; and to live against it is to find ourselves rubbed raw, and rawer still, until life is gratingly painful, miserable. In short, to try to live against the Creator's plan and purpose and will is to die.

We have no difficulty understanding all of this in the physical realm. The person who neglects nutrition, shortchanges herself on sleep, eats what is known to promote gastric distress, goes boating in icy waters without a lifejacket; when it all finally catches up to such a person and disaster overtakes him we shake our heads and say, "What did he expect?"

Our Hebrew foreparents always knew that the Ten Commandments, for instance, so far from being arbitrary and confining, onerous and oppressive; the Ten Commandments mark out the boundaries inside which there is blessing and freedom and contentment, outside which there is curse and bondage and misery. The Sermon On The Mount is our Lord's characterization of his followers. This characterization is to imprint itself so deeply into us that its hidden presence within us will make us glow with it—salt and light in the world is how Jesus put it. The weight and pressure of our risen Lord upon the apostles impelled them to speak his mind and heart; for this reason, the apostolic injunctions on how to live bespeak the mind of Christ. This wisdom is not mystery or hidden.

Dr. Stephen Garber in his book *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good*, said this about vocation in life. "The word vocation is a rich one, having to address the wholeness of life, the range of relationships and responsibilities. Work, yes, but also families, and neighbors, and citizenship, locally and globally—all of this and more is seen as vocation, to which I am called as a human being, living my life before the face of God." ¹

Sometimes we think of the words 'career' and 'vocation' as synonyms. As Dr. Garber has noted, for the believer our vocation is something that addresses the wholeness of life. Our vocation as Jesus' followers includes our career or work. We are to live as his people in the world and in that to be salt and light in the places where our work may take us. The wisdom imbedded in what our Saviour taught that is to characterize believers' lives is blessing to those around them.

When you think about the devastation of the Covid-19 virus in lives lost, increase in opioid-related deaths, spike in domestic violence, the strains on mental health along with the social, political, and business fallout; as the Irish poet W. B. Yeats put it one hundred years ago, "the centre cannot hold." If we are going to emerge from the impact of these devastations it is of vital importance to determine what narrative gives our lives coherence. What holds us together when things seem to be falling apart?

¹ Stephen Garber, *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good*, IVP Books, 2014. (Kindle location 49)

For the believer, Jesus Christ is the Lord of history. Things do not descend into complete chaos because the Holy Spirit is at work to mend lives. This world is the world God loves and will not abandon and the wisdom he gives builds life, heals, restores. As the Lord's people animated by this narrative, we go about our lives and work and in that are the salt and light of the news our world desperately needs. For example, our hope is grounded in the certainty of God's love poured out in Jesus Christ and we are to bring our hopefulness to every place we inhabit. Another example is the believers calling to announce the kingdom of God which is to announce that the sovereign rule of God is effectual in Jesus Christ. And because the sovereign rule of God is effectual in Jesus Christ, death has been defeated. Death is not the last word nor the final truth and reality of our lives. Living this hope in the face of death is an aspect of our vocation.

I invite you to take note that it is the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom, not a postgraduate degree in theology. It is that respect and reverence for God and his living truth that is Jesus Christ which any believer quietly exudes, however little might be said; this is the beginning of wisdom for those around us. Who we are as the Lord's people speaks volumes. When you come alongside the one who is devastated it is your confidence in our Lord through which our Lord speaks peace and hope.

3. We also read today the Apostle Paul's admonition to the Corinthian church regarding the ethical question of the permissibility for Christians to eat food that had been first offered to idols. You can see the wisdom with which Paul probes the believer's commitment that it is "love that builds up," to this issue.

It was in this same letter that Paul insisted that God's wisdom is demonstrated in the cross. The cross is that outpouring of God himself by which God has reconciled the cosmos to himself and has pardoned our offenses. No one in the ancient world looked upon the gallows as an act of wisdom; no one in the modern world does either. People with a philosophical turn of mind, says Paul, assume that wisdom comes out of high-brow philosophy. People with a messianic expectation assume that a dramatic occurrence in world history will dazzlingly display eternal wisdom. Paul insists that the act of God's outpoured sacrifice, the humiliation which tops all of the humiliations he has endured, is alone that wisdom which is the world's only hope.

Then the apostle says one thing more. The opposite of being wise is being a fool. And we, as Christ's people, are most profoundly wise, with God's wisdom, precisely when we appear most stupidly foolish; namely, when we are fools for Christ's sake. We are fools for Christ's sake when we cling to his cross and shoulder our own. Friends, congregational leadership exacts a sacrifice, and I am grateful that people unselfishly give themselves to these tasks year by year. Our world regards this as a foolish waste of time. Beyond congregational life people give themselves to be the support networks for the chronically ill—usually parents and relatives—the burden they bear of their cross-bearing you and I will never know.

The world may regard these people as fools. They are fools—but precisely fools of him whose wisdom appears foolish but in fact is the guarantee of the creation's restoration.

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