

**“WHAT DO YOU WANT?”**  
**I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14      August 18, 2024**

When I was in high school, I received my very first credit card. It was from the now defunct department store Montgomery Ward, a company that began as a mail order catalogue business in 1872 and went bankrupt in 2001. Even though I had a credit limit on the card, it felt like I was getting a blank check. That card enabled me to enter the store and purchase just about anything I wanted. Of course, we all know how financially crippling the misuse of such a power can be. One can quickly become indebted to credit card companies and find yourself only able to pay the minimum. Fortunately, even back then I had the wisdom to live within my meager means and have never been a slave to a credit card.

But I wonder what each of us would do if we were given an unlimited credit card and told to purchase whatever we wanted, and the bill would be taken care of. Spend with no strings attached. What would you do with the card? Buy a big house, a fancy car, put your children or grandchildren through college, take a world tour, give to charity, get a new wardrobe, start a business, etc.? If we were smart, we would take our time and think it through. Even though someone else is picking up the tab, there are still consequences to our choices. Getting what we want might not bring us happiness and can even work towards our detriment.

In the text for today, Solomon assumes the throne of his father David. At this momentous turning point, he has to decide what his focus will be as the new king of Israel. He knows very well that royal power can be used both for good and for evil, something his father's reign demonstrated, and Solomon hopes his administration can be a kinder and more gentle administration.

Since there is not yet a temple in Jerusalem, Solomon goes to a high place called Gibeon to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. We're told that **"Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar,"** so it is clear that Solomon is no slacker in the sacrifice department. While he is in Gibeon, the Lord appears to Solomon in a dream, and God says, **"Ask what I should give you."** It sounds like God has offered Solomon a unlimited credit card. He can ask for anything he wants with seemingly no strings attached. He could ask for long life, or riches, or victory over his enemies. He could express a desire for personal popularity, or political power, or romantic success. But Solomon asks for none of these.

Instead, he says to God, **"Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil."** Solomon wants wisdom. He asks for a talent not a bobble. On the surface that doesn't sound like much of an ask. I mean God is offering you the world and all you want is some street smarts. What gives? Who needs wisdom when you can have a Ferrari? The answer is we all do. In fact, I believe the world would be a far better

place if we each were blessed with and exercised wisdom. Perhaps the problem is we don't really understand what wisdom is, nor its value.

## I. WHAT IS WISDOM

In "Literature for Wisdom," *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, Donald T. Williams, writes, "We can start with what wisdom is not. Clearly it is not the same thing as **intelligence**.

Intelligence is just processing speed. It is better to have more rather than less, but having more does not guarantee that you will do anything good or constructive with it. Next comes **knowledge**; wisdom is more than mere knowledge. Knowledge is the possession of bits of information. But information alone doesn't let you accomplish anything more significant than an impressive showing on Jeopardy! The next step up is **understanding**, seeing how facts relate to each other, grasping their meaning in the big picture of the totality of God's universe. Now we are getting somewhere. But we still don't necessarily have wisdom.

**SO WHAT IS WISDOM?** Here is Williams' definition: **Wisdom is the inclination and ability to use our intelligence, knowledge, and understanding in creative and loving ways for the benefit of our fellow creatures, the advancement of Christ's kingdom, and the glory of God.** It starts, according to Solomon, with the fear of the Lord.

According to Williams, **wisdom is about how we use our intelligence, knowledge, and understanding and to what end.** This would follow a biblical understanding of wisdom.

## II. WISDOM BEGINS WITH THE SOURCE OF WISDOM

To get a handle on wisdom you have to understand the source of wisdom. Wisdom comes from God. In our story, it is God who initiates the interaction, who asks the question, makes the offer, and has the power to grant the wisdom request. Wisdom is a divine gift, not something you find in a book. It is more than life experience or earning a doctoral degree, neither of which necessarily make us wise or beneficial to others.

Solomon said, **“You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in great uprightness of heart toward you, and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne today.”**

Solomon understands that both he and his father are on the throne of Israel because God put them there and that God is good, faithful, loving, and desires to bless his servants. Wisdom is a gift from this same God, one among all the other gifts.

**Secondly**, Solomon is already wise enough to know that governing a people is a huge responsibility. He tells God, **“...although I am only a child: I do not know how to go out or come in.”** Solomon is humble enough to admit his need. I need you God as the foundation of my life and kingship. If I am going to be a good and just king, I need the wisdom that comes from a good and just God. To receive and make effective use of God’s gifts requires humility to know our need and ask

for help. If you desire wisdom, then you need to go to the source of wisdom.

### **III. WISDOM CONCERNS THE HEART**

My youngest granddaughter likes to go to the zoo and play with the stingrays, well at least pet them anyway. It's not like you can play catch with the creatures. The zoo near them has a large shallow tank set up where people can stick their hands in the water and touch the stingrays as they swim by. You can even buy food, hold it in your fist and the stingrays will swim over it and suck the food up.

Because of this practice when the rays see people coming, they will swim right up to them. Why? Because they know where the food is. The rays are not seeking companionship or friendship. They don't swim up out of love or commitment. They just want something from you.

Often our relationship with God is like that. We want something from God, but we don't really want God. When our need is met, we swim away. It is the spirituality of convenience. You know you have this kind of relationship with God when your prayers are not answered and your need goes unmet and we get resentful or mad at God for not giving us what we want.

Wisdom is not a gift of convenience, but rather a matter of the heart. Look at where Solomon's heart is at. Verse 3 says, **“Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of his father David...”** Solomon loved the Lord, but he also loved his people, **“Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people,**

**able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this great people of yours?”** Remember the two great commandments of Jesus? Love the Lord, Love your neighbor.

Solomon doesn't ask for something selfish or contrary to God's will. He is asking for a **talent**. He is asking for the ability to be a good and responsible ruler, a fair and just judge. He wants to carry out his kingly duties faithfully under God's guidance. Solomon is acting with the right motives and a loving heart to honor God and bless his people.

Just to push this idea a little further, the words “**understanding mind and discernment**” literally mean “**a hearing heart and an instinct to hear the truth.**” Listening is one of the greatest acts of love. It shows compassion and a willingness to understand others. Solomon wants to hear God's heart and to know the heart of people, so he can do the right thing and make the wise decisions and rule well. A heart skilled to listen is the foundation of good leadership.

But it is also the foundation for receiving and using all the other gifts of God. Wisdom is really a way of living the spiritual life. God's offer of wisdom and long life is contingent upon Solomon actually learning and applying the wisdom he's received. Solomon didn't ask for riches or long life, or for his enemies to die off (things we might expect from someone his age who suddenly becomes king), and yet God will grant him those things conditionally. “**If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life**”. In other words, in order for his

reign to be long and effective, Solomon would need to continue to maintain a particular way of life that demonstrated godly wisdom, loving God, loving his people, and practicing a hearing heart. The wisdom God gave him would need to be lived out in his experience day by day.

In some ways our lives are an unlimited credit card. God has given us abilities, resources, talents, opportunities, relationships, etc. And on top of all those things, I believe there are times when God who is lavishly generous and faithful enough will ask each of us, “What do you want me to give you?” And the answer we give will reveal our true self, the condition of our heart and spirit. At the same time we have the incredible opportunity to show our love for God, to humbling serve others, and to experience God’s presence in our lives. What will your answer be?

I will close with one thought from **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who wrote**, “The greatest tribute the Torah gives Moses is to call him *eved Hashem*, the servant of God. That is why Rambam writes that we can all be as great as Moses. Because we can all serve. We are as great as the causes we serve, and when we serve with true humility, a force greater than ourselves flows through us, bringing the Divine Presence into the world.”

When God asks, chose wisdom so we can be part of the Divine Presence the world so desperately needs. Amen.

# First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

## Sunday, August 18, 2024

### Second Scripture Lesson

---

#### I Kings 2:10-12, 3:3-14

<sup>10</sup>Then David slept with his ancestors, and was buried in the city of David. <sup>11</sup>The time that David reigned over Israel was forty years; he reigned seven years in Hebron, and thirty-three years in Jerusalem.

<sup>12</sup>So Solomon sat on the throne of his father David; and his kingdom was firmly established. <sup>3</sup>Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David; only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. <sup>4</sup>The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place; Solomon used to offer a thousand burnt offerings on that altar.

<sup>5</sup>At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, "Ask what I should give you." <sup>6</sup>And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant my father David, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you; and you have kept for him this great and steadfast love, and have given him a son to sit on his throne today. <sup>7</sup>And now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. <sup>8</sup>And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted. <sup>9</sup>Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" <sup>10</sup>It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. <sup>11</sup>God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, <sup>12</sup>I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you. <sup>13</sup>I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you. <sup>14</sup>If you will walk in my ways,

keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.