

Sunday January 21, 2024

Lesson 8: A Discerning Mind

Scripture: Proverbs 2: 3-5; 1 Kings 3: 3-15

Context:

We continue our new winter curriculum, “God Abides,” focusing on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. The second unit is titled “Empowering Discernment” with lessons on how God orchestrates events from behind the scenes as the figures appeal to God for wisdom. Today’s purpose is to differentiate good from evil through the gift of God’s wisdom.

We will continue with our exploration of two books from the Bible to see how the pursuit of wisdom is all throughout scripture. The first comes from the Old Testament and is the book of Proverbs. As we have discovered in the past several weeks, the book of Proverbs expresses sayings and allusions to help with Godly wisdom for life. The proverbs fall into two general categories: those which express insights about the human experience and those which have a religious dimension.¹ Today’s proverbs bring about the quest for insight and knowledge. Like a search for silver, the gift of understanding will lead to discovering the fear of the Lord and finding the knowledge of God. If one puts as much time into the quest for knowledge and understanding, then one will also come to have wisdom for life.

The second scripture passage comes from the book of 1 Kings. The book of Kings (divided into two books) explores the Israelite monarchy, particularly after the reign of King David. The king we meet today is Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba. The setting of the passage comes once the kingship has been put into place and Solomon is ruling as a newly consecrated king.

At the start of his kingship, Solomon goes up to Gibeon to offer sacrifices. While this would later be considered against the reforms of the Mosaic Law, something significant does happen there to set the tone for Solomon’s kingship. In the choice between a kingship of glory and a kingship in the spirit of Deuteronomy, Solomon chooses the second pattern.² This pattern of kingship is found in Deuteronomy 17: 14-20 and is later represented by Hezekiah and Josiah with a specific pattern: the king is declared as God’s servant and will be a loyal vassal in a covenant relationship.³ The focus of this kind of kingship is not on the royalty, but on the people the monarchs are to govern and God.

In the dream, God gives Solomon the choice of what kind of kingship he will pursue. Solomon does not ask for riches or power. Instead, he asks for the gift of wisdom and understanding to lead God’s people. God is so pleased with his answer, there is the promise of long life, riches, and victory over enemies. The picture of “Solomon in all his glory” is set in perspective by an insistence that the king must be God’s faithful servant.⁴ For Solomon, his

¹ Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 464.

² Nelson, Richard D. “First and Second Kings.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 31.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 36.

kingship will be defined by saying yes to God and asking for wisdom and discernment.

Application

Of all the prayers and conversations with God where there was a request for something in scripture, this is perhaps my favorite passage. Solomon's prayer for wisdom and discernment, particularly in knowing how to navigate between good and evil to govern a people, is a beautiful expression of servant leadership. This plea reveals how far more precious the gifts of wisdom and discernment can be in comparison to gifts of wealth or power. Once you can discern between good and evil, multiple individuals can thrive and all can taste God's goodness.

All Christians are sinners; we affirm as much when we stand ready to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion and we name before God of how we are sinners in need of God's grace. Even still as sinners, we are given the grace of God. God's grace is always at work in our lives to help us look for the Lord and be aware of how our transgressions are not the end of our lives. For every Christian, there is the ongoing journey to discover what is good and what is evil and how knowing the difference can make a huge change in the way we grow in our walk with the Lord and live with others.

In the recent Suzanne Collins novel adopted into a movie, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, the protagonist Lucy Gray Baird states, "I think there's a natural goodness built into human beings. You know when you've stepped across the line into evil, and it's your life's challenge to try and stay on the right side of that line." It was a simple, yet profound way to describe how all of us are capable of both great good and horrible evil. The choice is ours and every day we are given the opportunity to discern who God would have us to be.

I hope like Solomon every day we ask God to help us discern between good and evil. There are some days we do better than others where we are able to see the fruits of our praying and thinking. And then there are other days where we are called to be honest with ourselves and admit perhaps, we stepped across the line, and thus we feel called to hopefully step back onto the other side.

I have come to find in my life, God's wisdom speaks in themes to help me discern between what is good and what is evil. For example, the focus of covenant has driven me a great deal lately to think about the promises God has made to us and the promises I have made to God. All throughout scripture, I hear of God promising to be faithful to humanity even when we fail. God promised to never flood the earth again, to be with the people when they chose a king even though God warned them not to, and of course Jesus fulfilling the covenant on a cross, forgiving even those who mocked him as he was despised by the world. God has always been on the side of goodness, even when it doesn't make sense or doesn't look prestigious or mighty.

So as I think about making choices between what is good and evil, I think about the covenants I made with God. When I was nine years old and was confirmed, I promised to follow Jesus as my Lord and Savior, meaning no earthly power is to hold all my time and attention. When I was twenty-seven, I made a promise to the United Methodist Church to teach and preach historic Christian doctrines, focusing on the local church and ministry where I was sent. My attention is to be focused on what God puts in front of me in those places at those times, not looking forward at what other churches are doing or worrying about the future. Every time I baptize a child, I make a promise with the church to make sure the child has a community of faith where little ones are always welcomed and we promise to teach them about Jesus and the grace of God.

One might wonder though how these deal with good and evil. For me, following

promises I made means I do not have time for other things which come to distract me. Instead, I focus on how I can be faithful to God and others right where I am, and God will take care of the rest. The one constant prayer I can offer is like Solomon, asking the Lord every day to give me discernment between good and evil. And in my calling as an Elder in the United Methodist Church, to take care of the flock I have been entrusted to love and serve. I take these lines from 1 Kings and use them every day in my prayer time to ask God to direct me to faithfulness and understanding.

The good news is all can ask God for wisdom and discernment between good and evil. Whether it is sitting in a sanctuary in the quiet prayer time or having a heart with the Lord on the way to work, God stands ready to hear our requests for wisdom and grant it in the ways God can. Yet there's an ongoing nature to this prayer as especially when there is fear, anxiety, or confusion, reacting can seem like the easiest solution. Those moments are the very time for us though to pause, to ask God for discernment and pray for wisdom between good and evil.

What prayer do you offer up to God daily? What are the principles you see in people who know the difference between good and evil? Why do you think God gives people a choice when it comes to good and evil? How do you pray for discernment? Who are people you see as wise and discerning?

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