

Leadership Qualities: Wisdom

Dr. Kenneth Boa

Colin Smith tells about a recent trip to northern England when he and his family had the opportunity to visit Durham Cathedral. This magnificent place of prayer has stood for more than 900 years, still offering services daily. The main structure took 200 years to build! There were men who worked their entire lives on one level of the building and died knowing that even their grandchildren wouldn't live to see it completed.

Smith says that the next day, he and his family drove past some apartment buildings that were thrown up in the 1960s. After only 40 years the buildings were in a terrible state. The problems weren't just cosmetic; the buildings themselves were falling apart.

The contrast was striking. One building had been wonderfully put together and was still awe-inspiring after nearly 1,000 years. The other had been thrown together, and within a short time was an absolute mess.¹ What a clear illustration of the difference between wisdom and folly. Centuries after Durham Cathedral was complete, men and women have much more knowledge in the areas of construction and engineering. And what do we produce with this knowledge? Ugly and shoddy apartment buildings!

The Purpose of Wisdom

Wisdom has less to do with knowledge than it has to do with the application of knowledge in very specific ways. Wisdom is skill in the art of living life with each component under the dominion of God. When a person in the Old Testament demonstrated exceptional ability in a craft or art, that person was said to have what the Hebrew language calls *hokma*. English-

¹ Colin S. Smith, *Unlocking the Bible Story*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody, 2002), p. 55.

speaking translators render it as “skill.” In Exodus 31:3-5, God filled a man named Bezalel with the Holy Spirit and with “skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.” The word translated “skill” here is this word *hokma*.

Bezalel was given the ability to take raw materials and shape them into something beautiful and ornate. Likewise, in the book of Proverbs, we are viewed as that raw material. We are valuable but unshaped, worthwhile but undisciplined. We are precious but given to waywardness. We do not have within us the ability to take the raw material of our lives and shape it into the lifestyle our Creator desires us to live. Solomon selected that Hebrew word *hokma* to describe the quality needed by anyone who wanted to live life in the superlative – a life of excellence.

The Pursuit of Wisdom

The entire theme of the book of Proverbs is this: *pursue wisdom*. With the tone of a father giving instructions to his sons, Solomon writes:

Listen, my sons, to a father’s instruction; pay attention.... Do not forsake my teaching.... Get wisdom, get understanding.... Do not forsake wisdom.... Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding.... Accept what I say.... I guide you in the way of wisdom.

Proverbs 4:1-11

Verse after verse, the message is the same. Seek wisdom because it pays:

Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.

Proverbs 3:13-18

Wisdom is that quality that enables one to live a noticeably, recognizably outstanding life. Imagine how much this wonderful thing called wisdom can contribute to effective leadership.

Not all leaders think about wisdom as a character trait that needs to be carefully cultivated. Of course, we would quickly agree that wisdom is more valuable than money or status. At least we would agree with that statement intellectually. But how many of us pursue wisdom with the same vigor with which we pursue wealth? How many of us cultivate wisdom with the same passion we use to cultivate our stock portfolio? Somehow we believe that wisdom just comes by itself. Certainly, wisdom can and often is the end result of long experience in the leader's field of expertise. But the leader who gains wisdom by making poor decisions and learning from them is much farther behind than the leader who seeks the right kind of wisdom from the start.

In other words, learning from our own mistakes can lead to wisdom in the end. Malcolm Muggeridge said, "Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message." Events in our lives are not neutral; they are God-given opportunities to gain wisdom. In Proverbs 8 wisdom is portrayed as a woman calling out for all to embrace her. Notice especially what she claims:

"I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence; I possess knowledge and discretion. To fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech. Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have understanding and power. By me kings reign and rulers make laws that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth. I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me. With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity. My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver. I walk in the ways of righteousness, along the paths of justice, bestowing wealth on those who love me and making their treasuries full."

Proverbs 8:12-21

What leader in his or her right mind would not want such a priceless tool? Why would we not heed wisdom's invitation? Imagine this wise and wonderful woman, gazing into your eyes and saying:

“Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord.”

Proverbs 8:32-35

Could anything be more valuable to leadership than this?

The Provider of Wisdom

As with most things of value, however, wisdom is elusive, and it seems to be in short supply. Some people are crafty and shrewd, others are well-informed and highly educated, but few of us manifest the quiet depth of wisdom. In his book *Making Life Work*, Bill Hybels tells of a conversation he'd had recently with a businessman. Business was going so well that he'd had to hire new salespeople to fill all the orders. “The only problem,” the man told Bill, “is that so many of my new salespeople act weird.... They do stupid things and get themselves in trouble.” He went on to catalogue all the “weird” things his new salespeople did. They showed up for work late. They inflated prices. They were rude and uncooperative. Rather than building a successful career, they sabotaged themselves and wound up getting fired.

Hybels concludes that the bottom line of the man's complaints is that he can't find wise people. The people he hired were acting like fools. Hybels writes:

Today the word *fool* often means someone with low intelligence, but in biblical usage, fools may have a high I.Q. and a reputation for success. What makes them fools is that they ignore God's wisdom, preferring to follow the shifting dictates of the crowd or their own fallible opinions. While fools often consider themselves clever – people who know how to beat the system – their cleverness all too often leads to their ruin. Their penchant for distorting the truth, their lack of discernment and discipline,

their unwillingness to exhibit self-control and their apparent delight in throwing caution to the wind put them on a path to disaster.²

What is the secret and the source of wisdom? Job asked this question:

“But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell? Man does not comprehend its worth; it cannot be found in the land of the living. The deep says, ‘It is not in me’; the sea says, ‘It is not with me.’ It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed in silver. It cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir, with precious onyx or sapphires. Neither gold nor crystal can compare with it, nor can it be had for jewels of gold. Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies. The topaz of Cush cannot compare with it; it cannot be bought with pure gold.

“Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell? It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds of the air. Destruction and Death say, ‘Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.’ God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he established the force of the wind and measured out the waters, when he made a decree for the rain and a path for the thunderstorm, then he looked at wisdom and appraised it; he confirmed it and tested it. And he said to men, ‘The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.’”

Job 28:12-28

According to this passage, only God understands the way to wisdom because he alone is the source of true wisdom. The wisdom of God is evident in the beauty, subtlety, richness, intricacy, variety and splendor of the created order, and it is also evident in the person, powers and perfections of the God of creation.

Read that last verse again: “The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.” True wisdom can only be attained by cultivating the fear of the Lord. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10). To fear God is to nurture an attitude of awe and humility before him and to walk in radical dependence upon God in each area of life. The fear of the Lord is similar to the mindset of a subject before a powerful king; it is to be under divine authority as one who will

² Bill Hybels, *Making Life Work* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 19-20.

surely give an account. In his discussion on what it means to honor God's name, Rubel Shelly writes:

Scripture describes the spirit that hallows God's name as the *fear* of the Lord. This spirit is at once an attitude of esteem and awe before the majesty of God and a confidence in his mercy and love. While Yahweh has revealed himself as a mighty and terrible God who is to be feared, he does not invoke the cringing, groveling terror that worshipers of pagan gods felt.

The people of God's covenant community respect him. When he speaks, the people listen; when he commands, they obey; when he is disobeyed, he does not hesitate to punish. There is thus a stability about his relationship with his worshipers that was never present in any of the pagan myths. Their gods were petty, unpredictable, and untrustworthy. But Yahweh is the same yesterday, today, and forever.³

Fearing the Lord relates to trust, humility, teachability, servanthood, responsiveness, gratitude and reliance on God; it is the exact opposite of autonomy and arrogance.

King David cried out to God: "Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name" (Psalm 86:11). David knew that he could not fear God if he had a divided heart. If his loyalties were divided between this world and the world to come, he would not be able to truly fear God. Wisdom relates to developing an eternal perspective on life, and it can only come from God – the fountain of all wisdom.

The Priority of Wisdom

Wisdom includes the ability to use the best means at the best time to accomplish the best ends. It is not merely a matter of information or knowledge, but of skillful and practical application of the truth to the ordinary facets of life. James tells us, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). Admitting we lack wisdom is a difficult but necessary first step on the road to skillful living.

³ Rubel Shelly, *Written in Stone* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1994), pp. 78-79.

Many of us are like the CEO who was visited by an angel right in the middle of a board meeting. The angel said to him, “Because of your pious life, I’m going to give you a choice between unbounded wisdom, wealth or beauty.” Of course, being a pious man, he chose wisdom without hesitation. “Very well,” the angel said and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

The CEO sat in silence with a glow about him as all the board members stared at him. Finally, someone whispered, “Say something to us. We want to hear the voice of wisdom.”

“I should have taken the money.”

If God (or a messenger from God) approached you and offered to grant you one wish, what would it be? Your answer to this question is one of the most telling things about you; it illuminates your value system.

Instead of asking for a long life or wealth or power, Solomon pleased the Lord by requesting a discerning heart of wisdom:

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

“Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for – both riches and honor – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.”

1 Kings 3:5-14

Because of his focus on wisdom above all other things, Solomon was also granted things he did not ask for. This is an illustration of the truth of Jesus' words concerning the one thing most needful for leaders today: "But seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). When we pursue first things first, the second things are thrown in; when we pursue second things first, we not only miss out on the first things, but we also miss the fullness of the second things.

Wisdom is skill in the art of living with each facet of life under God's authority. This wisdom differs greatly from the wisdom of this world. James tells us:

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

James 3:14-17

The wisdom of Christ is very different from the wisdom of this world; do not confuse the two.

Wise men and women throughout the centuries have spent regular time in the book of Proverbs. Some have even made it their practice to read one chapter a day each month, asking God for the qualities celebrated in this marvelous book: wisdom, prudence, understanding, discernment, discipline, insight, knowledge, discretion, guidance, instruction, faithfulness, sound judgment, humility, justice, diligence, the fear of the Lord and a true understanding of success.

The Pain of Ignoring Wisdom

How many of us have looked back across the ruins of failure and said, "I knew better. Why didn't I listen?" Solomon offers an essential fact about wisdom that scares the discerning reader into thinking twice about heeding wisdom's invitation:

Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech:

“How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you – when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

“Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.”

Proverbs 1:20-33

Gary Richmond, a former zoo keeper, tells about an experience a friend had with a raccoon. He explains that raccoons go through a glandular change at about 24 months. After that they often attack their owners. Since a 30-pound raccoon can be equal to a 100-pound dog in a scrap, Richmond felt compelled to warn his young friend of his named Julie of the change coming to her pet raccoon. She listened politely as he explained the coming danger. She responded by saying what people always say, “It will be different for me.” She smiled and added, “Bandit wouldn’t hurt me. He just wouldn’t.” Three months later, Julie underwent plastic surgery for facial lacerations sustained when Bandit attacked her for no apparent reason. Bandit was released into the wild.⁴

God is not often interested in shortcuts, but there is a God-given shortcut to wisdom. Solomon assures us: “He who walks with the wise grows wise” (Proverbs 13:20a). We are given

⁴ Gary Richmond, A View from the Zoo Video Series (Nashville: W. Publishing Group).

the opportunity to learn wisdom from others who are further down the road than we are. We don't have to live and learn; we can learn and live. James Emery White says,

I am shocked at how many people attempt to make life-changing decisions, try to determine God's will for their lives, or seek to follow their life purposes, and *never* bring other people into the process! This causes you to miss out on two very important tools that God wants to use in guiding you, the first being *objectivity*. You're not objective about yourself, much less your life. Neither am I. I'm surrounded by my emotions, my circumstances, my biases, and my desires. I need to go to people who can see things independently of all that. But that's not all I get through counsel. I also get *wisdom*. When I go to someone else, I get his or her experiences, maturity, and knowledge concerning what I'm trying to decide. This isn't about running your life by committee, or taking what somebody says and feeling as if you have to follow it. It certainly shouldn't be used as a shortcut to the hard work of studying the Bible for God's moral will, or investing in prayer, evaluating circumstances, and using your common sense. But going to someone who is intimate with God, intimate with you, and able to tell you what you may not want to hear, is invaluable.⁵

Here is the critical principle of wisdom: The person who refuses to act on what he or she knows, who refuses wise counsel, who ignores sage advice, will get in trouble. In the resulting despair that good information will haunt that person; the fact that he or she knew what wisdom advised will become a cruel joke. While this passage says that wisdom will laugh and taunt, all the noise will come from inside this person's own head. When he or she searches for some intelligent way out of the pit he or she has so foolishly dug, there will be no wisdom left.

The long-range view is a basic tenet of wisdom. The fool lives in the present moment while the sage considers the longer-term consequences of present action. The next time you hear someone say, "I know better," or "Why didn't I listen?" you'll recognize this song of wisdom-after-the-fact.

Wisdom calls (vv. 20-21). Some listen (v. 33). Some don't (vv. 21-32).

⁵ James Emery White, *You Can Experience a Purposeful Life* (Nashville: Word, 2000), p. 160.

The Perseverance of Wisdom

When writing to the young men who were being educated for leadership, Solomon told them that wisdom was essential for their future hope. Was this the kind of wisdom that they could reproduce on a test? The kind of wisdom that they could recite in front of an audience? No – that’s a better description of information than wisdom. Leadership without wisdom will do more harm than good.

As much as students prepare for leadership, there is no textbook that will give them a technical answer to every difficult situation they will face. Still, Solomon instructs: “Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul; if you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off” (Proverbs 24:14).

John Piper writes about why Biblical wisdom is so essential to the godly leader:

Of course, the Bible does not answer every question about life. Every fork in the road does not have a Biblical arrow. We have need of wisdom in ourselves to know the path of lasting joy. But that, too, is a gift of Scripture. “The law of the Lord is perfect...making wise the simple...the precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart” (Psalm 19:7-8, 119:98). People whose minds are saturated with God’s Word and submissive to his thoughts have a wisdom that in eternity will prove superior to all the secular wisdom in the world. “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding” (Proverbs 3:13).⁶

Knowledge isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. There were two trees in the Garden of Eden: The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve picked the wrong tree. The knowledge of good and evil isn’t the kind of knowledge we want necessarily. From experiencing evil, we gain knowledge of it, but what good does that do? It only serves to alienate us from God and each other. T.S. Eliot said it this way in “Choruses from the Rock”:

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,

⁶ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1996), pp. 123-124.

Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

Our culture is fat on information but thin on wisdom. Godly leaders must know how to take the raw material of knowledge and refine it into wisdom, turning crude data into high-octane wisdom. Wisdom perseveres; it lasts beyond all the currents of culture, beyond the fashions of the day. Wisdom seeks that which will last and is willing to trade immediate gratification for an eternal reward. Failure to acknowledge this will result in leaders who carefully spend their lives constructing a house of cards.