

Worldly Wisdom  
Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 2:12-17

Can Solomon be serious? After all, he reminds his readers in chapter 1 verse 16 that he was in fact the wisest man in the world, if obviously not the humblest. If that's true, as other parts of the Bible confirm, then chapter 2 verse 12 logically follows: no one else can possibly understand wisdom or madness or folly better than he could (2:12).

But how could the wisest man in the world be so negative about wisdom itself? With the immense knowledge he possessed about the beauty and variety of the natural world (see I Kings 4:33), how could he honestly say that exploring the world is a "grievous task" (1:13)? Given the way he was able to instantly grasp the facts of a case and to render true justice (see I Kings 3:16-28), how could he say that "in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain" (1:18)? After examining everything that is done under the sun, how could he say that he "hated life," because "everything is futility and striving after the wind" (2:17)?

Because, as we learned last week, when we confine our analysis only to that which is "under the sun," Solomon is absolutely right. Now, make no mistake: Solomon was wise enough to see the relative merits of what we might call "worldly wisdom." As he says in chapter 2 verses 13 and 14, such wisdom is much better than folly. Knowing how the world really works and putting that knowledge into practice does tend to make our daily lives run more smoothly: you really do have to have power plants if you want reliable electricity. At the same time, folly – refusing to act on what we know to be true – keeps us stumbling in the darkness: No, you really can't have golf courses in the desert and still maintain reasonable levels of water in your aquifers.

And haven't so many of us found worldly wisdom to be valuable? If we are thoughtful and careful with our budgets, don't we tend to have more money in our bank accounts? If we follow an exercise plan, or think twice before smoking that cigarette, don't our bodies tend to be better able to fight off disease? If we are wise enough to stay away from street drugs and to avoid the excessive use of alcohol, don't we find it easier to maintain our self-control? And don't we all know people who fail to exercise such worldly wisdom only to find themselves broke or sick or in jail?

Sure we do. But if we put our faith in such wisdom to guarantee us successful, happy, productive and comfortable lives, we are kidding ourselves. For as the wisest man in the world points out in today's passage, worldly wisdom by itself is vanity: futile, pointless, and empty. A life lived only according to worldly wisdom will be as fruitful as trying to catch the wind.

To demonstrate this, Solomon offers us a proverb in chapter 1 verse 15: "What is crooked cannot be straightened." Simply put, just because you are smart enough to identify a problem, or even to develop a solution for it doesn't mean that you can actually fix it. As a result, such wisdom often leads only to frustration.

I have been told, for example, that there is a legal requirement for a certain percentage of the water in the Mississippi River to go down the channel past New Orleans instead of down the Atchafalaya River. And so, as the silt in the river has increased, the water tends to back up, increasing the probability that areas farther and farther upstream will flood – like the field across the highway from the Yokena Presbyterian Church.

But just knowing all this won't make Congress change the law. And even if they did, and even if more water was sent down the Atchafalaya, how many homes and fields along its banks would be

inundated as a result? And with less water going past New Orleans, how would ships be able to come up river to the ports in Baton Rouge?

Or take a look at the thorny issue of abortion. We can be justifiably grateful that the US Supreme Court has upheld Mississippi's law protecting the lives of babies 15 weeks after their conception. But how can we ensure that all the babies born in Mississippi are properly cared for? How can we encourage more fathers to take responsibility for their families? Indeed, how can we encourage all potential parents first to get their education or training, then to get married, and only then to have children – to follow the recipe not only for their own economic success and happiness but also for the wellbeing of their children?

No, just knowing the right thing to do doesn't automatically make it happen. Worldly wisdom alone is simply insufficient to solve such intractable problems. And because what is crooked just can't be straightened, having worldly wisdom is often supremely frustrating.

And what about the second half of that proverb in verse 15? "What is lacking cannot be counted." In these days of rising prices, that point is painfully obvious, isn't it? And with good-paying jobs for unskilled or semi-skilled workers increasingly difficult to find, those without an education or training are having an especially hard time making ends meet. In fact, many Americans are coming out of retirement and going back to work to make sure that their fixed incomes will be sufficient for their rising monthly expenses.

But some very smart people continue to imagine that worldly wisdom alone can solve the problem of scarcity, providing everyone what is lacking. Karl Marx, for example, taught that the solution to poverty was obvious: societies should simply take from each person according to his ability and give to each according to his needs. But instead of simply encouraging people to engage in Christian charity, as we all should, his followers have attempted to accomplish what is perhaps a laudable goal by brute force, martialing the power of the state to compel what they call a more equitable distribution of wealth through taxes. Some of them go so far as to confiscate the farms and factories, along with all the other means of production.

But all such utopian schemes invariably run aground on the rocks of reality, as they encounter the stubborn truths of human nature: people without economic incentives to work generally choose not to. And as socialism invariably leads to less economic activity, and thus less taxes, Margaret Thatcher memorably pointed out, "The problem with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people's money." And so, regardless of the schemes of even the best-meaning politicians, the problem of scarcity continues. Or as Solomon explains, even with the greatest worldly wisdom, "What is lacking can't be counted."

But if worldly wisdom is limited because identifying problems doesn't necessarily solve them, it is also quite obviously helpless to solve the greatest human problem of all: the problem of death. This week, we've been hearing a lot of well-deserved praise for Queen Elizabeth II's long life of service to her country and her devotion to her people. Those who knew her best have described her great wisdom, explaining what good advice she gave, what a keen judge of character she was, and what a tremendous amount of common sense, good judgment and clear perspective she possessed. But none of those things, none of that wisdom could keep her from dying at the age of 96 on Thursday.

Moreover, think about all the great wisdom and knowledge our scientists and doctors and nurses possess. With vaccines, Edward Jenner conquered smallpox and Jonas Salk put an end to polio. But COVID-19 has shown us the limitations of such worldly wisdom, hasn't it? Even though our clever Mississippi doctors and engineers have devised a way to make ventilators from parts you can buy at a

hardware store, and even though vaccines to fight COVID-19 were developed and distributed in record time, we continue to be plagued with this strange, stubborn, rapidly mutating virus. As Solomon solemnly observes, death eventually comes to the wise and the foolish alike: worldly wisdom is no path to immortality.

In fact, such wisdom can't even guarantee that we'll be remembered after we're gone. Some of you know that I have an "I Like Ike" cap that I wear, not only to keep from getting sunburn but also as a reminder of a time when Americans could disagree about politics without being disagreeable. Wearing that cap is also a way of honoring and remembering Dwight D. Eisenhower: the leader of the Allied invasion and conquest of Western Europe during World War II, the President of Columbia University, the President of the United States who helped found NASA and build our Federal system of interstate highways and integrate our public schools. But in spite of all of his great achievements, indeed, his great wisdom, I had a recent high school graduate ask me, "Who's Ike?"

Or think about today's date. To those of us who were alive in 2001, September 11 will always carry with it the images of the violence and destruction that are the inevitable byproduct of ignorant fanaticism. But we also remember the memory of the bravery and selflessness that our first responders demonstrated on that occasion. We watched in awe as they dashed into burning buildings to bring others to safety, all too many of them sacrificing their lives in the process. But no one under the age of 21 remembers any of that, just as no one under 80 remembers the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Yes, Solomon points out in chapter 2 verse 16 that even the wisest of men and the greatest of their discoveries are all too often forgotten. Think, for example, about the previous pastors of this congregation. Presbytery and General Assembly records can tell us the different ministries each of them were involved in, and we have their pictures hanging in the Annex. We have a handful of sermons from Dr. Butler, and we have a few manuscripts and recordings from Mr. Lowrance. Mr. Daniels left a whole box of notes to his family, but they have become hopelessly jumbled, and are too sketchy anyway to reproduce any of his excellent sermons. But what do we really know about most of these servants of God? And as the years go by, how many people will remember anything at all about them – or any of us?

No, Solomon couldn't be more right. Placing our faith in worldly wisdom is futile. Human ingenuity tends to be much better at identifying than at solving problems, and it alone is helpless to transform poverty into prosperity. The wisest as well as the most foolish of men will all eventually die, and sooner or later be forgotten. No amount of worldly wisdom can keep anything under the sun from eventually falling into futility or emptiness.

Ah, but there is a source of wisdom that comes from above the sun, isn't there? After all, our responsive reading reminds us that the words of Scripture weren't just dreamed up by the prophets or apostles. No, as those men were moved by the Holy Spirit, they spoke the very words of God, the God Who is in Heaven, the God Who has the power not only to explain but also to solve all our problems.

And while Marx and his brutal followers are only able to use force to compel people to behave in a certain way, the Word of God is living and active, able to change us from the inside out. It pierces our hearts like a sword and brings us to conviction of our sin. It holds up a mirror to our motives, revealing our rationalizations, and showing us our selfishness, greed and envy. It alone can give understanding to those who need it most, shining a light on the path of hard work and responsibility that leads to prosperity, thus allowing us to engage in the generosity that is the most effective remedy for poverty.

And while we may not know very much about so many of the Lord's servants that have stood in this pulpit, the message that they preached has survived all of them and will last so much longer than all of us. For what did Isaiah say? "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."

No, worldly wisdom can't keep anyone alive. But the wisdom that comes from above, the Holy Scriptures give us the hope of eternal life, don't they? Because God kept His promise to send a Messiah, an anointed ruler to defend His people even against the worst of our enemies, even against sin and death, all those who share the faith of Abraham, all those who trust in Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord shall not perish, but have everlasting life. That's the good news that has been proclaimed right here since 1828, and all over the world for almost 2000 years. And that life-giving, hope-inspiring heavenly wisdom will never be forgotten.

So, let's raise our eyes above the sun, above the merely material things of this world. Let's rely completely on the convicting, instructing, reassuring, never-failing Word of God to be our only and infallible rule both of our faith and our practice. For only that heavenly wisdom can give us unfailing light and keep us from stumbling. And only the living Word of God, the Lord Jesus, can fill us with His Holy Spirit, giving us a desire to obey God with all our hearts and giving us true peace.