

Sermon 72, Getting Lost in the Weeds, 20:25-21:4

Proposition: Wisdom gives insight into every discipline, but Yahweh has insight into every heart.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, our text this evening comments on many different disciplines. Why? Because wisdom has, in some measure, insight into every discipline. But even more important than particular insights wisdom gives about politics, ethics, or psychology is the universal insight wisdom gives us: Yahweh has insight into every heart. And so, listen to wisdom's important insights on these various disciplines — but do it with the conviction that your God has insight into your heart and into every heart.

I. The Disciplines of Wisdom, vv. 25-21:1

We have spoken a lot about the discipline of wisdom. But what are the disciplines of wisdom — the various fields of human endeavor on which it comments? Perhaps wisdom has something to say about every human project. But our passage this evening directly comments on seven different ones.

A. Worship: Holiness Is no Easy Thing, v. 25

The first of these is the discipline of worship. Now, worship is something every human being does, and it's often something we do without thinking about it. We just naturally find something to be our God and we look to that God to fulfill us and give us satisfaction. We don't think of getting an abortion as a sacramental offering, an act of worship made before the god of convenience. We don't think of spending time and money on watching football as an act of worship made to the god of entertainment or the god of sports. We don't think of yelling at our children as an act of worship directed toward the god of pleasure or the god of selfishness. Yet all

of these things are acts of worship, ways of serving the deity to whom you look for your satisfaction in life.

Solomon speaks here of true worship, directed to the Triune God, and specifically of the act of worship we call “dedication” in which you devote or dedicate something to God as holy. Now, in that era, it was relatively common to speak of dedicating an object, an animal, a person, or a sum of money to God. Now we more often use the language of “giving” those things to God. But the bottom line hasn’t changed: To dedicate something to God is to change the purpose for which it exists. To make something holy is to set it apart from common use to special use for God. What you put into the offering this morning was dedicated. You set it apart as holy. You gave it to God to be used for His purposes.

Isn’t this a good thing, you might ask? Of course it is. But it is also a serious thing. Don’t just blurt out “It is holy.” Why not? Because holiness is hard. To say “I’m going to use this exclusively for God” is one thing. To actually use it exclusively for God is something else entirely.

Don’t think of holiness as something easy. Ultimately, to make a person holy is something that only the Holy Spirit can do. You and I can and should dedicate ourselves to God and say, “God, I want to exist for you. I want to be perfectly holy for you.” But don’t do it lightly, quickly, or without counting the cost. Worship takes time and effort over the long haul. Making promises with no intention of keeping them and no knowledge of what keeping them would look like is no way to honor God.

B. Politics: A Wise King Makes Life Hard for the Wicked, v. 26

What does wisdom say about politics? It says that a wise king winnows the wicked. To winnow grain is to blow a current of air through it — thus blowing away the lightweight chaff but keeping the fatter, heavier kernels. This is what a wise king does: he “winnows” the wicked, i.e., applies policies and pressures that will flush them out from among the good citizens. The wise king does not let the wicked hide in the mass of decent people. He exposes them and their wickedness.

Once that has been done, what does a wise king do? He drives the wheel over them. In terms of the metaphor, this refers to rolling a heavy wheel over cut stalks of grain. The wheel makes the kernels pop out of the husks; in fact, to thresh with a wheel is in actual agricultural practice the step *before* winnowing. But in terms of the application of the metaphor, the meaning of both winnowing and threshing with a wheel is the same. The wise king applies policy instruments that flush the wicked out of hiding and separate them from the desirable righteous. In other words, wise government explicitly produces policies and laws that serve to separate the bad from the good and then, once the separation has been made, to favor the righteous over the wicked.

While this sounds vaguely questionable to us, it’s worth observing both that every government actually does this (its policies favor some kinds of people and disfavor others), and

that surely the best kind of people to encourage and favor are the morally better ones, the ones that live in the righteous way that exalts a nation.

C. Theological Anthropology: The Human Spirit Is God's Light Fixture, v. 27

Wisdom's comment on anthropology, the study of what the human being is, is a bit cryptic. What does it mean to call human breath (or spirit) Yahweh's lamp? The basic idea appears to be that the human spirit is like a brilliant light source inside every human being, rendering us completely transparent to God's gaze. Imagine a mannequin made of some translucent plastic with a powerful light source inside it. You can see everything that's inside that mannequin; no part of its interior is hidden from you. And in the same way, no part of your interior is hidden from the eyes of God.

Now, of course, we know that God can see our insides even without the aid of our human spirit or breath. Why does Solomon mention it, then? Probably to emphasize the idea that if you're alive, if you have breath, then you are internally illuminated in a way you can't switch off. The LORD sees you, and you can't hide from him.

D. Political Theology: The King Is Providentially and Morally Upheld, v. 28

While v. 26 emphasized the strictness of the king in turning against the wicked and exposing them, this verse emphasizes the king's softer side. He is upheld by mercy, truth, and lovingkindness, as the NKJV has it. The root word for "mercy" and "lovingkindness" is *hesed*, translated as "steadfast love" throughout the ESV. Now, is this the steadfast love the king shows or the steadfast love God shows to him? I think it's both. After all, the verb here is passive: the king's throne is upheld by mercy or steadfast love. He doesn't uphold himself on the throne; God upholds him. But the way God upholds His king is through the king's own character qualities. That's the message we've seen over and over in this book: God upholds and protects His people, and He frequently chooses to do so through their own actions and character qualities.

So what should a king be like? His policies need to distinguish the wicked from the righteous — but he needs to be a man characterized by steadfast love and by truth. A ruler without these qualities is not a ruler whose kingdom can endure permanently. Ultimately, we know that Jesus' kingdom will be eternal because He is perfectly loving and perfectly truthful. No earthly king is like that, and all of them will eventually lose their kingdoms. But Christ's kingdom will endure forever.

E. Psychology: What Men Glory In, v. 29

Well, wisdom also provides insight into human psychology. If you are wise, you will understand what people are most proud of, what they glory in. It's easy to see that some people glory in their home, some in their family descent, some in their children's athletic prowess, and so on.

Some glory in their birth, some in their skill,
Some in their wealth, some in their body's force,
Some in their garments though new-fangled ill;
Some in their hawks and hounds, some in their horse;
And every humour hath his adjunct pleasure,

Wherein it finds a joy above the rest:
But these particulars are not my measure,
All these I better in one general best.
Thy love is better than high birth to me,
Richer than wealth, prouder than garments' cost,
Of more delight than hawks and horses be;
And having thee, of all men's pride I boast . . .⁶

Shakespeare points out that various people glory in various things. But in a general sense, young men glory in their strength while old men glory in their age. Young men love sprinting up the stairs two or three at a time. Young men love performing athletic feats, doing more pull-ups and pushups than the next guy, and so on. Old men are proud of how long they have lived, that they have survived so much and seen so many things.

But as cool as strength and age are, can they be ultimate sources of glory? Of course not. True glory is found in life with God, sharing His glory.

F. Ethics: Suffering Purges Sin, v. 30

The last verse of ch. 20 makes a point from the discipline of ethics, telling us that suffering purges sin. Again, this is not in an ultimate sense, but in a proximate sense. By physical chastisement, you can often get someone to show a marked degree of self-control — more than you would have thought possible! This is what Jack London calls “the law of club and fang.” Wisdom tells us that physical chastisement can have a good effect; that’s why my father calls the spanking rod “the enableator.” It has helped me, and all of my siblings, suddenly conclude that yes, we can do what Mom and Dad are asking us to do. And this discipline is not merely effective on outward behavior; in one sense, it can even reach to the heart. While the Hebrew word here is “belly,” clearly we’re discussing interiority. Ultimately, the blood of Christ cleanses us from sin in the eyes of God — but suffering can help you learn to stop sinning and start following Christ instead. That means you must not rebel against suffering. Submit to it. Learn from it. Let it purge your sin away, insofar as it can. It is one of the means Christ uses to apply His sacrifice to you.

G. Theology: The LORD Controls the King’s Heart, v. 1

Well, wisdom’s final statement for us this evening applies to the discipline of theology. Specifically, it tells us that God has as much control over the king’s heart as irrigation engineers and water system managers have over water flows. The ditch rider opens and closes headgates as he pleases, letting water run down the ditch or keeping it in the reservoir. The water system engineers close and open valves, letting water flow one direction or stopping its flow in another. And that, my friends, is how Yahweh directs the king’s heart. It’s as easy for Him to incline the king’s heart a certain direction as it is for you to open and close your kitchen tap.

⁶ Shakespeare, Sonnet 91

That's quite a statement. But it is exactly the statement that our passage makes. The Lord is in control; the Lord is the arbiter of what the king thinks and therefore of what the king does.

Does this mean that whatever the king does is wise, godly, etc? Of course not! The fact that God made a certain man king doesn't mean that God has given him carte blanche to do whatever he feels like in that office. Rather, the point is that whatever the king does, God has the power to overrule him at any time. God can easily change the king's mind, direct the king's heart, and so on. Why does He sometimes let kings do evil things, even evil things to His people and His church? We don't know. The existence of evil is a mystery — yet we all know, and believe in our heart of hearts, that God is able at any time to stop evil dead in its tracks. That's why we pray fervently when evil threatens us! When state-sponsored evil looms, what do we do? We take it to the Lord. He can stop that evil. He can control that evil. He can overcome that evil. And if He doesn't, and lets it kill us? He has a purpose in that too. His message to us is "trust Me." Can you do that?

II. The Determiner of Wisdom, vv. 2-3

You see, after all the principles that wisdom teaches us about various disciplines of human inquiry, we come down to this truth: Yahweh is the determiner of wisdom. He is the final arbiter of whether what you did was wise or not. He will know whether you measured up.

A. Yahweh Weighs the Hearts, v. 2

All of us think that what we're doing is okay. Oh, we know that little things here and there, news articles when we're being paid to work, etc. crowd in from time to time. But in general, we think our way is the right way. But Yahweh weighs the hearts. He evaluates your heart; He has the final verdict on whether your heart was in the right place or not, whether your activity was acceptable or not.

So did you behave wisely this week? Are you thinking wisely right now? The Lord knows. Better, the Lord decides. Once again, as we saw with the principles wisdom teaches about all sorts of disciplines, the bottom line is that we need to trust Jesus.

B. Yahweh Desires Righteousness and Justice, v. 3

And when God weighs your heart, what will He be looking for? He will be looking for righteousness and justice. Jesus quoted Hosea's version of this proverb at least two different times. God loves it when you do what is right and when you treat others fairly. That is more important to Him than acts of worship. In other words, you can listen to tens of thousands of sermons. You can memorize every song in the hymnal. You can give billions of dollars to the church. You can perform every outward act of worship till you're blue in the face. But if you don't love others by acting with righteousness and justice, then it all means nothing. It's just a sham.

We began this sermon by talking about acts of worship, by saying that it takes work to make something holy. We end by pointing out that Yahweh is not particularly interested in you dedicating yourself verbally unless you follow through. Don't just say "I want to be holy."

Verbally “sacrificing” yourself like that is good — but unless it results in actual righteousness and justice, it’s pretty much worthless.

How do you get the righteousness and justice you need? By walking with Jesus in humility.

III. The Weed that Chokes Wisdom: Pride, v. 4

You see, you’ve heard a lot of wisdom from this book this morning. But pride is the weed that chokes wisdom. A haughty look — pride expressed on the face — and a proud heart — pride resident in the heart — are both sinful. Pride in your heart and pride in your face are not what the LORD wants to see. But they are the wicked’s headlights; bad people look at the world through the lens of their own overwhelming pride, and anything that would threaten their self-image gets shut down. That’s why God says that these things are sinful.

So do you want to learn from wisdom? Or do you want to be a fool who’s very proud of himself? The choice, brothers and sisters, is clear. Be the wise son who listens to the Father’s wisdom! He has insight into every heart, and He will reward you. Amen.