

## **Listen To Wisdom**

*preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on October 28, 2018*

This morning we are turning to the eighth sermon in our ten part series on the book of Ecclesiastes. Written by Solomon, Ecclesiastes is the reflection of a king of Israel near the end of his days where he ponders the meaning of life. Today's reading is from Ecclesiastes, chapter nine, verse seventeen through chapter ten, verse twelve.

Ecclesiastes 9:17-10:12

17 The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools. 18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one bungler destroys much good. 10 Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a foul odor; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. 2 The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of a fool to the left. 3 Even when fools walk on the road, they lack sense, and show to everyone that they are fools. 4 If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for calmness will undo great offenses. 5 There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as great an error as if it proceeded from the ruler: 6 folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. 7 I have seen slaves on horseback, and princes walking on foot like slaves. 8 Whoever digs a pit will fall into it; and whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a snake. 9 Whoever quarries stones will be hurt by them; and whoever splits logs will be endangered by them. 10 If the iron is blunt, and one does not whet the edge, then more strength must be exerted; but wisdom helps one to succeed. 11 If the snake bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage in a charmer. 12 Words spoken by the wise bring them favor, but the lips of fools consume them.

Imagine for a moment that God spoke to you, in an audible voice, and in a way that left you absolutely certain it was God speaking, and God said to you, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." What would you ask for?

Would you ask for riches? Would you ask for long life? Would you ask for the healing of your body? Would you ask for special powers; like the ability to read minds, or the ability to fly, or the ability to always be warm in the winter and cool in the summertime? Or, would you be a trickster and ask for another ten wishes? What would you ask for?

I know it sounds like a silly question to ask because we believe that God would never do such a thing for us. But, as we have already noted in our sermon series on Ecclesiastes, this has happened before. In 1 Kings, chapter 3, God spoke to the freshly anointed king of Israel, Solomon, and said to him, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

In response to this generous offer, we have noted that Solomon did not ask God for wealth, long life, or victory over his enemies. Instead Solomon asked for wisdom; for in his mind this was the greatest gift he could receive from God. In fact, Solomon valued wisdom so

much he wrote in Proverbs 3:13-15, “Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and gains understanding, for it is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. It is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with wisdom.”

In today’s Scripture reading, which belongs to the section of the Bible known as “wisdom literature,” Solomon returns to a theme that was central to his life and central to his writing. As Solomon begins to wrap up his thoughts on the meaning of life in the book of Ecclesiastes, he turns his attention to the subject of wisdom.

Before commenting on the verses that we read this morning, it will be helpful to make a few observations. First, Solomon is writing his reflection on the subject of wisdom from the perspective of a wealthy and powerful king who has had a long reign that has been marked by the absence of war.

Secondly, Solomon is writing from the perspective of someone who lives under the sun, that is, in the domain of humans. This means his observations require no supernatural insight. A careful student of everyday life should arrive at the same conclusions.

Thirdly, if Solomon lived in today’s culture, I am sure he would have been pursued by all the major publishing houses to write a New York Times best selling autobiography. Then, they would have insisted he write the follow up bestseller, “Nine Rules For Life: Living Like A King.” In looking for material upon which to base this book, today’s reading would make an excellent outline. If it were to be flushed out in just a little more detail, here is what that outline might look like, using the verses from today’s reading.

Rule 1. “The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouting of a ruler among fools.” In an age of information overload and shameless sensationalism this rule gives us sound advice regarding whose voice we should heed. It also provides us with the best way to exercise leadership wherever we are called to lead.

With regards to the first matter, Solomon tells us not to pay attention to the loud ruler who surrounds himself with fools. While our knee jerk reaction may be to focus all our attention on the squeaky wheels, we will be better off paying attention to the leaders who embody wisdom, who speak with dignity, and who get things done using quiet words.

With regards to the second matter, Solomon tells us something that we have heard in James’ epistle. In chapter three of James, he tells us that the tongue is the rudder that controls the ship of our lives. Therefore, we must gain control of our tongues if we want to guide our lives in the right direction, and if we want to exert a positive influence over the lives of others. This is why, Solomon says, the quiet words of the wise are much better than the shouting of rulers to fools.

Rule 2. “Dead flies make the perfumer’s ointment give off a foul odor; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.” Stated another way, one hole is all it takes to sink a ship. One bad deed can undo a lifetime of good works. So, always act with wisdom and honour. Never let your guard down. Avoid folly at all costs, because it only takes a few dead flies to ruin a very expensive perfume.

Rule 3. “The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of a fool to the left.” This is another way of saying, a tree is known by its fruit. Therefore, if you want to know the heart of a person, if they are wise, or if they are a fool, look at their actions and you will be able to discern the truth.

Given that our lives are the product of the people whom we surround ourselves with, knowing whose who is critical for success in life. This is especially true if you are a king, like Solomon. That is why he follows rule 3 with the line, “Even when fools walk on the road, they lack sense, and show to everyone that they are fools.” In other words, even when a fool is behaving, they still find ways to demonstrate that they are fools. So, don’t fret about being unable to discern the wise from fools. You will know. It will be obvious.

Rule 4. “If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your post, for calmness will undo great offenses.” In the modern world we might say, if your boss is mad at you, rightly, or wrongly, do not freak out, and keep doing your job. If you don’t lose your cool, and keep doing what you are supposed to be doing, everything will likely work out okay. However, if you flip out, all you will do is make a bad situation worse.

Rule 5. “Folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place.” My interpretation of this rule would be that life doesn’t play by the rules. Life is not fair. Be warned. And know, that complaining won’t help you. Instead, anticipate and adapt.

Rule 6. “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it.” Rephrasing this rule with other Biblical injunctions, “if we live by the sword, we will die by the sword.” In life, we reap what we sow. In today’s reading, this rule is repeated using three other metaphors. “Whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a snake.” “Whoever quarries stones will be hurt by them.” And “whoever splits logs will be endangered by them.”

Rule 7. “If the iron is blunt, and one does not whet the edge, then more strength must be exerted; but wisdom helps one to succeed.” The NIV translates this verse, “If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success.” The modern translation of this proverb would be, to achieve the maximum success in life, worker smarter, not harder.

Rule 8. “If the snake bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage in a charmer.” This is an ancient way of saying that a smooth tongue will not compensate for an inability to get the

job done. Thus, in order to be a great leader we need to be able to get results. While a great sales pitch is a useful tool, it is useless unless we can deliver on our promises. Execution is everything. Talk is cheap.

Rule 9. “Words spoken by the wise bring them favor, but the lips of fools consume them.” If Solomon were to use today’s Scripture reading to produce a best selling book called, “Nine Rules For Life: Living Like A King,” this last rule would be a nice way to finish things off as it is essentially a repeat of rule 1. Just as legendary investor Warren Buffet has two rules for investing: rule 1, don’t lose money and rule 2, never forget rule number 1, Solomon could finish his book by taking things full circle, with a reminder to his readers to listen to the words of the wise, and ignore the words of fools. He would also remind his readers once more how important it is to control their tongues. For the words that come from our mouths guide our lives, and determine our influence in the world. For those of us who live under the sun, Solomon would tell us, following these rules of wisdom will lead to a life of success. Failure to observe these rules will lead to ruin.

In closing, if Solomon were to write a best selling book today called, “Nine Rules For Life: Living Like A King,” which was based on his life’s pursuit of wisdom, and which used today’s Scripture reading as an outline, I am sure he would finish things off by pointing people to the One who is the source of all wisdom.

Starting in the Genesis story, and finishing in Revelation, I am sure Solomon would point his reader’s attention to the voice of wisdom that spoke creation into being, and the spirit of wisdom who guided the affairs of God’s good creation, by speaking wisdom to the prophets of old, who shepherded God’s people, and who pointed them to the Messiah, Jesus Christ, upon whom the spirit of the Lord rested, imparting wisdom, understanding, power, knowledge, and humility.

If Solomon were to write a book today about wisdom gained from under the sun, and how we are to find meaning in life, I am sure he would point people to Jesus Christ who is the source of all wisdom and whose life provides the ultimate rule for our lives. While a great man in his own right, I believe Solomon would follow in the footsteps of John the Baptist and point us to Jesus, and tell us to “follow him.”

Therefore, as we seek to live our lives in a manner that reflects the wisdom of God, may we heed the rules of life that we examined this morning in the inspired Word that Solomon recorded in our reading from Ecclesiastes. But, more than anything, may we, as people who live under the sun, lift our eyes towards Jesus, and may we commit our lives to following him, for our salvation, and for God’s glory. Amen.