

Wisdom and Knowledge

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We are talking about the library, but first I want to take you on a side trip to the farm—your farm. A famous young military commander in charge of several hundred armed men is hiding out in the hills above your farm. He and his men are being chased by an insane general who is out to kill them all. They are desperate, and they are hungry. These same men have been protecting you from bandits while you shear your sheep out in the open fields with your hired hands.

Now, the young leader sends ten representatives to your house to ask if you would supply his men with enough food to help them survive. What do you do? You happen to be a rather rich farmer. You own three thousand sheep, and a thousand goats. You could easily spare 50 or 100 sheep without any harm being done to your income. In fact, you have the rare opportunity of doing a good deed for someone who might be a powerful figure someday. Remember that the young military leader up in the hills has 400 soldiers with him, and they could just come and take all your sheep and your goats if they wanted to. They are all hungry, desperate, and being pursued. You are faced with a decision. What do you do?

Seems like an easy decision, right? You give the young leader some food, you wish him well, send a bouquet of flowers and a nice card back with the ten representatives, and thank him for his help guarding your employees as they worked. Easy.

Easy, that is, unless your name is Nabal, which means “fool.” Apparently Nabal had this name for a good reason. Here is how Nabal handled the situation: First, he angrily refused to provide the men who had come to him with any food. Second, he told the ten representatives to take a hike, to get off his property. Third, he insulted their young leader—the future King David—by saying David was probably just a servant who had run away and was hiding in the hills.

Nabal made a series of foolish choices. But, notice, Nabal had plenty of knowledge in this situation. What did he know? He *knew* there were 400 armed, hungry and desperate men in the hills above his farm. He knew he and his servants could not defeat these men in a battle. He also *knew* he had more than enough sheep and other food to help David without going bankrupt. Finally, he certainly *knew* about David, *knew* he was a legendary soldier, and probably even *knew* David would be king one day.

Notice this: Knowledge—what we know—does not make our decisions for us. That is where wisdom comes into play. Or, as in Nabal’s case, wisdom’s opposite, foolishness. Wisdom has to do with the choices we make. Knowledge may influence those choices, may help us weigh options and calculate risks, but knowledge by itself is inert and inactive. It takes a human being faced with a decision and guided by truth to turn knowledge into wisdom. It is this transformation of knowledge into wisdom through the decisions of a human being that I want to explore with you today. But first, a little more about Nabal.

Nabal failed in his lifetime to make the important discovery that knowledge alone is not enough. This failure cost him everything. The rest of this account, found in I Samuel chapter 25, is fascinating. Nabal's wife, Abigail, apparently a good deal wiser than her husband, found out about Nabal's foolish decision. She realized the imminent danger to everyone associated with Nabal. She quickly organized a moveable feast and ran to meet David and his men as they were headed down the mountain to wipe out the entire family and the farm, and take everything there. Abigail pleaded with David to forgive her husband's foolishness, and David was persuaded.

By the way, when Abigail met David she said to him, "Pay no attention to the surly man named Nabal. His name is Fool, and he really is foolish." Abigail *knew* the same things that Nabal did, but she made a very different kind of decision, a wise decision. Because of her wisdom and quick action, she saved the lives of her family and the others living at Nabal's farm. When Nabal, terribly hung over from a wild party the night before, heard from Abigail what had happened, the Bible says that he went comatose and died ten days later. Abigail later became David's wife.

Now, back to the library. Perhaps the most obvious reason for attending college, for pursuing higher education, is to gain knowledge, to broaden our rational horizons, to learn, to grow intellectually. It must be the case, then, that we attach some value to being informed, knowledgeable people.

I am all for gaining knowledge. If this quest for knowledge wasn't important to me, I wouldn't be in the profession I am in. I love to learn, and I love to be involved with other people as they learn.

But, despite my love of learning, it is not the process of gaining more knowledge that has really riveted my thinking over the past four or five years. The topic that has been on my mind a great deal, perhaps more than any other, is Wisdom. This is because I have been involved with several difficult situations in which I have watched people make choices that affected them and the people around them in dramatic ways. In some cases, these have been wise choices which have brought healing, built relationships, and drawn people closer to God. Other times I have watched people make foolish choices, and have seen how friendships and families and careers and Christian witness can be ruined by persistent bad choices. So, wisdom has been on my mind, and I have tried to understand what it is the Bible is saying to us about this crucially important topic.

I want to offer three observations about biblical wisdom. First, wisdom is something we must actively **seek** from God our teacher. Psalm 90 v 12 captures this idea in a short prayer: "Teach us so to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom." We need to live our lives in such close proximity to God that we allow Him to teach us His wisdom, teach us to make choices in keeping with his will, teach us to think about each decision that comes to us as an opportunity to learn more about God's ways. Teach us so to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

In the New Testament, James writes that we ought to pray for wisdom as well: "If any of you lacks wisdom," he writes, "let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given to him." (1:5) Ordinary wisdom, conventional wisdom, the wisdom that says to watch out for number one, comes by being careful, calculating, savvy, even shrewd. But, the wisdom God teaches us comes through prayer, obedience, and humility as we **seek** it from Him.

Second, wisdom comes by **submitting** our thoughts to God. When we submit our thinking to God's thinking, we bring the direction of our lives under the direction of the Holy Spirit. This act of submission takes effort on our part. Wisdom is acquired by intentional effort toward obedience to God in our decision-making. Wisdom means living *consistently* and *intentionally* according to God's will. When we do this, God develops in us a stability at the very center of our thinking. We are no longer "tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine" as Paul says in Ephesians, no longer misled by false ideas, no longer satisfied with anything less than God's truth.

God has given us a tremendous responsibility by giving us minds as powerful as the minds we possess. As a human being, you can do a lot of good, or a lot of harm with that mind. Wisdom means submitting the life of the mind to the mind of Jesus Christ. Have this mind in you," says Paul in Philippians, "that was also in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the very form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself and became a servant." Jesus Christ submitted himself to his Heavenly Father during his life on earth. Can we do any less? Biblical Wisdom comes by the submission of my will to the will of God, the submission of my mind to the mind of Jesus Christ.

So, we seek wisdom from God who is our teacher, and we learn wisdom as we submit our minds to the mind of Jesus Christ.

Third, we can not **separate** the *wisdom* of God from the *knowledge* of God. Paul puts it this way in Colossians: "In Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom *and* of knowledge." To know Christ is to know God, and to know God is to begin to learn the wisdom of God. This is because biblical wisdom is making our decisions based on what we know of the character of God, and not based on our intelligence, or our cleverness, or our education, or our common sense. To know God is to live in daily fellowship with Him. To know God is to know his Son, Jesus Christ, in whom he has revealed himself to us. "In Christ are hid all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge."

Seek wisdom from God, **submit** your thoughts to God, and recognize that the wisdom of God cannot be **separated** from the knowledge of God we have in Jesus Christ.

When you submit your life to Christ, when you submit your will to the will of God, Jesus begins to educate you right down to the practical details of your life. This is the process of learning God's wisdom. Sometimes this process is quite painful, because it can mean confessing where we have failed to act wisely, allowing God to reveal to us where we have been wrong. Nevertheless, keep coming before God with the decisions of your life. Don't keep anything from him, and don't excuse disobedience.

I will close with a prayer of David, the young leader who witnessed the foolishness of Nabal and the wisdom of Abigail. David knew God, but did not always seek God's wisdom. He sometimes tried to separate knowledge of God from the wisdom of God, and he fell as a result. After Nathan the prophet convicted David of his great sins of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah the Hittite, David repented. His prayer of confession and repentance is found in Psalm 51. I'd like to close with verse 6 of that Psalm: "Behold. Thou desirest truth in the inward being. Therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart."

To live according to the wisdom of God requires being truthful before God about who we are, and placing God's truth at the center of our thinking. It requires confessing where we have not sought God's wisdom, where we have not submitted our minds to Christ, where we have tried to separate the knowledge of God from the Wisdom of God. But when we are open before God, when our hearts are tuned in prayer to God's heart, then and only he can teach us His wisdom. Then he can put into us a heart of wisdom. Pray that God would teach you to have such a heart.

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