

Sermon: Sunday, June 12, 2022

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How Not to Be Secular

Proverbs 8

The Proverbs are attributed to Solomon because of his alleged legendary wisdom. In the stories told about Solomon he is depicted as the wisest man in the world by the narrators from Solomon's court. The other narrative, right there in Scripture, is that Solomon was a king that was lacking in wisdom but big on deception, lies, violence, and power. I want to complicate this story by suggesting that the book of Proverbs, often ascribed to Solomon, was another deceptive move. The protagonist of Proverbs is the "Wise Woman." That's an intriguing bit of irony. Solomon was not wise, but there was a wise woman in his time teaching young men how to be wise and righteous. A man receiving credit for a woman's work. Imagine that!

A historical prelude

In the time of Solomon, there was a crisis in the land. There was a lack of wisdom and knowledge in the nation. The wisdom of Solomon rested on one story. He figured out the true mother of a child claimed by two women. No wonder politicians kiss babies: they are hoping for the Solomon effect. There was deceit, despair, the people were oppressed, the politics were the politics of cheating, deception, and violence. He became king through deception, violence, and power. Nathan, the court preacher, and Solomon's mother, Bathsheba concocted a scheme to make Solomon king and deny the throne to Adonijah. Like the wholesale killing in the *Godfather*, Solomon eliminated his enemies, including his brother, Adonijah. Three times, the terse language of Scripture describes the cold execution by the hit man of Solomon: "So King Solomon sent Benaiah; he struck him down, and he died." Benaiah – the biblical Bussetta who did the killing for Michael Corleone.

There was a serious wisdom deficit among the leadership, even though a sense of propriety and piety was maintained. Behind all the posturing, there was a pack of lies, deception, and violence.

A biblical interpretation

The training manual for making up the knowledge deficit is found in our current book of Proverbs. The instructor, the dean of the school of wisdom and knowledge, was a person known as the wise woman. The speech she gave on the day she was installed as the dean of the department of rhetoric is found in Proverbs 8.

Wisdom extolls her virtue: “I have good advice and sound wisdom; I have insight, I have strength” (8:14). The wise woman is determined to offer courses for learning about wisdom and instruction, for understanding words of insight, for gaining instruction in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity; to teach shrewdness to the simple, knowledge and prudence to the young—let the wise also hear and gain in learning, and the discerning acquire skill, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles” (1:1 – 6).

Proverbs often refers to the wise woman’s public appearances and speeches: “At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks” (1:21). “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute” (31:8). She speaks and teaches the ancient wisdom. A culture can lose touch with its most ancient and revered wisdom and get caught up in the temporary, the pragmatic, the whatever it takes to win vocabularies of politics.

The wise woman does everything within her persuasive power to lead her students to the likeness of and fear of the Lord. Instead of exploiting others, she releases them to lives of knowledge, wisdom, holiness, and goodness.

Wisdom raises her voice. “On the high ground beside the road she takes up her stance.” She offers good sense, shrewdness, wisdom, understanding, insight, and perception. Rather than a rhetoric that is all flowers and sweetness, she insists, “my speech is straightforward,” “my utterances plain,” “my mouth speaks the truth,” “all my sayings are honest, nothing in them is tortuous or twisted.”

She enters the public arena and assumes the role of a speaker in the public forum of the town. “I possess policy and competence, insight and power. By me kings reign, and rulers enact what is right. By me statesmen wield power, and nobles –

all entitled to rule.” Wisdom presents herself and her speech as the example her students are to follow. One day they will be charged with the task of being statesmen and responsible for making both for righteousness and goodness in the world. Get wisdom above all is her cry.

A practical application

Our age lacks wisdom. Like a Jeopardy champion, we know a lot of information, but information is not wisdom. We know stuff, but it is not helping us live better. America has lost her collective mind, and each side accuses the other side of ignorance. In a recent article, “WHY THE PAST 10 YEARS OF AMERICAN LIFE HAVE BEEN UNIQUELY STUPID: It’s not just a phase,” Jonathan Haidt argues that our country has produced a new tower of Babel. Remember the old story. The people decided to usurp the throne of God – to build a tower that stretched to heaven and God confused their tongues and left them unable to communicate with one another. Something like that has happened to us, something has gone terribly wrong, very suddenly. We are disoriented, unable to speak the same language or recognize the same truth. We are cut off from one another and from the past. When the January 6 committee had a televised hearing, one America watched the hearing on the major networks. The other America watched FOX News ridicule the hearings and claim they were all liars. One side is talking English and the other side is listening in “dingbat.” You decide which one is which.

There is an active despising of the truth among us. People value freedom over truth – a dangerous philosophy. Americans are increasingly a people unwilling to be “bound” by anything, not even truth itself. Every person does what is right in his own eyes.

Let me show you the contrast. In the Bible, Christians are told, “You are not your own; you are bought with a price.” In the world, we say, “Nobody tells me what to do. Who are you to tell me what to do?” The faith says that our bodies, our minds, our hearts are not our own to do with as we please. What we do with our bodies, minds, and hearts makes a difference in our ability to be a holy people. Yet good Christians are saying, “Who are you to tell me what to do?” There’s a clamor of cacophonous voices shouting, “How dare you interfere with my ‘right’ to burn coal/ to own an assault rifle/to drive as fast as I please/to fly/to pollute/to trash the highways; how dare you interfere with my right to smoke, to pollute, to

not wear a seat belt or a motorcycle helmet? How dare you tell me what to do with my body? How dare you?

We are the children of a liberal political philosophy that insists that we have the freedom to do as we please. Liberals taught us all how to be free. Now, even conservatives are liberal when it comes to insisting on freedom as the highest good. John Stuart Mill called it his principle of liberty – that we should be free to do as we like so long as what we do does not harm others. We, of course, have loped off the last part about harm and say, “We are free to do as we please, and, by the way, we are free to tell others how they can live whether they like it or not.” We are wrong to put freedom in the virtue pile. Freedom is not enough. When the children of Israel were free from slavery, that freedom was not enough to make them strong and responsible. On the way out of bondage, God gave them 10 rules for staying free and living as accountable and responsible members of the people of God. We call these the Ten Commandments. Can we learn again why this matters so much? Freedom leads to license and everyone doing whatever they please no matter the consequences. The 9th commandment alone would improve our current social media disaster: Thou shalt not bear false witness.

We need to figure out how we can be free and live in the fear of the Lord. How can we be Christians in a secular land? It’s so easy to slip away. Leave first love. Become lukewarm. Have a name of being alive but being dead. It’s all there in the beginning – the early warnings about the loss of faith. Pay more attention to the gospel lest we be drifted by. “Take care, brother and sisters that none of you may have an evil and unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.” The pastor-writer of Hebrews knew the dangers of drifting, departing, turning away from God. “Let us hold fast to our confession.” “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” Provoking seems an odd word here, but maybe that’s what must happen. The pastor must be the one who provokes people. Imagine me as the provocative one, the one who stirs up passion and zeal for the Lord in our secular society, the one who says what nobody else will say.

In response to secularism, some churches lower the bar of expectations. Conservative churches offer entertainment. Liberal churches offer a muddle of

low-grade, low-commitment theology that amounts to little. Church first became one of many Sunday morning options and then became no option at all. Is there a way the church can get back on the Sunday option list for former church members?

I am concerned that the church in America is dying. Well, if the church is dying, we should decide to die for the right reasons and to go out in the glory of the maximum demands of the gospel. We should go out being faithful and holy and committed and take the ridicule and persecution we will receive from our worldly, enlightened friends. If the church doesn't stop imitating the world, stop trying to be like the world, stop trying to get the world to like us, stop trying to suck up to the world, the church will be dead and gone. I don't want to be part of a church that has become like the world. Our buildings will be restaurants, condos, microbreweries, and Oriental rug outlets. If we are going to die, let's die for the right reasons.

Once there was a pine tree that suddenly started producing hundreds of miniature pinecones. The tree doctor said that the tree thought it was dying and it was attempting to prolong life by producing all these little pinecones. I think the churches are like the pine tree. Thinking that we might die, many churches have resorted to all kinds of worldly practices to try to draw a crowd. But that's not the criteria for a healthy church. A healthy church is a church committed to the good news of Jesus Christ with a gospel that is social, inclusive, and powerful.

Can we imagine a church that has room for word and table for the deepening of our sense of communion, for a church where bodily practices and participation take the place of our boring existence as a people who sit through an hour of worship each week and then wonder why we keep doing it?

Our crisis, our opportunity is right in front of us. Here is our chance to be Christians in a secular world. Here is our chance to offer the world an alternative to violence, fear, anger, spite, and revenge. Let us go forth to make disciples of all nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.