

The Difference between Clever and Wisdom

Sermon for the 9th Week after Trinity

Sermon Text: 1 Kings 3:5-15



At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." ⁶And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before You in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward You. And You have kept for him this great and steadfast love and have given him a son to sit on his throne this day. ⁷And now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king in place of David my father, although I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in. ⁸And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too many to be numbered or counted for multitude. ⁹Give

Your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern Your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this Your great people?" ¹⁰It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. ¹¹And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, ¹²behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. ¹³I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days. ¹⁴And if you will walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and My commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days." ¹⁵And Solomon awoke, and behold, it was a dream. Then he came to Jerusalem and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings, and made a feast for all his servants.

In our modern use of language, someone is considered clever when he achieves something great for himself. At the many tables of wisdom, often the one who is considered the cleverest is the one who can best use or exploit a situation to his own advantage. At such a table, tax cheats, stock tips, and, of course, other "brilliant" business models are presented. Yet in the back of your mind, everyone around this table knows that facts are often embellished. Sometimes, the mistakes are completely covered up or even promoted as the cleverest scam ever. When someone obviously fails or makes a huge mistake, everyone scratches their beards and tries to bypass the issue with unflattering jokes.

Today, I invite you all to a table of wisdom where everything is very different. I invite you all to discover with me what the great Solomon said, thought, and wrote about wisdom. The first thing that we can learn from Solomon is that the focus is completely different. While in modern vernacular someone is clever if they have achieved something for themselves, Solomon is talking about a very different kind of wisdom. It's about the common good and not about one's own benefit. Solomon begins his reflections not with himself, but with God. Later, he writes in his famous Proverbs: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." (Proverbs 9:10) Solomon wrote that down much later, however. In our sermon text for today, we find Solomon at the beginning of his career, when he is faced with the enormous task of taking over his father's kingdom.

In doing so, he noticed that he possessed neither the strength nor the wisdom to fulfill this task. So what does Solomon do in this situation? He goes to the source of all wisdom, to God, and he prays. At this point, I want to pause and underline these words again: **Solomon prayed because God commanded him to!** We should highlight and repeat this fact. Solomon asks, because God commanded it! **And Christians pray because God commands it!** Our Savior Jesus Christ says: "Ask, and it will be given to you..." (Matthew 7:7a). In Jesus' call to prayer, we find two reasons to pray. First, we pray because Jesus commands us to do so. Second, we pray because Jesus promised to answer our prayers. So prayer is a promise as well as a command. Martin Luther emphasized both in his Large Catechism in the introduction to the Lord's Prayer. Regarding the command, Luther writes: "First, we must know why we are obligated to pray, namely, because of God's command." Because as Luther says, the command to pray is included in the second Commandment. In the second Commandment, it isn't just forbidding us from misusing the name of the Lord, but it is also a **commandment**

to call upon His name in every trouble. So the command to pray is directed at us in the second Commandment where it says that we should praise God's holy name, call upon Him in every trouble, and pray to Him. Prayer, then, is commanded as strictly and wholeheartedly as all the other Commandments..." And regarding the promise, Luther writes: "The second thing that should move and encourage us even more to pray is that God has made a promise to us when we pray. He promised that what we pray should be "yes" and certain, as He says in Psalm 50:15, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you..." With Solomon, we have to take a step back though. Before even one prayer passes over Solomon's lips, he listens to God. Solomon shows us that true prayer is a listening prayer. We do exactly that every Sunday in church. First, we hear God's Word in which God's salvation and forgiveness are promised to us. Only then do we respond with our concerns in the prayers of the church. This listening prayer also determines the content of our prayers. As for the content of our prayer, we can learn again from Solomon. Solomon's prayer couldn't be further from the table of conventional wisdom. Instead of covering up his mistakes, glossing over them, or presenting himself as a great man of action, Solomon is humble.

He considers himself powerless and useless and summarizes it like this: "...I am but a little child. I do not know how to go out or come in." (1 Kings 3:7b) Solomon is also wise in the point that he understands exactly how immense the task is that has been given to him. He explains with a realistic and bold view that the people are numerous and the task of standing before the people as their judge is overwhelming. And in the same breath, Solomon doesn't pray to be clever in the modern sense of the word and to use the whole situation to his benefit. Instead, he prays for the common good. Solomon knows that God's wisdom is never intended for individuals but for the common good of everyone. In all of history, God never chose a prophet, nor did He choose Abraham or even Noah for their own sake, but it is always about the big picture. God Himself praised Solomon with the words: You didn't pray for a long life, riches, or even the death of your enemies but for understanding to discern what is right. How desperately we need this wisdom of Solomon today. We need this wisdom in our congregation but also in our dealings with our fellow human beings. Yes, we need eyes and a heart for these people because God's eyes and heart are focused on their welfare! The gift of wisdom helps us avoid short-sighted and selfish decisions and to make prudent choices that benefit everyone. Such a wisdom is not clever and can even be condemned in our world as completely illogical. We should once again listen closely to Solomon. He doesn't ask God for the greatest advantage, but for "obedience" – "Give Your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern Your people, that I may discern between good and evil..." Our gaze is directed to Jesus Christ, in Whom are hidden the depth, height, length, and breadth of God's wisdom and love. The hymn recorded in Philippians talks about Him: "He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). We can also say: He acquired wisdom, a wisdom which doesn't fight for oneself but for others. We all draw from and live from His wisdom. God liked Solomon's prayer and He answered it, He gave Solomon so much wisdom that we still talk about the wisdom of Solomon today. And on top of that, God blessed him even more. That is typical for God – He is not stingy but gives us more than we could even ask. It would be interesting to know how Solomon would react to the friends at our table. He would probably stroke his beard and then proclaim with a loud voice: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom!" Amen.