Growing in Wisdom and Understanding

Old Testament Reading: Proverbs 4: 1-9
Gospels Reading: Luke 2: 39-52
Epistles Reading: James 1: 5

When we think of stewardship, the first word that probably pops into the head of many of us is “money.” There are probably several reasons for this. To begin with, a biblical approach to stewardship unquestionably involves our financial resources. We should never forget this truth. But in another respect, focusing first, or mainly, or narrowly on money may reflect something about the loss of a larger vision for stewardship in the Christian life.

By the same measure, if “wisdom” and “understanding” are not the first words to pop into our head when we talk about stewardship, this too may well reflect something about the loss of a larger vision for the Christian life.

But both in stories and teachings, the Scriptures emphasize the importance of growing in wisdom and understanding. Twice in his account of the young Jesus, Luke tells us that Jesus grew in wisdom:

- “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” (Lk 2:40)
- “And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature; and in favor with God and men.” (Lk 2: 52)

James, too, seems to view wisdom as important enough to mention very early in his letter.

- “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” (James 1:5)

A careful look reveals that wisdom and understanding are important themes sprinkled liberally throughout the Scriptures, as is evident from the reading in Proverbs:
5Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.
6Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you.
7The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight.
8Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her.
9She will place on your head a fair garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

The writer is saying here that wisdom both guards us and becomes us; protects us and crowns us with honor.

So in God’s economy, there is no question that wisdom and understanding are important. But ...

1. What is wisdom?
2. How do we acquire it? and
3. What does it have to do with stewardship?

1. What is wisdom?

We can begin to explain wisdom by saying what it is NOT.

- It is not **intelligence**. Over the years, I have had lots of very intelligent students. In terms of sheer intellectual horsepower, they far exceeded their parents and teachers. But most of them were not yet wise.

- It is also not **knowledge**. To know something is to have a correct belief and to be able to explain it or give an account. For example, the person who knows — really knows — scientific or mathematical truths is someone who not only has correct beliefs in those fields, but who can also give an account of them or explain why things are as they are. (Many people are familiar with Einstein’s famous equation E=mc², but few of us really know what it means.) But here again, being wise is not precisely the same as knowing. The two are related but not precisely the same. Just as an intelligent person can lack wisdom, so too a knowledgeable person can lack wisdom.

- Nor is wisdom precisely the same thing as “**know-how**.” Know-how is the ability to do something, usually something practical such as use a tool or complete a certain task or routine. The best craftsmen, athletes, and artists all have know-how. (When I completed my PhD, a friend of my father, who grew up in the Dakotas, said to tell me that he had also completed his p.h.d.: Post Hole Digger. In just a few well chosen words, he reminded me that there are skills and abilities that have nothing to do with the
academic world but which in the larger picture probably have more to do with human survival and success than an earned academic Ph.D.) But in the end, the know-how of a skilled craftsman, athlete, or artisan is not precisely the same as wisdom – though I would hasten to add that it is closer to wisdom than intelligence and knowledge.

So if wisdom is not the same as intelligence, knowledge, or “know-how,” what is it?

- Wisdom is essentially good judgment.
- The wise person has the ability to make good decisions.
- The wise person usually has a capacity for keen insight or discernment.
- The wise person has the ability to size up a person or a situation.
- The wise person is circumspect – aware of aware of the surroundings.
- Wise people are present to themselves – they know who they are; they have an inner “moral compass”; they act for their own reasons and are not pushed around by popular opinion or pervasive cultural messages.

2. How do we acquire wisdom?

Before setting out to answer this question, I must confess that I have good news and bad news. The good news is that there are wise people and that ordinary people can achieve a measure of wisdom. The bad news is that there is no formula for getting it.

Experience plays a role. Someone has said, “Good judgment comes from experience; and experience, well, that comes from bad judgment.” Many of us can see ourselves in this quotation. We’ve attended The School of Hard Knocks and the pain has nurtured appreciation for the need to think before we act the next time around.

In general, people tend to acquire more wisdom as they get older. Most traditional cultures have recognized this truth, and for this reason they have given honor to the elderly members of their society. Honor is accorded them not simply because they are old but because of the insight, awareness, and circumspection they have acquired. The Bible speaks of the Elders of the Church – people with the capacity to make good decisions in behalf of the people.

But of course experience does not always make us wise. The mere fact that we go through something, or even many things, does not mean that we have paid enough attention to develop the capacity for good judgment. [Think of Shakespeare’s King Lear.]

The key to gaining wisdom from experience lies in being attentive to the experience. To be attentive is to pay close attention and to reflect on what the experience means. Experience makes us wise only if we heed its lessons. Thus:

- Not all old people are wise, because not all old people have paid careful attention to their experiences. Instead of being attentive, they have simply endured.
and
  • Not all young people lack wisdom. (Think of Timothy in the New Testament.) Wise young people are usually careful observers and good listeners. They watch and listen, and then they ask themselves probing questions about what they have seen and heard. And as a result, they develop good judgment – which is wisdom.

The hard lessons of experience can sometimes be avoided if we listen closely to the words and deeds of wise people – teachers, parents, pastors, to name just a few.

Of course, the ultimate source of wisdom is God. I remind you of what James says: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” (James 1:5)

But as with all of these sources of wisdom – teachers, parents, pastors, and ultimately God – the key lies not simply in what is said or in who says it, but in how closely the listener pays attention and applies the message to his or her own life. In this respect, we must be participants in the wisdom that God gives us. It is a gift, but a gift that we must actively nurture.

For me the correct listening posture is the attitude of prayer. The kind of prayer I have in mind is not the kind in which we speak to God. We don't become wise by speaking to God. Wisdom comes by listening to God, discerning the voice of God, attentively attending to the things that finally matter to God.

For those who want quick and easy answers, I have disappointing news. Prayer that assumes a listening posture usually takes time. Like the culinary process of marinating – letting things steep, soak, season – prayer that discerns God’s wisdom involves patiently attending to and reflecting on what God is saying, both to me personally and to his people generally through the Scriptures. The listening posture of prayer and meditative reading of the Scriptures go hand in hand.

3. What does wisdom have to do with stewardship?

Wisdom is good judgment. Good judgment comes from carefully attending to the voice of experience and the voices of wise counselors. Ultimately, God is the source of wisdom, and this through the enlivening work of the Holy Spirit and through the Scriptures.

But what does wisdom have to do with stewardship. Quite simply, everything.

Consider the questions that most concern us:
  • How shall I invest my resources? (This is not principally a question about choosing stocks and bonds, but about what kinds of things are worth investing my limited resources in.)
• How shall I use my time? – with whom? – and for what purpose?
• What does it mean to be a good parent? – a faithful and loving spouse? – the guardian of an aged parent?
• What is my responsibility in and to the Church, the body of Christ?
• What will my life finally count for?

All of these questions cry out for wisdom. And to answer them wisely is to engage in good stewardship.

Stewards are people charged to care for and nurture things that are not their own. To understand ourselves as called to be good stewards of those things that God has placed in our trust is to recognize that we stand in need of wisdom. Wisdom is in fact the pathway to good stewardship.

Today, as we consider what stewardship means for each of us – investing our resources and time, nurturing our families, living the lives to which God has called us – let us pay close attention to the words of the ancient preacher.

5Get wisdom; get insight: do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth.
6Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you.
7The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight.
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Let him who has ears to hear, hear.