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Texts: Proverbs 9:1-6, Ephesians 5:15-20

Wisdom of the Ages

"Virtuous and wise he was, but not severe;
He still remembered that he once was young."

-Armstrong

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

-Thoreau

"Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration."

-Edison

As you might have guessed, I had a high school English teacher who made memorizing wisdom quotes a substantial portion of my grade. Every other week or so, he would give the class a new quote to memorize. During quizzes, he would randomly assign a quote for us to recall. As a student eager to please, I studied hard to commit them to memory. Isn't it funny how such things stick with you?

I am sure he considered this part of our larger moral formation. For one stretch of a semester, he had us read a chapter each night from Wayne Dyer's *Wisdom of the Ages*. At the time, I missed the irony that this was part of his curriculum for sophomores, by definition a group of "wise fools." Most of us at the time perceived ourselves as more mature than we really were. We would memorize these quotes without fully appreciating how they integrated into our lives. I honestly cannot recall one of them shifting a decision I made.

The book of Proverbs is full of such practical wisdom. Much of the text consists of quotes that editors gathered to help educate young men in their moral formation. Yet as a young man who read the chapter of Proverbs that corresponded with the day of the month for a stretch in middle school, I cannot say that simply reading the words themselves made the advice stick.

While memorization is helpful for somethings, learned wisdom without experience can feel untethered and irrelevant. As a high school business teacher, my mother knew this as well as anybody. She loved teaching personal finance because it was directly applicable to students' lives. She would tell me, "If I could get a kid to understand how much her daily Dunkin' Donuts coffee added up to over the course of a year, I was doing my job."

Once she moved into administration, she made sure every senior participated in a personal finance fair. Each student was randomly assigned an income, debt load, and credit score. They

had to visit a booth for housing, transportation, food, and the various other elements of a household budget.

When it was finally my year to participate, the top prize was an iPod and I was determined to win. I successfully made it from one booth to the next, parrying each attendant's attempt to upsell on luxuries I could live without. Even with a middling salary, I was able to set aside extra money each month for savings and emergencies. When I made it to the end, I proudly showed the budget to my mother. She nodded approvingly but gave me a puzzled look when I asked if I were in the running for the iPod. "We raffle off the prizes," she replied. "There is no winning this fair."

At the time, I resented the notion that fiscal responsibility is a reward in and of itself—I really wanted that iPod. Since then, my capacity to accept wisdom as its own reward has grown. Wisdom is not a notch in the belt or a trophy on a shelf but rather something that is living, breathing, and life-giving. It requires we have a relationship to it if we indeed wish to hold onto it.

Just like any relationship, wisdom requires time. According to our Ephesians text from today, how we allocate our time is a reflection of our wisdom. It reads, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time." The author of this text has a different relationship to time than Paul. Rather than believing that Christ would return in his lifetime like Paul, the author has more of a sense that Christ's reign is both present and out of reach at once. As Christians living in a world that has its dangers and pitfalls, we should be "wise" in this in-between period. Ephesians equates wisdom with "making the most of time" or in a more literal translation "buying back time."

The notion of "buying back time" is rather odd isn't it? Time is something we typically spend, and it is not something we can return. If it were so, I can think of countless hours of TV or mindlessly scrolling through my phone that I would prefer to purchase back. Buying back time here, however, means more than spending it shrewdly. This would warp God's word into little more than a self-improvement manual. In light of the Gospel's promise of abundant life, the wise person who buys back time looks to Spirit-filled moments that transform time. The wise person sees how the Holy Spirit can take a joyful moment of time and multiply it, so it continues to bless us long after it passes.

Since the Spirit's transformation of time is such a mystery, the author of Ephesians devotes over two chapters to rules that can create an atmosphere for the Spirit to flourish. These words of scripture we ponder are supposed to lead to an experience of God that teaches us true wisdom. Some of it even we know is tried and true: "Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts." We try so hard to make beautiful music here because we value how it can buy back our time. Think of how you felt as we sang your favorite hymn or as you let out a wolf cry at the Paul Winter Concert. These type of moments fill us so full with the Spirit that it feels like we have joy to spare. It is how a wise person can buy back time.

Unfortunately, Christians do not always live up to God's standard for wisdom—even in Church. While the author of Ephesians had good intentions, sometimes God's word speaks to us in a text

like this by lifting up the author's failings. Immediately after this passage, the text commands wives to obey their husbands and slaves to obey their masters as if they are obeying Christ himself. Even if this had some marginal benefit to the community at the time, we know powerful people have abused passages like these to benefit themselves. These actions undermine each person's dignity as a person created in the image of God and violate the freedom we have in Christ, who lived, died, and rose again so that we might have.

The legacy of ecclesiastical leaders' abuse of power is heartbreaking. Although what I am about to say is painful to hear, I want to take a few moments to talk about the news that came out this week about Roman Catholic priests in Pennsylvania. For those of you who do not know, a grand jury released a report documenting over 1,000 instances of sexual abuse by more than 300 priests over the course of 70 years. There were likely thousands of more cases never reported in Pennsylvania alone. The grand jury also brought to light a pattern of covering up these crimes by the very people charged with holding them accountable. Although our spotlight is currently on the Catholic Church, we know that these were not the only places where abuse occurred and was subsequently covered by those who should have known better. Other denominations also pushed along abusers disguised as holy men to the next unsuspecting congregation. Every church leader complicit in these crimes and their cover up failed to protect our most vulnerable members. Such injustice demands wise words and actions in response. Unfortunately, our leaders' foolish inaction over the years has stolen time from us.

Our passage from Proverbs reminds us that God's wisdom has no time for ways that protect the injustice of a powerful few. God's wisdom does not dole out privileges and keep the rest of us at the gate. God's wisdom is the quintessential host of all. She treats each person with dignity and assures that they too might have a place at her table. Rather than simply lecturing the foolish, she invites them into an experience of respectful, life-giving sharing. "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine," she bids. "Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight."

Until the day comes when it is on earth as it is in heaven, we cannot completely insulate ourselves from foolish people. In addition to our precautions, we must have faith that the Holy Spirit will not leave us. The Spirit's presence will continue to infuse your world with life giving moments. Her wisdom is powerful enough to buy back time that we have misspent and the time that has been stolen from us. What a gift it is to experience such wisdom in time.

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