

Do not be a “know-it-all”

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church, Wednesday
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“Do not be wise in your own estimation” (Romans 12.16, NASB)

Introduction

Have you ever met someone whom you could describe as a “know-it-all”? Whatever the subject of conversation, whether it be politics, religion, history, English literature or whatever other subject you might choose, you will only be a sentence or two into what you are saying, and he will interrupt you and hold forth with his own dogmatic position, as if he were the world’s foremost authority on the matter. You have a pretty good idea that what he is saying is incorrect, but there is no point in trying to put him right, because he will continue to think what he thinks irrespective of anything you say. In his mind, he is right, and cannot be corrected by anyone.

The sentence we are thinking about today could be paraphrased as “do not be a know-it-all”. Our translation says, “Do not be conceited.” The literal translation is “Do not be wise according to your own...”, with a blank after “own”, for which, in order to make a complete sentence in English, we need to supply a word, such as “thinking” or “wisdom.” The King James translates it, “Be not wise in your own conceits.” The New King James says, “Do not be wise in your own opinion”. The ESV puts it as “Never be wise in your own sight.” The New American Standard translates it, “Do not be wise in your own estimation.” This last translation is the translation that I shall be using today. Let me say it again. “Do not be wise in your own estimation.”

In other words, in this part of the verse the apostle is calling upon believers not to be their own judges of what is wise, or of what is true. They are to submit their idea of what is wise to the wisdom that God

gives, and to receive the wisdom that comes from God, rather than relying on the wisdom of this world.

We need to be clear about what wisdom is. Wisdom is the ability to make choices that are beneficial to you and to other people. We need to distinguish wisdom from knowledge. Knowledge is the accumulation of information. Knowledge, if applied correctly, can be an aid to wisdom, but does not necessarily lead to wisdom. It is possible to be amazingly knowledgeable, and yet to make disastrous decisions when it comes to one's own life. One illustration of this is King Solomon. He had amazing knowledge about all sorts of things, and was a sort of walking encyclopaedia. Yet his own life was a disaster, especially in his later years. He married the daughter of Pharaoh King of Egypt, who was an idolater, and then went on to marry many other women who did not worship the God of the Bible. The result was that his heart was turned away from God to idols. It is also illustrated by our current generation. Never in the history of the world has there been a generation with such access to information as this generation has had. If you have a computer or a "smart" phone with an internet connection, you can do a search on any subject and immediately pull up a vast number of books and articles. And yet, arguably, there has never been a generation that is as foolish as our current generation, especially in the West, making the most foolish decisions about how to live. Of our generation, what the apostle says in chapter 1 of this letter, verses 21 to 21, is especially true:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

The apostle says in this verse that we are to be wise, but not according to our own wisdom. If we look for wisdom within ourselves, or from what the world gives us, we will land up in a terrible mess. Instead, we need to learn to think and to live according to the wisdom which God gives.

This is a very important thing, and is really fundamental to the whole Christian life. To become a Christian, you need to abandon your own human way of thinking, and instead to accept God's way of thinking. This is the very essence of repentance. Not only so, but after we have become Christians, we need to keep on having our thinking renewed according to God's way of thinking, rather than thinking according to human wisdom.

There are many other Scriptures that speak about the importance of not being wise according to our own ideas, but, rather, of accepting the wisdom that God gives. Let me mention a few:

Proverbs chapter 3 verses 5 to 8 says famously,

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.

Proverbs chapter 26 verse 12 says, “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”

In Proverbs chapter 28 verse 11 we read, “A rich man may be wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has discernment sees through him.”

This subject has many potential applications. I am going to confine myself to three main areas:

1. Becoming a Christian
2. Growing as a Christian
3. Our attitude towards others who may have different views from ourselves

1. Becoming a Christian

Let me start by addressing any who at this point in time may not be converted. Let me ask you, what do you do when you are challenged to repent and to believe in Christ as your Saviour?

What many do is to raise all sorts of clever sounding objections to Christian belief. These objections are often raised as questions. Questions like, “Who made God?” “If there is a good God, why is there suffering in the world?” “How can there be three divine persons, and yet only one God?” “If those who are saved have been chosen by God, how can those who are not chosen be blamed for their sin?” “How can a loving God send people to hell?”

If you raise these sorts of objections, what are you doing? You are trying to deflect the focus away from yourself. The Gospel puts you on the spot. It says that you are a guilty sinner. You are on your way to hell. You are a slave of sin. Your religious good works cannot make you

fit for heaven. Such truths are uncomfortable. You do not like them. So you try to hide behind clever sounding objections to faith, just like Adam and Eve tried to hide from God when they sinned.

God is commanding you to stop being a clever-clever know-it-all, and to come down off your high perch. He calls you to humble yourself before him, to abandon your own way of thinking, and to receive his message of salvation, as he has revealed it in his Word. You might not understand everything at first. Some things you might never understand in this life. But you need to have the humility to receive the message of the Good News of God, as he has revealed.

Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew chapter 18, verse 3, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." What is it about little children that we should emulate? Should we be unstable like little children, one moment happy, and the next throwing a tantrum? Of course not! Should we be unable to string more than a few words together? Of course not! So what then? The answer is that we should have humble, trusting confidence like little children. Children believe what they are told. We should have that attitude as regards the message of God's salvation. We should believe the message, and accept it as true, even if we cannot fully understand every aspect of it. We should say to ourselves, "Does God say I am a sinner? In that case I am a sinner. Does God say that I cannot get to heaven by my own works? In that case, I cannot get to heaven by my own works. Does God say that only Jesus can save me? In that case only Jesus can save me. Does God say that I must turn from my sin? In that case, that is what I will do. I will turn from my sin and trust in Christ for salvation."

Part and parcel of this is accepting the Bible as the Word of God. So many say, "Why should I believe the Bible? It is just a book written by men, over hundreds of years, and changed down the centuries". What they do when they say this is to pit their own sinful minds against the Word of God. They say, in their arrogance and pride, "I will decide which parts of the Bible I will believe. Those parts which seem reasonable to me, I will accept. Those parts that I do not consider to be reasonable I will reject." If you do this, you are showing a proud, unbelieving attitude. God is calling you to repent, and to humble yourself before him and his Word. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 2, verse 13, Paul commended the believers there for the way in which they received the Word of God from him: "We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men,

but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.” If you have been sitting in judgment on the Word of God up till now, you need to repent and humbly receive it, so that you may be saved.

James says, in chapter 1 of his letter, verse 21, “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” Although addressed to believers, this word also applies to unbelievers. Will you do this? Will you heed God’s call to humbly accept his Word, which is able to save you?

In Isaiah chapter 55, verses 1 and 2, God issues a call to those who are far from him to come to him and receive from him the salvation that he offers. He generously offers an abundance of spiritual bread, spiritual wine, and spiritual milk, completely freely:

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

The passage goes on in verses 6 to 9 to say that in order to receive this spiritual food, you must humble yourself. You need to abandon the way that you have previously thought, and receive God’s message of salvation.

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’ ”

You need to realise that God’s thoughts are far higher than your thoughts. Turn from your wicked, godless way of thinking and turn to God’s revealed truth. If you are going to do this, you need to be ready for others to treat you the way that you yourself may have treated Christians in the past. You need to be willing to become what the world would call a “fool”. The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, verses 18 – 20,

Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's

sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."

Your friends will say you are a fool. They will say "Oh, so you've become a fundamentalist, have you? You've become a Bible basher? You've suspended your mind?" There is a reproach about being a Bible-believing Christian. Are you prepared to bear that reproach? You need to be prepared to take up your cross and to follow Christ and for people to laugh at you.

So here is the first area of application, in terms of becoming a Christian. Don't be wise in your own eyes, according to human thinking. Do not be a "know-it-all". Stop thinking you know better than God. Humble yourself before him and receive his Word of salvation, that you may be saved.

To those of us who would say that we are Bible-believing Christians, I would say, is there perhaps a little bit of the liberal Christian in all of us? Is there a little bit of the unbeliever, that little bit of lingering doubt, whereby we say "Oh well, I don't take that bit of the Bible seriously" or, "Oh well, I'll choose what to believe and what to ignore"?

All of us need to heed this message, to humble ourselves and to take God at his word.

2. Growing as a Christian

If you become a Christian, what should you do now? You need to grow. What is a Christian after all? A Christian is a disciple. According to Scripture there is no difference between a Christian and a disciple. There are some people who call themselves Christians who say that you can be a Christian and saved but not a disciple – discipleship is for the elite, the keen Christians, but even if you are not yet fully surrendered to Christ you are still a Christian.

There is no such thing as a Christian who is not a disciple. A person who claims to be a Christian but who is not a disciple is not a Christian at all.

If anyone wants to be a Christian you must take up your cross and follow him. What is a disciple? A disciple is a learner, a follower, who follows someone and learns from them.

So we are to be disciples of Christ.

In Matthew 28, verse 19, in the Great Commission, Jesus tells his apostles (in words which I am sure we can say also apply to the whole church, and tell all Christians what to do):

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

So you become a disciple, then for the rest of your life you are learning all of Scripture. Paul says in Acts 20.26, “For I have not hesitated to declare to you the whole counsel of God.” You have not arrived at the point where God wants you to be until you know the entire will of God, the entire Gospel. God wants you and me to come to maturity.

The world rightly talks about “life long learning”. If even the world talks about this, how much more should we expect to carry on learning as believers.

This of course applies to pastors. The mistake that some pastors make (although I have not myself met many like this) is to complete their three years of training at a college, then that is it. They think “Well, I’m trained now.” So they stop learning. They trot out the same old sermons, the same old clichés and they never go any further. That is as far as they get. Such men tend to have quite short ministries because they realise they are starting to repeat themselves. Once everyone else realises that their pastor has nothing fresh to say, the pastor has to move onto another church. No, pastors need to be learning. They need to be at conferences, to read books and study the Scriptures, so that they can grow. Paul says to Timothy, in 1 Timothy chapter 4 verses 14 to 16,

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

You should see your pastors moving forward, growing in their knowledge of the Lord. Sometimes a pastor has to admit that he once used to teach a doctrine that he now realises is mistaken. The studying he has subsequently done has made him realise he was wrong. In such situations a pastor has to have the honesty to say that, because he is moving onwards in his relationship with God and knowledge of his Word, he has come to a more informed understanding of an issue. There is nothing wrong with this. Rather, it is a healthy sign of that pastor moving forwards. In 2 Timothy chapter 2 verse 15, the apostle

Paul says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."

What is true for shepherds should also be true for the sheep. The sheep need to feed themselves upon the Word of God. If you are a Christian, you have a responsibility to watch your own spiritual diet. You cannot just think that it is your pastors' job to feed you. You have a responsibility to feed yourself upon the Word of God. You cannot blame anyone else apart from yourself for your spiritual state. God is going to call you to account on the final day as to the extent that you nourished your own spiritual life.

You should be making progress. You should be moving forward. Staying still is actually a form of backsliding, and is very dangerous.

This is a very down to earth, practical application to this: are you setting aside a time each day to read the Bible? Do you have a time each day when you get alone with God, cut out all distractions, and simply read the Word of God? You have a responsibility to do that.

I am shamelessly going to say again what I have said previously: you really do need to come back on Sunday afternoons if you possibly can. Why? Because you need to hear the Word of God. If your health allows and you are physically capable of getting back, why stay away? Nothing is more important than your spiritual health. It is key to everything else.

Come midweek as well! Some have jobs which prevent them, but if you possibly can, come to hear God's Word.

It is not of course a matter of merely being there, but properly listening when you are there. When you are present, listen carefully to what is said. There is always a danger that we are just looking to be entertained by sermons, or of listening to sermons with a view to rating the preacher. To my shame, I am often guilty of this myself. It is all too easy to evaluate and criticise another speaker.

In Ezekiel chapter 33 verses 31 to 32 God warned Ezekiel how he would be treated by the people, not as a prophet but as a pop star:

My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love

songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

Is that how you view the preacher? Like someone singing love songs. As someone who entertains you, and someone to score out of ten?

There are programmes on TV where aspiring singers are rated. Are you like one of the judges on the panels of these shows, holding up the score afterwards? Are you like one of those judges when you come to church, rating the preacher?

What should you do if the preacher makes a mistake? Get angry? Switch off? No. Note the mistake. Carry on listening. See what you can learn. Talk to preacher afterwards. It is actually really helpful if you point out to a preacher something he has said that is wrong or confusing, and make helpful criticisms at an appropriate time.

Or do you think you already know it all? Do you switch off once the text is announced if you think you already know what is going to be said? The question is not "Have you heard it before?" but "Are you doing it?" Even if you **are** "doing it" you still need to listen because you need to be reminded. If you already think you know all that there is to know, then you will never benefit from preaching.

So this is the second point of application. We need to have an attitude of being continually willing to learn.

3. Our attitude towards others

It could be that you may be as sound as a bell in all your convictions. You may be utterly orthodox in your view of Scripture, and completely sound in terms of your understanding of sin. You may be completely sorted out as regards your view of God, your view of man, your view of election and predestination, your view of the law of God, your view of salvation, and your view of the future and whether or not there is going to be a millennium. You could be correct in your views of the church, have sound views on which gifts of the spirit have ceased and which continue; you could have all these things right, or so you think, but you could still be all wrong because of the attitude with which you hold those convictions. If we hold true convictions, but in a wrong way, with pride and envy, then whatever "wisdom" we might have is unspiritual, even devilish. If our attitude towards others who have a different point of view from ourselves is one of condescending pride, then we do not have any

real wisdom at all. Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 verses 1 and 2, "We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know."

You think "I'm sound , I'm Biblical, I'm all worked out". Watch out! You are in the most dangerous place of all, in danger of pride. In this connection, it is useful to look at what James teaches in the third chapter of his letter, verses 13 to 16:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

James says an astonishing thing here. If what you think of as your wisdom, your grasp of the truth, the sound doctrines that you proclaim and stand by, are mixed up with envy and selfish ambition then whatever wisdom you may claim to have is actually earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. So you can have a devilish understanding of election, a devilish understanding of justification, a devilish understanding of the right doctrine of the church. You say "How can that be?" Because it is held in a wrong spirit, in a proud, judgemental way. So what is really gripping your heart is not the wisdom of God but devilish, unspiritual wisdom, which is disguising itself in apparent sound doctrine. I have known those who claim to be reformed Calvinistic Christians who believe all the right doctrines as regards predestination and election but who are proud, hard as nails and horrible to other people. That should not be. If you believe the doctrine of election, you should be the kindest, most humble, most generous-hearted person on the face of the earth. That is true for all the other doctrines of the Bible. Right understanding of these should show themselves in great living. That is what the apostle goes on to talk about in verse 17 of James 3: "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."

So, do not be wise according to your own idea of wisdom which makes you proud, self righteous and unpleasant to other people. Have that wisdom that comes from God that is truly loving and kind.

Conclusion

What we have seen today is that God calls us not to be wise in our own understanding, not to be a “know-it-all”, but to have the wisdom that comes from him. This needs to happen in terms of our conversion. We need to humble ourselves and receive God’s Word for what is it, the very word of God. We have seen that it is true in terms of Christian growth. We need to be always learning and receive what other believers have to teach us. We have also seen it in terms of how we relate with others who disagree with us. We should relate with them with love and humility.

May God give us grace to hear his word and to act upon it.

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