

## Chapter 9

### Wisdom: The Essence of Godly Authority

Obtaining wisdom should be the life-long goal of those who would shepherd the Father's flocks.

In essence, wisdom sees life from *God's point of view*. Wisdom enables you to apply His principles to your life situations. Certainly the Hebrew sages who led their people knew the importance of wisdom in their leadership. Wisdom was essential if they were to fulfill God's plan to set apart the Israelites as His instruments to reach the world for Himself: "*See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'*" (Deuteronomy 4:5,6; see also Jeremiah 3:15).

Wisdom is not achieved in a vacuum. Your willingness to open your heart and mind to the influence of those who are wiser and more experienced in righteous ways separates a fool from a seeker of truth: "*The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice*" (Proverbs 12:15). The humility required for you to learn from others can change the course of your life.

Attaining wisdom is a process that begins early in life, ideally in the home. The book of Proverbs is full of gems that extol the virtues of wisdom, particularly if you can learn its value even from youth. And the people best in a position to foster opportunities for gaining wisdom are parents. Note the following proverbs of counsel from a father whose heart's desire is to see his child become a man who someday might be fit to shepherd his people:

*"The fear of the Lord teaches a man wisdom, and humility comes before honor"* (Proverbs 15:33). Learning from infancy that loving obedience to God precedes any other commitment or relationship prepares your heart to develop a humble dependence on God's will alone. Genuine humility is key to preparing a man for leadership and any honor that might come. Those who feel that they have achieved success by the strength of their own hands will be deafened to the voice of God, for He resists the proud.

*"Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding"* (Proverbs 3:13). Finding wisdom entails a lifelong habit of teachability, a tireless desire for yieldedness to the mind of Christ. A vessel full of itself has no room for the living water that pours forth wisdom. Acquiring *understanding*, the sister of wisdom, is also a pilgrimage process. Weigh each new opportunity and experience against the standard of the truth of God's Word. The blessing of ever-increasing intimacy with God comes as He opens your willing heart to continue to view circumstances from His perspective.

*"Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding"* (Proverbs 4:7). In ancient times, as now, a battle rages within the soul between material worldly success and spiritual righteous victory. Young people three thousand years ago were just as tempted to seek after worldly pleasures as are today's youth (remember the Prodigal Son?). Yet the more a child was exposed to the role model of godly virtuous parents who were willing to forsake material gain to prize that which pleased God, the likelier he was to cling to those values when he matured.

Young Jesus desired with all His heart to walk in intimate union with His heavenly Father. His earthly parents provided that righteous training ground for Him to exercise growth in holiness: "*And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. . . And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with*

*God and men” (Luke 2:40,52).*

The apostle Timothy was trained from early childhood to treasure the Word of God and to live to please Him. What valuable preparation this training was for the mission God had prepared in advance for his adulthood! “[A]nd how from infancy you have **known the holy Scriptures**, which are able to make you **wise for salvation** through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15).

Jewish parents knew how powerful the influence of relationships could be. That is why those who ruled their households well (and thus had taken the first step toward becoming an elder) were wise enough to train their offspring from childhood to discern good relationships from evil: “He who **walks with the wise** [those who give and take advice] grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20).

Unless a child’s or new believer’s values are reinforced by those in authority, they will melt to conform with the values of the people with whom they keep company. Instead, teach children and babes in Christ to actively seek out as friends and mentors those who are walking with the peaceable fruit of righteousness evident in their lives. Then they will increase their likelihood to treasure and cling to the wisdom that comes from above. And as they grow in that wisdom, they will be able to reach out to the lost without being drawn into sinful snares in the process.

“And he [John] will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the **wisdom of the righteous**—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17, quoted from Malachi 4:5). The rebellious separation between generations had been foreseen by the prophet Malachi. Hundreds of years later, Zechariah prophetically announced the significance of his son John’s birth to fulfill this mission of reconciliation. John would prepare the way for the coming Messiah so that division and strife would not have to rule either in families or in the Body of Christ. *Wisdom* would till the soil of their hearts to discern the truth of the gospel of salvation.

With so much to gain by seeking after wisdom, what might hinder the development of that which is so greatly extolled in the Word? Some definite clues are given in James 3:13-17 to distinguish between the growth of life-giving wisdom and the stunting of sinful self-focus:

*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 harbor 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.*

It is easy to see that the search for wisdom and for godly application of it is a lifelong process. It takes many years for a certain level of wisdom and experience to develop. For those diligent in its development lay the prize and honor of “elder.”

Although we will discuss the issue of bitterness more extensively in Section 3, one point is appropriate to consider here. Far too many men and women fall by the wayside along their spiritual journey because of bitter envy and selfish ambition. Bitter envy is often a product of sibling conflicts. One sibling, due to either wrong focus or pressure from parents, grows up comparing his or her life with one or all of the brothers and sisters. This inappropriate focus called bitter envy keeps them trapped.

Embittered people often feel they have gotten “the short end of the stick.” Throughout their lives bitter envy will cause them to compare their lives with others they meet. Resentment or jealousy will grow if an acquaintance is considered better off or more accomplished than they are. John describes such people: “*But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him*” (1 John 2:11). To compensate for their ugly feelings, people with bitter envy will display selfish ambition by getting ahead any way they can.

A person driven by selfish ambition becomes an idol unto himself. He acts without any consideration of God’s will or the people he hurts. His life may exhibit a series of financial problems, wrongs goals and decisions, and severed relationships. He is living a lie yet cannot see it.

One common thread among the older and wiser is their ability to give and receive counsel and advice. The devoted relationships that develop among elders are born through this type of mutual give and take: “*Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise*” (Proverbs 19:20). A willingness to *listen* as well as speak was part of the Hebraic heritage. Thus the elders at the temple could marvel at the understanding and answers of even a twelve-year-old boy, Jesus!

Opposite to those who sought wisdom were the people who remained fools and failed to mature. Hebrew Scriptures denote a variety of words for “fool.” The *kesil* (kess’-il) is self-confident and set in his ways. His dogmatic strong will keeps him from learning from others: “*As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool [kesil] repeats his folly*” (Proverbs 26:11). No matter how many times you help him, he returns to the same pattern of mistakes.

The *letz*, on the other hand, is a mocking fool who knows better than those who try to correct him. His condescending attitude makes him difficult to speak with. *Nabal* (nah’-bull) is the Hebrew word for the fool who denies that the God of Scriptures is who He says He is: “*The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’*” (Psalm 14:1). Not an atheist, the *nabal* makes his god conform to the image he wants to worship. Therefore he fears no consequences to his disobedience.

The character of each of these types of fool blocks wisdom from impacting their lives toward godliness. They just grow older but are no wiser for the journey. And regrettably, the influence they exert on the less mature may be so detrimental that the elders must remove them before others follow their example of unrepentant folly.

## **Biblical Discussion: Humbly Seeking *What’s* Right, Not *Who’s* Right**

Because their decisions played such a prominent role in the life of the whole community, Hebrew elders needed to be *available* and *accessible* to the people. Since they were of an age that they no longer worked at regular occupations, these men had the time to devote to matters of public and private concern within the community. In order for an elder to devote the energy and hours that such a role required, his own family must have already been taken care of. Therefore, the *zaken’s* children were probably grown and living nearby or even under the same roof. Or, his extended family could provide help. Since eldership was so highly esteemed, it was an honor to meet his needs.

The willingness for a man to discuss his plans with others before he acts is an important litmus test for spiritual shepherds. Wisdom gleaned over years produces a humble walk that is open to counsel and advice. Men who are wise endeavor to listen closely and to interact with what they hear. Remember, “*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*” (James 3:17). Discussion, or what some call “interactive communication,” is normal

interplay among the wise. You get to know a wise man on a deep, transparent level. He is willing to share even the mistakes he has made and the wisdom he has gleaned from his errors.

Many old men who have spent their lives foolishly seeking knowledge rather than wisdom have a narrow communication radius. Most are uncomfortable in discussions where *what* is right is cherished above *who* is right. For narrow people, “knowledge is power.” The information they possess is used to control others or to draw attention to themselves. These men *speak at* rather than *speak with*: “*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*” (1 Corinthians 8:1). It is difficult to get to know or to draw close to this type of person. His pride acts as a barrier, and his lack of love for others prevents him from shepherding the Father’s flock.

There are also those who, for various reasons, have missed the corrective devices of life. Some, through divorce, negligent parents, working mothers, or death of a parent, escaped the corrective training of childhood. Others have consciously avoided authority figures, staying just out of reach of those who might confront them. Those who are shrewd may project a disarmingly pleasant demeanor, hoping to forestall reprimand. Spirits deceive their minds into believing that “correction is rejection.”

Many old-but-foolish men are often great story tellers. By their lengthy, intricate tales they can prevent conversations from becoming interactive. Without interaction, listeners shut their minds off after awhile. You never get to really know these talkers, although your library of stories grows immensely.

Another type of older man who resists transparency is the one who has “hidden secrets.” He is outwardly friendly, but his conversations reveal little about his inner person. During a shipboard deployment Mike befriended another officer named Ralph. Ralph was a likable guy, easy to be around. After several months aboard the ship Mike overheard Pete, one of Ralph’s friends: “Ralph, you and I first met four years ago at Officer Candidate School. We’ve been stationed together ever since and I’ve been your roommate all these years. But Ralph, *I don’t know you!*”

Months later back in San Diego, Ralph and his wife invited us to dinner. After the meal, Karen suddenly broke into tears and blurted out, “We need your help. I’ve been married to Ralph for three years, but *I don’t know him!* If things don’t change I plan to leave him.” Mike immediately remembered Pete’s comment.

Until the wee hours of the morning we talked with this couple. Ralph kept giving excuses for why he didn’t reveal anything about himself. As Mike prayed to himself, the Holy Spirit revealed: “Ralph has been lying to you all evening.” Mike, tired and frustrated, announced, “The Holy Spirit just told me that you’ve been lying to us all evening. I’m leaving if you don’t start telling the truth!”

Breaking into tears, Ralph took the risk of transparency and revealed a secret about his past which he had told no one. He had always feared that if he began to share anything about himself with others, this “dark incident” would come out and people would despise him. We all sensed that this one thing had been destroying his relationship with others. Karen immediately embraced him warmly, as did we. Over the next few months Ralph’s relationship with Karen and with others changed dramatically for the better. Transparency that is shared with discretion is a powerful instrument in the Spirit’s hands.

### ***Halakhahs: Display Your Father’s Wisdom As You Apply His Word***

By sitting in an established area in the city, the elders of biblical times were accessible to all who passed by during the course of the day. Everyone knew where the elders could be found if there was a problem or question to be addressed. By group consensus the eld-

ers would decide the correct *halakhah* (hah'-luh-kuh), the most appropriate biblical solution for that situation. Establishing a *halakhah* represented the best efforts of the community elders to discover and apply one of several true, biblical options. Their decision would then become a precedent for all generations to consider in future deliberations.

The Jewish people, and therefore the earliest Church, had long been accustomed to gathering to pray and to study the Bible. In these groups they regularly discussed the Word of God in order to determine how He wanted them to apply it. Most often the discussions were conducted in a style known as the *yeshiva* (yeh-shee'-vuh) method, a give-and-take dialogue. The deliberations were very democratic. Issues were settled by the confirmation of two or three or by a simple majority vote, whichever was appropriate for that situation. This process underscored the Biblical axiom that "*in the multitude of counselors is safety.*" (See Proverbs 11:14; 12:15; 13:10; 20:18; 24:6—with that many repetitions, God is trying to get our attention!).

One person was recognized as the moderator of the discussion group, the *nasi* (nah'see), or "prince." Rather than lording himself over the others or forcing his own opinion, the *nasi* represented equals. He was responsible for facilitating the dialogue until the group collectively reached an understanding of God's will on the issue at hand. *Plurality* of thought and input was an essential ingredient; in today's vernacular, all the cards were put on the table before a decision was reached.

What a burden of heavy responsibility the elders faced as they administered community life! Totally dependent on the principles of the Hebrew Scriptures, they strained to apply God's truth correctly. Prominent in guiding their administration were the commands of Micah 6:8: "*He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*" In all their decisions the elders were responsible to uphold the Hebrew Bible and apply it to real-life situations.

For instance, say that a dispute arose over water rights to a stream that bordered two men's properties. In a land as parched as Israel, water was a commodity as precious as gold. The two men would state their cases before the elders at the gate, within earshot of curious onlookers. The elders would discuss the Mosaic laws and the precedents that had been established from similar previous cases or issues. The precedent *halakhahs* that best suited the present situation were explored, and the application of biblical truth that seemed most appropriate was then offered as a course of action. The plaintiffs could stand assured that biblical demands had been satisfied by the decision that had been reached, even if one or both were not completely satisfied with the outcome. A *halakhah* that stated how resolution had been reached in this situation was then written down as an application guide for the whole community in the future. (For more on the topic of *halakhahs*, see our book *Christian Halakhahs*.)

Note that the emphasis in all of this was not a *theoretical interpretation* of Scripture but a *correct application* of the truth to settle a real-life situation. Can we today find any greater source of wisdom than the Word our Lord has given His people?