

Wisdom: Its Own Reward

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Dear Friends,

Not only does Scripture teach us what to do; it also teaches us to guard our motives for doing. This week's study deals with Solomon's story regarding a poor wise man who delivered a city, but was soon forgotten. Without question, Solomon concludes that wisdom is right and worthy in its own merit. We do not justify wisdom by exhibiting it for others to view and praise. If no one ever noticed or said a word, wisdom is the right thing to do. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' personal guide to—and for—disciples in their daily lives. One of the anchors that stands out in the Sermon on the Mount is the danger of doing things "to be seen" rather than doing them because Jesus taught us to do them and because they are the right thing to do, whether anyone ever sees or praises us or not. A significant number of sincere folks in contemporary Christianity believe that they literally work their way into heaven by their own good deeds. They seem more intent on working for more stars in their crowns than for the glory of God. We readily sense the self-serving spirit of this faulty theology and reject it, but our pride-filled and sinful humanity often allows similar motives to creep into our own thinking and conduct. If you had the raw, bare choice to make—work for Jesus or work for the notice and appreciation of folks whom you respect, but you could not have both—what choice would you make? I fear that many professing Christians would struggle intently with such a decision. There should be no struggle! The only acceptable and godly motive for everything that we do in our Christian service, even the most difficult of labors, is for the glory of God, not for our own selfish and personal gain, whether it be the fictional "stars in my crown" or the approval and praise of our peers. Self-examination is never easy, but it is essential if we hope to refine and purify our motives for what we do. May we serve the risen Savior and not our selves, Joe Holder

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This wisdom have I seen also under the sun, and it seemed great unto me: There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it: Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man. Then said I, Wisdom is better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. The words of wise men are heard in quiet more than the cry of him that ruleth among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war: but one sinner destroyeth much good.? (Ec 9:13-18) How do we go about making sense of this lesson? Is Solomon telling us how things should be or warning us about how they are? Can we invest godly wisdom into every situation of life and reasonably expect that it shall always be recognized or heeded, much less appreciated? As a pastor and minister, I can't tell you how many times over some fifty years that I've observed various people who invested personal effort in a church activity, only to complain bitterly, if at times privately, that their hard work and dedication were not recognized or appreciated. One begins to wonder; did they invest their effort for recognition and appreciation or because it was needed and beneficial to the church's spiritual function? Our humanity craves recognition for what we do that is good. Often we must struggle with frustration and disappointment when we do something worthwhile, and no one notices or voices appreciation. Our "all about me" humanity wants to cry out, "Why bother? I'll just let someone else do it next time." In the Sermon on the Mount, His handbook for Christian living and wise discipleship, Jesus warns us about our human and sinful craving for attention and appreciation. In several of the examples Jesus takes the roof off our sinful humanity by exposing our motives, "to be seen of men." With a touch of humor, he

promises that such folks shall have their reward. They shall be seen of men! The Greek word translated "to be seen" in these verses is the Greek root for our English word "theatrical." If our motivation in doing something is to "be seen" and appreciated by people who see what we do and praise us, we are guilty of being "theatrical" about our Christianity rather than being God-centered and doing things for His glory, not for the praise of people who see what we do. The "to be seen" theatrical attitude is not merely something we should avoid in others. It is in fact something that we should keenly avoid in ourselves. However devoted you and I seek to serve God and His people unselfishly, our fallen human natures love the praise and attention of people when we do something that triggers our pride. Rather than teaching us how things should be, Solomon uses this lesson to warn us not to do things with the expectation of notice and praise. In the unfolding story he tells about the little city, the great king, and the "poor wise man" Solomon confronts the fact that the king presumably had no problem taking the credit for delivering the city. He would use his position to regularly remind his subjects of what a good king he is, exemplified by his deliverance of the city in its moment of danger. No one would protest the king's selfish grabbing of credit from the "poor wise man." In fact Solomon confronts us with the simple point of hard reality. No one remembered the wise man. Soon both the king and his subjects would come to believe that the king really was responsible for delivering the city. Put yourself in this city. Specifically put yourself in the position of the "poor wise man." Given the opportunity and knowing the outcome, if the city were again threatened and you had the wisdom to know how to deliver the city, would you do so, or would you retire into the background and let the city fall to its enemies? This question takes us to one of the major points of the lesson. Do we view wisdom as its own reward, or do we seek recognition and praise from people who see us demonstrate wisdom? I recall many years ago an interesting experience that my wife and I had. There are several Christian counseling subgroups who conduct seminars and workshops for interested believers. We had heard good reports about one of these organizations, so when we received an announcement that this particular organization planned a three day seminar in San Diego, just over a hundred miles from our home, we were anxious to attend. Honestly, the people who conducted the individual seminars were delightful Christians with godly insight and worthwhile information for our consideration. Throughout the various workshops, we were regularly reminded that the ideas being presented originated with the man who founded the organization. Finally the time came for a general assembly of the whole group. The founder was scheduled to make the keynote speech at this gathering. As he entered the auditorium, we heard people gasp, and many people started pointing and whispering as they saw the founder. The thought occurred to me that this man rather enjoyed this adoring attention. Would he have been as creative and assertive in his programs if no one knew him or ever mentioned his name in near-worshipping tones? He seemed a bit too comfortable with this excessive attention and praise. Despite some beneficial information, my wife and I were not interested in attending the next seminar conducted by this organization. For us the position of the One whom we worship has been taken and is sufficiently exclusive that we have no desire to inject a competitor into our thoughts. D. A. Carson draws some instructive analogies out of this story. "The Teacher recalls an incident in which there was a struggle between prestige (powerful king) and insignificance (small city), between strength (huge siegeworks) and weakness (small city). The precise incident is unknown but was similar to the events of [Jg 9:50-55](#) and [2Sa 20:15-22](#). The last sentence of v 15 would mean that no-one remembered the poor man after his help was given. However the line could be translated, 'he could have saved the city by his wisdom'. This fits v 16: the humble circumstances of the poor person count against him and his wisdom is unheeded. But this is not a call for us to abandon wisdom as useless but rather to persevere in its light and leave the outcome to God." [1] Notice Carson's conclusion, "...persevere in its light and leave the outcome to God." If godliness and wisdom are right, whether we receive credit and praise for our actions or not, we are obligated—no, honored and blessed—with the opportunity to use the wisdom that God may bless upon us for the benefit of His family. Are we willing to do what is right, regardless of someone seeing and praising us, because it is right? Are we willing to "leave the outcome to God"

when the alternative would be praise from people? I suggest that, just as faithfully as Jesus promises that a "theatrical" performance, a godly act done "to be seen" and praised by people, shall surely earn its expected reward (People will see what you do and praise you.), even more so a godly deed done solely for the glory of God shall also receive its reward. Whether a single human sees or knows what you do that is godly and commendable, or your good deed goes wholly unnoticed, when you do it for God and His glory, He shall see it and respond with blessings. Would you prefer the fickle praises of another human being or the approval and blessing of God? At some point you may actually face an either-or choice between the two. A decision for one eliminates the other.

Elder Joe Holder