

Sunday 30th June 2024 - That's The Spirit! : Wisdom

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Morning everyone. Nice buzz this morning. Good to see you all. Well done, well done. A bit gloomy out there. Hopefully no Sunday rain later like it was for the football yesterday. So if you're watching a match later, let's hope it's a good one at five o'clock this afternoon. But football aside and more importantly than that, obviously, in this Sunday series that we've been doing called That's the Spirit, we've been exploring some of the various ways in which God is at work in our lives through the Holy Spirit, what we might call the personal presence of God with us.

And looking at the way God is at work in our lives, I think we might have bitten off more than we can chew really because we're basically trying to understand God because the Holy Spirit is God. And yet, as we've seen and as we'll explore more of today, I think the Holy Spirit in particular merits our focus because of the very personal nature of God's presence with us through the Spirit. And yet we think about the various ways in which God is revealed to us. There are times like these, for example, when we think of God in a very big kind of cosmic creation level kind of way, this massive God who is over us and above us, far beyond us. And yet because this understanding of God is so big and difficult to get our heads around, it seems the writers of the Bible, and in particular Jesus himself, tends to address this kind of understanding of God with the name Father. So it's this sort of picture of a, I sort of imagine the Father as a kind of bear, a huggingly loving character, you know, someone who's protecting and creative and generous, slightly mischievous maybe, but always a merciful character, indescribably holy, but also endlessly exciting. This God the Father is a combination of a mystery we can't see whilst being the one whose fingerprints are all over creation. Equally though, alongside this Father view of God, we see God revealed in Jesus, the God-man known as the Son. Son of God, as some call him, connecting to the way perhaps that Jesus saw God as his Father, but also Son of Man, as Jesus himself preferred to be known, a Son of Humans, in other words, you know, revealing this unique way in which Jesus is fully God, but also fully human. And the person of Jesus, what we see in the Gospels, we see in the video readings that we tend to use here, you might see in series like The Chosen on TV, this Jesus, he's captivating, he's fascinating, he's a magnetic presence who offers a radical, even revolutionary way of living that shows what love and kindness and compassion and righteousness actually look like fleshed out in life. Qualities that I'd say make

Jesus still to this day the most remarkable person who's ever walked on earth. And yet at the same time, Jesus embodies just as much wonder and mystery and majesty as God the Father, you know, primarily through the game-changing comeback of his resurrection and the way in which he showed his power even over death itself. This Jesus, who we're told is now with the Father in whatever kind of cosmic realm we can imagine that happening. It's just as much God as the Father is, but is this different way of understanding, of relating to, even of identifying with God. So that's the Father, then there's Jesus, which leaves us with the Holy Spirit, this third way of understanding God, the third person of the Trinity, to use the Trinity, to use the jargon. Now because the Holy Spirit is God, the Spirit encompasses everything that the Father is and everything that Jesus is, just as the Father and the Son encompass everything that the Spirit is. And we can't compartmentalize God in this way. God is all in all.

[4 : 39] But the Spirit, I'd say, is the way in which the fullness of God is personally present with us now, you know, in our breath, in our bones, in the lives we live and the love we share.

Now why might this personal understanding of God be particularly important? Well for various reasons, but I think one of the benefits is that God through the Spirit is indeed personal. In other words, relating to you and to me in ways which are just right for us. Not too hot, not too cold, just

right.

For example, let's think about one way in which God might be personal to us. Let's think about God and gender for a moment. Because on the one hand, it's clear that so much of the way that we tend to think of God and that God is presented in the Bible is often along male or masculine lines.

Indeed, I don't know how this masculine picture and idea of God sits with you, quite how you picture God when you think about God. But at the very least, I think the metaphors that we have of God as father, well that's obviously a male image. And Jesus himself was clearly a man. Yes, there are passages in which God is likened to a mother hen or a midwife or a woman searching for a lost coin.

But probably due to the time it was written and the male dominated culture in which the Bible was formed, God in the Bible is often he. Often he. When we come to the Holy Spirit though, what's interesting is that the Hebrew word for spirit that we looked at the other week, this word ruach, in Hebrew, that word is actually a feminine term. So in some ways, we could say the Holy Spirit is a she.

[6 : 50] And the keen-eared among us, I guess, might have heard Ruth sometimes speak of the Holy Spirit as she. She did that in her talk the other week just here. Now the way we speak of God, that would make perhaps an interesting discussion another time. And I guess any description of God as either he or she fall short because God is way beyond and not limited by gender. But the fact that the Holy Spirit, I think, can legitimately be understood as in some way feminine, well I'd suggest that can open up all sorts of new ways for us to personally relate to God if we've previously tended to see God in largely masculine ways. And this might be particularly helpful, might even be healing perhaps, if our experience, say, of father figures or certain men in our lives has been difficult. And the book and the film, *The Shack*, that's worth checking out for more on that line of thought of how the feminine imagery of God might help heal if we've got a kind of distorted image of what masculinity looks like perhaps in this life. Yes, as I say, God is beyond gender. But if imagining God in feminine terms is helpful for us to encounter God in new ways, then I'm pretty sure God is all in favour of it.

Because as we're saying, the Holy Spirit is the means by which God speaks into our lives in a deeply personal way. Now how else might God's personal presence with us shape our lives and our understanding?

Well, as Alex said, another key way which I'd like us to spend a bit of time thinking about this morning is the way in which God gives each of us wisdom, wisdom to know how to live life in the best ways possible. Now interestingly, wisdom is another way in which a more feminine idea of God is brought out. Because in the Bible, the quality of God's wisdom is often described and personified, you know, given an identity that we can relate to in a female form. So in the book of Proverbs, it puts it like this. It says, get wisdom, get understanding. Do not forsake wisdom and she will protect you. Love her and she will watch over you. The beginning of wisdom is this. Get wisdom.

wisdom. And then a little bit later on in the book of Proverbs, there's a beautiful passage which basically describes how crucial wisdom is to all that this life is about. It's not short, but we've done a sort of abbreviated version of it here. But I just want to read it because it's worth hearing perhaps pretty much in full. It says this, the Lord brought me wisdom forth as a first of his works before his deeds of old. I was formed long ages ago at the very beginning when the world came to be.

When there were no watery depths, I was given birth. When there were no springs overflowing water, before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth. Before he made the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth. I, wisdom, was there when he set the heavens in place. When he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep. When he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep. When he gave the sea its boundary so that the waters wouldn't overstep his command. And when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day. Rejoicing always in his presence. Rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in the human race. Now then, my children, listen to me.

[11 : 15] Blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be wise. Do not disregard it. Blessed are those who listen to me. Watching daily at my doors. Waiting at my doorway. For those who find me, wisdom. Find life and receive favour from the Lord. For those who fail to find me, harm themselves.

Indeed all who hate me, love death. Wisdom, therefore, is something, you know, pictured here as someone, as a she, who's so tied up with God that she's seen as being crucial to both the formation of the world, but also to how we're to live God's ways in the world. Indeed, the need for wisdom inspires lots of other passages in the Bible, but in particular maybe Apostle Paul when he says this in his letter to the Ephesians, he says, I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better. The spirit of wisdom. Again, underlining how much wisdom is part of who God is, part of who the Holy Spirit is, and how the spirit is at work in our lives.

So what exactly is wisdom? Well, wisdom is more than just sort of normal intelligence, more than being clever. Indeed, I think we could say that wisdom is the combination of experience and knowledge and good judgment. Experience, because the more we see of life, the more we learn, in theory at least, how to live well. It's knowledge, and as we understand more of how the world works and how people tick, so that knowledge aids our ability to respond wisely. But it's good judgment as well.

You know, being able to weigh things up, to reflect and know on balance what the best way forward might be. It's interesting, thinking about experience and all that stuff. One of the few things that we're told about Jesus in his younger years is this, that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature. He grew physically in stature, yes, but most of all, and primarily first here, he grows in wisdom. And the fact that Jesus had to grow in wisdom, I think that means that even Jesus had to learn, we might say through experience and knowledge and good judgment, how to live wisely, how to live well, and how to help others do the same.

[14:14] No wonder Paul, in that little verse earlier, tells people, therefore, to ask for the spirit of wisdom, wisdom, because if Jesus needed to develop wisdom, how much more might we need God's help to do the same.

So, how? How do we grow in wisdom? How do we get wisdom, as Proverbs says? Well, it seems the starting point is to do, as Paul suggests, is to pray for wisdom.

Or as the letter of James similarly puts it, he says this, if any of you lacks wisdom, they should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

I don't know, this asking for wisdom stuff, I don't know, perhaps, in your own prayer life, if wisdom is anything that you've ever asked God for.

Sounds quite an obvious thing, perhaps, to ask God for, but I'm not sure it's something that I, and maybe we, tend to ask for all that often. You see, when faced with a tricky situation or decision to make or something, if you're anything like me, my first prayer, when I'm a bit flummoxed about something, might be along the lines of, God, you've got to show me what to do here. I'm stuck.

[15:36] Give me the answers. I need to know what to do here. I need your help. And that's a fine kind of prayer to pray. But it's not actually praying for wisdom. Instead, it's asking for God to give us the answers. You know, just tell me what to do, and I'll do it. In contrast, wisdom is what God will give us so that we can work out the answers for ourselves. It's God's way, I think, of helping us to grow up, you know, of encouraging us by saying, look, you got this. You can do this. What do you think you should do? You know, I've given you a brain. Use the brain. Use the experience, the knowledge, the good judgment that I've already given you to make a wise decision here. You know, if you think about it, I was up here with Alex earlier. They're all good parents. They raise their children to increasingly make their own decisions in life. And I suspect the longer that we know God, the more God trusts us to draw on the internal wisdom that the Spirit is growing in us.

Maybe, I think, maybe that's why God sometimes feels silent when we ask for guidance or help. Not because God is far away or sort of muted or anything, but because God is deliberately perhaps keeping quiet in order to help us to grow in wisdom for ourselves. So we grow in wisdom firstly by asking God for it, by asking God to help us draw on knowledge and experience and good judgment in order to make wise decisions. But secondly, and perhaps a bit more practically with all this, I came across a really good article on wisdom recently by this guy here. You might recognize him, a guy called Nick Page, a lovely guy who, if you've been with us a good few years, you might remember he came and spoke at a church weekend that we had here a few years back. And he wrote an article on wisdom. And in this article, he lists his top seven tips for how to be wise, ways to be wise, he calls it. And I just want to briefly share three of them, because there's a lot of wisdom in them. So one way to be wise is to, as Nick puts it, is to find your elders, to find your elders. In other words, you know, find people you respect, people from whom you can learn, people who might

guide or mentor you in life and in faith. Pick their brains, run decisions that you've got to make past them. And these elders, they may not necessarily be older than us, but they are likely to have more experience in something than we do. Makes sense to listen to and learn from their experience. As Proverbs says this, it says, listen to advice and accept discipline. And at the end, you'll be counted among the wise. So find your elders, whoever they may be. Next up though, and connected to this, is this one, engage in honest reflection. I don't think wisdom automatically comes with age. It's not just a matter of time and suddenly we wake up one day and we're wise. Now rather, it comes instead, I think, primarily through reflection. An honest reflection means thinking about and learning from mistakes we might have made or learning from successes we might have had. You know, what might we learn from failures? What might we learn from things that have gone well in order to not repeat the mistakes, but to build on the things perhaps that have gone well? Equally honest reflection, I think, means working out how and why we feel the way we do. That kind of reflection, that could be done with God on our own, but often I think it's best done in conversation with someone we trust, whether that's a friend or someone in a more professional capacity. For example, I know for me, I think for pretty much all my life, I've felt fairly self-sufficient, I think, with working my feelings out. I'm kind of naturally reflective. I walk a lot, which helps with that. I try to think things through, maybe overthink things sometimes. And my prayer life is very much a kind of ongoing conversation with God. It's not too formal. It's a kind of ongoing chat, if you like, with God. And yet that sense of self-reliance over the years, might call it pride even. I think that's only got me so far because I got to the stage by, what, summer's end last year, when a few things were beginning to really get on top of me in life. You know, feelings that I couldn't really make sense of, where understanding myself was getting beyond me, if you like. And so last year, and for the first time in all my life, I had some professional counselling. And I'd meet with this counsellor every two or three weeks or so for an hour. And it was great. It was great. It was a privilege to have enough space to be really listened to by a trained professional therapist. It was what's called person-led counselling. So I'd come and share feelings that I've been having. And my counsellor, well, she was brilliant. Because by being honest with her, she was then able, in her professional capacity, to give a name to my feelings and experiences in a gentle but kind of totally authoritative kind of way. And through the back and forth of our conversation, my counsellor's wisdom, and she had a bucket load of it, her wisdom gave me wisdom. You know, helping me to process my experiences with her knowledge so that I can hopefully live in a more rounded, self-aware way. In a way, I think she was probably doing what that verse from Proverbs talked about. She was giving me more discipline. You know, we might say disciplining me in the way of wisdom. And again, as ever, as Proverbs says, whoever heeds discipline shows the way to life. But whoever ignores correction leads others, and I'd suggest themselves, ourselves, astray. And so thinking about that, I wonder, again, for you, whether it's through your own personal, private prayer time with God, whether it's praying with others, the prayer team are around this morning, that's on offer, whether it's a trusted friend you go for a walk or a pint or a coffee with, whether it's a professional counsellor, I can't recommend honest reflection enough as a way to grow in wisdom. And if you want the name of my counsellor, or simply want to talk to me, or be signposted to someone else you could talk to, then do please come and have a chat. Do take the opportunity to work out how we might better engage in honest reflection.

And finally, for now, another way to be wise that Nick Page highlights is this, to slow down, shut up, and listen. Wisdom, says Nick. It often comes through empathy, which is the attempt on our part to see things from someone else's point of view. But empathy, that requires us to be patient, to be quiet, and to listen, and to really pay attention to what someone else is sharing with us.

[24 : 25] I mean, I'm as guilty of this as anyone, but as soon as someone starts sharing an experience that they've had with me, I tend to immediately think of similar things that I, or others I know, have been through. Whether that's a time that I've visited the same place as them, or they're talking about the same kind of operation I, or people I know, might have. You know, someone says, I'm going on holiday. Oh, I've been there. Or they say, oh, you know, someone's having an operation on their ankle.

Oh, yeah, I had an ankle operation. If you, you know, you immediately put it back to yourself, and you compare things with your own experience. Perhaps it's just a natural thing often that we do. And yet empathy, and the wisdom, I suggest, which follows from it, I think empathy requires us not to say, oh, yeah, I know how you're feeling, but instead to ask, how did that make you feel?

Because it's only through understanding something from someone else's perspective that our experience, our knowledge, our ability to make good judgments, in other words, our wisdom might grow. If you think about this, slowing down, shutting up, and listening, Jesus, he was excellent at this. You know, not once in the Bible do we hear Jesus say, ah, yeah, I know how you feel, because the same thing happened to me the other day. Now, Jesus, instead, he was forever asking questions of people.

I think we've done this before. There's something like 300 times Jesus asks a question in the Gospels, and he only answers a question like three or four times. It's like a hundred to one ratio of him asking questions than answering them. He was always asking questions. He's always showing empathy.

He's always wanting to learn from and about other people. And that, I would suggest, is a key way by which he became such a wise teacher. So for us to get wisdom, I think we'd do well to really listen to others and try to see things from their point of view. And by way of conclusion on this, I think when the Bible talks about the spirit of wisdom, we could say that's really describing and really talking about the spirit of Jesus with us. Because Jesus is by far and away the wisest person who's ever lived, someone who's teaching, has stood the test of time, and whose experience and knowledge and good judgment means that we can do no better than to follow him and his ways. I know for me, the more time I reflect on and I think about and I try and relate to Jesus through the spirit, he increasingly becomes my hero.

[27 : 26] You know, someone whose life gives the color and the shape of who I want to be and the way I want to live. And I know the same is true for so many of us here today. I think just to sum up, really, in all of our desire and our seeking to get the best out of this life, to grow in wisdom, to learn and live well, might say to learn to fly and scale the heights of this life with the spirit, it's the personal presence of Jesus, of God with us, through the spirit that will enable us to do that wise living better than anything. And as God gives and grows wisdom in us, through prayer, through finding our elders, through engaging in honest reflection, through slowing down, shutting up and listening, through experience, through knowledge, through good judgment and so on.

My prayer for each of us is that you and I would never cease to keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we might know him better. Amen.