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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 68

The Wisdom of God's Counsel's

"O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" Rom. 11:33.

1. Some apprehend the wisdom and the knowledge of God to mean one and the same thing. Others believe that the wisdom of God more directly refers to his appointing the ends of all things; and his knowledge, to the means which he hath prepared and made conducive to those ends. The former seems to be the most natural explication; as the wisdom of God, in its most extensive meaning, must include the one as well as the other, the means as well as the ends.
2. Now the wisdom as well as the power of God is abundantly manifested in his creation; in the formation and arrangement of all his works, in heaven above and in the earth beneath; and in adapting them all to the several ends for which they were designed: Insomuch that each of them, apart from the rest, is good; but all together are very good; all conspiring together, in one connected system, to the glory of God in the happiness of his intelligent creatures.
3. As this wisdom appears even to short-sighted men (and much more to spirits of a higher order) in the creation and disposition of the whole universe, and every part of it; so it equally appears in their preservation, in his "upholding all things by the word of his power." And it no less eminently appears in the permanent government of all that he has created. How admirably does his wisdom direct the motions of the heavenly bodies! of all the stars in the firmament, whether those that are fixed, or those that wander, though never out of their several orbits! of the sun in the midst of heaven! of those amazing bodies, the comets, that shoot in every direction through the immeasurable fields of ether! How does he superintend all the parts of this lower world, this "speck of creation," the earth! So that all things are still, as they were at the beginning, "beautiful in their seasons;" and summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, regularly follow each other. Yea, all things serve their Creator: "Fire and hail, snow and vapour, wind and storm, are fulfilling his word;" so that we may well say, "O Lord, our Governor, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!"
4. Equally conspicuous is the wisdom of God in the government of nations, of states and kingdoms; yea, rather, more conspicuous; if infinite can be allowed to admit of any degrees. For the whole inanimate creation, being totally passive and inert, can make no opposition to his will. Therefore, in the natural world all things roll on in an even, uninterrupted course. But it is far otherwise in the moral world. Here evil men and evil spirits continually oppose the divine will, and create numberless irregularities. Here, therefore, is full scope for the exercise of all the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, in counteracting all the wickedness and folly of men, and all the subtlety of Satan, to carry on his own glorious design, -- the salvation of lost mankind. Indeed, were he to do this by an absolute decree, and by his own irresistible power, it would imply no wisdom at all. But his wisdom is shown by saving man in such a manner as not to destroy his nature, not to take away the liberty which he has given him.
5. But the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God are most eminently displayed in his Church; in planting it like a grain of mustard seed, the least of all seeds; in preserving and continually increasing it, till it grew into a great tree, notwithstanding the uninterrupted opposition of all the powers of darkness. This the Apostle justly terms the manifold wisdom (*polupoikilos sojia*) of God. It is an uncommonly expressive word, intimating that this wisdom, in the manner of its operation, is diversified a thousand ways, and exerts itself with infinite varieties. These things the highest "angels

desire to look into," but can never fully comprehend. It seems to be with regard to these chiefly that the Apostle utters that strong exclamation, "How unsearchable are his judgments!" His counsels, designs, impossible to be fathomed; "and his ways" of accomplishing them "past finding out!" impossible to be traced! According to the Psalmist, "His paths are in the deep waters, and his footsteps are not known."

6. But a little of this he has been pleased to reveal unto us; and by keeping close to what he has revealed, meantime comparing the word and the work of God together, we may understand a part of his ways. We may in some measure trace this manifold wisdom from the beginning of the world; from Adam to Noah, from Noah to Moses, and from Moses to Christ. But I would now consider it (after just touching on the history of the Church in past ages) only with regard to what He has wrought in the present age, during the last half century; yea, and in this little corner of the world, the British islands only.

7. In the fulness of time, just when it seemed best to his infinite wisdom, God brought his first-begotten into the world. He then laid the foundation of his Church; though it hardly appeared till the day of Pentecost. And it was then a glorious Church; all the members thereof being "filled with the Holy Ghost;" being "of one heart and of one mind, and continuing steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine, and in fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers." In fellowship; that is, having all things in common; no man counting anything he had his own

Meek, simple followers of the Lamb, They lived, and thought, and spake the same: They all were of one heart and soul, And only love inspired the whole.

8. But this happy state did not continue long. See Ananias and Sapphira, through the love of money, ("the root of all evil,") making the first breach in the community of goods! See the partiality, the unjust respect of persons on the one side, the resentment and murmuring on the other, even while the Apostles themselves presided over the church at Jerusalem! See the grievous spots and wrinkles that were found in every part of the Church, recorded not only in the Acts, but in the Epistles of St. Paul, James, Peter, and John. A still fuller account we have in the Revelation: And, according to this, in what a condition was the Christian Church, even in the first century, even before St. John was removed from the earth; if we may judge (as undoubtedly we may) of the state of the church in general, from the state of the particular Churches (all but that of Smyrna and Philadelphia) to which our Lord directed his Epistles! And from this time, for fourteen hundred years, it was corrupted more and more, as all history shows, till scarce any either of the power or form of religion was left.

9. Nevertheless it is certain, that the gates of hell did never totally prevail against it. God always reserved a seed for himself; a few that worshipped him in spirit and in truth. I have often doubted, whether these were not the very persons whom the rich and honourable Christians, who will always have number as well as power on their side, did not stigmatize, from time to time, with the title of heretics. Perhaps it was chiefly by this artifice of the devil and his children, that, the good which was in them being evil spoken of, they were prevented from being so extensively useful as otherwise they might have been. Nay, I have doubted whether that arch-heretic, Montanus, was not one of the holiest men in the second century. Yea, I would not affirm, that the arch-heretic of the fifth century, (as plentifully as he has been bespattered for many ages,) was not one of the holiest men of that age, not excepting St. Augustine himself. (A wonderful saint! As full of pride, passion, bitterness, censoriousness, and as foul-mouthed to all that contradicted him, as George Fox himself.) I verily believe, the real heresy of Pelagius was neither more nor less than this: The holding that Christians

may, by the grace of God, (not without it; that I take to be a mere slander,) "go on to perfection;" or, in other words, "fulfil the law of Christ."

"But St. Augustine says:" -- When Augustine's passions were heated, his word is not worth a rush. And here is the secret: St. Augustine was angry at Pelagius: Hence he slandered and abused him, (as his manner was,) without either fear or shame. And St. Augustine was then in the Christian world, what Aristotle was afterwards: There needed no other proof of any assertion, than Ipse dixit : "St. Augustine said it."

10. But to return: When iniquity had overspread the Church as a flood, the Spirit of the Lord lifted up a standard against it. He raised up a poor monk, without wealth, without power, and, at that time, without friends, to declare war, as it were, against all the world; against the Bishop of Rome and all his adherents. But this little stone being chosen of God, soon grew into a great mountain; and increased more and more, till it had covered a considerable part of Europe. Yet even before Luther was called home, the love of many was waxed cold. Many, that had once run well, turned, back from the holy commandment delivered to them; yea, the greater part of those that once experienced the power of faith, made shipwreck of faith and a good conscience. The observing this was supposed to be the occasion of that illness (a fit of the stone) whereof Luther died; after uttering these melancholy words: "I have spent my strength for nought! Those who are called by my name, are, it is true, reformed in opinions and modes of worship; but in their hearts and lives, in their tempers and practice, they are not a jot better than the Papists!"

11. About the same time it pleased God to visit Great Britain. A few in the reign of King Henry the Eighth, and many more in the three following reigns, were real witnesses of true, scriptural Christianity. The number of these exceedingly increased in the beginning of the following century. And in the year 1627, there was a wonderful pouring out of the Spirit in several parts of England, as well as in Scotland, and the north of Ireland. But from the time that riches and honour poured in upon them that feared and loved God, their hearts began to be estranged from him, and to cleave to the present world. No sooner was persecution ceased, and the poor, despised, persecuted Christians invested with power, and placed in ease and affluence, but a change of circumstances brought a change of spirit. Riches and honour soon produced their usual effects. Having the world, they quickly loved the world: They no longer breathed after heaven, but became more and more attached to the things of earth. So that in a few years, one who knew and loved them well, and was an unexceptionable judge of men and manners, (Dr. Owen,) deeply lamented over them, as having lost all the life and power of religion, and being become just of the same spirit with those whom they despised as the mire in the streets.

12. What little religion was left in the land received another deadly wound at the Restoration, by one of the worst princes that ever sat on the English throne, and by the most abandoned court in Europe. And infidelity now broke in amain, and overspread the land as a flood. Of course, all kind of immorality came with it, and increased to the end of the century. Some feeble attempts were made to stem the torrent during the reign of Queen Anne; but it still increased till about the year 1725, when Mr. Law published his "Practical Treatise on Christian Perfection," and, not long after, his "Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life." Here the seed was sown, which soon grew up, and spread to Oxford, London, Bristol, Leeds, York, and, within a few years, to the greatest part of England, Scotland, and Ireland.

13. But what means did the wisdom of God make use of in effecting this great work He thrust out such labourers into his harvest as the wisdom of man would never have thought on. He chose the weak things to confound the strong, and the foolish things to confound the wise. He chose a few young, poor, ignorant men, without experience, learning, or art; but simple of heart, devoted to God, full of faith and zeal, seeking no honour, no profit, no pleasure, no ease, but merely to save souls; fearing neither want, pain, persecution, nor whatever man could do unto them; yea, not counting their lives dear unto themselves, so they might finish their course with joy. Of the same spirit were the people whom God by their word called out of darkness into his marvellous light, many of whom soon agreed to join together, in order to strengthen each other's hands in God. These also were simple of heart, devoted to God, zealous of good works; desiring neither honour, nor riches, nor pleasure, nor ease, nor anything under the sun; but to attain the whole image of God, and to dwell with him in glory.

14. But as these young Preachers grew in years, they did not all grow in grace. Several of them indeed increased in other knowledge; but not proportionably in the knowledge of God. They grew less simple, less alive to God, and less devoted to him. They were less zealous for God; and, consequently, less active, less diligent in his service. Some of them began to desire the praise of men, and not the praise of God only; some to be weary of a wandering life, and so to seek ease and quietness. Some began again to fear the faces of men; to be ashamed of their calling; to be unwilling to deny themselves, to take up their cross daily, "and endure hardship as good soldiers of Jesus Christ." Wherever these Preachers laboured, there was not much fruit of their labours. Their word was not, as formerly, clothed with power: It carried with it no demonstration of the Spirit. The same faintness of spirit was in their private conversation. They were no longer "instant in season, out of season," "warning every man, and exhorting every man," "if by any means they might save some."

15. But as some Preachers declined from their first love, so did many of the people. They were likewise assaulted on every side; encompassed with manifold temptations: And while many of them triumphed over all, and were "more than conquerors through him that loved them," others gave place to the world, the flesh, or the devil, and so "entered into temptation:" Some of them "made shipwreck of their faith" at once; some by slow, insensible degrees. Not a few, being in want of the necessaries of life, were overwhelmed with the cares of the world; many relapsed into "the desires of other things," which "choked the good seed, and it became unfruitful."

16. But of all temptations, none so struck at the whole work of God as "the deceitfulness of riches;" a thousand melancholy proofs of which I have seen within these last fifty years. Deceitful are they indeed! For who will believe they do him the least harm And yet I have not known threescore rich persons, perhaps not half the number, during threescore years, who, as far as I can judge, were not less holy than they would have been had they been poor. By riches I mean, not thousands of pounds, but any more than will procure the conveniences of life. Thus I account him a rich man who has food and raiment for himself and family, without running into debt, and something over. And how few are there in these circumstances who are not hurt, if not destroyed, thereby Yet who takes warning Who seriously regards that awful declaration of the Apostle: Even "they that desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into divers foolish and hurtful desires, which drown men in destruction and perdition" How many sad instances have we seen of this in London, in Bristol, in Newcastle; in all the large trading towns throughout the kingdom, where God has lately caused his power to be known! See how many of those who were once simple of heart, desiring nothing but God, are now gratifying "the desire of the flesh;" studying to please their senses, particularly their taste; endeavouring to enlarge the pleasures of tasting as far as possible. Are not you of that number Indeed, you are no

drunkard, and no glutton; but do you not indulge yourself in a kind of regular sensuality Are not eating and drinking the greatest pleasures of your life the most considerable part of your happiness If so, I fear St. Paul would have given you a place among those "whose god is their belly!" How many of them are now again indulging "the desire of the eye!" using every means which is in their power, to enlarge the pleasures of their imagination! if not in grandeur, which as yet is out of their way; yet in new or beautiful things! Are not you seeking happiness in pretty or elegant apparel, or furniture or in new clothes, or books, or in pictures, or gardens "Why, what harm is there in these things" There is this harm, that they gratify "the desire of the eye," and thereby strengthen and increase it; making you more and more dead to God, and more alive to the world. How many are indulging "the pride of life!" seeking the honour that cometh of men! or "laying up treasures on earth!" They gain all they can, honestly and conscientiously. They save all they can, by cutting off all needless expense; by adding frugality to diligence. And so far all is right. This is the duty of every one that fears God. But they do not give all they can; without which they must needs grow more and more earthly-minded. Their affections will cleave to the dust more and more; and they will have less and less communion with God. Is not this your case Do you not seek the praise of men more than the praise of God Do not you lay up , or at least desire and endeavor to "lay up, treasures on earth" Are you not then (deal faithfully with your own soul!) more and more alive to the world, and, consequently, more and more dead to God It cannot be otherwise. That must follow, unless you give all you can, as well as gain and save all you can. There is no other way under heaven to prevent your money from sinking you lower than the grave! For "if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." And if it was in him in ever so high a degree, yet if he slides into the love of the world, by that same degrees that this enters in, the love of God will go out of the heart.

17. And perhaps there is something more than all this contained in those words: "Love not the world, neither the things of the world." Here we are expressly warned against loving the world, as well as against loving "the things of the world." The world is the men that know not God, that neither love nor fear him. To love these with a love of delight or complacence, to set our affections upon them, is here absolutely forbidden; and, by parity of reason, to converse or have intercourse with them, farther than necessary business requires. Friendship or intimacy with them, St. James does not scruple to term adultery: "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God Whosoever therefore will be a friend to the world is an enemy of God." Do not endeavour to shuffle away, or evade, the meaning of those strong words. They plainly require us to stand aloof from them, to have no needless commerce with unholy men. Otherwise we shall surely slide into conformity to the world; to their maxims, spirit, and customs. For not only their words, harmless as they seem, do eat as doth a canker; but their very breath is infectious: Their spirit imperceptibly influences our spirit. It steals "like water into our bowels, and like oil into our bones."

18. But all rich men are under a continual temptation to acquaintance and conversation with worldly men. They are likewise under a continual temptation to pride, to think more highly of themselves than they ought to think. They are strongly tempted to revenge, when they are ever so little affronted: And, having the means in their own hands, how few are there that resist the temptation! They are continually tempted to sloth, indolence, love of ease, softness, delicacy; to hatred of self-denial, and taking up the cross, even that of fasting and rising early, without which it is impossible to grow in grace. If you are increased in goods, do not you know that these things are so Do you contract no intimacy with worldly men Do not you converse with them more than duty requires Are you in no danger of pride of thinking yourself better than your poor, dirty neighbours Do you never resent, yea, and revenge an affront Do you never render evil for evil Do not you give way to indolence or love of

ease Do you deny yourself, and take up your cross daily Do you constantly rise as early as you did once Why not Is not your soul as precious now as it was then How often do you fast Is not this a duty to you, as much as to a day-labourer But if you are wanting in this, or any other respect, who will tell you of it Who dares tell you the plain truth, but those who neither hope nor fear any thing from you And if any venture to deal plainly with you, how hard is it for you to bear it! Are not you far less reprobable, far less advisable, than when you were poor It is well if you can bear reproof even from me: And in a few days you will see me no more.

Once more, therefore, I say, having gained and saved all you can, do you give all you can else your money will eat your flesh as fire, and will sink you to the nethermost hell! O beware of "laying up treasures upon earth!" Is it not treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath

Lord, I have warned them! but if they will not be warned, what can I do more I can only "give them up unto their own heart's lusts, and let them follow their own imaginations!"

19. By not taking this warning, it is certain many of the Methodists are already fallen; many are falling at this very time; and there is great reason to apprehend, that many more will fall, most of whom will rise no more!

But what method may it be hoped the all-wise God will take to repair the decay of his work If he does not remove the candlestick from this people, and raise up another people, who will be more faithful to his grace, it is probable he will proceed in the same manner as he has done in time past. And this has hitherto been his method: When any of the old Preachers left their first love; lost their simplicity and zeal, and departed from the work, he raised up young men, who are what they were, and sent them into the harvest in their place. The same he has done when he was pleased to remove any of his faithful labourers into Abraham's bosom. So when Henry Millard, Edward Dunstone, John Manners, Thomas Walsh, or others, rested from their labours, he raised up other young men, from time to time, willing and able to perform the same service. It is highly probable, he will take the very same method for the time to come. The place of those Preachers who either die in the Lord, or lose the spiritual life which God had given them, he will supply by others that are alive to God, and desire only to spend and be spent for him.

20. Hear ye this, all ye Preachers who have not the same life, the same communion with God, the same zeal for his cause, the same burning love to souls, that you had once! "Take heed unto yourselves, that ye lose not the things ye have wrought, but that ye receive a full reward." Beware lest God swear in his wrath, that ye shall bear his standard no more! Lest he be provoked to take the word of his grace utterly out of your mouth! Be assured, the Lord hath no need of you; his work doth not depend upon your help. As he is able "out of stones to raise up children to Abraham;" so he is able out of the same to raise up Preachers after his own heart! O make haste! Remember from whence you are fallen; and repent and do the first works!

21. Would it not provoke the Lord of the harvest to lay you altogether aside, if you despised the labourers he had raised up, merely because of their youth This was commonly done to us, when we were first sent out, between forty and fifty years ago. Old, wise men asked, "What will these young heads do" So the then Bishop of London in particular. But shall we adopt their language God forbid! Shall we teach Him whom he shall send; whom He shall employ in his own work Are we then the men, and shall wisdom die with us Does the work of God hang upon us O humble yourselves before God, lest he pluck you away, and there be none to deliver!

22. Let us next consider, what method has the wisdom of God taken, for these five-and-forty years, when thousands of the people that once ran well, one after another, "drew back to perdition" Why, as fast as any of the poor were overwhelmed with worldly care, so that the seed they had received became unfruitful; and as fast as any of the rich drew back unto perdition, by giving way to the love of the world, to foolish and hurtful desires, or to any other of those innumerable temptations, which are inseparable from riches; God has constantly, from time to time, raised up men, endued with the spirit which they had lost: Yea, and generally this change has been made with considerable advantage: For the last were, not only (for the most part) more numerous than the first, but more watchful, profiting by their example; more spiritual, more heavenly-minded, more zealous, more alive to God, and more dead to all things here below.

23. And, blessed be God, we see he is now doing the same thing in various parts of the kingdom. In the room of those that have fallen from their steadfastness, or are falling at this day, he is continually raising up out of the stones other children to Abraham. This he does at one or another place, according to his own will; pouring out his quickening Spirit on this or another people, just as it pleaseth him. He is raising up those of every age and degree, young men and maidens, old men and children, to be "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; to show forth His praise, who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light." And we have no reason to doubt, but he will continue so to do, till the great promise is fulfilled; till "the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea; till all Israel is saved, and the fullness of the Gentiles is come in."

24. But have all that have sunk under manifold temptations, so fallen that they can rise no more Hath the Lord cast them all off for ever, and will he be no more entreated Is his promise come utterly to an end for evermore God forbid that we should affirm this! Surely He is able to heal all their backslidings: For with God no word is impossible. And is he not willing too He is "God, and not man; therefore his compassions fail not." Let no backslider despair. "Return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon you; unto our God, and he will abundantly pardon."

Meantime, thus saith the Lord to you that now supply their place: "Be not high-minded, but fear!" If "the Lord spared not" thy elder brethren, "take heed lest he spare not thee!" Fear, though not with a servile, tormenting fear, lest thou fall by any of the same temptations; by either the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, or the desire of other things. Tempted you will be in ten thousand different ways, perhaps as long as you remain in the body; but as long as you continue to watch and pray, you will not "enter into temptations." His grace has been hitherto sufficient for you; and so it will be unto the end.

25. You see here, brethren, a short and general sketch of the manner wherein God works upon earth, in repairing this work of grace, wherever it is decayed through the subtlety of Satan, and the unfaithfulness of men, giving way to the fraud and malice of the devil. Thus he is now carrying on his own work, and thus he will do to the end of time. And how wonderfully plain and simple is His way of working, in the spiritual as well as the natural world! that is, his general plan of working, of repairing whatsoever is decayed. But as to innumerable particulars, we must still cry out, "O the depth! How unfathomable are his counsels, and his paths past tracing out!"

Edited by Tracey Bryan with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology at Northwest Nazarene University.

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