

Wise Counsel
Exodus 18:1-27

Recently Michelle and I celebrated 18 years of marriage together.

It has been a wonderful 18 years and I can honestly say that my love for her has only increased over the years.

I can also say with absolute honesty that the reason for the health and strength of our marriage is completely owed to the grace of God in Christ.

I have often said over the years that marriage is simple but it is hard.

God lays out really clearly in His word (1 Corinthians 7, Ephesians 5, 1 Peter) His design for marriage and if both a husband and a wife resolve together to live that out it produces two blessings.

One, it calls attention to the goodness and glory of the Lord.

Two, it brings joy to the marriage relationship.

God's formula it really straight forward.

Be selfless while pointing one another towards Christ.

That is easy enough to understand, but it is hard to live out.

I know that as a husband God calls me to imitate Christ and be willing to sacrifice even my life for my wife.

But it is hard to set aside my selfish desires and seek her good before my own.

It is easy to understand that I should be encouraging my wife and children to serve the LORD, but it can be hard to fight the desire to have them serve me instead.

While it is hard to fight against our sin nature, I can tell you from firsthand experience that it is worth the fight.

Marriage though is also about more than a husband and wife.

While they are a new and distinct family, they still have a connection to the families they come from.

Now I would never say to a couple that they should not get married because of their extended family, but I always counsel people to have a good sense of what they are getting into.

Again I consider myself enormously blessed to be a part of my wife's family.

I have wonderful parents of my own and marrying Michelle I get the great benefit of her fantastic parents as well.

In particular I have very much appreciated my friendship with Michelle's dad.

He has introduced me to different hobbies, we have shared many hours discussing theology, and have been able to celebrate a number of life's milestones together.

As a pastor's son he has been able to give me an important perspective on being a pastor and has on many occasions given me timely encouragement and wise counsel.

We all need that don't we? We all need someone to speak into our lives with helpful and godly advice from time to time.

[In our text this morning **Exodus 18:1-27** Moses' father-in-law comes to see him and gives him some wise counsel. In our time together I want to point out to you some qualities that Jethro displays that are important to providing good counsel to others. We should not take advice from just anyone. We should weigh carefully who we listen to and this text gives us four qualities of a person who gives wise counsel. First...]

Point #1 – Wise people affirm God given responsibility.

Those who would steer in a good direction will encourage us to be faithful in all that God calls His people to.

Verses 1-6 tell us about Jethro's visit, and Moses' wife and sons are mentioned several times.

We are told that they are with Jethro in verse 2, we are told the names of the boys in verses 3-4, we are told in verse 5 that they are coming with Jethro, and that is repeated again in verse 6.

Whatever other reasons Jethro may have for visiting Moses, one of the main ones is returning his wife and children.

At some point between when Moses travelled to Egypt and when he left he had sent his wife and sons away.

This is one of those times where many of us want a bit more detail than what is given.

Why are they sent away? Some commentators think it was because Moses and Zipporah had a fight, some think he sent them away to protect them from the dangers of Egypt, some think Moses sent them to visit Jethro and report to him all that the Lord had done.

I think the context points us away from any kind of negative reason, but the fact is we don't know the reason we just know they are separated for a time.

Whatever the reason for the separation, Jethro knows it is time for Zipporah, Gershom, and Eliezer to return to Moses.

Visiting grandpa is good, but this is Moses' family and they are his responsibility.

Jethro here shows he understands the importance of a husband being faithful to his wife and children.

This is God's design and anyone who gives any advice worth listening to will encourage this kind of faithfulness.

[In the New Testament when we read about the qualifications for an elder/pastor in the church. It says this about being an elder in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)” The point being if you are going to care for the church you must first demonstrate that by caring for your family.]

Now, you don’t have to be married to be a wise counselor, but you do have to encourage people to uphold God’s designs.

The family in our culture has been under attack for some time now.

So many times I have heard people encourage others to walk away from their God given responsibilities.

So many times I have heard people tell others to ignore God’s commands regarding family.

That is the way of foolishness rather than wisdom.

[All of us need people who will give us wise counsel in our lives and one of the qualities of a wise person is that they value the importance of God given responsibility and being committed to God’s design for marriage is an important and essential example of that. Notice here in verse seven that Moses and Jethro greet one another warmly which strongly indicates that Moses appreciates the return of his wife and sons. That leads to a time of fellowship between Moses and his father-in-law which reveals a second quality of a wise counselor. It shows us that...]

Point #2 – Wise people rejoice in the works of God.

People who will give you the best advice are people who find their joy in God.

After Moses greets his father-in-law he tells about ‘everything’ God had done, about the challenges that they faced, and about “how the LORD had saved them.”

Listen to how Jethro responds to all that his son-in-law tells him (**Verse 9-12**)

What is his response to what the LORD has done? Look again at verse 9! It says he is ‘delighted’.

He praises God in verse 10 and declares the supremacy of the LORD in verse 11.

In verse 12 he provides sacrifices so that he can worship with Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel to honour God’s work among the Israelites.

What does Jethro gain by the people of Israel being freed from Egypt?

If God had never called Moses and he had stayed in Midian and the people of Israel remained in slavery would Jethro’s life be much different?

It is hard to any sort of personal gain for this man and yet here he seems overjoyed at all the blessings God is pouring out on the Israelites.

That tells us something important about the heart of this man.

He finds joy in God’s glory rather than personal gain.

That is a wonderful character trait to look for in a wise counselor because it shows that their advice is going to focus on the LORD which results in the highest good.

[Have you ever gone car shopping? Do you know what kind of car the sales people at the Ford dealership think you should buy? What about the people over at the Chrysler dealership? How about Toyota, Volkswagen, Honda, etc? I've met a few really nice sales people over the years but the fact is they have a slanted perspective because they benefit if you listen to their advice.]

Wise advice requires objectivity which requires an objective foundation and the only objective foundation is the LORD.

Think for a moment about the people that you look to for direction in your life.

Have you observed them when something good happens to someone else?

What is their reaction? Is it jealousy or are they able to rejoice in the blessing of someone else?

What is the source of their satisfaction in life?

Is it focused on themselves or the LORD?

How those questions are answered is going to tell you a lot about whether or not you have wise counselors in your life or foolish ones.

[The day after Jethro has a time of worship and fellowship with his son-in-law he gets the opportunity to see what a day in Moses' life is like. As he watches what takes place he demonstrates a third quality that is important to wisdom. Wise people know the importance of family responsibility, they find joy in what God does, and thirdly...]

Point #3 – Wise people are careful observers.

Good direction comes from a good understanding of a situation.

The bible says in James 1:19 "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

James actually has a lot to say about what comes out of our mouths.

It is very easy to rush to judgement and speak too quickly.

Jethro in this text, however, does not speak right away, instead he observes what is happening (**Verse 13-16**).

It is hard to even appreciate how much of a toll this would take to listen to arguments between people from sun up until sun down.

With a group of people in the range of 2 million I imagine there would be a continuous line of cases waiting to be heard.

He likely would not get to everyone in a day so the people would have to come back the next day and by the time new cases would likely pop up and the cycle would keep repeating.

I highly doubt Jethro had to watch very long before he concluded that this was not a good situation but in order for him to know that Moses did this from “morning to evening” he would have had to observe it from morning to evening.

In addition to his patient observation, we also see that before he offers any advice to Moses he begins with a clarifying question.

He asks two questions actually, “What are you doing?” and “Why are you doing it this way?”

Have you ever made the mistake of offering advice before having all the information?

Offering or listening to advice based on only some of the information rarely leads to a good outcome.

[A few years ago I was having a problem with a machine that makes copies of DVD’s. All you have to do is put in the DVD that you want to copy and put in blank discs, hit a button, and a few minutes later you have a copy. I had used it many times but on this occasion it wasn’t working. After trying a few times I decided to take it all apart to investigate the problem. Everything looked good, I put it all back together and it still didn’t work. Almost ready to give up I pulled out the blank disc and noticed that it was a cd and not a DVD. The whole time the machine was fine I was using the wrong disc. I felt like a fool and rightly so because I was not paying close enough attention to what I was doing.]

The same thing is true for people who are quick to offer solutions when they don’t even appreciate the problem.

Think about the people you go to for direction in your life.

Do they listen carefully, or do they cut you off and offer a response?

Do they demonstrate a desire to understand and clarify what is happening, or do they presume to know the answer right away?

Quick answers rarely mark the road of wisdom.

[Having watched carefully and having clarified with Moses the situation, Jethro then offers his son-in-law some advice. He rightly sees that there is no way this man is going to be able to sustain what he is doing and suggests a different way of going about his work. He qualifies his advice with something extremely important and that gives us another quality of wise counsel. He shows us that...]

Point #4 – Wise people offer advice under God’s authority.

No matter how good a piece of advice may seem on the surface, it can only be good if the LORD endorses it.

Jethro gets right to the point in Verses 17-23.

What Moses is trying to do, which is providing justice for the people, is good.

But Jethro sees that if he keeps going about it in the way that he is, he is not going to make it.

What he is trying to do is impossible for one man to accomplish.

Now think about this. If Moses can't do more than he can handle by himself do you think that we can?

Often times I get it into my head that it's all up to me and I have to do it all by myself.

It is just not realistic, we need other people.

If you are overwhelmed by work and convince yourself that it is all up to you, then something in your life is not going to go well. We need other people.

That is especially true in the church, we need fellow believers.

Jethro rightly sees that here, but notice where he puts his advice. It is under God's authority.

Look there in verse 19. He says, "I will give you some advice, and may God be with you."

When he is talking about the kind of men that should be chosen to judge the smaller matters they are to be capable, God fearing (they demonstrate a deep desire to order their lives according to God's ways), trustworthy, and who hate dishonest gain.

Jethro believes the LORD needs to be central in the lives of these men if they are to serve well.

After the plan is fully laid out before Moses, Jethro adds in verse 23, "If you do this and God so commands you will be able to stand the strain."

Practically this is wise counsel, but Jethro knows that even though it makes sense it needs God's approval.

While it is not stated here I am convinced Moses took the suggestion to the LORD and God gives His approval and we see in verses 24-27 the plan is implemented.

Why is God's approval so important? Because it is the only objective foundation upon which anything can be considered good and wise.

[Perhaps you have heard of Ravi Zacharias who recently passed away. He was a well-known author, speaker, and thinker who travelled the world arguing in favour of the Christian faith. On one occasion a student asked him, "How can there be a God with so much evil in the world?" He responded by saying, *"When you say there's too much evil in this world you assume there's good. When you assume there's good, you assume there's such a thing as a moral law on the basis of which to differentiate between good and evil. But if you assume a moral law, you must posit a moral Law Giver, but that's Who you're trying to disprove and*

not prove. Because if there's no moral Law Giver, there's no moral law. If there's no moral law, there's no good. If there's no good, there's no evil. What is your question?"]

His point is that the very idea of evil depends on a there being something that is good and something being good completely depends on objective moral law (something that is good for all people across all time) and to have that requires an eternally Being Who is both separate and superior to all creation to give the law.

You have probably seen on the news all the protests regarding the death of a man named George Floyd at the hands of police.

People are right to be upset at what happened they are right to call for justice, but many of the people calling for justice in that situation completely ignore the need for justice for those whose stores are being burned, windows broken, and property stolen.

You see when you cry for justice apart from God you have no objective foundation upon which base your plea, what you are left with is mere opinion and if you manage to get what you want you will simply be trading one victim for another.

There is no such thing a good advice without placing it under the authority of almighty God.

Do you have people around you that can give you wise counsel?

If Moses, a man who spoke with God face to face, can benefit from such a person then you and I surely need the same.

We need people who recognize the importance of honouring our responsibilities, we need people who delight in the works of God, people who observe things carefully, and people who know that God's opinion is always the most important opinion.

May the Lord bless you with such people and the wisdom to listen to them.