

**Matthew 7:24-29**

**Psalm 111**

**January 28, 2018**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **A WORD TO THE WISE**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Have you heard the music playing on Main Street? It's quite enjoyable, and the soundtrack has an interesting mix of songs. Tuesday afternoon I was walking along and I heard someone singing:

L, is for the way you look at me  
O, is for the only one I see  
V, is very, very, extraordinary  
E, is even more than anyone that you adore can

Nat King Cole recorded the L-O-V-E song on December 3, 1964, and the album by the same name was soon released. That was his last recording session; he died three months later. I don't know who was singing on Main Street Tuesday afternoon — it might have been Nat King Cole or Michael Bubl  or somebody else, but I stopped for a minute and listened. It was a nice break in a busy day.

The L-O-V-E song is what we call an *acrostic*. The dictionary definition of an *acrostic* is "a series of lines or verses in which the first, last, or other particular letters when taken in order spell out a word, phrase, etc."

Look at the picture in the upper left-hand corner of today's bulletin. You'll see an *acrostic* of the word "wisdom."

**W**ise  
**I**mitators  
**S**ervant-hearted  
**D**oers  
**O**bedient, and  
**M**eek<sup>1</sup>

Here are a couple of other *acrostics* about wisdom:

**W**indows into the eyes of God  
**I**nto the very heart of our purpose  
**S**ensed even in our deepest moments  
**D**on't ever deny it for earthly pleasures  
**O**ut of our mouths it flows when our hearts have been transformed  
**M**inute by minute it is at our disposal<sup>2</sup>

Wisdom from God and his word  
Illustrated daily, active example  
Soul cleansed against sin forever  
Doom who does not listen  
Omnipotent, God gives salvation  
Master of wisdom, gives who seek<sup>3</sup>

It's a shame that we can't all read and understand the Hebrew language. We lose a lot in the translation of the psalms into English. As beautiful and beloved as the psalms are for most Christians, some of the artistry and beauty and structure gets lost in the shuffle and translation from the original language to our everyday English.

Look at the words of Psalm 111 on the bulletin insert. Notice the first letters of the first words in each of the ten verses, not including the very first word "Hallelujah!" I, G, M, Y, Y, Y, T, T, Y, T. That certainly doesn't spell a word, and yet Psalm 111 is an *acrostic* hymn. You can't tell it by looking at the English translation, but the first word in each measure of this psalm begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. To get the equivalent effect in English, each new phrase would begin with A, B, C, and so on. The psalmist is a master poet, because the alphabet and structure of the *acrostic* limit the words he can use. Nevertheless, in twenty-two phrases in ten short verses, the psalmist expresses some very important truths about God.

*Acrostic* psalms might have been written to help worship leaders in the temple or to help faithful people memorize the words so they could praise the Lord. When we say something is covered "from A to Z," we mean the whole shootin' match. That is also the message of this *acrostic* Psalm 111 — "Praise the Lord in all of life, for everything he has done. Praise the Lord in all of life, let **everything** praise the Lord!" We might say the psalmist sings God's praises from A to Z — and calls God's people, then and now, to do the same.

This morning I'd like to do something a bit out of the ordinary in my sermon. Maybe you've never heard the Hebrew language read out loud. I want to play a recording of a professor named R. Brian Rickett reading Psalm 111 in Hebrew. First, he will read the psalm in Hebrew. As you listen, pay attention to how Professor Rickett pauses after each phrase. He will emphasize the first sound of each word in each phrase. Then he will pronounce all of the first words in the psalm in Hebrew. You might recognize the sounds, but he will be reading the words in Hebrew alphabetical order. You might want to have your bulletin insert handy when he begins reading in Hebrew and translating into English. Another impressive accomplishment of the psalmist is how each phrase in the psalm is only three words — and yet, we hear all about the wonderful deeds and works of God's hands, from A to Z or, as you would say in Hebrew, from Alef to Tav. This will take about 5 minutes.

[On my iPad I will play a recording of Professor Brian Rickett reading Psalm 111. Found at [www.soundcloud.com/r-brian-rickett/psalm-111-reading](http://www.soundcloud.com/r-brian-rickett/psalm-111-reading)]

That was different, wasn't it? I didn't play the audio just for entertainment purposes. And all of this information about *acrostic* poems and psalms isn't just so we can

leave here this morning knowing a little more than we did when we arrived (although there is nothing wrong with that!). No, I played the audio and described the characteristics of *acrostic* psalms to show how God's people through the centuries have meditated on and passed along their experiences of God's mighty acts and the works of his hands.

The psalmist ends his poem with these words: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding." (Psalm 111:10) From time to time, people ask me what that means. "Does that mean being afraid of God? How is that a good thing?" Here are two more *acrostic* poems, both about FEAR, but completely opposite in meaning.

**F**rightening  
**E**erie and strange  
**A**nxiety rises  
**R**eady to flee<sup>4</sup>

Compare that description of "fear" to this idea:

**F**ocus on Christ  
**E**mootional Stability  
**A**uthority Orientation  
**R**eady for service<sup>5</sup>

That kind of fear — beginning by focusing on Christ and ending with being ready for service — is the kind of fear that leads to the wisdom and knowledge of God. That kind of fear — we could say reverence, awe, wonder — is the kind of fear that comes from knowing and seeing all that God has done and continues to do for his people and for his world. That's what Psalm 111:2-9 is all about: great works of the Lord; honor, majesty, and righteousness; grace and mercy; sustenance and the covenant; power; faithfulness, justice, and trustworthiness; and redemption.

This kind of wisdom doesn't just come from "book learning" (although there's nothing wrong with that!). It's not the kind of wisdom that is just facts and data and dates and names and ideas. This kind of wisdom comes from the worship and respect and reverence and awe at God's mighty acts. This kind of wisdom becomes a way of life, an orientation toward God that shapes and directs our actions. It's the kind of wisdom that comes from hearing Jesus' words and acting on them. It's the kind of wisdom that helps us build and live our lives on a firm foundation of rock instead of sand.

In a comment on Jesus' parable about the two houses on sand and rock, Douglas Hare writes, "The 'outstanding church leaders' [in Jesus' day] have indeed heard Jesus' words over and over again, but they have refused to make those words the rule of life. As a result, their reputation as eminent Christians is built on nothing more solid than shifting sand. On the other hand, there are humble Christians who can claim no special gifts but who listen intently to Jesus' words and strive to live by them. The lives they

build upon the rock will be able to withstand the storms of this life and of the final judgment.”<sup>6</sup>

We’ve now completed three weeks of Basic Bible 101: What You’ve Always Wanted to Know About the Bible but Were Afraid to Ask. Last week we talked about the Bible being the inspired Word of God and how to interpret God’s Word in our life circumstances. We are learning a lot of information about the Bible, how it came to be, who wrote it, when it was written, etc., etc. But the point of Basic Bible 101 isn’t so we can all say, “Look how much we know about the Bible!” The purpose is to help all of us realize how God’s Word can make us wise in the sense of appreciating, accepting, and rejoicing in God’s gracious, merciful, and mighty acts, especially our salvation in Jesus Christ.

You may notice that each week before I read the scripture lesson, I invite you to listen **for** the Word of God rather than **to** the Word of God. I think there’s a difference. When we listen to the Word of God, we may just hear words being read from a book. When we listen for the Word of God, we listen with the ears of our hearts so we can make the story our own or, to be more precise, let the story make us its own. This week I shared a quotation from N.T. Wright with the Monday night and Tuesday morning groups. I think he expresses well what it means to listen **for** the Word of God. I think it is a word for the wise:

*We read scripture in order to be refreshed in our memory and understanding of the story within which we ourselves are actors, to be reminded where it has come from and where it is going to, and hence what our own part within it ought to be.*<sup>7</sup>

***Let us pray: Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word and your might acts. Give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Graphic found on Pinterest.

<sup>2</sup>alanahlouisepercy, “Wisdom: An Acrostic Poem,” at [www.acreatorskaleidoscope.wordpress.com](http://www.acreatorskaleidoscope.wordpress.com)

<sup>3</sup>Nicole Alexander, “Wisdom (Acrostic),” at [www.allpoetry.com](http://www.allpoetry.com)

<sup>4</sup>Read more at [www.examples.yourdictionary.com/acrostic-poem-examples](http://www.examples.yourdictionary.com/acrostic-poem-examples)

<sup>5</sup>Pastor Douglas Graham, “Fear of the Lord acrostic,” at [www.blog.madetofish.com](http://www.blog.madetofish.com).

<sup>6</sup>Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 86.

<sup>7</sup>N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today*.