

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Mind the Gap
Wisdom of Solomon 1.13-2.24; James 3.13-4.8
Russ Dean, September 20, 2009



In 1908 you could buy a Model T Ford for \$825. Due to ingenious use of the assembly line (on which you could earn a whopping five dollars a day), eight years later you could have one for less than half that price. At \$360¹ Henry Ford had sold nearly a half-million by 1916. Nine years later, with more than 15-million Model Ts on the road, we were hooked. Feeding the hunger of our so-called “rugged individualism,” the nation quickly turned its attention from mass-transit, ship and rail, and in 1956 created a national Interstate Highway System, over which you can now travel nearly 49,000 miles.² In your car. All by yourself!

Yes, we are obsessed with our cars, and the illusion of independence they give. Only our largest cities have well-developed means of mass transit. The rest of us, Charlotte included, in the midst of a fury of issues (population growth and economic uncertainty and environmental degradation and international geo-political strife, etc, etc...), in the midst of all this we’re clinging to our cars, and struggling to get on the mass transit bandwagon.

This is not so in Europe, which aimed in a more communal direction years ago.³ Today across that continent there is a host of above ground and under ground options for mass travel. Madrid’s beautiful Metro, the aging but efficient system under the streets of Paris, and London’s “Tube,” provide easy and affordable transportation through these urban centers. Our family

¹ According to Wikipedia, the number is \$7,020 for 2008, adjusted by the Consumer Price Index.

² Also according to Wikipedia, there are 46,876 miles in Interstate Highway System (the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways), which was authorized by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956.

³ The U.S.’s decision toward the automobile industry was made for numerous reasons, none theological, but there are theological/social implications to this decision, which has emphasized our “independence,” and, in one more way, has separated/isolated us from our neighbors.

enjoyed studying the underground maps, and quickly became proficient at navigating the lines as we traveled this summer. As you get in and out of the trains in London, a very pleasant, and properly-accented “Bri’ish” woman, warns travelers to watch your step as you board, to be aware of the space between the platform and the train, that gap which is sometimes sizeable. As you enter, she loudly, but kindly calls out: “Mind the Gap.”

Mind the Gap.

I wish she were here today, for her imploring tone needs to be shouted from pulpits around this country. Far too many of God’s children are falling through the gaps created by a thoughtless adherence to that which is accepted by the masses and protected by the mighty. Call this Conventional Wisdom. Far too many of God’s children are falling through the gaps created by the persecution and alienation that is inevitable when religion is more about passion than compassion, more about enthusiasm than thought – when we love God with *heart and soul and strength*, but not with all of our *minds* (Mark 12.29). Call this Popular Religion.

Conventional Wisdom is that body of enshrined beliefs, the norms and practices and truths, which are generally accepted by a culture’s majority. The myth of the “rugged individual,” to which I earlier alluded, is one such Conventional Wisdom in American culture. You see, none of us is really “rugged” – we all have wounds which need bandaging. And none is an “individual” – everyone is dependent on someone else. Community is our identity. Other Conventional Wisdoms tell us that we can “pull ourselves up by our bootstraps,” and that everyone in this great country of great freedom has the same opportunity to do so. Because of these unfortunate “wisdoms” we’ve also ensconced the critical view which judges the poor and oppressed just for being poor and oppressed. Obviously, Conventional Wisdom tells us, anyone in America who is poor must want to be poor; anyone who is oppressed must have it coming to

them – because they’ve had the same chances you and I have. This unfortunate “wisdom” leaves many Americans unable, by their ignorance, or unwilling, by their apathy, to lend a hand to those whom God so loves. Every culture has its Conventional Wisdom. And every culture is in imperiled by it, if its people cannot be influenced by a higher law.

Popular Religion is that body of belief that passes, often from generation to generation without consideration. It is composed of the ideas of God that just swirl in the air. Popular religion is promoted, explicitly and implicitly. It is promoted by politicians who now dutifully end every speech with, “God bless America,” conveniently blurring the lines between theology and civics, as they do so, and watering down faith into a kind of campaign slogan. It is promoted by pundits who in recent years have helped the Religious Right convince too many Americans that Jesus is a Republican. It is promoted by preachers who tell their flocks that God allowed “9/11” and Hurricane Katrina in order to punish a sinful nation. (You know... all the gays and all the gambling. God will get you for that!) Even professional athletes get into the show, with their public expressions of thanksgiving to God for that winning touchdown.

The problem with Popular Religion is not that faith should have no role in politics, and it’s not that God is uninvolved with the workings of this world – nor that an attitude of gratitude is a bad thing. The problem is that Popular Religion domesticates God – making God sound like our little buddy. It polarizes God – making God to do the bidding of “us” over “them.” And it trivializes the Majesty of God – making the mystery of faith into a formula to be spouted like an advertising slogan.

Do we really think the God of an infinite universe cares who wins your football game? Do we imagine that we really are such pawns in a kind of eternal chess match that a controlling deity even decides the fate of our petty little sports contests? Or takes sides in our misconceived

wars? Or needs the vote of one political party to accomplish the divine will? Popular Religion, which is the chosen dogma of far too many, believes just this, and the implications of its controlling, manipulative, partisan God, work its way out in immeasurably harmful ways in the American psyche.

The double danger for us, who live as the culture's majority and as a part of the dominant religion, is for the ideas of Conventional Wisdom and Popular Religion to become interchangeable, incestuously supporting one another. Many American Christians can no longer distinguish the difference between being American, and being Christian. The two have simply merged in many people's minds into one movement of common purpose. They are not. There is the Conventional Ignorance that masquerades as Wisdom; there is the Popular Propaganda that insinuates itself in the powerful robes of Religion. And then...

There is Divine Wisdom.

Friends, I do not pretend for one moment to believe I have a hold on the mind of God. I am less and less comfortable with the God-language that fills the air we breathe, which so easily assumes this is possible. Even as one called to the task of speaking for God, it is a responsibility I approach with great humility, born of fear and trembling. But it is painfully clear to me that there is a dramatic difference between our wisdom, conventional and religious, conservative and liberal, American and "foreign," Christian and non-Christian... A difference between our best wisdom and God's Wisdom – which ancient and contemporary prophets have suggested is everywhere and always moving among us. Discerning this Wisdom, Minding the Gap between it and us, requires our best effort – and is worth all we can put into it. Doing so may mean the difference in our progress and our sure destruction.

Solomon's timeless Wisdom, and the exhortations of St. James, draw the line between the two wisdoms as between the "godly" and the "ungodly." To be sure, there is a difference between our belief and the belief of the atheist. But that line is perhaps not as bold as the judgments of Popular Religion would have us believe. James asks "Who is wise?" and answers not, "the evangelical," or "the partisan," or even "the religious," but the one whose good works are marked by gentleness. As you do, I know a lot of people, claiming a variety of religious and non-religious labels, who are marked by such gentle living. And, as you also do, I know a fair number of Christians, who might not make that cut. Because of this, frankly, I'm a lot less bothered by the (so called) "ungodly" in this world, than by many who claim God, but whose actions are far from gentle. I have no need to draw that line of wisdom between the "us and them" of religious distinctions.

What I do need is to be part of a community that is seeking, daily, to discern the Wisdom of God, and that is willing to draw a line in the sand we will not cross. To be part of a community that will claim that Wisdom – regardless the cost. If it means someone thinks we're old-fashioned, too religious. So be it. If it means being called liberal do-gooders. Thanks be to God. If it means struggling every day to define and defend who we are ("...not that kind of Baptist!"). If it means standing against the tide of public opinion – or the loudest religious opinion. If it means swimming upstream. God give us strength. Whatever it will take for you, personally, for us as a congregation, what it means, ultimately, is that we will be mindful of all of God's children who have fallen (and can't get up!). It means we will stand, always, with the poor and oppressed, the widow and the orphan,⁴ the least of these among us, the voiceless, the

⁴ Defending "widows and orphans" is a common biblical exhortation, the expression symbolizing the helpless in society. Among many other examples, see Deuteronomy 14.28-29, Isaiah 1.17, and James 1.27.

powerless, the homeless. If the wisdom you hear my friends, does not lead you to speak a good word, or lend a helping hand for these... it is not the Wisdom of God. God's wisdom and the world's wisdom are at odds. Paul reminded the church at Corinth, "*The wisdom of the world is foolishness in God's sight*" (1 Corinthians 3.19). Certainly the opposite is also true.

Military science says "Might makes right." Paul says God's power is "*made perfect in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12.9). Ben Franklin taught us that "God helps those who help themselves." Jesus taught us, "*When you have done it the least of these, you have done it to me*" (Matthew 25.40). A President said, "The people who knocked down these buildings are going to hear from all of us, soon."⁵ And they have. But Jesus claims a radically, disturbingly different kind of response to evil, altogether: "*Turn the other cheek*" (Matthew 5.39). Sports teach us to love winning. Jesus says, "*The first shall be last, the last, first*" (Matthew 20.16). A consumerist society claims, "The one who dies with the most toys wins." Jesus says, "*To whom much is given, much will be required*" (Luke 12.48). The culture says, "If it feels good, do it." Jesus says, if you what to follow him, "*Deny yourself*" (Mark 8.34-35). A fearful world knows death as the final enemy. Jesus knows it as our necessary beginning: "*Take up your cross* (which always leads to death), *and follow* (Mark 8.34-35) ... *For she who saves her life will lose it. And only he who gives his life away will find what it means to live*" (Matthew 10.39).

I want to be a part of a community that is struggling with these obvious contradictions, and that is seeking to be found faithful to God – no matter the cost.

My grandmother, who lived to be 96, had a favorite saying: "Age is a matter of mind. If you don't mind – it don't matter!" As it relates to God's wisdom, and all of God's the children in the gaps, Wisdom, too, is a matter of mind – but minding such wisdom is all that matters.

⁵ These words were spoken by then-President George W. Bush, standing in the rubble of the World Trade Center, following its collapse on September 11, 2001.

May it be so!