

Sermon – July 30, 2023  
Pastor Dan Hollis  
1 Kings 3:5-12

Let's be together in a spirit of prayer.

"Dear God, let some word that is heard be Yours. Amen."

Our sermon today is motivated by a single question: "What is the best prayer?" Now, I don't want to give anything away, but I have to admit that *I don't know* the... *definitive* answer to that question. I mean, *mathematically* speaking there's *got* to be a kind of prayer that's the "best," just like there's a... best *wish* to make if you find a genie in a lamp. You wish for more *wishes*, obviously. And if the genie says you can't *do* that, then you wish for a different genie. Simple.

But I'm not so certain about the best kind of *prayer*. What prayers are objectively just *better*? Prayers that we should be making a *habit* of praying, not only because they have a "better rate of success," but also because they are pleasing to *God*.

Well, one of the kinds of prayers that I think is both *effective* and—from a Biblical standpoint—*admirable*, is "prayers for wisdom and guidance."

Now I'm not saying these are the *only* prayers we should be praying, and I'm *certainly* not saying that praying for anything *else* is *bad*. But if like me you want to round out your perfectly balanced breakfast of prayers, *I* find praying for wisdom and guidance bears a *lot* more *fruit* than maybe all those prayers for God to drop a sack of money into my lap.

Now... when I say the name "Mister Rogers," who here gets a warm feeling in their heart? Raise your hand.

Fred Rogers was the kind and talented creator and host of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," a public television show for children that ran from the 1960s to the early 2000s. If there's a serious contender for best *human* out there, Mister Rogers is definitely in the running. He taught the generations of young children who watched his show that they were special, and he helped them develop tools to deal with situations of anxiety and worry in their lives.

And everything about Mister Rogers was *comfort*. From his sweater and comfy sneakers, to his calming voice, to the gentle and compassionate way he approached real-life struggles common to all young children—and many adults too. He made you feel seen and understood, and offered wisdom and guidance that is just as relevant today as it was then.

In this world that sometimes feels like its falling apart around us, we could all use a visit to Mister Rogers' house every now and then.

Mister Rogers was also a person of faith, an ordained Presbyterian minister in fact, but his *show* wasn't a *religious* program or a televangelist pulpit. He simply lived *out* his faith in the ways he interacted with the viewer, with children, and he sought God's wisdom in the work that he did for the people of the world.

The prayer that I opened this *sermon* with is actually what *he* would pray before walking into the studio to begin taping an episode of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. "Dear God, let some word that is heard be Yours."

He explained this prayer in a letter he wrote years ago, saying, "I always pray that through whatever we produce (whatever we say and do) some word that is heard might ultimately be *God's* word. That's my main concern. All the others are minor compared to that. As you know in this business there are countless decisions every day (every hour!) and I solicit your prayers for guidance from above in all the decisions which must be made all the time."

Not only was Mister Rogers a man of prayer, but he began every working day with a prayer for guidance, and for the discernment of God's own wisdom. And he passed that wisdom on to *us*, all those children across nearly forty years' worth of sweaters and tennis shoes. And anyone who ever tuned into Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was the better for it.

King Solomon, from our Scripture reading today, wasn't much at all like Mister Rogers. Not even close, really. But one thing I think they would have *recognized* in each other, was... an honest desire for God's wisdom and guidance.

Solomon was the son of King David, as in "David-and-Goliath" King David, and while he idolized his father and sought to walk in his footsteps, he also sought to please *God* in all that he did, and *earn* the title *birth* had given him. Now like all kings, both David and Solomon were far from perfect. In the Bible, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, *and* Kings were an exercise in on the one hand showing the *greatness* of ancient Israel's early rulers, and on the *other* showing those same rulers' follies and failures. The very imperfections that in the end contributed to the *fall* of ancient Israel. They serve as sort of a cautionary tale that no matter how *righteous* we are, we are not immune to doing wrong.

But our Scripture today highlights one of the things Solomon got *right*. The reason he came to be *known* as the wisest ruler in Jewish history, and perhaps even in all of ancient civilization. And *I* think it all goes back to a prayer. A prayer that Mister Rogers probably would have recognized.

Early in his reign, God came to Solomon in a dream. “Ask what I should give you,” God commanded him.

Now this is a *real* genie-and-the-lamp moment. When God appears to you with a blank check in hand, that’s something you take seriously. And Solomon thought long and hard about his answer.

His answer *began* in the form of gratitude for all that God had done in his life and in the life of his father, and then it *shifted* to something else.

He acknowledged how *little* he knew, and how underqualified he was for the work God had asked of him. He even went so far as to call himself “a little child,” even though he’d already come of age.

And *then* he made his request. The request God had commanded saying, “Ask what I should give you.”

I can think of about a million things I could ask of God if I were ever offered a blank check like that. I wouldn’t know *what* to pray for, if only because I had too many choices. Which brings me to the question I asked at the start: “What is the best prayer?”

Well Solomon... he *thanked* God for what he had, *acknowledged* his own shortcomings, and then *asked*... for an understanding mind, able to discern between good and evil, and he asked to be blessed with God’s wisdom—for *guidance* to navigate the complexities of his life, his reign, and his *responsibilities* to all of God’s people.

And that’s really a handy set of bullet points when we ask ourselves, “what kind of prayer should I make today?”

*Thank* God. *Acknowledge* our shortcomings. And *ask* for wisdom, understanding, and guidance.

And how did God respond? “It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him, ‘Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word.’”

God *granted* Solomon a wise and discerning mind... and more than that, in the *end* God granted him riches and honor and legacy that he’d *not* asked for. Which is maybe a lesson in itself.

Solomon is a great example of how God surprises us with the answers to sincere and righteous prayer. Solomon stood before God with humility, making a selfless ask not just

for himself, but for the good of others. Those he had a *duty* to. And Solomon's life and legacy are a testament to the fact that when we pray for wisdom, God grants us that and much more: the *tools* to accomplish God's *work* with the wisdom we're given.

Solomon prayed to God for something we *all* should. Something we all *need*. Wisdom, the understanding to discern between good and evil, and the guidance of God to better serve others. That's one of the *best* prayers we can offer to God. One we *should* be lifting up even when we think we've got everything figured out. And of course when we haven't got a clue.

And truly I tell you, God's answer to a prayer like that *will* surprise you, just as much as it surprised Solomon, who thought he had used *up* his one shot at a golden ticket.

God's answers to our prayers are *never* what we expect. Sometimes we even *miss* them because we're looking for the wrong answer. But when we pray for wisdom and guidance, God gives us that and *more*.

In all that we do... may we seek the same wisdom Solomon did. The same wisdom Mister Rogers sought every day before he switched on those cameras and pulled on his comfy sneakers. May that wisdom shape the way we relate to God and to one another... and may that wisdom shape the work each one of us does in service to God *and* our fellow human beings. Our fellow *children* of God. Because Solomon was *right* to call himself a child. We're *all* children when you get right down to it. We're all children of God. Children who *always* need a wise neighbor. A good neighbor.

"Won't you be my neighbor?" Amen.