



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Sharing Wisdom as an Act of Love
(*Where Wisdom Is Found*, pp. 66-73)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Sharing Wisdom as an Act of Love

Marilynne Robinson's beautiful novel *Gilead* is a powerful realization of the integral relationship of wisdom to love. It illuminates the qualities of character that one must possess if the wisest of one's words are not to be vacuous or inaccessible to their hearer's understanding.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 4:1-9

Responsive Reading: based on Psalm 111

Lift up your hearts in thanksgiving to the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Great are the Lord's works, full of majesty and splendor.

Praise will be his forever and ever.

His words are truth and justice; faithfulness informs his law.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Holy and awe inspiring is his name.

Praise will be his forever and ever.

The fear of this Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.

They who live in it grow in understanding. Amen.

Reflection

Let's be honest. When we hear "Listen, children, to a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight" (Proverbs 4:1), what sort of parent-child talk do we think is coming next? If our imaginations have been marinated in those endless television sitcoms where wise children spring amazingly from clueless, blustering parents, we may expect to hear an embarrassing little sermon. We would not be looking for something like a love letter, tenderly delivered by one generation to the next.

Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer prizewinning novel *Gilead* reimagines for our day the sort of loving parent-child instruction that was central to biblical wisdom. It presents itself as a memoir of seventy-six year-old Reverend John Ames written in 1956 to be preserved for his seven year-old son until he is of an age to read it. Ames, who knows he is dying, shares his counsel in order to bequeath to his son a sense of intergenerational identity.

Near the beginning of his memoir, Ames writes: "See and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can't claim to understand that saying, as many times as I've heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it." These biblical words of disclaimer, David Jeffrey notes, are an early sign Ames will speak "without taint of self-righteousness or condescension."

From Reverend Ames, we might learn to share counsel with others and listen well to the wisdom in Scripture:

- ▶ *He practices thoughtful self-criticism.* From personal stories he tells, we see that Ames has lived the truths he teaches. Yet he defers to the opinions of others – his father and grandfather, and theologians with whom he often disagrees. Ames "holds deeply considered and well-formed opinions," Jeffrey notes, but "reckons it to be impossible for any individual to judge of a matter accountably



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without the aid of divergent as well as complementary perspectives.”

- ▶ *He values conversations* with friends in his pursuit of wisdom. He weaves in conversations with fellow pastor and neighbor Robert Boughton, “persons in all types of categories of relationship, past and present,” and books that “remain present to his consciousness as voices in an ongoing colloquy.”
- ▶ *He reflects and speaks with an undertone of prayer.* “For me, writing has always felt like praying,” Ames confesses, “even when I wasn’t writing prayers, as I was often enough. You feel that you are with someone.” Ames tells his son that he is praying for him. Later he reports praying in adversity, and praying for the needs of others—his own and Boughton’s church members—sometimes through the night.
- ▶ *He recognizes that truth abides beyond our measure.* “Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense,” Ames says in a remarkable passage. “In the matter of belief I have always found that defenses have the same irrelevance about them as the criticisms they are meant to answer.... There is always an inadequacy in argument about ultimate things.... [Proofs are] never sufficient to the question, and they are always a little impertinent...because they claim to find for God a place within our conceptual grasp.” Thus, Jeffrey concludes, “the culminating theological wisdom Ames wishes to impart to his son, namely that in matters of faith it is seldom fruitful to look for ‘proofs’ but always fruitful, in effect, to try to live in obedience to Christ.

Study Questions

1. What traits make John Ames a winsome source of wisdom?
2. If a parent or adult mentor had written such a memoir for you as Ames writes for his son, what would it mean to you?
3. *Gilead* reminds us of our “failure to transmit the wisdom of the generations even to those we most love,” David Jeffrey says. What signs of this do you see in our culture, your family, or congregation? What steps can we take to change?
4. Ames is glad his son, with mom’s help, is memorizing Scripture, for the lad’s pleasure in “the magnitude of the accomplishment” will pale in comparison to the value of such wisdom later, when the meaning of the remembered words comes inwardly to life in a richer way. Discuss this remark.

Departing Hymn: “Happy the Home When God is There” (vv. 3 and 4)

Happy the home where prayer is heard,
and praise is wont to rise;
where parents love the sacred Word
and all its wisdom prize.

Lord, let us in our homes agree
this blessed peace to gain;
unite our hearts in love to thee,
and love to all will reign.

Henry Ware, Jr. (1794-1843)

Tune: ST. AGNES

Sharing Wisdom as an Act of Love

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore how Reverend John Ames, the protagonist in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead*, is a model for sharing counsel and listening well to the wisdom in Scripture.
2. To consider how we can transmit wisdom of the generations to those whom we love in our families and congregations.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Happy the Home When God is There" locate the familiar tune ST. AGNES in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Interview

Interviewer: "What were the challenges in writing about a religious man, a good man?"

Marilynne Robinson: "I had no problem writing about a religious man. I know preachers are conventionally represented as frauds or scoundrels, hypocrites at best. In general, I try to steer clear of conventions. I know good characters are supposed to be uninteresting. . . . If the word 'good' implies narrowness, judgmentalism, or hypocrisy, then 'good' has become a synonym for 'bad,' nothing a writer would wish to explore sympathetically. But if goodness implies the attempt to be a positive presence in the world, a good father or mother, a good friend, or simply an honest human being — that requires a great deal of sensitivity and attention, as everyone knows who has tried it. . . . Self-seeking is dull and monistic by comparison. In any case, making my narrator both religious and good (though blind to some essential things as well) allowed me to give him a large, active, reflective mind." [Michelle Huneven, "Divine Invention," *LA Weekly* (January 20, 2005)]

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for opportunities to receive counsel from our elders, and to share our wisdom with the next generation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Proverbs 4:1-9 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

If members have read *Gilead*, keep the focus on Marilynne Robinson's depiction of Reverend Ames. If they have not, encourage members to recall occasions when they received loving counsel from their parents or adult

mentors. Explore the obstacles in our culture for sharing the wisdom of the generations within our families and congregations.

Study Questions

1. David Jeffrey highlights Reverend John Ames's thoughtful self-criticism, appreciation for and careful weighing of the opinions of others (even people with whom he disagrees), caring for others expressed through prayerful attention to their needs, and acknowledgement of the limits of his own insights and of human knowing. A thread that runs through these traits is Ames's humility. Ames speaks with "little or no presumption of obligation, only a natural hope of communion," Jeffrey notes. His "advice [is] born of experience, yet each such element is delivered without taint of self-righteousness or condescension."

Encourage members to discuss occasions when they received loving counsel from their parents or adult mentors, or shared their counsel with others, especially to a younger generation. What qualities of character in the advisor made all the difference in how his or her words were heard? Also discuss those occasions when counsel was not well given or readily received. What went wrong?

2. Hopefully, for many members this will be an opportunity to recall and express gratitude for loving counsel they received from an older generation. However, be sensitive that other members would not wish to hear advice from their parents or significant older adults in their life; these members may want to explain why, or they may be reluctant to discuss the context. Still other members may deeply yearn to have had such loving counsel, and they still grieve the fact that death or separation has prevented this time of sharing. You might discuss how your congregation can minister to those who are in each of these situations.
3. Encourage members to make a list of the major obstacles within our culture, families, and congregations to intergenerational counsel of any sort—e.g., our culture does not teach us to value the wisdom that comes with age; tragedy or divorce may take parents away from younger children; to pursue educational and career opportunities, grown children may move far away from their parents; often we become so busy that we do not take time for serious conversations with anyone; generations increasingly are separated by dramatic changes in popular culture, technology, and so on. Now add the obstacles to our sharing "the wisdom of the generations," the hard-won truths and time-tested practices of family life, culture, and religious faith tradition—e.g., we value new ideas and ways over time-tested truths; we do not make time to record family stories, study our own religious tradition, and so on.

Choose one of two of the obstacles and discuss how members might reorder priorities or amend practices to overcome those obstacles to seek counsel from an older generation or share wisdom with a younger generation.

4. Rote memorization of anything, including Scripture, is out of fashion today. Perhaps we are too worried that memorized words will remain intellectually undigested. After all, though Augustine believed "the wisdom of what a person says is in direct proportion to his progress in learning the holy scriptures," he warned, "and I am not speaking of intensive reading or memorization but real understanding and careful investigation of their meaning" (quoted in *Where Wisdom is Found*, p. 63).

Ames's insight is that his young son's memorization of passages whose meaning he cannot now understand, will be more valuable later in life when, through much experience, he grasps the meaning of the words in a richer way. Perhaps members can share stories of memorizing scripture passages, hymn texts, prayers, or poetry as a child, that much later in life became more spiritually meaningful to them.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.