

# “THE FAMILY BUSINESS”

a sermon by

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*Text: “I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you” (1 Kings 3:12).*

Some people are born into greatness.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., by virtue of his birth into a prominent family, had tremendous opportunities that few of us are able to imagine. His grandfather was a judge. Late in life, Justice Holmes was known to write many court opinions while standing at his grandfather’s desk. His uncle, John, was very successful as an attorney. John was known to be kind and unassuming. Justice Holmes’ father, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., was larger than life. He was a prominent physician, lecturer and educator who taught for many years at the Dartmouth and Harvard Medical Schools. Though respected as a physician, Dr. Holmes was known more widely for a very popular feature, *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, published regularly by the *Atlantic Monthly*.

As a young man, Wendell Holmes was a combat veteran of the civil war. Three times he was wounded in battle. While recovering from the third of these wounds, young Mr. Holmes decided to continue with his study of the law. His father, then a professor at Harvard, did not take the news well. Without looking up from his work, Dr. Holmes blurted out, “What’s the use of that, Wendell? A lawyer can’t be a great man.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. was born into a family of great men. They were judges, attorneys and physicians by trade. But for each, his livelihood provided an outlet and an opportunity for success. But, together, their family business was greatness. The Jackson-Holmes family produced great men. The continuation of that legacy was – rightly or wrongly – important to their sense of identity.

Theirs was not the last family to define itself by its greatness. Neither was it the first.

Many years ago, a royal dynasty was established in the Middle East. David was a great king. He successfully united Judah and Israel. In time, David was succeeded by one of his sons, King Solomon.

## *From David to Solomon*

The reign of King David was extremely important to the history of ancient Israel. David had been chosen and raised into leadership by the very hand of God. During his reign, David considered building a temple. But, speaking through the prophet Nathan, God rejected that idea while affirming David's place in history.

“Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth” (2 Samuel 7:8-9).

The greatness of David's kingship was increasingly apparent throughout his rule. David's success was unrivaled, no other leader could compare. But David was not a complete success. Throughout his life, King David's children were something less than model citizens.

Last week I spoke of the ill-fated relationships among these royal children. David's eldest son, Amnon, had enraged and was murdered by another son, Absalom. Absalom had also attempted to kill David during an attempted coup d'état. While hunting to kill his father, Absalom himself was killed by David's soldiers. Even though his own life had been at risk, David wept the bitter tears of a grieving father. (2 Samuel 15:1ff.)

Many years later, as David was in his death-bed, another son, Adonijah, attempted to seize power (1 Kings 1:5ff.). Adonijah gathered as much visible support as his father's money could buy. The description of Adonijah's coup is intentionally, clearly, eerily similar to the description of Absalom's ill-fated revolution. But, unlike his brother before him, Adonijah never had the support of any of his father's chief advisors.

Now, I must pause for just a moment to consider Adonijah's actions. Surely he knew what Absalom had done. Surely Adonijah was aware that he was risking his own life by attempting to seize power. Then there is the way that his actions unfolded. Adonijah declared himself to be the new king and reigning monarch, offered sacrifices to God, and celebrated his self-decreed coronation. But, a simple reading of the story makes it quite clear that Adonijah did not enjoy the support of any other people in power.

It sounds a bit like a bad joke. Did you hear the one about the kid who declared himself to be king? But it was not a laughing matter.

At some earlier time, David made a promise to Bathsheba that her son, Solomon, would one day become the king (1 Kings 1:12ff; esp. 1:29-30). Hearing of Adonijah's actions, David decreed that the time had come for Solomon to become the king of Judah and of Israel. So, with David's blessing and at his direction, Solomon became the king.

Not long afterwards, David would pass away and Solomon would begin the work of consolidating power. He would appoint his own advisors, and remove any who might threaten the stability of his rule. That's a subtle way of saying that he killed any potential rivals, including his brother, Adonijah.

## *The Need for Wisdom*

For Solomon, the work of the family business included the work of being king over Israel and Judah. As Solomon set about the actual work of ruling, he found the task to be more difficult than he had imagined. This is where we meet King Solomon in today's text. He is new to the work of being the king. Solomon is bold and decisive in his actions. But, through the description of his dream, we learn about Solomon's personal struggles with his new-found responsibilities.

“The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and said, ‘Ask what I should give you’” (1 Kings 3:5).

Curiously, the Lord God did not say, “Ask for what you want to receive.” Instead the command was to “Ask what I should give you.”

“And Solomon said, ‘Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this, your great people?’” (1 Kings 3:9)?

Through Solomon’s request for wisdom, we learn much about the values that he held in his heart. Through the response of our God, we learn much about the values that we are to hold in ours.

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. God said to him... “I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind.... I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you.”

After a short time in leadership, Solomon learned that he needed wisdom. After being groomed for a successful reign, Solomon possessed great skills for political and military success. But, there remained other elements of leadership, intangible talents that he did not possess. Solomon needed wisdom – not book smarts, not street smarts, but wisdom – the ability to provide sagacious counsel beyond all human abilities.

Since the reign of King Solomon, the world has seen many changes. People have populated the earth, built roads, mastered the seas and set foot on the surface of the moon. Recently I heard it said that in 1884 the United States – all 44 of them – had less than 150 miles of paved roads. In the past 125 years alone, we have built roads across the span of this continent, from north to south and from east to west. We then crossed the span of this continent first with wires for the telegraph, then with wires for electricity and for telephones. In a few short generations our farmers have moved from using hand-tools to using hand-held GPS devices to maximize their output of the land.

Regardless of these amazing technological advancements, we still need for our leaders to possess the God-given gift of wisdom. Let me be clear in saying that I am not – am NOT – giving a politically biased speech about this leader or about that President. Through the years, both of our modern political parties have produced great leaders that possessed wisdom that exceeded all human abilities. Both political parties have also produced leaders that have proven to be shallow, popularity mongering boneheads.

### *The Problem with Wisdom*

We would like to think that the wise leaders would also be the most popular leaders. This simply is not true. The leaders that have possessed the greatest wealth of wisdom may also be the leaders least likely to enjoy a general sense of popularity. In many ways, Harry Truman may have been least qualified for the work of the President. He was known for his plain-spoken nature and for his sense of fairness. He was also known for a long string of failed businesses.

Harry Truman became the Vice-President when Franklin Roosevelt was elected to his fourth consecutive term in office. There is the very famous story that Vice President Truman was summoned to the White House in April 1945. There he was taken into Eleanor Roosevelt’s sitting room where he received the stunning news of the President’s death. After a moment of silence, Mr. Truman asked, “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Mrs. Roosevelt replied, “Is there anything that we can do for you? For you’re the one in trouble now.”

With fewer than 90 days as the Vice President, the death of Franklin Roosevelt brought Harry Truman into the Presidency. Within the year, the war would end – first with the surrender of Germany; then, following the use of the atom bomb, Japan also surrendered. But President Truman could see beyond the immediate needs of the nation. The advent of nuclear weaponry and the emerging Soviet Union combined to create a new, and far more threatening, moment in the history of our nation.

Harry Truman, a failed haberdasher from the Midwest, worked to form and to enact an appropriate foreign policy response to the emerging Soviet threat. President Truman, and his foreign policy advisors, can be

credited for the framework of containing the Soviet threat. At times, the policy and its variants did not work particularly well. But, in 1991, the Soviet Union finally dissolved.

Every President, when campaigning for office, brought unique language to the matters of foreign policy. But, when it came time to lead, each successive President continued to follow the policies enacted by President Truman. As an expert in the field observed, once in office and confronted with the realities that are different from the campaign, “either the Administration abandons or modifies its themes (in substance, if not in rhetoric) or it takes uncontested credit for the transformation” of their own ideas.

When Harry Truman left office, some considered him to be the least popular of any American President. But history will note that he served with distinction, with foresight and with wisdom – real, God-given wisdom. President Truman’s wisdom may have saved the world. But that same wisdom did not earn him much popularity.

The same thing was true of King Solomon. His wisdom was good for the people that he ruled, and for the generations that continue to follow them. But, Solomon’s real, God-given wisdom did not always make him popular.

Immediately following the story of the dream and Solomon’s prayer for wisdom, there was a disruption caused by two prostitutes fighting for possession of one child (1 Kings 3:16ff). Each woman had given birth, but one child had died. Now both were fighting for the possession of the one living child. King Solomon called for a sword and ordered that the child be split in half, with each woman receiving one-half of the living child. The first woman shrieked out to stop and to let the child live, even if it means that the child would live with the other woman. Solomon stopped his servants and said, “Give the living child to the first woman, and by no means slay it; she is its mother.” Solomon’s decision caused people to hear of his wisdom – his real, God-given wisdom. One of the women was pleased with his decision. The other was bitterly disappointed.

In truth, then, as now, people tend to be driven by self-centered wishes and whims. We want what we want when we want it. But, we don’t always want the same thing. In truth, then, as now, our greatest need is for leaders who are and will be guided by wisdom – real and God-given wisdom. This need is shared by our nation, our state, our county and our town. This is true for our schools, our church and for our family.

The Apostle Paul was writing to a group of Christians who themselves needed to find Christian leaders who possessed wisdom – real and God-given wisdom. But, even more than that, Paul knew that they needed to become and to be Christian leaders who possessed wisdom. To them Paul wrote:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Some people are born into fame and fortune. For others, success is the result of a life-time of work. Whether continuing a family business, or beginning a new enterprise, great work – the work of true greatness – requires wisdom, real and God-given wisdom.

In the Body of Christ, the pursuit of wisdom is more than an intellectual exercise. The work of wisdom is different from the development of a particular set of skills.

The critical questions for you, and for every Christian, include these: Are you able to recognize wisdom when it is possessed by another? Are you willing to defer to real, God-given wisdom – even when it is unpopular with you? Are you willing to seek out wisdom for your self, to demonstrate its hold on your life?

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. was born into a family whose work was the work of greatness. Solomon was born into a family whose work was to rule Judah and Israel. You and I, as Christians, are born into a family whose business is the worship and the work of our God.

The work of our family business requires wisdom, real and God-given wisdom.

END NOTES