

Title: The Wisdom from Above

Subtitle: A comparison and contrast between godly wisdom and worldly wisdom

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/BFqCT1dXMjw>

Of the four Gospels, Mark's is the shortest. Mark has a sense of urgency as he depicts the life and character of Jesus in rapid succession. He knows Jesus is on a mission, so he wastes no time telling us where Jesus is going and how the story will end.

In today's Gospel, Mark depicts Jesus saying almost the exact same thing for a second time. But when Mark repeats himself, it is only because he wants to show us something very important and easily missed. While Jesus was thinking about the cross, his disciples were thinking about power, prestige, and worldly pursuits. It's a reflection of our own humanness. If people so prideful and slow to receive spiritual wisdom and insight could be transformed into apostles, then there is hope for the least among us, who want to become his disciples.

Mark, with his characteristic brevity, doesn't reveal the expressions on the disciples' faces when they heard Jesus utter the words, that "*The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.*"¹ But I can only imagine that they were horrified by something they didn't want to believe or even think about. They couldn't understand it, and they were even "*afraid to ask him*"² about it. So they went on with life, avoiding the topic and thinking about other worldly ambitions and pursuits.

When Jesus asks them, "*What were you arguing about on the way?*"³ They were silent, for, on the way, they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

This ambition, is again, another picture of our humanity. It is not unusual for people to compare themselves with others and want to be great. I was raised in a family of six boys, and the competition among us at times was fierce. Human ambition can be both good and bad, depending on your perspective and what you do with it. In their case,

¹ Mark 9:31

² Mark 9:32

³ Mark 9:33-34

Jesus needed to address some important issues, but before doing so, he sat down. When a rabbi in Jesus' day wanted to explain something essential to their students, they sat down with their disciples around them. Some subjects are delicate and complex, and it takes time to address them. And like some news that is hard to receive, it's best to have the person sit before giving it.

When Jesus responds to their personal ambitions, he doesn't scold them for wanting to be great. There is nothing wrong with striving to be number one, but that ambition needs a spiritual perspective on how it is to be achieved. Jesus said, ***“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”***⁴

The family business that my Father began was given an award from J.D. Power as being the best Electrical Contracting Company in Northern Virginia for customer satisfaction. When my brother explained the reason for such success, he stated that he taught his employee something my grandfather told him. Which was to get the tools and materials neatly assembled in order before you begin, and secondly, after you finish the job, make sure you sweep up after yourself. Then he added one last humbling comment, “After all, we are really just glorified laborers.”⁵

My Dad's company became great because his employees were taught to serve.

“Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’”⁶

A child was used as an object lesson because, in the ancient world, children were especially powerless. They were humble because anything they had was given to them.

I remember once when I was serving as a volunteer at an orphanage, one of the little girls with golden blond hair, as I was about to leave, grabbed hold of my leg, looked up into my eyes, and said, “I never want to let you go.”

⁴ Mark 9:35

⁵ Quote from Bill Becker, Stephen's brother

⁶ Mark 9:36-37

That little girl has always been an image to me of humility and receptivity to love. All she knew was that she needed love, and she was not afraid to admit it.

I would hope that our attitude toward wisdom would be approached in a similar manner as this young girl, who took hold of me, and said, “I don’t want to let you go.” We need to welcome wisdom as we would a little child. We need to seek wisdom as we would silver or gold, and when we find it, never let it go.

James begins our New Testament lesson today with the words, **“Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”**⁷ The Greek word James uses for wisdom is “Sophos” (the feminine form is “Sophia”). In scripture, it is used to describe God’s wisdom, not human wisdom. Socrates, the great philosopher, refused to be called wise because he considered it to be blasphemous to take on something that only belonged to God. He preferred instead to be called “a friend of wisdom.” It from this term that we get the word *philosopher*.

James connects wisdom with understanding when he asks: “Who among you is wise and understanding?” The word *understanding* is a different word. It means one who knows how to take wisdom and put it to work in your life in practical ways. The apostle takes it for granted that if a person is really “wise and endued with knowledge,” he will have a life that is blended with meekness, gentleness, humility, and good works.

God is telling us through James that true wisdom is not found on the mountaintop with our head in the clouds but down in the valley where we live. There is nothing wrong with thinking great thoughts, but those thoughts must be grounded with godly virtues that express themselves in good deeds. The “wisdom that is from above” is a divinely balanced mix of gentle strength that has come under God’s control.

Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, said, **“Lord, I am only a child, and I do not know how to go out or come in among these great**

⁷ James 3:13

people.”⁸ “Therefore, give me an understanding heart to judge your people.”⁹ Wisdom came to him because of his childlike humility.

The virtue of this “wisdom from above” is that it is without “bitter envy and selfish ambition.” It is a virtue that seeks to serve. It is not the wisdom of winning at any cost. It is not divisive. It does not try to grab control. It is gentle, approachable, and reasonable. Furthermore, God’s wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits.

I read an article this past week, by Jonathon Edwards who assisted with the first Great Awakening. He kept journals about that revival and detailed how that revival sadly came to end. It happened when the same people who experienced a great move of God’s Spirit became puffed up with self-righteous pride. Then they began to criticize others who did not agree on every point of belief. Then it wasn’t long before churches began to have splits, the Spirit was grieved and the revival ended.

It was to prevent such disasters that James talks about the true fruits of godly wisdom. When God’s Spirit begins to work in our lives it is not given to puff us up. So I like the way different people approach this difficult topic.

A classic peanuts cartoon opens with Linus curled up in a chair, quietly reading a book, while Lucy stands behind him with a funny look on her face.

“It’s very strange,” Lucy told him. “It happens just by looking at you.”

What happens? Linus asks.

Lucy calmly answers, “I can feel a criticism coming on.”

How often do you feel the same way when you look closely at those around you? The truth is, that’s the tendency we all have apart from grace. I struggled for years with this tendency in my relationship with my twin brother. But as we matured, we learned to appreciate our differences.

In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the central characters, Mr. Darcy, is described as a man “Who never looks at any woman but to see a blemish.”

How often do you function like Lucy or Mr. Darcy? Are you frequently critical of others? Do you look at those around you only to

⁸ 1 Kings 3:7

⁹ 1 Kings 3:9

find a blemish? There is plenty of darkness to be found in each one of us. When World War I erupted in 1914, British statesman Sir Edward Grey declared, “The lamps are going out all over Europe,” and he wondered if he would ever see them lit again in his lifetime.

I think we can wonder the same thing in our own day. Sometimes it seems like the lamp in our country is going out, with the constant political wrangling, accusations and confusion that take place in our political arena.

As we see these things happening around us, I believe God is calling us to be difference-makers in the world. But to do so, we must rely on His wisdom. A wisdom that is *“...first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness”*¹⁰ We are called to reap that kind of harvest today within our own spheres of influence. So let us be more like children, who trust that our heavenly Father will give us his wisdom generously when we ask. And when we receive it, let’s use it for fruitful service that will build others up and not tear them down. Amen.

Reflection Questions

- What does it mean to humble oneself like a child?
- What is one childhood quality you would like to recapture?
- How does success “Jesus style” differ from the ideas of success pressing in on you from the world?
- How does “wisdom from above” differ from worldly wisdom?

¹⁰ James 3:17-18