

Title: Childlike Humility: Wisdom's Curious Reorientation

One of the unique literary elements reported throughout Mark's Gospel is the disciples' lack of understanding. At times, the disciples are depicted as confused, challenged, and even discouraged by Jesus' exhortations and teachings. In today's Gospel, Mark states that after Jesus predicted his coming death at the hands of men, his disciples "***did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him.***"¹ Clearly, there is a disconnect as Jesus explained his purpose and future destiny, which ran 180 degrees counter to what they expected.

I can only imagine they were horrified and distressed² by something they didn't want to believe or think about. They couldn't understand it and were even "***afraid to ask Jesus***" about it. So they continued on with life, avoiding the topic and thinking about otherworldly pursuits and ambitions.

Our Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah explains that it is the Lord "***who tests the heart and the mind.***"³ The Lord perfectly sees what is in the heart with its thoughts and intents as he considers our motives and feelings. Similarly, Jesus probes the thoughts and intents of his disciples when he asks, "***What were you arguing about on the way?*** But they were silent, for, on the way, they had argued about who was the greatest."⁴

The question Jesus asks opens a teaching opportunity that guides the disciples in the following lesson on godly character and human ambition.

When a rabbi in Jesus' day wanted to explain something essential to their students, they sat down with their disciples around them. Similarly, in this narrative, Mark tells us, "***Jesus sat down and called the twelve.***"⁵ In this relaxed learning

¹ Mark 9:32

² Matthew 17:23 This parallel verse from Matthew states, "and they were greatly distressed."

³ Jeremiah 11:20

⁴ Mark 9:33-34

⁵ Mark 9:35a

environment, Jesus dealt with the delicate and complex subject of humility and said, “***Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.***”⁶ To be a disciple of Jesus is to learn and unlearn a whole new way of looking at the world.

To help his disciples understand this new way of thinking, he uses the likes of parables. But today, Jesus surprises us with an even more human illustration. Mark writes, “***He 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.***”⁷

Jesus uses a child as an object lesson because, in the ancient world, children were without power or rights. They had no voice in the home, the city, or the nation. They were also totally dependent on their parents and caregivers for the necessities of life, including emotional support and the education needed to survive. The parallel text in Matthew tells us, “***Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.***”⁸ Consequently, the humility of a child is the foundation for wisdom and understanding.

Solomon, who was considered the wisest man in the Old Testament, said at the beginning of his reign, “***Lord, I am only a child, and I do not know how to go out or come in among these great people.***”⁹ “***Therefore, give me an understanding heart to judge your people.***”¹⁰ Wisdom came to him because of his childlike humility, and his willingness to ask for what he needed.

⁶ Mark 9:35b

⁷ Mark 9:36-37

⁸ Matthew 18:3-4

⁹ 1 Kings 3:7

¹⁰ 1 Kings 3:9

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.”***¹¹ James, therefore, connects wisdom with understanding when he asks: ***“Who among you is wise and understanding?”***

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.”

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

I would hope that our attitude toward wisdom would be approached in a similar manner to this young girl’s, 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.

In the Kansas City Times, Robert Fulghum wrote, “Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. That article was later expanded into a book in 1986. In it, he states, “Wisdom was not found at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school.” “It was there I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. Say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.” This writer has captured part of what Jesus

¹¹ James 3:13

meant when he used a child as an object lesson in our Gospel today.

From my experience with children, I have realized that I have never outgrown this need for this childlike conversion. Whenever I hold my grandchildren in my arms, I feel something of the wonder children possess, and I never want to lose that gift that views all of life with innocent curiosity.

Today, our lesson from James tells us more about this different way of looking at life. James describes it as “*the wisdom that comes down from above.*”¹² Surprisingly, it is not found on the mountaintop with our heads in the clouds but down in the valley where we live. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be great as long as those ambitions are grounded with godly virtues that express themselves in good deeds. Therefore, godly wisdom is a divinely balanced mix of gentle strength that is pure, peaceable, accommodating, and full of mercy because it has surrendered itself to God’s control. Those who grow great in God’s kingdom are those who most depend on Him to work in them. Maybe it has been a while since you humbled yourself before the Lord and admitted anew how much you need His strength, guidance, and provision in your life, but now is the best time to start as you humbly trust him to give us his wisdom generously. And when we receive it, let’s use that wisdom for fruitful service as we learn to become servants of all. *Amen.*

Reflection Questions:

- What does it mean to humble oneself like a child?
- What do you think Jesus meant when he said, “Unless you change (or are converted) and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)
- Is there a story from your memory that captures a childhood quality you would like to recapture?

¹² James 3:15