

## "What price wisdom?"

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### **Old Testament: Psalm 111** **New Testament: Matthew 11:16-19**

Professor Herman Daly of the University of Maryland tells the story of the village idiot who was stopped every day by the townspeople and asked to pick between a nickel and a dime. The idiot always chose the nickel, and the residents always went away saying, 'There, you see what an idiot he is.' Asked about this years later, "the idiot" explained, saying, "Yes, I picked the nickel over the dime. But, if I had kept picking the dime, then they would have stopped offering me the coins. My way, I kept getting nickels every day."<sup>1</sup>

So it is with wisdom – its values might not be so apparent at first, and people might think we're crazy for settling for them, but over time they surpass anything we could ever ask for or imagine.

Jesus says in Matthew that "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." And the "village idiot" agrees. Turns out he's not an idiot at all, just a simple man with simple needs, happily living his life at the expense of the smarty-pants townspeople, one nickel at a time; the fruits of his wisdom proving the true value of his otherwise foolish-looking actions of deeds. Jesus came as wisdom personified, a prophet able to live off the land, outwit the Pharisees, treat enemies as friends, and generally approach life with joyous abandon. And most everyone he met – at least the kind of people who take pride in worldly wisdom – most everyone attacked him, called him "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners." And staring them straight in the face, Jesus says, you're acting like "children sitting in the market-place and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'"

In other words, people who reject Jesus are the ones who want it their way regardless of what's going on in any situation or how poorly their approach to things is working out in the end. They want peace, and they're willing to fight like hell to get it. They're like someone who says, "The beatings will continue until happiness ensues."

In Matthew, Jesus is revealing the secrets of life and most people would rather play mind games, rationalize their way through life *as they see it* rather than open themselves up to a life led by divine wisdom. John the Baptist "came neither eating nor drinking," says Jesus, "and (you) say, 'He has a demon; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and' you attack him for that – for doing the exact opposite as John the Baptist – you're playing mind games, he says.

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<sup>1</sup> "Human Scale" by Kirkpatrick Sale (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1980), 335.

And seeing this ridiculous behavior all around him, Jesus calls them on it. Don't give in to the foolishness of rationalization to get through life; don't act like you can outwit the truth when it's staring you straight in the face.

The truth is the truth, wisdom is wisdom, whether it comes dressed in a normal white robe like Jesus comes wearing camel's hair - like John. Wisdom can make you rich one nickel at a time, while foolishness and pride leave you with nothing but one thin dime.

Don't we fall victim to foolishness and pride from time to time – don't we sometimes find ourselves staring truth right in the face, and yet still we can't accept it; we can't bring ourselves to do the right thing. We know in our hearts what's right – we can't prove it – but we know deep down inside. And still we fight it. We make excuses to do it our way. We want our cake and eat it, too. And in doing so, we sell ourselves short – “I can't change my bad habits;” “It won't matter if I study more, I'm just not smart.” “I've tried to quit smoking, but I can't. I don't have a drinking problem – I could stop anytime I want to.” “Pot? Pot's not *really* a drug.” “It doesn't matter what I say to him or how hard I pray, he'll never turn his life around.” “I'd believe in Jesus – try to learn and follow his ways – if I only had some proof.” Belief *and* proof? Really? You know, if you've got the one, you don't need the other?

There's a difference between proof and belief; between knowledge and wisdom. People can have proof and still choose the wrong thing. But wisdom does what is right *regardless* of whether it's proven or not. Wisdom taps into the power of belief; it transcends proof and knowledge, and thus leads to a higher way of being, a higher truth. But wisdom takes faith.

Proof is confined to paper and pencil – academic math and empirical science; wisdom takes those proofs and tests them in the real world. Wisdom wants to see if they will bear fruit or die withering on the vine. Two players are in the middle of a computer fantasy game. After some loud yelling, one of them asks the other: “Okay, now my wisdom is at maximum. Now what should I do?” Not so wise after all. Wisdom isn't found in computer chips; wisdom is found in community. Or, as theologian Edmund Clowney says, “wisdom includes sanctified ‘street smarts.’ Wisdom starts in heaven,” says Clowney, “but works at street level, where we bump shoulders with others. It isn't satisfied with information retrieval. You can't access wisdom by the megabyte. Wisdom is concerned with how we relate to other people, to the world, and to God.”<sup>2</sup>

Take for example this story about Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was hired to sue someone over a \$2.50 debt. He didn't want to do it, but his client insisted – wanting to be *proved* right. So Abe asked the client for a fee of \$10, upfront. He then gave half to the defendant, who promptly paid the debt. Can you do the math? Lincoln was paid \$10 by his client to sue the other guy for \$2.50. He gave \$5 to the other guy, who used half of that money to pay the \$2.50 debt. The client spent \$10 to get \$2.50 back – *and*, I suppose, the satisfaction of being proved right, legally. (After all, the guy did pay up). But does this mean he admitted being wrong – admitted that the client was right? Or was the other guy just wise enough to know a good deal when he saw it – coming out \$2.50 ahead over a \$2.50 debt.

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<sup>2</sup> Tabletalk, March 1995.

What price are we willing to pay to be *told* we're right – to cling to our misguided beliefs no matter how poorly they work out for us? How quick are we to reject the truth for fear of having to try something new, something untried and certainly not proven, but something we suspect is right; something wisdom is telling us is worth a try? How much pain will we endure to stay where we're comfortable rather than to move to where we know we'd be happiest – even if that took a little extra effort? What area of your life are you thinking of right now, where divine wisdom could make a difference?

When Jesus asks, 'But to what will I compare this generation?' he is talking about the generation of disbelief, the generation of little faith, the generation that puts little in and then complains because so little comes out the other end.

And we all do this, no matter whether we're teens, or adults or older adults. We all have moments of disbelief, lack of faith, resignation to life being just the way it is with no hope for anything better. And when we get like that, that's when we find ourselves willing to suffer just about anything to prove we're right, to prove that life couldn't get any better. Because, if it could, certainly we would have achieved it by now.

But did we really open ourselves up to divine wisdom? Were we really willing to try something new; to seek another path? Or were we dead certain we were too far down the wrong path to have any hope of turning back now? It's so easy to have our lives all figured out. The hard part is following our faith to a new way of looking at life. A way of approaching life that allows God's truth and wisdom to roll out a new canvas for our lives.

One day one of Mahatma Gandhi's disillusioned followers came to him and said, "You have no integrity. Last week I heard you say one thing, and today you are saying something different. How do you justify such vacillation?" Gandhi quietly replied, "It is simple, really, my son. I have learned something since last week." When Gandhi learned something, he wasn't afraid to change his mind and alter his position, even if others rejected him because of it.

*Have you ever felt rejected because of your faith or what you believe about life; about what's right and what's wrong? Ever felt like acting on your faith would make you look foolish?* When all is said and done, the question that matters is, are we more committed to being right than to growing in wisdom? Do we treasure what passes for knowledge in our world today over that which brings true peace and lasting happiness?

"Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds," says Jesus. Wisdom is proven right by the results it achieves, even in the face of any contrary facts or alternate proofs. So, what does this all have to do with us? Well, if I had a nickel for every time I felt overwhelmed by troubles of my own making, every time I "knew better" but I said or did the wrong thing anyway. If I had a nickel for all the times I stared wisdom straight in the face and instead succumbed to weakness, I'd be as rich as a "village idiot" – happily living my life one nickel at a time.

But that's not who we are, is it? We're more like the smarty-pants townspeople, working our butts off for riches that we end up nickel-and-diming away for a moment of amusement. How we spend our money matters. How we spend our time matters. The fact that we come here on a Sunday says that we're willing to invest a little of our time – and money – seeking the

truth of Jesus Christ. But if we're only willing to spend a little and then we sit back expecting a lot in return, we're just playing the fool. And as children of God, we're not here to play the fool; we're here to seek divine wisdom, and then to live into it in our lives.

And so, we ask ourselves, what changes is divine wisdom calling you--calling me – to make in our lives, and are we willing to try something new, embark on a new path to achieve them – to give ourselves the opportunity to attain the peace and lasting happiness through the pursuit of the wisdom of Jesus personified. Amen.

## PRAYER

O Lord, we come before you realizing that without you we are nothing. Until we lay our hearts captive to your word and touch, we remain bound to the temporal things of the flesh, all those things that fail to truly satisfy our deepest need and desire.

Take us, we pray, renew in us a sense of your living, breathing Spirit, that our souls will take their rest in you.

For it is only when we give ourselves over to your divine will that we gain access to what you long for us to have. It is only in you and through you that we can accomplish all that you desire.

God of great love, help us to soften our hearts to your love and open our closed minds. Help us to move beyond the mire we find ourselves as we seek to breathe deeply of your Spirit.

Enable us to delight in the laughter of a child, the beauty of a sunset, the scent of a rose, and thus to see the glory of your world.

And where there is pain in this world, O Lord, we pray for your healing touch. We pray for those with physical needs. We pray for peace and wholeness where there is emotional and spiritual brokenness. We seek your presence and touch amid fractured relationships.

Mostly, though, we pray for faith ... faith to wait and faith to stand up under the desperate longing that often accompanies your healing. Give us faith to trust in you.

We ask all this in the name of the One who knew hatred and in return gave love, who seeing disease granted peace. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.