

Man's Wisdom vs God's Wisdom

Introduction

Hello again, and I hope you had a blessed New Year's celebration. At the start of this New Year when many people are making New Year's resolutions, I want to talk about man's wisdom and God's wisdom. I want to discuss how the two sources of wisdom differ and then discuss how we specifically access God's wisdom. Now, let me start by saying that wisdom is an important topic in the Bible which makes over 40 references to it and we have noted in past messages that an indication of the importance of a subject for Christ followers is the number of specific references made to it in the Bible.

If you're a new believer, you should view today's message as part of your discipleship training. Similarly, if you have been a believer for a number of years, I believe this message is worth reinforcing because we sometimes take for granted the various gifts we have access to when we become Christ followers; for you, this message can be taken as a reminder. If you have still not made the decision to give your life over to the Lord and, to coin a phrase I have used before, 'put Jesus in the driver's seat' in your life, treat this message as information to help you make your decision.

A Central Scripture

Our subject today is significant, not only because of the number of references to wisdom in the Bible, but also because contrasting man's and God's wisdom is specifically addressed in the Bible itself. The book of James, in chapter 3, versus 13 to 18 makes the following comparison, and in the New International Version of the Bible, this passage is actually titled 'Two Kinds of Wisdom'. Here is the passage:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven 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.

Let's now examine the differences between man's wisdom and God's wisdom with specific reference to this passage from James and we can start with man's wisdom.

Man's Wisdom

First, we can be certain that James is referring to man's wisdom in contrast to God's wisdom in this passage because he refers to a wisdom that is 'earthly' which, according

to various dictionaries, can also mean 'worldly' and 'human'¹. An obvious point, therefore, is that this type of wisdom does not originate from heaven, to use the words of James, but is man-made.

It Lacks Moral Foundation

So what is the problem with man-made wisdom? Well first, it lacks moral foundation. The benchmarks of good and evil are found in God, He is the standard and when He is not at the root of any notion of wisdom, what we are left with is a wisdom, if we can call it that, which actually allows for a multitude of sins. Those of us who spent a major portion of our lives as non-believers know only too well how easy it is to rationalize and excuse our own behaviour, which measured against God's standards, is actually selfish and sinful. Man-made wisdom is like this, take God out of the equation and what you are left with is a convenient wisdom that tends to rationalize behaviour which often falls short on moral grounds.

If we look on the darker side, if the source of man's wisdom is not God then by default its source is Satan, the 'prince of this world' as he is referred to in the Bible in the book of John chapter 16 verse 11. This is exactly what James means when he also describes earthly wisdom as not only man-made but 'unspiritual' and 'demonic'. Many of man's wisdoms sound very enlightened, but they often endorse practices that are just not Biblical.

It Yields 'Rotten' Fruit

Now, Paul warns the Christian community about false prophets and in this context states the following in Matthew 7 verses 16 to 20 (NIV) and this is what he says: *By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.* Now like much in the Bible, this message of Paul has a wider application than the specific context to which Paul was referring; in fact, Paul was establishing a Biblical principle of how to judge others' real motives rather than relying on a superficial assessment. Here we have an example of God's wisdom delivered in the Bible, this time, by Paul. In this context, we need to look at the fruit of man's wisdom that is referred to in our passage from James. James notes that the fruit of man's wisdom is bitter envy and selfish ambition.

Let's examine these fruits in a modern context and we've only got to take a stroll around any bookstore to see that man's wisdom is about 'self' rather than about 'others'. The

¹ e.g., dictionary.reverso.net/english-synonyms/earthly

following best sellers say it all with their titles: 'Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny!', 'Feeling Good: the New Mood Therapy', 'Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience'. The problem with literature that is not grounded in Godly wisdom is that it is ripe for corruption by Satan. For example, a focus on self can easily lead to pride and egotism. In a similar way, a desire for self-development can be manipulated by the enemy to create a mindset where 'others', namely, our fellow men and women, don't matter as people. They become mere tools of our desire for self-actualization and count only to the extent that they help us achieve our self-development ambitions.

Furthermore, a pre-occupation with self inevitably involves aspirations to be like this person or that person, in other words, comparisons. Again, man's wisdom that is not firmly grounded in God is fair game for Satan who can turn these comparisons into 'bitter envy'. Add to this boasting and denial of the truth, in other words pride and lies, which, according to the passage from James, are associated with selfish ambition and bitter envy, and there is a strong argument supporting the view that the fruit of man's wisdom is rotten.

Now, I fully recognise that the fruit of man's wisdom can sometimes be for the good even when those producing it are not Christians and may actively deny the existence of God. Nevertheless, even fruit produced with the best of intentions, when it is not grounded in the Lord, is susceptible to being corrupted by Satan. He can have free reign when God is not at the root of fruit designed for good. Consider all the funds that were sent to Tsunami victims in 2004 that 'went missing'.

God's Wisdom

Now let's move to God's wisdom.

It Has Moral Foundation

Well, the first thing that is evident is that it has moral foundation. In our passage from James he states that *the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure*. Why this purity? It's because it comes from the source of all morality. I've already mentioned that God is the benchmark of good and evil. Without this benchmark, we have no basis for deciding what is good and what is evil and this world cannot provide this benchmark. One man believes one thing acceptable that another considers unacceptable. In stark contrast to this is the Bible which presents God's wisdom regarding good and evil. His standards are absolutes against which we can measure our own behaviour.

It Yields Good Fruit

Contrasting with the fruit of man's wisdom, God's wisdom yields good fruit as stated in the passage from James. 'Humility', 'good deeds', 'peace-loving', 'considerate', 'submissive', 'full of mercy', 'impartial' and 'sincere' are all words associated with the fruit of God's wisdom. The dimension that is strongly implied in these words is an 'others' orientation rather than a 'self' orientation which is the central characteristic of man's wisdom. The focus on others implied in James' description of the fruits of God's wisdom is confirmed elsewhere in the Bible. In writing to the Philippians, Paul makes the following statement in chapter 2 verse 3: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves...* Now, it is this characteristic of God's wisdom that results in good fruit.

Discussion about the nature and fruit of God's wisdom would be incomplete unless we look at how we actually gain access to this wisdom as a Christ follower, and this is what we'll focus on now.

Accessing God's Wisdom

I want to start by drawing your attention to the following verse from the Bible which is central to the subject. The verse is from one of Paul's letters to Timothy who was Paul's protégé or apprentice. This is what he said in 2 Timothy 3:16: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...*

Paul was referring Timothy to one of God's wisdoms, which eventually were collated together to become God's manual for life, and we have access to this very same manual today. A major part of the answer to the question of how we access God's wisdom is to read, contemplate on, and learn from the Bible which contains all of God's wisdom as conveyed through the various authors of this supernatural manual. Reference to the Bible as a supernatural manual leads me to the second means by which we, Christ followers, access God's wisdom. Now, so far, the Holy Spirit has not been the specific subject of any of TLC World's teachings, and it certainly will be treated fully in a separate message. However, for the purpose of this message, let me say that when we become Christ followers, we are given a friend, comforter and advisor in the person of the Holy Spirit, one of the three manifestations of God that is described in the notion of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit comes to life within and is active in revealing God's wisdom to us.

It is the working of the Holy Spirit in us that gives us a desire to read the Bible and it is also the same Spirit that will highlight for us certain passages and verses of the Bible just as if someone is shining a light on these passages or verses. It is also this same Spirit that will indicate just how a sermon we hear speaks directly to us. It was also the Holy Spirit that directed the authors of the Bible to record God's word in this supernatural manual! In gathering God's wisdom from the Bible, to use modern

terminology, the Bible is like the data warehouse and the Holy Spirit is like the operating system that delivers the wisdom to the reader.

However, the Holy Spirit's delivery of wisdom is not confined to his interaction with the Bible because he is also a major source of wisdom for Christians as they advance through the spiritual battleground. Prayer is the key to unlocking this wisdom. While today's message is not meant to be a full explanation of the working of the Holy Spirit, any message concerned with God's wisdom and how to access it, has to give due recognition to the work of the Spirit. For now, it is sufficient to say that if you want to access God's wisdom so that you are able make decisions with God's wisdom, which of course will mean your decisions will ultimately lead to good, then the two essential activities are regular Bible reading and prayer; the Spirit will do the rest.

Implications

Now let's just look at the implications of all this. As Christ followers, we need to bear good fruit by embracing God's wisdom rather than man's wisdom, and central to accessing this wisdom is, as already stated, Bible reading and prayer. Furthermore, in matters of right or wrong, we have to look to the Bible for guidance. This will sometimes mean that we will have to go against the general flow of world opinion and, at times, we may not be popular as a result of this. In view of all this, we need to note one of God's central wisdoms stated in Proverbs 29 verse 25 (NIV) and this is it: *Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.* For those of you who have not yet made your commitment to Christ, I want to refer you to Matthew 10:28 (NIV) which states the message of Proverbs 29:25 (NIV) in stronger terms: *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*

Now, I hope this message has stimulated some thoughts and questions that you can share and discuss in your various churches and groups but for now, once again I just want to wish you all a very Happy New Year, and I look forward to speaking to you again next week. Goodbye.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the self-help literature so popular these days that various titles 'hit' the best sellers list?
2. Given the subject of this message, how can we explain the fact that sometimes non-Christians can do good things?
3. Why is the result of man's wisdom 'disorder and every evil practice' and God's

wisdom 'peace' and 'a harvest of righteousness'?

4. Did God Create Evil?

5. In light of 2 Timothy 3:16, how do we reconcile the fact that the gospel accounts are not identical and differ regarding some of the facts e.g. the number of angels in the resurrection accounts?

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