

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN GOD'S WISDOM AND HUMAN REASON

From the 16th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we listen again to verse 23:

Jesus turned and said to Peter, ". . . you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Dear Friends in Christ,

The American humorist Mark Twain is credited, by some, with saying, "The older I got, the smarter my father became." * Isn't that the way it has always been with young people? When you are in middle school, or even in your early high school years, your parents often seem hopelessly lame, embarrassingly out of touch. Their decisions seem backwards. Their rules feel restrictive. But when you get a little older you begin to see the intelligence and the concern, the love and the wisdom behind their parenting. And when you, in turn, become a parent you may even find yourself imitating them and incorporating their wisdom into your own parenting.

For believers in Christ, there is the same contrast between God's wisdom and our wisdom, our reasoning. Oftentimes it is only as you grow and mature spiritually that you begin to see the intelligence, the love, the concern and the plan behind God's wisdom in contrast with human reason.

Unbelievers see very little wisdom in God's ways. 1 Corinthians 2:14 (NIV) *The man without the Spirit (someone in whom the Holy Spirit has not worked faith, i.e., an unbeliever) does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.* That's why the ways of the world, the wisdom of mankind, is often in contrast with God's Word and God's will.

Our lesson today points out that contrast in three areas:

1. The plan of salvation,
2. The issue of life's real purpose, and
3. The question of what is truly valuable.

Down through the ages people have had difficulty with (their reason has rebelled against) God's wisdom in all three areas - especially God's plan of salvation - and Jesus' twelve disciples were no exception. They heard Jesus talk about establishing his kingdom and their minds were filled with thoughts of being bigshots in the government run by Christ, princes, rulers, power brokers. So, verse 21:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

*<http://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/10/10/twain>, <http://www.toinspire.com/author.asp?author=Mark+Twain>,
but see - <http://www.snopes.com/quotes/twain.htm>.

These disciples (all disciples for that matter) needed an understanding of the work Jesus was about to do to win eternal life for us. Because, as the Bible clearly tells us, we are born in sin and fall far short of

ever earning eternal life in heaven, we are all in need of a Savior from sin. Because God loves us and wants all to be saved from sin, he sent his own son Jesus, to be the savior we need. Because God's justice demands punishment for our sin and because God, in his mercy, wants to spare us from the punishment we deserve, he placed our sin squarely on the shoulders of Jesus and punished him, the innocent victim, for our sins. (2 Corinthians 5:21).

That's the "suffering" Jesus spoke about with his disciples and it just didn't make sense to them.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Their REASON told them that when you enter a fight and get killed, you're the LOSER, not the WINNER. They didn't understand the necessity of the cross for their salvation. They didn't realize that Jesus had to die to pay for their sins in order to reconcile them to a just and holy God. And many people still don't understand the necessity of the cross of Christ for their salvation. Just ask people, "How do you get to heaven?" Most will say, "Do good." "Lead a good life." "Do good to others." And even within Christianity many will say, "Use Christ as an example. Lead a life like his and you'll get to heaven."

You see, human reason wants to inject something of us into God's plan of salvation and either take Christ out altogether, or make us partners with him in our salvation. But that's not what God's Word says.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV).

Faith in Jesus is the God-given means for receiving his gift of eternal life.

But it's not just human reason that's to blame for distorting God's plan of salvation. You have an adversary, the devil, who makes it his business to confuse God's plan of salvation in your mind, in the understanding of all mankind. The devil tried to get Jesus to turn aside from God's plan because he knew it would end in his destruction. Because he couldn't divert Christ from his purpose, he's tried to confuse the whole matter in peoples' minds. And he didn't even hesitate to enlist Christ's own disciples. Peter really tried to keep Jesus from going to Jerusalem. Because of his love for Jesus, Peter wanted to save Jesus. With the best of intentions, Peter wanted to spare him, but unwittingly, Peter had made himself an agent of Satan.

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Herein lies a warning for you and me. We need to take a careful look at what our love, our good intentions, lead us to do so that they don't end up accomplishing Satan's purposes and not God's. Need an example? Our society, our congregations across the country are full of examples. What do you say to the young, unmarried girl with an unplanned pregnancy, expecting a child she doesn't want and can't care for? Do you, motivated out of real love for her and real concern for her future, do you suggest the killing of her unborn child to aid her, to help her? Our love, like Peter's love for Christ CAN end up accomplishing Satan's purposes when human reason is your guide and not God's Word, when you, like Peter, have in mind the things of man and not the things of God.

What do you say to the unchurched friend, the unchurched family member? Does your love and concern caution you to avoid the subject of religion so as not to upset them or make them feel uncomfortable? If so, your love, just like Peter's love for Christ, your love can end up accomplishing Satan's purposes and not God's will.

What do you say to the young couple, whom you love, who are living together without marriage? What do you say to the person, whom you love, who is involved in a homosexual lifestyle? Is your love misdirected? Is your love unwittingly accomplishing Satan's purposes? It can, you know, when you follow human reason and not God's wisdom, when you say nothing and fail to warn someone you love that they are involved in something that is contrary to God's will. It is in the Gospel, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, that you find the strength and the desire to speak God's truth to those who need to hear it.

Peter's love unwittingly accomplished Satan's purposes when he suggested that Jesus not go to Jerusalem, that Jesus not suffer and die. Peter had in mind the things of man, not the things of God. So Jesus rebuked Peter. *"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. . ."*

Then Jesus explained to his disciples that their mistaken ideas about salvation had also distorted their understanding of the PURPOSE of LIFE. It was a strange view, a view contrary to reason which Jesus expressed concerning life's purpose.

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

God's idea of saving your life involves losing it for the sake of Christ. Oh how this must have clashed with what the disciples thought about the purpose of life. They weren't looking for cross-bearing or suffering or self-denial. They were expecting a life of ease and prestige, power and glory.

Just look around us today. Despite a growing interest in things spiritual, the real bottom line in our society is that your purpose in life consists in EXTERNALS, in things. How much stuff do you have? Can you provide all the good things for your family to live in comfort? Are you able to pay for college tuition? Do you have enough to retire comfortably? How much influence and power do you have? Have you achieved "celebrity" status? The unwritten rule is that your purpose in life is to pursue these things, not something INTERNAL like your knowledge of God's Word or your faith in Jesus.

A proper perspective in life begins with a proper evaluation of what Jesus has done for you by his life and his death. When people are confused about the matter of their salvation, they are also going to be confused about the matter of their life's purpose. Your real purpose in life is to come to faith in Jesus, to grow in your faith, to share your faith with others and to glorify God in your life. When you don't recognize this, you settle for lesser goals in life like acquiring the most wealth you can, achieving prominence or fame, living a worry free life now and having a secure retirement plan. You think that you're saving your life, making the most of it, when in fact you could be losing your life, losing out on God's real purpose for you and the things he wants to accomplish through your life.

Jesus says that the person who builds his or her life on the abundance of things, the abundance of possessions, who is materialistic rather than spiritual, is striking a fool's bargain.

²⁶ *What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*

What good is it if you win the lottery at a young age and live a lavish lifestyle, in good health, for 100 years but spend an eternity in hell? The very best that you can achieve in the worldly realm is just a fleeting moment, a drop in the bucket compared with eternity. The only thing of real value that you possess is your soul. Your soul is what is important in the eyes of God. Ultimately it is the state of your soul that determines your eternal health and welfare. When you stand, some day, before the judgment throne of God, you won't be welcomed into heaven on the basis of your wealth, your popularity, your power or your social position. You are judged solely on the basis of your faith in Jesus.

In this life you have to expect to carry your cross, to endure criticism or ridicule or even persecution because of your faith in Jesus. In this life you have to be willing, if necessary, to deny yourself the things of this world, the things of man, the things that pass away, in order to lay hold of those spiritual treasures which are eternal. And oftentimes that's difficult because the things of this world are visible and the things of the spiritual realm are invisible. Human reason says if you can't see it, or hold it, or spend it, it's worthless. God's wisdom says seek first the things of God. Nurture your soul with the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Share your faith with those who do not know God. Prepare yourself and your family for eternity. That's where you will spend the vast majority of your existence.

In this life you will often see God's wisdom in sharp contrast with human reason. Our calling, as believers, is to be less and less like a child of the world, and more and more like God's child, to follow God's wisdom and not man's reason.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,
Like earthly children of earthly parents we sometimes fail to see and appreciate your wisdom. Give us strength to follow you when human reason balks, to trust you when human reason starts to doubt, to believe your promises when human reason sees no hope, to look to things spiritual when human reason tells us to rely on the things of this world. In Jesus' name we ask this. Amen.