

Wisdom Alert

Proverbs 1: 20-33 James 3: 13-18

The older we get, the more confident we become of our own wisdom, acquired over decades of learning and experience. The centuries of collective wisdom in this room alone could sink a ship. But that very confidence in our wisdom can also be our undoing.

In my Life Mapping class at MCI, before the halfway point, I try to meet with each student briefly to hear their story, listen to their aspirations, and try to craft with them a starting personal vision and mission statement. Ideally, it takes 15-20 minutes per student. Some can get quite involved, however.

On Friday, I spent most of the day interviewing my students as I could get access to them. I still have to interview about half my class. While it's exhausting to spend a whole day being extroverted and focused on listening, asking questions, and then interpreting, it's also a spiritually powerful time to realize that God's promise abides in each one, looking for an avenue of fulfillment. When we have finished and they walk away with a vision and mission statement for their lives – albeit quite preliminary – they feel different, more purposeful, more capable, more hopeful, even the guy with multiple life sentences.

But there was one student, who I'll call Mitch, who troubled me. He is Pentecostal and had spent a lot of his time before prison working for an evangelist, traveling, doing fundraising, setting up events, and he felt that he was a spiritually mature and empowered person. One topic that I always bring up is education and personal growth.

Mitch mentioned that he was taking university level courses in counseling. I raised my eyebrows, knowing how exceptional it is for an inmate to have access. Frankly, I don't know of any university that offers programs, much less degrees, to inmates. Mitch said he was studying for a Masters degree.

As we talked further – and Mitch is quite the talker – issues of relational problems emerged, and Mitch had a hardline man-is-the-head-of-the-household attitude. He insisted that he had never done anything wrong, and he was going to dictate terms as the head of the household is supposed to do. Now I'm wondering what kind of counseling courses he's taking, because it doesn't sound like he's getting good information.

I questioned the source of the materials, the accreditation, the content, and the guidance. Mitch insisted that this university had been around for decades, and that its instructors and curriculum were all top notch. He mentioned the name of the school.

I know that there are a lot of inmates who take courses and get "degrees" and "certifications" through mail order curriculum because it's the only thing available and it tends to be relatively inexpensive. Most of them appear to be of negligible quality, about what you pay for them. Frankly, they are fundamentalist Bible trash.

To give you an example, the school providing Mitch's materials actually mocks accreditation. Here is what it says on their web site:

Secular accreditation has become nothing more than educational idolatry (Ex. 20:3). Today this intimidation is so polarizing, even Christians are afraid to attend a fundamentally sound Bible school the government hasn't endorsed. Please consider this question my friend: Is "Caesar's" sanction the criteria necessary for God to tell us well done thou good and faithful servant Matt. 25:21), or is there something else?

That, my friends, is a huge crock of guacamole. But it gets worse.

Mitch's program is called "Nouthetic Counseling" ("Nouthetic" is a clever concoction using the Greek word for "spirit" <nous> and God <theos> to name itself; Spirit of God Counseling.) Here is the description of this program:

Nouthetic counseling is not psychology or psychoanalysis. Nouthetic counseling is simply directed discussion led by the Nouthetic counselor who uses the Word of God and relies on the Holy Spirit to change the life of the counselee. According to Dr. Jay Adams in the Christian Counselor's Commentary: "Counseling . . . is the process of bringing Christians face to face with the Savior in His Word in order to effect the changes that He wants. And when a counselee comes to Jesus for change, that change can be as certain as His promises in the Bible. Only Biblical counselors can offer such certainty of change.

And all of this quackeroo is tied to a well known, longstanding televangelist who charges inmates \$300 for the full counseling program.

Having taken this course of study, Mitch was uber-confident in his wisdom, yet a scratch at the surface revealed that this "wisdom" was a sham. Despite my challenges, he remained steadfast in his self-confidence.

It's troubling that this man has been led astray, has been taken advantage of, and has come to believe that he has, in effect, a nearly-divine level of wisdom. In fact, it has made him worse off, and made him immovable in his self-regard.

Think of Mitch as we consider the passage from Proverbs chapter 1.

Wisdom is a woman calling out to people who reject her words. Earlier, Proverbs introduced Wisdom as coming from Solomon, and then as a father talking to his son about his mother's teaching, his mother being Wisdom. Wisdom is the presence and voice of God. Some might see a correlation to the Holy Spirit. Whatever the case, God is present in a **feminine** dimension. That freaks out some folks terribly, God's voice as a woman's voice. They just go to pieces because God has to be masculine. For example, I'm sure Mitch would freak out.

Anyway, Wisdom cries out continually, trying to convince people to change their ways. Wisdom gets a bit nasty, promising a mocking laugh when calamity overtakes these simple sinners and they cry out to her, seeking salvation. This harsh tone is an attempt to get people to wake up and make the changes in their lives that need to occur. The consequences are a matter of life or death. Only a fool would disregard her words.

But you know how we are. We're loath to change to begin with, but we're also full of our wisdom acquired from our encounters with the world. Surely, this wisdom we possess is adequate for the purposes of God and reflects the values of the Kingdom. How could it be otherwise? I've invested so much time in the church. In worship, in volunteering, in all kinds of ways, and I've been doing it for years and years. I know! And having said that, we're little different than Mitch. We've grown so much older and so much wiser, or so we believe. In fact, it is very rare when our face has an expression like you see on the face of the child on the bulletin cover, reveling in that "a-ha!" moment. Children have those moments, not folks looking back fondly on the disappearance of middle age.

Toward the end of this selection in Proverbs, the tone turns rather bitter. *I will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you, when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind ... Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me. Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and be sated with their own devices.*

It sounds like Wisdom has gotten really nasty and may be letting fail and suffer those who made mistakes by ignoring and even scoffing at true and sacred wisdom. What happened to the grace of God? Why would Wisdom withdraw and leave people high and dry? It isn't so much Wisdom's doing as it is our own. Having rejected sacred wisdom, and having clung to our self-confidence in worldly wisdom, *our* acquired wisdom, we proceed to make decisions and dig ourselves holes, and rather than seek the better way, the sacred way, we double-down on our skill, our expertise, our experience, our accumulated wisdom. We always have that option of turning from our cherished wisdom, but we tighten our grip on it, and keep working a failed enterprise until all is lost.

Wisdom did her best, and would have what's needed to bail you out. But there comes a point of no return, and a faith unto oneself that puts us beyond reach, and plunges us into calamity.

A great case in point: Pharaoh in his confrontations with Moses. Pharaoh trusted his own counsel and the wisdom of his counselors. He felt assured by his own divinity, by his own status as a god, that he could overcome this miserable character Moses and his Yahweh God. Moses had no empire, and his Yahweh God was the God of the slaves, the losers, the ones who served him and his grand designs. Even after the night of death of the first borns, Pharaoh relents only for a moment to let Moses and the Hebrews go. Then he returns to his senses, but turns aside from truly sacred wisdom. He returns to

his confidence in his divine mandate to rule, and goes forth with his army of chariots. And it ends in calamity. As Proverbs says: *Therefore, they shall eat the fruit of their way, and be sated with their own devices. For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them; but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.*

The passage in the James epistle also considers wisdom, albeit no longer personified as a female image of the person of God. James has been talking about speech and the taming of the tongue which can prevent many faults and guide a person more toward righteousness. He turns to wisdom as another example of how one can move toward righteousness, or not.

The “good life” has its witness in daily life, in “deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom,” the key word in the phrase being “humility.” The pretender of wisdom, the one who carries “bitter envy and selfish ambition” is revealed in a witness of “disorder and evil practice.” It is when a person derives their identity and their worth from their acquisitions and possessions, their status and their pridefulness. This is not sacred wisdom, but profane wisdom, earthly and unspiritual.

By contrast, wisdom from the spiritual and the sacred is “first of all pure, then peace-loving, gentle, willing to yield, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.” These are all suitable characteristics that define that key word “humility.”

In the end, we find that sacred wisdom gets accessed from a spirit of humility. If we can recognize that the wisdom we so typically cherish and the assumptions that we dearly covet may be inaccurate, false, and even harmful, then we will need that spirit of humility to see past ourselves, to see through our own arrogance and confidence. By trusting ourselves *less*, we open ourselves *more* to the better wisdom that is spiritual and sacred. And we come to reflect the proper witness to Jesus and his ministry as the members of the body of the living Christ, becoming healers, showing grace, and working for justice and peace, the fruits of the Kingdom.