



## WISDOM THAT LEADS TO WORSHIP

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 Jeremiah 8:4-10:25  
 Eighth Message  
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Who is the wise person?

Is it the one who checks his oil regularly? One question that my children hear from me a lot is, "Have you checked your oil lately?" They will probably put it on my tombstone.

Who is the wise person?

A wise husband tells his wife that he loves her in person, not by e-mail.

A wise child does not put peas up his nose.

A wise person attends to health problems by getting immediate attention and periodic evaluations.

A wise person invests in the right stocks and mutual funds.

A wise person would have bought ten houses in the Bay Area twenty years ago!

When it comes to possessions and careers, the things of the world, we are good at making wise decisions. However, when it comes to being morally and spiritual-ly wise we lack the common sense that seems so true of us in other areas. What is true wisdom? Who is the wise person? Our text this morning from the book of Jeremiah answers this question.

Jeremiah 8:4–10:25 is one unit of study. Like most of this book, the flow of the text is not cohesive. In this prophecy images are pieced together somewhat like a photograph album, without chronological sequence. Certain themes are presented and then repeated. The poetic images hit us with hurricane-force winds. They are not meant to instruct our minds, but to move our hearts.

In our last study we saw that one of the key words in chapter 7, *shema*, means to listen or obey. In today's section the key word is *hokma*, which is translated wisdom. There are many points that we could discuss from this text, but what I want to focus on is wisdom.

The word wisdom or wise appears nine times in the text. It refers to the idea of being skilled in an activity, like the skill of a craftsman, a weaver, a shipbuilder. This is the same word that is used extensively in the book of Proverbs: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Prov 9:10). Wisdom is the skill of living life rightly and beautifully, in the context of the kingdom of God. It is a spiritual as opposed to a natural quality. James says that there is a wisdom from above

and a wisdom from below; one is heavenly, the other is earthly. Wisdom understands God's design for life and lives accordingly.

The opposite of wisdom is stupidity. This word occurs three times in chapter 10. It means brutish, dull-hearted, unreceptive. A stupid man does not have the rationality that differentiates men from animals. He is foolish and without knowledge.

Sin and idolatry is the context for this study of wisdom in contrast to stupidity. Judah was fixated on the worship of Baal and other gods. In the same way we are obsessed by the idols of our world which compete for our affections. Our spiritual life hangs in the balance. Jeremiah asks, "Who is the wise man?" He puts this question to Judah and to us, too. Are we spiritually wise? If we aren't, then the prophet will shock us with the revelation of our stupidity.

In this text we are going to point out and discuss three aspects of true wisdom.

### A. True wisdom recognizes the authority of God's word (Jer 8:8-9)

**"How can you say, 'We are wise,  
 And the law of the LORD is with us'?  
 But behold, the lying pen of the scribes  
 Has made it into a lie.  
 The wise men are put to shame,  
 They are dismayed and caught;  
 Behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD,  
 And what kind of wisdom do they have? (Jer 8:8-9,  
 NASB)**

The people of Judah claimed to be wise because they possessed God's word. However, having God's word doesn't guarantee any favored status with God. The Israelites thought they were wise, but they were fools. The scribes had taken out their red markers and trimmed God's word to what was acceptable to them. Their "lying pen" had changed truth into lies. Others rejected God's word completely. The people were caught in their own trap. What kind of wisdom did they really possess? It was a wisdom that did not benefit them in the least.

It is foolish and stupid to ignore or reject the words that God has spoken. We spend our time poring over financial statements, market analysis and product evaluations. We find dime-store novels engrossing. We have in-depth knowledge of merchandise catalogs. We surf the Web for hours. But what about God's word? Why

do we give less time to the truth that can save us and redeem us and teach us how to laugh, cry, work, play, serve and love?

True wisdom means putting all of God's word at the center of our lives. We shouldn't be content with the Reader's Digest version of the Scriptures. We can't whittle the word down to what is comfortable and acceptable. We should desire to know the whole counsel of God, to listen intently to it, allowing it to shape us and submitting ourselves to it. Let us place our trust in what God speaks to us. As R. A. Torrey said once, "The truly wise man is the one who believes the Bible against the opinions of any man. If the Bible says one thing, and any body of men says another, he will decide, "This book is the word of him that cannot lie."

When we buy something that needs to be assembled, the first thing we do is unpack the box and begin the assembly process. We feel certain that we know how to put it together, but somewhere in the process we find ourselves in trouble. Something won't fit right. Only then do we consult the directions. Then we find that someone has already put them in the garbage. We get frustrated and angry and blame everyone in sight.

A wise person, however, reads the directions. If they say to put something together a certain way, that is what we should do. If the label on a garment says "wash by hand," that is what we should do. If the tire says, "do not over-inflate," that is what we should do. If we are warned to wear protective glasses, that is what we should do. Everyone knows that it is foolish not to read and follow the directions, but we do it anyway. We fail to follow directions with things that we buy and we do the same with the spiritual life. We seem to think that we know all the necessary information and we fail to consult the manual. It doesn't make sense. Eugene Peterson comments: "What we must never be encouraged to do, although all of us are guilty of it over and over, is to force Scripture to fit our experience. Our experience is too small; it's like trying to put the ocean into a thimble. What we want is to fit into the world revealed by Scripture."<sup>1</sup>

#### **B. True wisdom means that we do not trust in human and earthly resources (Jer 9:23-24)**

**"Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things, "declares the LORD. (Jer 9:23-24)**

At its core, idolatry can be defined as seeking to discover the ultimate meaning and purpose of life within the world of our own control and production. We crave autonomy. We want to live life on our own terms, trusting in our own resources. We "boast" in our own abilities. The word means praise. A person who lacks wisdom praises himself – his wisdom, his might, his riches.

He believes he is solely responsible for attaining some earthly status or blessing. He places all his hope and confidence in these things, believing that earthly wisdom, might and riches will somehow make his life special.

But that is stupid. None of these things is eternal. Human wisdom will change, strength will fail, riches will decay. The logic that makes us rich today may bankrupt us tomorrow. Age takes away beauty and strength. We amass riches only to leave them for someone else to enjoy. Someone will set the vault two inches too low at the Olympic Games. Today's Olympic heroes will be forgotten tomorrow.

Forbes magazine recently published its annual rankings of the nation's wealthiest people. Bill Gates still tops the list, although his worth decreased from 85 to 63 billion dollars. If he has a few more bad years he may be reduced to a mere millionaire. Intel co-founder Gordon Moore moved up to number five on the list, but maybe that will change this week. Millionaires and billionaires are common in Silicon Valley. It seems almost anyone can join the club. Even Martha Stewart made the Forbes list. So did professional wrestler Vince McMahon, whoever he is. It's hard to be impressed.

True wisdom forces us to look beyond ourselves to God. We must humble ourselves, realizing that self-sufficiency is a myth. We must learn that what we really desire does not come from our own wisdom, strength and riches. These things will never satisfy our deepest desires and longings or make us the kind of people we want to be.

What we really desire is justice, lovingkindness and righteousness. Deep down we desire character and spiritual maturity, qualities that we do not possess in ourselves. We cannot produce these things; they come only from knowing God. They are his gifts to us. Three fading glories are replaced by three unfading glories. Let us boast in God alone. Let our praise be for him and not for ourselves.

The apostle Paul picks up on this aspect of wisdom in 1 Cor 1:18-31:

**For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**

**Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men,  
and the weakness of God is stronger than men.**

**For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor 1:18-31)**

There is nothing wrong with owning houses and cars or with seeking a satisfying and challenging career. What is wrong is boasting, praising ourselves and taking pride in these things, thinking that we accomplished everything ourselves. What is wrong is thinking that somehow these material possessions will give us what our hearts desire. Might and riches will not change our inner lives. They will not make us more mature or give us character. Of course, selling all of our possessions and losing our jobs doesn't mean that we will gain character, either. What we desire is outside of ourselves. It comes from God.

So, as Christians we should not boast in the fact that we own an expensive home in Silicon Valley. We should not boast in our athletic ability. We should not boast in academic degrees. We boast in the Lord, in the cross, in our weakness and suffering. We die to ourselves and we look to God for justice, righteousness and loyal love. These are what give life eternal purpose. The world calls this foolishness, but God calls it wisdom.

**"My soul will boast in the Lord.  
The humble shall hear it and rejoice" (Psa 34:2).**

**C. True wisdom recognizes the difference between the impotence of idols and the majesty of God (Jer 10:1-16)**

**Hear the word which the LORD speaks to you, O house of Israel.  
Thus says the LORD,  
"Do not learn the way of the nations,  
And do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens  
Although the nations are terrified by them;  
For the customs of the peoples are delusion;  
Because it is wood cut from the forest,  
The work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool.  
They decorate it with silver and with gold;  
They fasten it with nails and with hammers  
So that it will not totter.  
Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they,  
And they cannot speak;  
They must be carried,**

**Because they cannot walk!  
Do not fear them,  
For they can do no harm,  
Nor can they do any good."  
There is none like Thee, O LORD;  
Thou art great, and great is Thy name in might.  
Who would not fear Thee, O King of the nations?  
Indeed it is Thy due!  
For among all the wise men of the nations,  
And in all their kingdoms,  
There is none like Thee.  
But they are altogether stupid and foolish  
In their discipline of delusion— their idol is wood!  
Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish,  
And gold from Uphaz,  
The work of a craftsman and of the hands of a goldsmith;  
Violet and purple are their clothing;  
They are all the work of skilled men.  
But the LORD is the true God;  
He is the living God and the everlasting King.  
At His wrath the earth quakes,  
And the nations cannot endure His indignation.  
Thus you shall say to them, "The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and from under the heavens."  
It is He who made the earth by His power,  
Who established the world by His wisdom;  
And by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens.  
When He utters His voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens,  
And He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth;  
He makes lightning for the rain,  
And brings out the wind from His storehouses.  
Every man is stupid, devoid of knowledge;  
Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols;  
For his molten images are deceitful,  
And there is no breath in them.  
They are worthless, a work of mockery;  
In the time of their punishment they will perish.  
The portion of Jacob is not like these;  
For the Maker of all is He,  
And Israel is the tribe of His inheritance;  
The LORD of hosts is His name. (Jer 10:1-16)**

This tremendous word unmasks the foolishness of idols and the stupidity of worshipping them instead of the one true God. The people of Judah made figurines and images; we worship at the altar of our own needs and wants.

The words "delusion" (verses 3, 8) and "worthless" (15) are the same word that we encountered in 2:5: they "walked after emptiness and became empty." The word means vanity, emptiness, vapor, nothingness.

Consider the contrast in the text between idols and God:

Idols are the work of human hands. No one created

God. God is.

Idols can't move, speak or walk. They are like scarecrows in a field. They have to be tied down so they don't totter. There is no breath in them. There can be no relationship with them. God is living. He breathes. He moves. He speaks. He is a person. There is the possibility of a relationship with him through Christ.

Idols are false gods. God is true and reliable.

There are many idols. There is only one God.

Idols are temporary. They perish. God is everlasting. He is forever.

Idols are common, ordinary. God is unique. He is "other." He is great.

Idols have no power or might. They cannot create. They cannot give life. They have no power to do good or evil, to bless, give hope or protect. An idol cannot love you. It can never bestow on you a sense of well-being. You can never find acceptance in its face. But God has the power to give life. He made the earth by his power. He established the world by his wisdom. He speaks and nature responds: clouds, lightning, rain and wind waft over the earth. We can find love and acceptance and blessing in the arms of God.

All of these lead to the conclusion that is repeated twice: "there is none like Thee." God is great. There is no comparison between God and our idols.

It is absolutely stupid and foolish to place our hope in idols. They seem so impressive, but they are of no avail. They have no value. Nothing of moral or spiritual consequence can be expected from such material sources.

So why do we do worship them? The text gives two reasons. First, we learn the "way of the nations, the customs of people." We follow the majority because we don't want to stand out. The second reason is the link

between economics and religion, between gold and silver, violet and purple. Idols are not just religious objects. They are commodities with economic value that lead to a false and destructive organization of community life.

True wisdom understands the difference between God and idols. True wisdom recognizes that there is no comparison between what idols cannot do and what God can do. Idols will leave us empty. God gives us fullness. It does not require much intelligence to make the proper choice. Jeremiah doesn't even draw a conclusion. It is obvious.

As I reflected on this text I had difficulty grasping this truth about the greatness of God, that "there is none like Thee." Then I realized that it is worship that allows us to enter into this mystery. That is what worship is - contemplating, meditating on, and responding to the greatness of God. This is what gives us a sense of awe and wonder. And this is why we gather as a community of believers. We can't grasp this truth in the drive-through or on the cell phone. We have to stop and listen and ask God to reveal to us what is invisible, unknowable and unfathomable.

What kind of wisdom are we seeking? A wisdom of our own making or of God's making? True wisdom will put us at God's feet, soaking up his every word and taking it to heart. True wisdom will cause us to boast only in the Father, in his Son, and in the cross. We have no need to praise ourselves. True wisdom leads us to worship, so that we might see the folly of idols diminished in the majesty of God.

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1. Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2000) 74.