

GOSPEL WISDOM

WEEK 5: Divine Invitation

'The Plight of Man and the Power of God' led to the death of Jesus which, in turn, made the 'gospel wisdom' personified by Jesus, the final revelation of God to humanity. As we look back at the solution to the problem of sin, can we doubt the wisdom of the cross and all it stands for? Jesus had no doubts about His fate, and over the last three weeks we have seen that His unique perspective on the God-humanity situation combined with His divine credentials and extraordinary wisdom and authority makes Him the ideal Person to listen to if we want to reap the benefits of His wisdom legacy. That legacy consists of the good news which He proclaimed nearly 2000 years ago. The good news, however, technologically speaking, has an 'interactive' component, for the good news also came as an invitation from Jesus to respond to all that He said and came to earth to do. It is our response to that invitation that determines whether or not Jesus sees us as wise, for it is our response to His invitation that shows whether or not we have taken 'gospel wisdom' seriously.

Using Jesus' own words, we can see why we need to do so. Bearing in mind that Jesus just had three years of public ministry, He could not afford to waste time 'waffling'. All that God wanted to reveal about the plan of salvation and a life lived in the light of that, had to be packed into this relatively short time. And, when you come to the teaching of Jesus it would be hard to find anything that is not relevant. Every teaching given and the manner in which it was given was ideally suited to every spiritual and practical situation that we will face in life. It follows from this that time studying Jesus' words is never ever wasted.

But that does present us with a bit of a dilemma. How do we get a grasp of all that Jesus taught given the list of things He talked about, mentioned a couple of weeks ago. We can be familiar with the Sermon on the mount, the Lord's prayer, the parables, stories of the miracles and verbal encounters with His disciples and others He met. We probably also have a general overview of His less pleasant encounters with members of the Jewish religious establishment. But how does all of this teaching fit together in order for us to classify Jesus' teaching as 'gospel wisdom'?

GOSPEL WISDOM

The way our Bibles are divided give us a good way of doing this. New Testament really means a new covenant or dispensation. In other words, all that Jesus taught and the way He taught it were to define and illustrate what His coming to earth meant for God's new way of dealing with humanity to bring its salvation to fruition. What follows will all be very familiar to you. It's been said in different ways before, but please bear with me, because in terms of gospel wisdom it leads to a very significant conclusion.

What we can say first of all is that with gospel wisdom we are dealing with certainty. Jesus' credentials guarantee that. Unlike any other form of wisdom, we can clearly identify all its essential elements - the things that make it what it is. Looking at those new essential elements we find that they are built on an Old Testament foundation. The revelation God had given of Himself and of His plans to send a Messiah, were still a part of the new revelation. We have quoted many times, Jesus own words that He had not come to abolish the law but had come to fulfil it. When asked what that law was, Jesus replied with the words of Deuteronomy

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength and your neighbour as yourself.

When He wanted to teach the disciples about the meaning of His death and resurrection, He started with Moses and the prophets. That means that all the fundamental principles of God's covenant existence, nature, work and revelation of Himself in the history, prophecy and wisdom of one nation reach their highest level in the Person of Jesus Christ. And when Jesus started His public ministry, He still preached the key requirement of the Old Testament covenant - repent.

**From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near
(Matthew 4:17 NIV)**

John the Baptist said

GOSPEL WISDOM

What was new was the reason for the now urgent call to repent, for all that was to be revealed had to be done so in just three years. We could say that people had three years to see God at work, to hear what He had to say in terms they could understand and, more importantly, having enough teaching of the new beginning to enable them to make a choice between believing in the Person they could see and hear or rejecting all He claimed to be. We often think how easy it would have been to believe if only we had been among the people who actually met Jesus. But that meant we would have been Jews and given their religious beliefs, would it really have been that easy? In many ways we are more blessed because we have the whole Bible today and Jesus' words.

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

(John 20:29 NIV)

As we have seen, belief in Jesus' Person and words and deeds none of which can be separated from the other, is the essence of gospel wisdom. Perhaps you feel like I do that we just can't leave it there. We can be sure of its Source and what it consists of but, how do we get it and how do we know whether or not we actually possess it. The most accurate way is to examine our response to a divine invitation - for second only to Jesus' use of the word 'Father' was His use of the word 'kingdom'. The new beginning was the inauguration of the kingdom of God by Jesus. So one way of taking the measure of whether or not we possess gospel wisdom is by examining our attitudes and beliefs about the concept of the kingdom of God. To what extent do we agree with what Jesus taught about it? This is a concept which has been subjected to much scholarly research and a wide range of theological meaning has resulted from that. It is said to be original and distinctive, invisible and eternal, universal in scope and design, present yet future, moral and spiritual rather than political - and there is extensive discussion about all of these. None of these classifications are complete because they only concentrate on parts of the concept. Unfortunately, too, sometimes they have led to unbiblical meanings, which were never intended or existed when the words about the kingdom were first uttered by Jesus. So, the only theological meaning

GOSPEL WISDOM

that is of any importance is that which Jesus intended to convey, since, as we've seen, Jesus, Himself inaugurated the Kingdom while on earth and continues to protect and sustain it in the existence of the church.

I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.

And since the time of Christ, a divine invitation to enter that kingdom has been extended to everyone on earth for as long as this world lasts. The Invitation, originally included the Hebrews only, but because of Jesus' earthly ministry, it was widened to include the whole of humanity. It was revealed in a number of ways that the corporate existence of a people of God was to be redefined in spiritual rather than along national or ethnic lines. Jews were ingrained with what is termed nowadays 'pride of race'. They were children of Abraham, children of the Mosaic covenant, both historical beliefs making them certain of God's acceptance when judgement came. But like John the Baptist before Him, Jesus disabused them of this notion and rendered this heritage of no account in the new kingdom. He praised the faith of the Roman centurion with words that must have angered the Jews present. And to add insult to injury, as it were, Jesus told the Jews their righteousness had to exceed that of the religious authorities who were deemed to have reached the highest standards of righteousness achievable by a human being.

“There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. 29 People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. 30 Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.”
(Luke 13:28-30 NIV)

I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. 12 But the subjects of the kingdom will be

GOSPEL WISDOM

thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

(Matthew 8:11-12 NIV)

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 5:20 NIV)

This is why the concept was so vigorously resisted. It wasn't easy for Jews to accept this, especially when Jesus explained the nature of the kingdom of God in answer to a question from the Pharisees. The kingdom was a moral and spiritual one, not a political one as Jesus later explained to Pilate.

Luke 17:20:21

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is’ or ‘There it is’, BECAUSE THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU.

Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

(John 18:36 NIV)

In terms of whether or not we possess gospel wisdom, we have to look at our inner selves. Jesus clearly defines residency in the kingdom in terms of an inward disposition rather than outward conformity to any dogma, creed or ceremonial observances. If this is the case, then we can legitimately ask what does that disposition consist of in practical terms. It may be an illegitimate way of finding out, but try using the Sermon on the Mount as a quiz and see how many points you score. And, ‘No’ I didn't dare try it! But you can see the point. The Sermon on the Mount spells out the ideal characteristics of a citizen of the kingdom, but the first one is the most essential for it is an absolute prerequisite.

GOSPEL WISDOM

**“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:3 NIV)**

Poor in spirit indicates the recognition that Jesus spoke the truth about our spiritual condition which is so dire that we can never achieve any standard of righteousness that would make us acceptable as citizens of God’s kingdom. The Pharisee and tax collector parable is an illustration of this. To admit to any kind of poverty takes humility. In the face of the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, very few Jews would have been prepared to admit spiritual shortcomings publicly. But if admission of spiritual poverty takes humility, then it follows that self proclaimed spiritual wealth is the product of inner pride and arrogance. Throughout the Bible, pride is anathema to God for it is the seed bed of all the forms of rebellion against Him.

Spiritual poverty is also an expression of a need. Many times we need things, but how much time and effort are we prepared to invest to get them. It’s another way of asking, how much value do we put on what we really need. Can any of us honestly say our sense of spiritual poverty has made us first seek the kingdom of God before considering what we need to pay for basic necessities like food, drink, clothing and shelter. Can any of us honestly say we have never worried because we are too busy meditating on how to seek and find the kingdom of God.

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33NIV)

Jesus, did not say these words, however, to depress us and make us feel spiritually inadequate or guilty. The force of His words is that ultimately being in God’s kingdom must take precedence over other worldly concerns. Yes, we must be prudent about physical and material matters, but these alone will not serve us well when we too must face God in judgement. The parable of the man who built bigger barns expecting to sit back and enjoy the rest of his life in luxury and comfort, reckoned without God. That was his undoing, not building bigger barns.

GOSPEL WISDOM

What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul

(Matthew 16:26 NIV)

Jesus tells us the value being part of the kingdom of God on a par with the man who sold all he had to buy the field with treasure hidden in it. Note we are not told the nature of the treasure, but it was obviously much more valuable than anything else the man possessed. The merchant who found the fine pearl did the same thing in order to possess it. A pearl too is hidden, until the oyster is opened and reveals its contents.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it

(Matthew 13:44-46 NIV)

On an even more positive note, being in the kingdom means we will never be lost spiritually or eternally again. Luke gives us three parables not in Matthew. He tells us of Jesus speaking of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and, one of David’s favourites, the lost son. As citizens of the kingdom, not one person will ever be abandoned - no one will be left behind. Sheep have the reputation of going astray, wandering away from the path. Coins get lost, more often than not by falling out of the place they are kept. People get lost, more often than not through their own wilful and deliberate disobedience to what they know is right. Jesus is telling us that on the path to sanctification there will be times when we will lose our way, but that does not necessarily mean disaster.

And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. 29 My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand

(John 10:28-29 KJV)

GOSPEL WISDOM

The One who had come to seek and save the lost, was the One who could with complete confidence declare on the eve of His crucifixion:

While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

(John 17:12 NIV)

And this was reaffirmed at the moment of greatest danger in the Garden of Gethsemane when the disciples too were under threat of arrest and possibly could have suffered the same fate.

Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. If you are looking for me, then let these men go.” This happened so that the words he had spoken would be fulfilled: “I have not lost one of those you gave me.”

(John 18:8-9 NIV)

Possessing gospel wisdom is accepting all that Jesus said about the kingdom of God and having the mindset required to qualify for entry into it and to accept the invitation to enter it. All of what we have said so far points to a spiritual existence that can be a reality for us in the here and now. Being in the kingdom of God involves a new beginning spiritually and, although it may involve many adjustments, some of which may prove difficult to manage, there is the assurance that we have gained more than we have lost. There is also the assurance that the One who has brought this kingdom into being is fully in control of all that concerns the welfare of its citizens. And that brings us full circle again, for for it too is personified in the One who has provided the means to enter into the kingdom. Communion constantly reminds us that our salvation is the result of the new covenant in Christ's blood. But before Jesus told His disciples this in the upper room, we are told of the way He described the means of entry to the people He came into contact with. For example, the image of the gate is a recurring motif. It illustrates Jesus statement “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me

GOSPEL WISDOM

**“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it
(Matthew 7:13-14 NIV)**

**“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.
(John 10:1-2 NIV)**

**Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture
(John 10:7-9 NIV)**

It is also significant, that some of the miracles which were the manifestations of the power of the kingdom took place at gates. Life was given to the widow of Nain’s son when Jesus met the funeral procession at the gate of the town. And the pool of Bethesda where the paralysed man was healed was situated at the Sheep Gate at Jerusalem. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the beggar at his gate, focused on the eternal destinies of the two men.

**As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her
(Luke 7:12 NIV)**

**Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. 3 Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed
(John 5:2-3 NIV)**

GOSPEL WISDOM

**At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores
(Luke 16:20-21 NIV)**

I said at the beginning that there is a certainty about gospel wisdom that we find nowhere else. But like invitations we receive in life, accepting an invitation is only the start of a process. We have to make the effort to go to whatever event the invitation mentions. Sometimes a change of mind or circumstances can lead to a withdrawal of the acceptance and although the invitation remains in place, for whatever reason, it is set aside and ignored. And once the event has passed there is no further opportunity to avail yourself of it. Unlike the invitations we receive in life, however, the invitation to enter the kingdom of God will last globally as long as the world lasts, but only for each individual lifetime. The question for all of us is whether or not we will be wise enough to accept the invitation Jesus offers to each one of us. And if we have accepted, how can we then be sure, that everything promised in that invitation will come to us?

Jesus gave us very simple ways to ensure our guaranteed entry into the Kingdom of God.

John 5:34

I tell you the truth, whoever bears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

John 8:31

...If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

John 14:15 & 23

If you love me you will obey what I command....If anyone loves me he will obey my teaching.

Matthew 7:24 & 26

GOSPEL WISDOM

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.....But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand

We saw last week there is a clear connection between Jesus' words and belief and obedience. Gospel wisdom has left nothing to chance. The credentials of the One issuing the invitation are impeccable. He guarantees entry into His kingdom on the basis of repentance and subsequent belief and obedience to His words and teaching, which constitute wisdom in all its fullness. And the first step to ensure we have gospel wisdom is to obey the foundational principle of it.

Matthew 6:33

Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added to you.