

# GOSPEL WISDOM

## WEEK 1: GOSPEL WISDOM DEFINED

Have you ever had the nagging sense that you've missed doing something or left something undone? Now when somebody else nags you about something like that it's bad enough. But when you start nagging yourself about it you sort of have to deal with it. I hadn't intended to carry on with the topic of wisdom because the last talks were meant just as an overview of the wisdom books of the Old Testament. But somehow, leaving Jesus as 'wisdom personified' tagged on to the end seemed like stopping in the middle of a story with no sense of where it was taking us. And Christianity Explored struck me too as 'gospel wisdom' that needed to be taken a bit further. When we looked at wisdom last time, I think we established that worldly wisdom cannot be defined at all, because it depends too much on worldly philosophies, political ideologies and socio-economic, cultural and religious sensibilities, all of which change with the passage of time. We came to a more manageable definition of wisdom in the Old Testament because God is identified as the definitive Source of wisdom and there is a body of Law and divine decrees and precepts that encapsulate what that wisdom consisted of. Since God is the Source of wisdom and He is the Creator God of the universe and the timeless Alpha and Omega, divine wisdom becomes an established and eternal yardstick to finding an understanding of the meaning of life and the way it should be lived. It's advantage over all kinds of earthly wisdom is that it is relevant in all life situations and circumstances at all times.

There was one drawback, however. Old Testament wisdom originated with a unique people who had, primarily, a corporate rather than a personal relationship with God and, consequently, had a particular view of the character and nature of God. Apart from some intimacy with individuals like the Patriarchs, King David and the prophets, the God of the Old Testament had given only partial revelations of Himself, hence there was the potential for a further revelation of divine wisdom. As Christianity Explored showed us, we know that came when God did give the fullest revelation of Himself possible, in the Person of Jesus Christ. From the moment of the Incarnation, divine wisdom became embodied in a Person. Because of that development, the wisdom of the Old Testament was taken to a higher level, for Jesus fulfilled the law to the extent that He revolutionised what wisdom consisted of and what it would mean for humanity from that time onward.

Both Christianity Explored and the last talk of Jesus as Wisdom personified left that nagging feeling of unfinished business and aroused all sorts of other questions. One problem about studying history is that it is drummed into you that if you make a statement you need credible evidence to back it up. That means asking all sorts of questions about a topic. Those that came to mind were: Was enough said about how

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or why Jesus can be portrayed as wisdom personified? What qualifications does He have to be considered as such? If His wisdom is something different to the wisdom of the Old Testament, do we need more information about it? Did Jesus change the perception of the wisdom of His forefathers? If so, in what way(s) did He do so? Some of those questions will be answered in the coming weeks but it is the last question that confirms more needs to be said about Jesus being wisdom personified, the simple reason being that Jesus' earthly ministry fulfilled all that constituted wisdom in the Old Testament through the living example of everything that He said and everything that He did. That is why, I have called these talks, for the want of a better term, 'gospel wisdom'.

So, in what ways did Jesus change what we understand by Old Testament wisdom. Like Christianity Explored, we start with Mark's plain, straight-to-the-point statement. **The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

Just as the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom in the Old Testament, so the beginning of gospel wisdom starts with the coming of Jesus Christ into the world and culminates in all that is entailed in His earthly ministry. The gospel, meaning 'good news', began with the proclamation of the coming of Christ by John the Baptist, himself the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. The 'good news' message preached by both John and Jesus was **Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.**

That was the good news for a people expecting the arrival of a long-awaited Messiah. It was the good news that after 400 years of silence, God was now going to intervene in the affairs of the world and bring about the kind of change only an almighty, all-wise God could engineer. But the Jews did not get what they were expecting. Taken at its most superficial level, what they got was an itinerant preacher, who admittedly was a great teacher and miracle worker, but who suffered the curse of crucifixion and therefore could not have been the Messiah. As Paul tells us, this was the conclusion reached by both Jews and Gentiles.

**Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**

**(1 Corinthians 1:22-24 NIV)**

Yet what Paul preached was for one purpose only

**(Colossians 2:2-3 NIV)**

**.....in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**

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It occurred to me perhaps the reason why we haven't asked these questions I've raised is because we take it so much for granted that what Jesus taught during His earthly ministry constitutes 'gospel wisdom' and all we have to do is believe it. Both Mark and Paul are telling us that a Person embodies the whole of the gospel, which itself is all the knowledge and wisdom we need for salvation. When, at a much later date, John wrote the 'Word became flesh and dwelt among us' his words summed up the Pauline concepts of Jesus, Himself being the gospel and the words that He preached and taught being the wisdom of the gospel. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:13-16 are the simple affirmation of what Jesus said the ministry of the Holy Spirit would be.

### **1 Corinthians 2:13-16**

**What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit- taught words.**

### **John 14:25-26**

**All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, THE HOLY SPIRIT, whom the Father will send in my name, WILL TEACH YOU ALL THINGS AND WILL REMIND YOU OF EVERYTHING I HAVE SAID TO YOU.**

Today our knowledge and understanding of what Jesus taught is aided by the Holy Spirit. Maybe it's just my perception, but the words of Jesus have almost become secondary to those of the apostle Paul whose contribution to Christian theology remains unsurpassed. Although Paul did not preach or teach anything that would have contradicted what Jesus had said, nevertheless, Paul's own personality and cultural background did influence some of the things he did write to the churches. That is why when we talk of 'gospel wisdom', we need to refer directly to what the Evangelists have recorded about Jesus Himself. It does have to be acknowledged that there is intense scholarly debate as to which of Jesus' words are His authentic utterances and what are those the Evangelists have attributed to Him. As Christians, we accept the Biblical record in its entirety and, logically, if the apostles wanted a strong foundation for belief in Jesus as the Messiah, they could not afford to attribute to Jesus words that would be constantly contradicted or disproved. On the other hand, an intensive study of all the words recorded as uttered by Jesus would reveal a harmony of all the essential components of the gospel He preached, taught and lived. So these talks will concentrate on those essential components as presented in the words of Jesus, for unlike any other definitions of wisdom or types of wisdom that exist in the world, the record of the Jesus' earthly ministry is the sum total of 'gospel wisdom.' That sum total includes all the words and deeds of Jesus, but these talks

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will concentrate on the words because they provide the answers to any questions we might have about why we should put our faith in Jesus and give Him the right to tell us how our lives should be lived.

That is why we can begin with the fact that both testaments are in agreement that wisdom can be taught by words.

### **Ecclesiastes 1:1**

**The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem.**

### **(Luke 11:31 NIV)**

**The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom; and now something greater than Solomon is here.**

### **John 13:13**

**You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am.**

The designation of 'teacher' was one that Solomon, later referred to as Qoheleth, gave himself when passing on the wisdom he had learned. What he had written in earlier books like Proverbs and Song of Songs was based the Israelite belief in a Creator God, on God as the God of history who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, made them a chosen people and a nation and had given them the Law He expected them to follow. But the wisdom of Solomon had more to do with the ethics and morality associated with allegiance to and belief in a Holy God. From that we could then assume that 'gospel wisdom' is simply something that is taught through the words of a recognised teacher and has simply to do with a written divine code of conduct and belief. But Jesus tells His audience that He is greater than Solomon. That being so, it follows that what He speaks carries greater weight than anything spoken by Solomon. Since Solomon's wisdom was proverbial throughout the ancient Near East, Jesus' statement must have, at least, raised a few eyebrows. Can His claims about being greater than Solomon and being a Teacher be substantiated?

Jesus' reputation as a Teacher during His lifetime and the public verdict on the wisdom of His teaching provide us with the evidence that they can. That Jesus was recognised as a teacher during His 3-year ministry, is not in doubt. In fact, He was primarily regarded as a teacher and in the gospel records, Jesus is addressed as 'Teacher' 60 times, the title being used by people from all different walks of life. The testimonies of His contemporaries were both positive and negative, but both focused attention on what He taught and the way He taught it. These examples include

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teachers of and an expert in the law, the Pharisees, a temple tax collector, private citizens, and a ruler.

**Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go**

**(Matthew 8:19 NIV)**

**When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”**

**(Matthew 9:11 NIV)**

**Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.”**

**(Matthew 12:38 NIV)**

**On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

**(Luke 10:25 NIV)**

**After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax**

**(Matthew 17:24 NIV)**

**While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore**

**(Mark 5:35 NIV)**

**A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”**

**(Luke 18:18 NIV)**

Given the level of respect given to ancient teachers, it would seem that Jesus through both His public preaching and teaching had earned this title, rather than have it officially conferred upon Him. This, too, would account for much of the hostility from those who were officially regarded as Israel’s teachers. His abilities to reach the mass of ordinary people engendered the murderous envy among the authorities whose authority was being undermined by Jesus ministry. In spite of no formal training, Jesus showed Himself to be totally qualified to teach on every topic that He mentions in the Gospels and also show the ‘experts’ where they were going wrong. To the religious authorities, this carpenter’s Son, in their eyes an untrained ‘nobody’ from the rural setting of Galilee, was nothing but a demagogue out to deceive the people. In the face of such opposition from the most powerful people in Judaism, how did Jesus not only merit His reputation as a teacher in His own day, but still retain recognition as a great teacher until the present day, even among those who have no time for what He taught? After all, these teachings have endured for nearly two

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millennia and so far, no one has disproved anything He said. No one can prove Jesus is not who and what He claimed to be. Yet, while rejecting His claims regarding divinity, the world will still give Him recognition as one of the greatest and wisest teachers the world has ever known. They will acknowledge that His words are still inspirational even in an atheistic and materialistic age.

More has been written about Jesus than any other human being, so differing opinions are to be expected. Even in His own day opinion was sharply divided. How would you feel about accepting the teaching of someone reputed to be a deceiver, a winebibber or possessed of a devil?

**62 The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. 63 “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’”**  
(Matthew 27:62-63 NIV)

**The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and you say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners**

**And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons.”**  
(Mark 3:22 NIV) (Luke 7:34 KJV)

On the other hand, think of the privilege it would be to learn from a great prophet of righteousness, a good man and the wisest of teachers.

**The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee”**  
(Matthew 21:11 NIV)

**As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”**  
(Mark 10:17 NIV)

**And when he was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works**  
(Matthew 13:54 KJV)

Faith accepts the latter descriptions of Jesus and by looking more closely at Jesus credentials we are not doubting any of them, but instead establishing the model by which all who claim God’s sanction for their words need to be measured and

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compared. For in addition to wisdom, people also recognised His teaching came with the kind of authority that their religious teachers lacked. I'll come back to both wisdom and authority in a week or so. More needs to be said about both because they are the most significant elements of the way Jesus taught and are the key characteristics that distinguish Jesus' teaching from that of any other religious teacher before, during or since His earthly ministry.

Accepting the general principles that Jesus' reputation as an outstanding Teacher was widely publicly acknowledged and that there was a recognition that, as a result of His obvious gifts of wisdom and authority, His teaching was important, what did He actually teach? We talk about primary, secondary and tertiary education teachers and lecturers today. We talk about subject specialists. All of these limit the range of teaching ability and the range of knowledge, understanding or experience involved. But when we come to what Jesus covered in just three years, we begin to get a grasp of the breadth and depth of 'gospel wisdom'.

Herbert Lockyer has written a book called "All the Teaching of Jesus." He has divided the chapters like this.

1. The Teacher, Himself, God, the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures
2. His Authority, Man, Sin, Repentance, Forgiveness, Salvation, Righteousness.
3. Faith and faithfulness, Humility, Money, Prayer, The Sabbath, Sickness and death
4. Love, Divine love, human love, false love, marriage and divorce, women, children
5. Ministry, Angels, heaven, Satan, hell, the Kingdom, the Second Coming.

The topics in these five chapters cover, the Godhead and the plan of salvation, the human dimension given the certainty that life ends in death, relationship issues both human and divine and the spiritual realm as it already exists and the climax of both human and spiritual realms when Christ comes again. Can you imagine any three year theology courses anywhere, even with the most brilliant theologians, that could cover every single item of essential information to ensure we can make an informed choice regarding our eternal destiny? Yet Jesus did this in the most non-academic way imaginable.

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In another part of the book Lockyer gives a more specific list of the areas of life which inspired many of Jesus' examples, parables, proverbs and principles, together with all the Bible references.

Indoors scenes show us Jesus' awareness of what went on in the home. Women grinding corn, heating the oven, making the bread, sweeping the floors, mending the clothes, the value of money, children at meals, children in bed.

From nature He drew on His knowledge and observation of flowers, chickens, sheep, ox in a pit, foxes, eagles, small seeds and big trees, sowing and reaping wheat and corn. The marketplace led to comment on the buying of sparrows, bargaining, measuring and children at play. He talked about trading in pearls, oil, weapons, cattle, slaves and land. The seashore too contributed to His words in all the references to fish and fishermen and the dragnet.

Personnel that appeared in what He said include noblemen, ancient kings, stewards, an unjust judge, a banker, a householder hiring labourers, groomsmen and maidens in attendance at a wedding. Also Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees publicans, Samaritans and gentile foes. Robbery on the road and of a house, the burden of debt, the misuse of wealth and the art of hospitality, youthful dissipation and prudent and eager resourcefulness all find expression in His speech.

I've taken these examples from this one book as a illustration of what Jesus included in His teaching, which, quite literally, depicted in some way or other, every facet of the lives of people of that time. All the key characteristics and pursuits of men, women and children were reflected in how Jesus presented the gospel message. Putting all these things in lists brought home to me the fact that, especially for older Christians who have had a church and Sunday School background, so much of what Jesus taught in passages like the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's prayer, the parables and stories of the miracles, is so familiar to us, that their significance to some extent has faded into the background of our Christian learning experience. The lists also brought home the fact that it would be impossible in six weeks to try explain how each individual item in these lists relates to the wisdom of the gospel message.

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What can be done, however, is to explore through questions about Jesus why we can assert that He personified 'gospel wisdom' and why Jesus' teaching has stood the test of time. Perhaps the key difference initiated by Jesus was the fact that He was a Teacher who engaged directly with people and continues to do so through the Holy Spirit. Dissemination through the writings of kings was appropriate for the times. Yet when the King of Kings started to spread His message, we don't find Him in what we might term today an 'ivory tower'. Jesus spoke to people wherever He found people prepared to listen to Him. He broke the barriers of gender and race when He spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well. He allowed Mary of Bethany to learn at His feet, a privilege usually reserved for men. He shared the good news with a teacher of Israel with 'ears to hear' like Nicodemus as well as with other hostile religious authority figures. He taught on land and water. The blind, the lame, the deaf and demon possessed were given the same attention, if not more, than the likes of the young ruler and the rich men who gave Him hospitality.

Above all, because Jesus delivered His message in words that resonated with the way people lived their lives they came as an invitation to consider the implications of what He said, rather than to demand or enforce belief in and obedience to His gospel message. Jesus left people with the information and left the choice to their own conscience. Also, by couching great spiritual truths in the verbal images of the home, the sea, the fields and the market place and the ordinary everyday activities of the people of the times, no one could claim lack of understanding because of what we would call today "theological jargon". These are just some of the differences between Old Testament wisdom and the wisdom we find in the New. The Person of Jesus makes the difference. That is why gospel wisdom can only be fully defined in the words that Jesus taught, first of all about Himself. That comes first because as we will see later, He is the connection between the human and spiritual planes of existence, which will one day culminate in His coming again to earth. As we explore what gospel wisdom entails through the words of Jesus, I hope we will all be able to say 'Amen' to Paul's words:

**...I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.  
(2 Timothy 1:12 NIV)**