

# GOSPEL WISDOM

## WEEK 3 WISDOM AND AUTHORITY

If wisdom comes through teaching and if we believe Jesus' own words about His origins, then why go beyond Jesus' deity to establish His credentials as a teacher of 'gospel wisdom'. In one sense, no reason whatsoever. Jesus is the Son of God, our Lord and Saviour so what He says is true and that's that. But if we want to learn more about Jesus and acquire a greater knowledge and assurance of what we just take for granted, exploring what makes Him the best teacher we could have, particularly in spiritual matters, is a faith building exercise. That is especially the case when we examine the 'how' of His teaching. Two words sum that up - Wisdom and authority. Both were recognised during His lifetime to the amazement of those who heard Him and the annoyance and anger of those who opposed Him.

We start with wisdom. As we have already seen, wisdom was a greatly prized characteristic and Jewish people looked to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament as the bedrock of what constituted a wise and godly life. Consequently, when Jesus began His public ministry, this characteristic was immediately apparent even in His home town.

**Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?" they asked Matthew 13:54**

Jesus did not depart from any of the essential principles in what had been written. Indeed, in saying that He had come to fulfil the law, He had adhered to every principle of wisdom that was derived from that law. In one sense we could say that He updated established wisdom so that it related to the new perspective that His coming into the world entailed. Wisdom was a distinguishing mark of Jesus teaching, but two points from these texts are worth noting.

**And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man. (Luke 2:52 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 (Luke 11:31 NIV)**

Jesus' own words about being greater than Solomon that have been mentioned before, and Luke's words that He 'grew' in wisdom both have

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implications for what made Jesus' teaching different. Jesus' reference to Solomon was directly related to the wisdom He possessed, which He claimed was greater than that of one who was revered by the Jews as the wisest man who had ever lived. We should not doubt that the Bible tells us that when Solomon asked God for wisdom it was given to him as a one-off gift and he exercised that gift, albeit, often not very wisely, throughout his reign. Contrast that with Jesus who 'grew' in wisdom. That means that Jesus' wisdom accumulated over His lifetime. We have the first indication of this at the age of twelve.

**(Luke 2:46-49 NIV)**

**After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."**

**49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"**

A casual reading of this incident leaves us with a little hint of Jesus' boyhood, but its implications go further. Understanding and answers clearly indicate Jesus had immersed Himself in the Jewish Scriptures. Being in His Father's house or about His Father's business as the King James version of the Bible puts it, is the first indication we have that Jesus is putting God first in His life. We could say that this was the equivalent of the Old Testament adage that the fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom.

We already saw from the Lenten studies that the glory of God was the primary concern of all that was entailed in Jesus' earthly ministry. We also know that when Jesus was on earth He was not omniscient. There were things like the timing of the end of the world that Jesus chose not to know while He was on earth. Logically, what this all points to is that Jesus' wisdom was not the result of an instantaneous divine gift which He had simply asked for like Solomon. Jesus chose to acquire wisdom through the normal human channels. In terms of teaching gospel wisdom that meant that He had to make the effort involved in gaining knowledge, understanding and experience of life lived as a human being in order to teach as He did. In spiritual matters. it meant knowing the Hebrew Scriptures. Then His preparation for His earthly

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ministry was completed by the power of the Holy Spirit which led to the kind of wisdom that was founded on immersion in and obedience to God's will.

So, while Jesus never denied His deity, it is obvious from numerous references that He was never self-reliant on it. It will probably be repeated quite a lot that Jesus' wisdom and authority were the result of His subordination to the Father's will. It therefore follows that when Jesus put God first, what He taught would only be what God wanted revealed. The Temple episode showed that before embarking on His public ministry He had grounded Himself in what is now our Old Testament. Despite the fact that, as a Person in the Godhead, He had been involved in the inspiration of those very texts, it is clear that He subjected Himself to the education every Jewish boy was required to undertake.

Jesus, in effect, had spent all His years of understanding from boyhood preparing for just a three year ministry. The evidence for this statement is the numerous occasions, Jesus either quoted the Old Testament or preceded His own words with the saying "It is written." In other words, when Jesus came to teach, He was thoroughly prepared. He knew and understood His subject for God's words and Jesus' words merged as they were spoken. That is what made such a noticeable difference between the wise teaching of Jesus and that of the religious leaders. Israel's teachers taught from the sense of religious superiority in knowledge and conduct. Lip service was paid to the fear of the Lord being the beginning of wisdom. They were too wise in their own eyes to see how Jesus was teaching that precept through His words and His life. They regarded themselves as experts in the interpretation of the Scriptures, and we have Jesus' own observation of their standards. They had added so many man-made traditions to the Scriptures that their teaching was more to do with the quoting of the most notable rabbis past and present rather than the plain words of the Old Testament.

**You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."**

**9 And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!**

**(Mark 7:8-9 NIV)**

As a result, the wisdom of God had become legalistic dogma encumbered by so many man-made rules that people no longer had any assurance of where they stood with God. By the time Jesus came an enormous gulf had opened up between those who regarded themselves as paragons of religious virtue and truth, and the mass of ordinary Jews.

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Gospel wisdom as taught by Jesus re-established the priority of not only God's revelation of Himself in the past, but the new revelation He was giving in the Person of Christ. That new revelation was and still is the foundation stone of gospel wisdom. For the first time and only time in history, every single person stands on the same footing before God, and a change in their spiritual circumstances depends on their response to Jesus. Unlike the teachers of the law who regarded themselves as distinct from ordinary people in levels of spiritual achievement, Jesus taught that everyone, including those reviled by the religious authorities like tax collectors and prostitutes, could come under God's favour through a personal relationship with a living Lord whose teaching changes people from the inside out, so that what people see on the outside is a reflection of what comes from the invisible thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and faith on the inside. Wisdom dictated that people had to be led into these new truths. Jesus did this through using what people were already familiar with and presenting it in such a way that coming to a way of life that would please God was open to anyone who was prepared to follow what Jesus taught. Jesus' teaching led people to the clear knowledge and understanding of God's perspective of the human condition and its ultimate destinies.

As believers, we have no problem accepting the wisdom of Jesus teaching about having a relationship with God. But, like the religious authorities of Jesus' day, unfortunately, the view that Jesus was a teacher sent from God is ridiculed by self-designated civilised and scientific, twenty first century generations. It is one thing to recognise wisdom, but it is something else to regard it as authoritative in the way life is to be lived. That is why, the wisdom of Jesus' teaching is of no account if it is not accompanied by acceptance of it as authoritative regarding the way we live.

Again the Evangelist's records show that Jesus' words did carry not only wisdom, but authority. The most damning indictment of the religious authorities of the day came from the crowd's verdict on the Sermon on the Mount.

**When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, 29 because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law  
(Matthew 7:28-29 NIV)**

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It was perhaps the obvious differences between the Jesus and the teachers of the law that aroused such hostility to Jesus for we have only one recorded example of a teacher of the law genuinely seeking what Jesus taught.

**“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”  
(John 3:2 NIV)**

**“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.**

**10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.**

**(John 3:9-11 NIV)**

We could say that Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus exposed the inadequacy of Israel’s teachers for Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus was saying to him about being born again. Since it appears from the accounts that this was the situation throughout the religious leadership, the refusal to heed Jesus’ words made them even more blind to the truth. The authorities may have been more blameworthy because they were in a position to know better. Yet while the Evangelists tell us that the crowds recognised this authority too, very few were prepared to submit to it, hence challenges to Jesus.

For example, authority was recognised by those who witnessed the healing of the paralysed man, by Temple guards and by witnesses to the casting out of demons.

**(Matthew 9:8 NIV)**

**When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man**

**(John 7:45-46 NIV)**

**Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, “Why didn’t you bring him in?”**

**46 “No one ever spoke the way this man does,” the guards replied**

**The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” 28 News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee**

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**(Mark 1:27-28 NIV)**

In the third incident it is significant that it was not just the miracle itself but the new teaching with authority that amazed the witnesses. This too incensed the religious authorities for when people recognised this authority and compared it to the words of the scribes and pharisees, what they were implying was that Jesus' teaching emanated from a different source to that of the religious authorities. After the Sermon on the Mount and the healing of the paralysed man, it was public opinion, including temple guards, that attributed a higher kind of authority to the words and deeds of Jesus.

We saw last week how Jesus had to claim God as witness to His telling the truth, but the challenge came to His authority as well. Such was the impact of His teaching that the religious authorities were rattled enough to try to undermine it by challenging its source.

**23 Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. 25 John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know." Then he said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things (Matthew 21:23-27 NIV)**

Jesus countered it by challenging them to name the source of John's baptism. If they said 'from heaven' they were condemned because they did not believe the Baptist's message. If they said from a 'human origin', the people would condemn them for John was a revered prophet. This was one example of Jesus refusing a direct answer in order to make them reflect on the answer to their own question. In a sense it implied that they needed to get back to the basics of their own Scriptures. Through those they would clearly recognise John as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy whose message had to be taken seriously. That would mean accepting Jesus as the One he heralded. By refusing to answer Jesus' question, they rejected their own Scriptures with the consequence that they not only rejected the

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messages of John and Jesus, they rejected Jesus Himself which meant rejecting the God they claimed to serve.

Even more than their additions to the Scriptures and speaking on the authority of their own members, it was this kind of hypocrisy that Jesus condemned them for. The religious authorities were living according to their standards of righteousness and that distinction was made very clear by Jesus when he compared the pharisee to the tax collector at prayer.

**To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed:‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. ’**

**13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner. ’**

**14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”**

**(Luke 18:9-14 NIV)**

What is so ironic is the fact that while the religious leaders refused to recognise the source of Jesus’ authority, a despised foreigner did so. The Roman centurion, whose servant was healed by just the word of Jesus recognised the authority of that word came from a higher source. In the soldier’s case, the higher power was the emperor. As a God-fearer, the clear implication is that he recognised Jesus’ authority as coming from God.

**7..... But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 8 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”**

**9 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel (Luke 7:8-9 NIV)**

Bearing in mind that it was God who had granted Solomon’s request for wisdom, it cannot be denied that the wisdom Jesus possessed came from the same source. But, unlike Solomon, whose authority was the result of his

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royal status or that of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus authority was identical to that of God. Wisdom and authority were the hallmarks of 'gospel wisdom'. They authenticated both the Messenger and the message. The two were inseparable because as mentioned before, when John stated The Word became flesh and dwelt among us He had identified the most significant distinction between Old and New Testament wisdom.

There are two aspects of this idea of authority. It is clear that people recognised a voice of authority as Jesus spoke. But we also have Jesus' own testimony as to that authority. Deity gave that to Him, but Jesus gave the consequences of heeding or ignoring the authority of His words in the parable of the wise and foolish builders. The text is crystal clear.

**Matthew 7:24 & 26**            **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 upon the sand.**

**Matthew 24:35**            **Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.**

**Matthew 28:16 & 20**            **All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me....make disciples of all nations.....teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you....**

We all know the consequences for both houses when the rains came. It may have appeared arrogant to state His words would never pass away and that such was His authority that only those who obeyed His commands could claim to be disciples. And from any other person, this would have indeed been the case. We can accept these statements from the lips of Jesus because Jesus was not speaking only on His own behalf. When He sent His disciples out to preach and teach His words their mission was directly related to His connection with and subordination to God's will and purpose. I have put these verses in reverse order because only as it is accepted that Jesus' words are a revelation of the Father, rejection of His words, is directly related to the rejection of God.

**Luke 10:22 & 16**            **All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who**

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**the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**

**He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me.**

This vital connection is explained further in John's gospel.

**John 5:19 & 24 ...I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.....I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.**

The words of verse 24 come to full circle in Jesus' high priestly prayer in 17:2-3

**For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.**

We could quote many other similar texts, but in Jesus' words in 5:24 and 17:2-3 we have the combination of 'authority', 'word' and 'belief'. Belief in the authority of Jesus' word leads to eternal life, which in practice, is knowing God in the intimate and personal way that Jesus demonstrated for us in His earthly ministry. It is also clear that eternal life is granted on Jesus' authority. God has decreed that belief in and obedience to Jesus, the Word become flesh, is the only qualification required to have the assurance of eternal life. That is the wise choice every human being has been given by God. But it is our own decision that determines whether we are wise or foolish!