

The Battle of Two Wisdoms

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To many Christians, it seems like our belief system and way of life have come under a spiritual assault that grows heavier every day. 60 years ago, when all the old-line denominations were still strong, there was a broad-based national consensus about what was right and what was wrong that lined up in many ways with our own. Back in the old days, if someone got divorced, everybody else in the neighborhood would whisper disapprovingly about it for the next year. If a woman got pregnant out of wedlock, she was often sent away to have her child in seclusion so that no one would find out. Today, of course, divorce and illegitimate children are so common that the public at large greets them with a shrug.

Nor are these little factoids isolated instances. It's fair to say that the basic worldview of the people around us has shifted so far from ours that they have become mutually incomprehensible. Many of our non-Christian acquaintances don't have the foggiest idea why we would go to church three times a week, refuse to drink alcohol, and live our lives for something more than the accumulation of stuff. Of course, we often don't understand them either.

In reality, there's nothing new about any of this. Paul points to the same phenomenon in 1 Corinthians 2:6-7. Back in the first century, there were plenty of worldlings who didn't understand Christianity either. They were baffled by these people who claimed to be the disciples of a man who was crucified for rebellion against the Roman government. They were mystified when these so-called Christians clung tenaciously to their faith, even in the face of persecution and death. As Paul says, though, the men and women of the early church were neither dumb nor deranged. Instead, they made their decisions on the basis of a completely different way of thinking that their contemporaries couldn't grasp.

Today, we too are called to a completely different way of thinking. If we want to be true disciples of Jesus, we must reject the world's worldview in favor of God's. Let's see how this works out in the battle of two wisdoms.

General Rules.

One of the main rallying cries of the wisdom of this age is "Do what you want!" Basically, our nation considers anything that is legal to be morally acceptable behavior. You can party all you want, have all the sex partners you want, live off your parents or the federal government, and generally violate every commandment in the Bible that isn't incorporated in the U.S. Code, and your next-door neighbors aren't going to care a whole lot.

The world says, "Do what you want," but God says, "**BE HOLY.**" This is plain from 1 Peter 1:15-16. Peter's point is that no, it's not OK for us to do whatever we want as long as the authorities let us get away with it. Instead, God expects a higher standard of behavior from us and from everyone. Just as God is perfectly dedicated and perfectly good, we are to be perfectly dedicated and perfectly good. This holy way of life will accomplish two things for us: First, it will save us from all the pitfalls that sinners encounter in this life, and it will bless us with an eternal life to come.

In response to arguments like that, the world whispers "Put yourself first." Most people won't own up to this, but it's an integral part of the new American philosophy. Under this philosophy, what's important is not that we're doing what God wants, not that we're living up to community standards, not that we're being a blessing in the lives of others, but that we are doing what makes us happy. That selfish happiness is the be-all, end-all for millions today.

Of course, God's word doesn't share that priority system. It urges us to **SERVE OTHERS**. As an illustration of this, look with me at Mark 10:43-45. Throughout the Scripture, Jesus is our example not of selfishness, but of selflessness. We never see Him putting Himself first, not even once. He came to earth for us, He lived for us, and He died for us. That's the way we're supposed to be. Our constant question must be not, "What makes me happy?", but "What will bless others and make them happy?" This doesn't come naturally. My daughter Zoë is as cute as can be, but she is only concerned about herself. It's something we learn, something we grow into as we follow after Christ.

In addition to being selfish, the worldly worldview urges us to live for today. Most of the people around us are quite frankly bad at taking the long view. They own their old TV outright and it works just fine, but they want a new one with all the 3D bells and whistles. They don't have the cash to pay for it, so they put it on the credit card and take it home. Sure, it'll take them 15 years to pay it off, and the interest will cost them three times what the TV's worth, but so what? Tonight, they get to watch Monday Night Football in 3D, and right now is all that matters.

This today-centered perspective is not part of the Christian ethic. Instead, we are to **LIVE FOR ETERNITY**. Paul emphasizes this more godly viewpoint in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18. As we consider this passage, it's worth thinking about what Paul considered "momentary, light affliction." Paul was stoned for Christ, he was beaten for Christ, he was shipwrecked for Christ, he went hungry for Christ, and he suffered a million other torments beside. He lived a life on earth that was utterly miserable. However, in comparison to the glory that he foresaw, he thought all of those things were trivial by comparison. That, friends, is living for eternity. It's making whatever sacrifices we need to make here so that we can be assured of a far greater reward in the hereafter. It takes wisdom to walk that walk, but it's worth it.

Specific Behaviors.

For those who walk according to the flesh, though, another primary rule is “rely on yourself”. We live in a nation that believes in the cult of the individual. The essence of the American Dream is that you can start out in the poorest, most disadvantaged background imaginable, but as long as you’re tough enough and determined enough, you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps and make something of yourself. Lots of people apply this way of thinking everywhere in their lives. These are the kinds of folks who don’t need anything from anybody. They don’t ever have problems they can’t handle, they don’t ever end up in situations they’re afraid of, and they can make it through life just fine on their own.

That’s the way the world reasons, but the Scripture tells us to **TRUST IN GOD**. We see this spelled out plainly in Proverbs 3:5-6. All of those people out there who pride themselves on being self-reliant are really just leaning on their own understanding. They think they’re wise enough and strong enough to make their own way through life. In reality, though, nobody is. No matter how smart we are, there’s always going to be a dilemma we aren’t smart enough to untangle. No matter how strong we are, there’s always going to be some disaster that will break us. If nothing else, every one of us is going to face the end of our lives, and it is quite frankly impossible for anyone by himself to handle death or the day of judgment without help. That’s why we need God. That’s why we give the direction of our lives over to Him. We aren’t smart enough, but He is. We aren’t strong enough, but He is. Even when we wait at the doors of death, He is able to give us eternal life. This acknowledgment that we can’t do it on our own, that we need God, might sound like weakness in the ears of so many. In reality, however, it is the only strength that can carry us through the struggles of life.

Hand in hand with this worldly idea of self-reliance comes the idea that all we need to do is get rich. As Solomon sarcastically notes in Ecclesiastes 10, some people think that money is the answer to everything. This is the message preached by every TV commercial, every billboard, every banner ad on the Internet that we see, every day of our lives. The point of advertising is to get us to believe that we’ll be happier if only we buy some product or service, and in order to buy all that happiness, we need lots and lots of money. And so millions of people in this country work 60-hour weeks, 80-hour weeks, not because they have to, but because they want to, because that’s what they must do to support the lifestyle they desire. And then, for the leftovers of their lives, they go home to all their stuff and go to sleep.

Jesus, though, counsels us instead to **LAY UP TREASURE IN HEAVEN**. We find this in Matthew 6:20-21. As Jesus points out, the problem with working so hard for so much money and so much stuff is that we don’t get to keep it. In 10 or 15 years, that shiny new car will just be a bucket of bolts on the way to the junkyard. That big brick house will have a broken air conditioner and a leaky roof. That fancy new TV will be so out of date that only the garbage man will take it. Where’s the happiness in those things? Instead, we are to lay up treasure in heaven, by contributing to the Lord’s work, by giving money to those who need help. Even beyond that, we need to spend our time better, so that we’re punching God’s time clock and not just our employer’s. It’s in those things that true treasure can be found.

Of course, there’s nothing particularly unusual about a life that’s headed into that materialistic dead end. When we do that, we’re learning only to follow the crowd. It’s one of the great ironies of our society. We claim to be so individualistic, and yet, in so many ways, we’re so conformist. We see some SUV commercial that proclaims, “Be an individual!”, so we rush out, buy this rugged, individualistic SUV, and use it to go to the grocery store just like the other 10 million individuals with the same SUV. If we start to actually live our own lives, though, that will raise some eyebrows.

However, that’s an inevitable consequence of Christianity. Where the world tells us to follow the crowd, the Bible tells us to **FOLLOW RIGHTEOUSNESS**. That’s the point of Matthew 7:13-14. If we spend our lives chasing after the crowd, we’re going to end up going where the crowd is going. Most people live lives that are aimless, devoid of purpose and meaning. They exist only to feed the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. For that aimless, evil, existence, on the day of judgment, they will get what they deserve. If we don’t want to walk that path of destruction, we will have to work at it. We will have to dedicate our lives to learning what God wants us to do, and then putting it into practice, even when it takes effort, even when it takes suffering. That’s what righteousness takes.

Ultimately, the people of the world follow all of these lies because they believe the big lie, the lie that says, “Don’t worry about God.” The way the world sees it, there are a few possibilities. Either God doesn’t exist, in which case we don’t have to worry about pleasing Him, or, if He does exist, He’s basically just a heavenly fluffle-bunny who doesn’t have any expectations for our conduct, and as long as we don’t think we should go to hell, He’ll let us into heaven.

In contrast to that Pollyanna worldview, the Bible solemnly warns us to **REMEMBER THE JUDGMENT**. Paul states this elegantly in Romans 14:12. In the old sitcom “I Love Lucy”, the tagline was, “Lucy, you have some ‘splainin’ to do.” On the day of judgment, every one of us is going to have some ‘splainin’ to do. We’re going to have to tell our Creator how we used the lives He gave us. We’re going to have to review every moral decision we ever made and justify it to God. Every idle word, every secret sin, everything. If there is even one unforgiven sin in our lives, we will fail the examination and be eternally lost. If that sounds frightening, brethren, it should. We need to live every day of our lives with that last judgment in mind, so that when that great and terrible day comes, we will not be found wanting.