

[Deuteronomy 18:15-20](#)

[Psalm 111](#)

[1 Corinthians 8:1-13](#)

[Mark 1:21-31](#)

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SERMON:

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

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Summary: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life

We all know that there's a difference between being smart and being wise, although it's hard to say what exactly the difference is.

Without arguing for it, I'm going to suggest to you this morning that at least part of the distinction is that being smart is purely a quality of intellect, whereas being wise is largely a quality of personality: The wise person doesn't simply know what's best, but has also brought or at least attempted to bring his or her life into conformity with that apprehension. Or another way of putting this is to say that wisdom is that quality about a person that enables him or her to flourish, to achieve full potential, in whatever circumstances present themselves.

And if you will grant that, at least for the time being, then the question immediately arises: how does someone become wise? You become smart by being born with a high IQ; but how does one become wise? How does one acquire this personality that will enable one to flourish, even as that person's life circumstances might change?

Psalm 111 in our readings for today has given us the answer: *111:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*, but before looking at that answer more closely, we should note that the phrase that's translated here as *fear of the Lord* doesn't mean being afraid or scared of; it's simply an old-fashioned way of saying having respect for, or even better, submitting to the authority of. So the instruction

of the psalm really means something like this: the beginning of wisdom is submitting to the authority of God. So let's think a little about what that means for us.

In my life, following my own calculation of what's best, submitting to my own authority, I've made so many mistakes, taken so many wrong turns, gone down so many paths only to bump up against a dead end, that if you were nominate candidates to take the prize for foolish decisions and squandered opportunities, for a lack of wisdom, you could hardly choose better than to place at the top of your list the individual standing at the pulpit in front of you this morning.

Scattered here and there, however, throughout this amazing variety of foolish decisions, you can find a handful that ran contrary to the general pattern, and I'll take the liberty of mentioning one of them today, because it offers a very homely illustration of the great lesson to be learned from our psalm and also, I think from our Gospel selection. So let's first read that now together.

- [Mark 1:21-31](#)

About a dozen years ago, shocked by how my body had suddenly begun to experience difficulty in simply getting up from a chair or lifting a heavy cat off the floor, I decided I would take up weightlifting.

Full of self-congratulation for my prudential foresight, I began going to the gym, lifting barbells and exercising on the various machines there with all the enthusiasm of a ten year-old in a candy store.

Well, the gym soon taught me the meaning of "comeuppance." Between serious back sprains, serious muscle strains, and the amused looks of various physically fit young men and women at the antics of this gray-haired old fool, I reached the point of giving up and becoming resigned to the inevitable wasting away of what musculature I still retained at this advanced age.

And then – either by luck or providence (I choose to think providence) – I came across a book called *Starting Strength*, written by a man named Mark Rippetoe, who, after many years as a strength trainer, had developed a weight-lifting program that he claimed to be effective for people of all ages, based on limiting one's training to a very small number of lifts, on gradually adding weights to those lifts, and on doing so with the proper form.

Either out of desperation or providence (I choose to think providence), I decided to give it a chance, and basically committed myself to following Mark Rippetoe's program, to following his leadership, where my own had proven to be so ineffective.

And lo and behold, just as Mark Rippetoe had promised, I very quickly began to gain strength, and I have followed that program ever since, until today (and this is obviously humble bragging, so please forgive me), those same physically fit young men and women who used to look askance at the old fool, now occasionally come up to me and politely ask: Excuse me, Sir, but just how old are you?

I hope you believe me that the point here is not only to brag, but rather to illustrate how the first step in enabling even an old fool like me to flourish in the limited worldly environment of a weightlifting gym had nothing to do with my IQ, with my ability to figure things out for myself, and everything to do simply with picking the right person to follow.

In his Gospel, John makes the point over and over again that the miracles of Jesus are always to be understood as signs, as signs pointing to something else, that they are offered, not simply to amaze, but to establish the authority of Jesus to provide leadership in the important matters of eternal life.

Return again to our Gospel selection for today. We find Jesus providing instruction in a synagogue, and we are told that his listeners were "*astonished, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*"

The scribes mentioned here were the customary teachers in the synagogues, and their instruction invariably consisted in communicating what someone had said or written in the past, either in the Hebrew Scriptures themselves or in one of the countless commentaries that had been written on those Scriptures in the intervening centuries. Their argument was always *It is written that such-and-such* or *As so-and-so has said*.

But this new rabbi, Jesus, didn't depend on what was written or what someone else had once said, and that was why his audience in the synagogue was astonished. He taught as one having authority.

And then Mark describes two miracles, the first then and there in the synagogue, where Jesus miraculously heals a man spiritually by casting out a demon, and then right after the synagogue service, when he physically heals Simon Peter's mother-in-law. And these are clearly miracles, one of the spirit and one of the body, that

Jesus intended to begin the process of convincing his followers that the authority with which he speaks is real, is true authority, because of who he is.

It's not uncommon to speak as if you have authority. Mental asylums notoriously have inmates who speak as if they were Napoleon or Joan of Arc. More mundanely, turn on any cable news program, and you find talking heads in every twelve-minute segment between commercials talking confidently and seemingly knowingly about whatever the topic of that twelve-minute segment is. And on a much more solemn and important scale, religious leaders throughout human history have offered their instruction as authoritative, as if they had authority to speak to the most important matters of human existence.

But in all of history, there is one and one only who not only speaks to these matters **as** one who has authority, but speaks **with** authority. And who is that? Here's Paul's way of putting it"

***15**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. **16**For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or **[e]**principalities or **[f]**powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. **17**And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. (Colossians 1)*

Authority is not found in what is said; authority is found in who says it. *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."* How do we know that? Because Jesus says so. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11)* How do I know that? How can I trust that? What guarantee is there of that? One reason, one reason only. Because Jesus said so. And why should I believe him? One reason, and one reason only. Because of who he is.

We speak often of Christian faith, but what is Christian faith? It is one thing, and one thing only: it is the choice to choose Jesus as the one from whom you will receive instruction.

I chose Mark Rippetoe as the one from whom I would receive instruction about gaining strength, and that was a lucky choice. That was a lucky worldly choice having to do with worldly benefits, of flourishing in the gym and being able to pick myself up off the floor. But much as I have appreciated them, those benefits will of course dwindle and pass away.

The benefits of eternity, which are peace with God, and flourishing in God's eternal Kingdom, also depend on choosing the right teacher, and doing what that

teacher says. This is the beginning of true spiritual, true heavenly wisdom: the surrender to a heavenly teacher.

Could we have figured out how to flourish in heaven, how to flourish in eternity, by relying on our own smarts, on our own IQ, our own human intelligence? Absolutely not. And why not? Once again, Saint Paul gives us the answer:

***18**Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. **19**For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the (humanly) wise in their own craftiness"; **20**and again, "The LORD knows the thoughts of the (humanly) wise, that they are futile." (1 Cor. 3)*

Turning the other cheek, loving your enemies, forgiving seventy times seven, loving your neighbor as yourself ... these are not instructions for flourishing in the merely human world: on the contrary, they are generally recipes for human worldly failure. That's why they are so hard for us to follow. Why then should we even try?

For one reason, and one reason only. Because of who Jesus is.

And so our prayer for this morning is a prayer of gratitude and a prayer for faith: a prayer of gratitude for sending your only begotten Son to teach us how to flourish, not in the limited span of our worldly lives, but in the eternity of our heavenly lives; and a prayer for faith in Him, in whose name we pray. Amen.