

# **St. Mary's Sermon Series**

**John 8:1-8**

**Spiritual Gifts:  
Wisdom**

**If you were asked to draw up a list of the spiritual gifts, I wonder which gift you would start with and which one you would put last? As we look at the list Paul drew up in 1 Corinthians 12 I think we are in for one or two surprises. He does not start where we would start. He puts tongues and interpretation at the bottom of his list which, given the emphasis placed on tongue speaking in some churches, is probably the exact opposite of where you might have expected them to be. You may have heard the motto of an unbalanced Christian before: These three remain – faith, hope and love but the greatest of these is tongues.**

Where we might be tempted to put tongues first and wisdom last, Paul did the exact opposite because he recognised that tongues must not be over valued and wisdom must not be under valued. In fact, I would go as far as to say that in many of the situations we face within the church today one of our greatest needs is in fact for wisdom.

I deliberately chose John 8 as our reading this morning for it is a very clear example of Jesus using God given insight/wisdom to great effect to defuse a very tricky situation with which he was confronted. On this particular occasion the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were deliberately trying to trap Jesus and they haul a woman who had been caught red handed committing adultery before him. The interesting question is, “What they were doing spying on the woman in the first place?” and, “What happened to the man who must also have been involved in this scenario?” but then that is another issue altogether.

### **How should Jesus handle this situation?**

If he shows leniency and lets the woman go then the Pharisees can accuse him of being lawless. Jesus would be well aware that the Torah commands that she be put to death by stoning. On the other hand, if he condemns her and demands her immediate execution, they can accuse him of being loveless.

### **Shouldn't the Messiah also be a man of compassion?**

This was quite a desperate moral dilemma for Jesus to deal with. Either way it looks like a no win situation. Whatever course of action he takes it seems as though he can be condemned for behaviour unbecoming of the Messiah.

So what does Jesus do? His immediate response is interesting. He bends down and starts writing in the sand. We are not told what he wrote - that does not seem to be important. Although we are not told explicitly what Jesus was doing, I don't think we would be reading too much into the text if we assume that Jesus was giving himself a few precious moments to pray and to listen to what the Father is saying and to receive heavenly wisdom into how he should deal with the problem. Having heard that wisdom he stands up again and addresses the crowd, “If anyone is without sin let him cast the stone at her.”

In one fell swoop the tables are turned on the accusers. Having sought to trap Jesus his opponents find themselves trapped instead. It is they who are now facing an equally difficult moral dilemma. If any of them throws a stone at the woman now, they can be justifiably accused of gross spiritual pride. If anyone fails to throw a stone then that person

can be seen to be failing to condemn an immoral behaviour. So they all walk away, the older ones first, presumably because the older ones are wise enough to recognise true wisdom when they see it.

At this point Jesus, who had stooped down again and was once again drawing in the sand, stands upright and addresses the woman. Again, it would seem he has been spending a few minutes waiting on the Holy Spirit for a word of wisdom to give to the one, so horribly abused and exploited, who is still standing before him. The need for wisdom is again obvious. If Jesus fails to show her compassion he can be accused of being loveless. If he fails to point out the need for sexual holiness then again he can be accused of being lawless. So Jesus begins by reassuring the woman, giving her a word of affirmation and assuring her of his acceptance. "Neither do I condemn you." Jesus begins with a word of compassion and mercy. But Jesus does not finish there. He tells the woman that she is to go and leave her life of sin. Having shown her forgiveness, he warns her not to sin again. In this way Jesus avoids the two extremes of soft liberalism and harsh legalism. He will not exercise compassion without morality, nor will he teach morality without compassion. His whole approach to this situation is a wonderful example of how to love the sinner without neglecting God's abhorrence of sin.

You might well say to me that we should expect to see the gift of wisdom at work in Jesus; after all he was God son. But the spiritual gift, known as the word of wisdom, was not just given to our lord Jesus. Paul clearly teaches that the word of wisdom is one of the spiritual gifts distributed to the members of the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. When it is given to a believer it is given spontaneously and suddenly. It is not something we discern with the natural mind. It is something unveiled by the power of God's spirit. The word of wisdom is a charismatic disclosure of divine truth.

Let me give you an example:

I recently read the true story of a doctor who was driving his children home from the funeral of his first wife. Naturally, they were overcome with grief and the doctor was trying hard to find some words of comfort to give to them, without much success. Just then a huge lorry passed them and its shadow swept over the car. As the lorry passed by the doctor received some unexpected inspiration.

"Children," he said, "would you rather be run over by a truck or by its shadow?"

"The shadow of course," the children replied in unison, "because a shadow can't hurt us at all."

The doctor went on to say, "Did you know that two thousand years ago the truck of death ran over our Lord Jesus in order that only its shadow might run over us?"

I don't know about you, but I think that this illustration helpfully puts death in its proper perspective. Do you see how the Holy Spirit gave the doctor a very simple yet profound piece of wisdom with a word which sheds light on the relationship between God's work of salvation on the cross and personal tragedy? If a word of wisdom is genuinely inspired by the Holy Spirit the result will always be that God's kingdom is advanced and Jesus is glorified.

I am sure that we can all think of situations that we have faced when we have not known which way to turn. We would do well to learn from our master Jesus in these situations and learn to find a way to stop and to pray. James makes it perfectly clear in his letter when he wrote, "If any of you lack wisdom he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him. But when he asks he must believe and not doubt." (James 1:5-6.)

If we need that special gift of wisdom all we have to do is go to God in prayer and ask in faith, believing that God is an extravagantly generous God.