

How wise are you?

Text: Matthew 2:1-12 for 1/6/2019 by Pastor Bolwerk

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, when Herod was king, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, ²“Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴He gathered together all the people’s chief priests and experts in the law. He asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, because this was written through the prophet: ⁶You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are certainly not least among the rulers of Judah: because out of you will come a ruler, who will shepherd my people, Israel.” ⁷Then Herod secretly summoned the Wise Men and found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report to me, so that I may also go and worship him.” ⁹After listening to the king, they went on their way. Then the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, until it stood still over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced with overwhelming joy. ¹¹After they went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²Since they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

Today we celebrate the day when wise men came to worship Jesus as the newborn king. By calling these men wise we recognize they had some kind of wisdom. But what is wisdom? To use a dictionary definition: Wisdom is an accumulation of knowledge that gives someone the ability to discern certain qualities and relationships. Wisdom understands how things and people interact and react. For example: the Wise Men were able to understand the relationship between a star and the King they were looking for. So, what does it mean to be wise? It means using that which you have learned to better yourself and your position in life.

This is certainly true about worldly wisdom. Yet when it comes to understanding God, and what it takes to be in a right relationship with God, the truths of worldly wisdom don’t always apply. So how can we know if we are “wise” or “unwise” before God? For that we are going to make some comparisons. We will do that by looking at examples from our text to find out ...

Theme: How wise are you?

- I. Wiser than a king?
- II. Wiser than an expert in the law?
- III. Wiser than the Wise Men?

The first comparison we will make is to see if you are wiser than a king? From a worldly perspective King Herod could be considered “wise.” Herod knew that if you want to stay in power you have to deal properly with your enemies. Herod dealt with his enemies in two ways: Bribing people or killing people. Right from the start of Herod’s reign in Judea the Jews did not like Herod, so he bribed them by paying for major renovation work to the temple in Jerusalem. And when a popular Jewish High Priest threatened Herod’s power, Herod bribed the High Priest’s bodyguards to have him “accidentally” drown while bathing. Herod knew exactly what it took to remain in control, and he was not going to let anyone rule in his place.

But then Herod hears of a rival king. Matthew tells us: **After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, when Herod was king, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him (vs. 1-3).** Herod “was alarmed:” he was distressed and a little confused as to who this king was and where he came from. To deal with this treat to his power Herod uses deception. He tells the Wise

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Men, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report to me, so that I may also go and worship him” (v. 8). Herod has no intention of worshipping this king. His real desire is to kill his rival. We know this because the Gospel writer Matthew tells us that when the Wise Men did not come back to inform him, Herod “issued orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding countryside, from two years old and under. This was in keeping with the exact time he had learned from the Wise Men” (Matthews 2:16). Herod killed to remove what he thought was a threat to himself and his power. Herod may have thought he was being “wise” with this “enemy,” but ultimately, he was being very foolish in his relationship with God.

Are we wiser than King Herod, or do we sometime finding ourselves acting like Herod? Our sinful nature is always telling us that we alone have the right to rule our lives, and no one will ever rule in our place. If we listen to that sinful voice, we may find ourselves “killing” our relationship with that newborn King. Or perhaps we find ourselves using Herod’s methods. Do we ever find ourselves bribing others with words of flattery or promise, so we can have our way or keep the peace with family or friends? Do we ever end up using our words to kill those who point out our sins, belittling or embarrassing those people who speak in the name of the true King? How often have we claimed that we’ve come to worship Christ the King, but really, we are just trying to justify ourselves in spite of our King’s saving work. These things are not true wisdom.

If we are not wiser than a king, are we are wiser than an expert in the law? The experts in the law that Matthew spoke about were Levites who were given the task of knowing every detail of God’s word, so they could help in making legal decision regarding God’s civil and religious laws. When Herod brings the experts in the law together and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea” (vs. 4-5). They knew from God’s word exactly where the Messiah was to be born. Yet they don’t get excited to hear the Savior has been born. We don’t hear about them joyfully following the Magi to meet the new born King. Surprisingly these teachers of the law seem uninterested, almost apathetic. These men seem more interested in keeping their own set of rules as opposed to listening to, and obeying, God’s word. The teachers of the law had the knowledge of God, but they did not apply that knowledge to themselves.

Are we wiser than an expert in the law? We certainly know what God says about the Messiah. I would not be the least bit surprised if many of us could recite most of Luke 2. But does God’s word move us to a joyful response, or just a board “Ho-hum, I’ve heard that all before?” Does the word of God’s law drive us to the child King who can save from the law’s punishment, or instead do we find ourselves following our own rules and philosophies that we feel can somehow make us right with God? These things are not true wisdom either.

If we are not wiser than an expert in the law, is it possible for us to be wiser than the Wise Men. Who were these Wise Men? Matthew describes them using the Greek word “magi.” Magi were a kind of scholar, specifically people who studied the stars. They were part magician, part astronomers, and part astrologers. So it makes sense that they noticed this new star as it rose in the sky. We don’t know exactly where they came from. We just know they came “from the east” (v. 1). We really don’t know how many of them there were. We know there were three gifts, but scripture never tells us how many Wise Men there were. We *do* know they were non-Jews. We *do* know they were waiting for a King to come to save them from more than just worldly enemies. We *do* know they came to Jerusalem looking specifically for that King.

And as these Wise Men receive this new knowledge of where to find the Savior-King, how do they respond? With fruits of faith! They rejoice with overwhelming joy. When they see their King

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with their own eyes they bow down and worship him. They worship this child who would grow to live and die for the sins of the world. Then, they set their treasures before him, thanking this King for the forgiveness he came to bring. This is true wisdom.

But where did this true wisdom come from? Scripture tell us: **“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”** (Psalm 111:10). That fear, that reverence for God, only comes through faith. The Bible tells us that **“Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ”** (Romans 10:17). The Good News of God’s plan of salvation changes a person’s heart and life. That Good News gives a person true wisdom. God given faith gives a person the ability to take this God given knowledge and apply it to one’s life.

The joy that these Wise Men had can be our joy. We can be filled with the overwhelming joy of God’s Word. That word speaks of the fulfillment the Christ child brings: the forgiveness God had planned since humans fell into sin. This child, who is worshiped by the Wise Men, is the One who came to suffer and die for all of our sins. Jesus died: for our sinful desire to be king in his place, for our spiritual apathy to his word, for our attempts to save ourselves. Our King battled our enemies and won for us the victory of sin, and Satan, and death. Christ our King has washed away all of your sins in his own holy blood.

This means we can feel that same joy the Wise Men felt. We may not rejoice at the light of a star that points to Jesus. Instead, we are filled with overwhelming joy of the light of Christ’s gospel. That joy moves us to respond like the Wise Men. We rejoice in our Savior’s forgiveness. We worship Christ our King, humbly bowing our hearts before him as we honor him with the praise of our lips. And we set before him our treasures. Not some quickly thrown together gift. We thank our Lord and King with treasures given from the heart, treasures that express our gratitude for his generous forgiveness and his abundant love to us.

The best part is, we can be even wiser than those Wise Men! Godly wisdom comes through God’s word. We can continue to learn and grow in the knowledge of our Savior King. As we grow in that knowledge of God, not only can we apply it to ourselves, but we can also share it with others. We can share with the people in our lives the Word that gives true wisdom. It is the Word that fills a person with overwhelming joy and peace.

Our King has come. He has called us out of the darkness of sin and delivered us from death. Our Lord has given us so much more than gold, or incense, or myrrh. Our King has given to us his full and free forgiveness. Jesus has given us heaven. May we be wise in our God given faith and continue to apply God’s word to our hearts and lives so that we never lose these blessings from God.

Our King has given us so many wonderful gifts. Yet one of the gifts we may often overlook is the gift of Godly wisdom. Today we have heard and learned that this wisdom only comes through God’s word. When we apply that God given knowledge to our lives it makes us wise, and it makes us blessed. May our Lord Jesus truly bless you, as you worship the King who was found by the light of the star. May your King’s blessing go with you as you live your life, looking forward to the day when the overwhelming joy of heaven will be yours. Amen.