

Who is Jesus, and How do I follow His Way?

A-9: Zechariah 9:9-12; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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Sermon-in-a-Sentence: Following the Way of Jesus is simple – love God, love your neighbor, but it is not easy, and frequently stirs up confusion and resistance, from the “wise and intelligent.”

Children’s Sermon:

This is a really hard Gospel reading. Who do you think really understands better exactly who Jesus is and what he stands for? Those people out there? Or you guys? Jesus seems to be saying, often, the “wise and intelligent” people like me and lots of those out there, don’t really get who he is or what his mission is.

Jesus says, God has “hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and has revealed them to infants.” I don’t think he means **babies**, but maybe young kids like you, or others who older but haven’t completed their education, or don’t have complicated jobs and complicated lives.

According to Jesus, sometimes kids and the uneducated poor understand who Jesus is and what Jesus is really trying to teach us, more than all of us educated, successful mature adults. That’s what Jesus seems to be saying.

Do you think your life is more complicated and stressful, or less complicated and stressful than those out there? Probably a lot less stressful. Sometimes education and wealth and status complicate our lives and complicate the way we look at or listen to Jesus. The more stuff we have going on in our lives, the harder it may be to hear Jesus’ voice. In Jesus’ day, most of the highly educated religious leaders, and the wealthiest and most successful people thought Jesus was a fake. They were not willing to step away from all they had learned and believed and all their success to follow Jesus on a different path.

The ones who did follow Jesus were mostly the poor, the uneducated, the fishermen or farm workers.

Do you remember how Jesus summarized all of Scripture? Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. That was how Jesus lived his life – loving God and loving his neighbors. But the more education and success we have, the more we tend to separate our lives from our neighbors, which makes it more difficult to understand and to love our neighbors, especially the ones who are poor, or suffering.

I don’t think it’s a bad thing at all to be wise, intelligent, well educated, successful. But we have to realize that all of that can be a big distraction from really listening to and following Jesus.

Here's the point I'm trying to make. You are already old enough and smart enough to know who Jesus is and believe in him and follow his way of loving God and loving our neighbors. But as you get older, and wiser, and more intelligent, and as your lives get more complicated, you will probably have to work even harder and be even more committed to stay true to Jesus.

Does that make sense? Now I've got to try to explain this to those people.

Adult Sermon:

After Jesus had finished instructing his 12 disciples and had sent them out on their own, he continued going to towns and villages to teach and proclaim his message. As he was teaching, some of John the Baptist's disciples came up to him with a question from John, who was now in prison. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus did not say, "Yes, I am the one," or "No, I am not the one." Instead he said, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." (Matt.11:3-6)

When John's disciples left, Jesus turned back to the crowd and began to talk to them about John the Baptist and how they had responded to him. He asked them, "What did you expect when you went out to listen to him?" John the Baptist lived in the wilderness, wore rugged clothes. He didn't look or smell like a high priest from the temple. But according to Jesus, he was the one sent by God to prepare the way for the Son of Man, and was the greatest prophet ever sent by God.

And this is where today's Gospel reading begins. Jesus continues talking to the crowd about their response and the wider response to John the Baptist and to Jesus: "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man (referring to himself) came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!' **Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.**" (Matt. 11:16-19)

According to Jesus, real wisdom is vindicated, not by status, or knowledge, or beliefs, but by her deeds.

Jesus then began to critique the people of the cities he had been traveling through, where he had been doing deeds of power – reaching out to and healing the blind, the lame, the deaf, casting out demons and bringing good news to the poor. Most of the people in the cities he went to simply didn't get it. They did not repent of their sins and they did not choose to follow

the Way of Jesus, the Way of love, to begin reaching out to needy and doing similar deeds of love. Both John the Baptist, (who Jesus considered the best prophet ever), and Jesus himself, had been largely condemned and dismissed by most of the religious leaders and most of the people of Israel. Jesus was condemned because of the way he reached out to and connected with and performed deeds of healing for the people in need, which the religious leaders and the majority of the active religious people thought should be avoided because they were “sinners.”

And then, as he speaks to the crowd, Jesus says a prayer. “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants. . .” (Matt. 11:25)

“Hidden” from the “wise and intelligent,” and “revealed” to the “infants”! What is going on?

When Jesus refers to “infants” or “little ones,” most scholars think he is referring to his disciples and his followers, in contrast to “the wise and intelligent,” the ones with education and status, and extensive religious training. The “wise and intelligent” ones don’t seem to get who Jesus is and what he stands for.

Why is it that the poor, the uneducated, the farmers and fishermen are the ones who seem to understand who Jesus really is and the ones who choose to follow his Way? I think it’s because they see Jesus, and experience Jesus, practicing what he’s preaching. He is loving God and actively loving his neighbors. Because Jesus is reaching out to his neighbors who are in need, and loving them, practicing what he’s preaching, pouring out God’s love on them, ***they get it***. They see that He is indeed the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

But why aren’t the “wise and intelligent” ones, those with education and status, who know their Scripture and the words of the prophets, why aren’t they getting it?

I have really been wrestling with this all week. Why is it, in Jesus’ day, that those who knew Scripture the best, who were committed to regular worship, who were the most educated and most successful, had the hardest time understanding who Jesus really was and committing themselves to follow his way? Jesus gives an example, later in Matthew chapter 19. He encounters the rich young ruler, who wants to follow Jesus’ way and have eternal life. He asks Jesus, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus says first, follow the commandments. The young man said, “I have kept all these, what do I still lack?” Jesus says, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.” When the young man heard this word, he

went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’” (Matt. 19:20-24)

What I’m hearing is that it’s much more difficult for the “wise and intelligent,” for the religious or governmental leaders, for the successful and wealthy to walk away from all they had accomplished, in order to follow Jesus. For the fishermen, like Peter, James and John, they weren’t walking away from nearly as much. It seems Jesus is saying it takes more sacrifice for the people on top to walk away from their existing lives so they can follow Jesus.

What does this look like today, in our world? How do we read and understand, in our context, what Jesus was saying back then in a very different world?

Do those of us today who happen to be “wise and intelligent;” who are well-educated and have been successful, do we face a similar challenge to really follow the way of Jesus? Are we more focused on believing the right things, than we are on actually following the Way of Jesus, and doing the deeds of Jesus?

I wish I had an easy answer to this; or even a complicated answer. But I don’t.

In this world, I consider myself among the “wise and intelligent,” the well-educated and successful. So I am also deeply challenged by this Gospel reading. What is distracting me from truly following the way of Jesus? What is my burden? What is holding me back? What do I need to be willing to give up? I’m still struggling to find my answer or The Answer.

I can only leave you with this **question**, and Jesus’ invitation to those who are struggling. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For (ultimately) my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28-30)

Amen.