

WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

ISAIAH 9:6-7

Direction. Guidance. Wisdom. Where do you get it? How do you get it? Some years ago now, Robert Fulghum wrote a best selling book entitled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. He said that by the time a person finishes kindergarten, he or she has already received enough direction to live a good, productive life. "Wisdom," Fulghum writes, "was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at Sunday School. In that sand pile I learned such things as 'Cookies and milk are good for you.' and 'Wash your hands before you eat.' But more importantly, I also learned such things as: share everything... play fair... don't hit people... say you're sorry when you hurt somebody... don't take things that aren't yours... hold hands and stick together." Well, he's got a point, doesn't he? What a better place this world would be if everyone just practiced the simple wisdom that you learned in kindergarten: share... play fair... say you're sorry when you hurt someone... leave other people's stuff alone... hold hands and stick together.....

This morning I want to begin a series of Christmas messages based on Isaiah 9:6-7. I'm calling the series "What Child is This?" after the well-known Christmas carol by the same name. Isaiah answers that question in a unique way by giving Jesus four very descriptive names. Let's look just now at that passage itself. What child is this? Isaiah gives four interesting answers. He says, in effect, "Well, this Child is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace." Now, today, I want you to think with me about the first name – Wonderful Counselor. Here's the first question we'll try to answer:

HOW IS THIS CHILD WONDERFUL?

Isaiah was a man of God – a prophet – who lived in Israel some 800 years before the birth of Jesus. It was a time of great spiritual, political and economic turmoil. The nation of Assyria was threatening to absorb every surrounding country into its growing empire including Israel. Isaiah actually had a mixed message. He predicts that Assyria would indeed take over and govern at least a portion of God's people. At the same time, he also predicts that God would deliver Israel from Assyria in the future.

Isaiah's words have layers of meaning and fulfillment. Again, he promises that God is going to punish His own people very soon, but that one day He will deliver His people from the Assyrians. That's one layer of fulfillment and it came true. But the prophet also predicts another kind of deliverance entirely – a deliverance from sin and its terrible effects in our world. That also came true. How so? Isaiah knew that it would happen through a very special person who would be born in the future. He doesn't know when this person will be born, but he's certain that God will send Him at just the right time. That's one reason why Isaiah uses the past tense in these verses. He's not claiming that this special person has already come. No, he uses the past tense to underline the certainty and finality

of what God is going to do. Since God is going to do this, he can refer to it in the past tense. The Bible makes it quite clear that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled by the birth of Jesus some 800 years after the prophet wrote these words.

Why did Isaiah call Him "wonderful"? The basic meaning of the word itself is simple enough. It means "to be wonderful or to cause wonderful things to happen." Both meanings are true of Jesus. Jesus is Himself wonderful and He truly does wonderful things. The more you learn about Jesus in the Bible and the more you personally experience His life within you, the more you come to see how essentially wonderful He truly is. No greater person has ever lived. Consider His character. Consider His teachings. Consider the effect of His life upon billions of people over the past 2000 years.

Augustine is one of the most famous Christians who ever lived – a great theologian, thinker and Christian leader. At one point in his life, he was having a difficult time resolving the doctrine of the Trinity. One day as he walked along the seashore, he noticed a little boy playing. The boy was using a sea shell to dig a hole in the sand. He was going back and forth from the water to the hole, filling the shell with water, then pouring it into the hole. Augustine asked the boy what he was doing. The youngster replied, "I am putting the ocean in this hole." Augustine laughed, but then suddenly realized he himself might be trying to do the same thing. He said, "Standing on the shores of time, I am trying to get into this finite mind things that are infinite." Jesus is wonderful beyond our comprehension. He exceeds our ability to understand and appreciate fully.

Jesus also did wonderful things. In the Old Testament, the word "wonderful" is used to describe the many ways God delivered and saved his people: the calling of Abraham, the exodus out of Egypt, crossing the Red Sea and conquering the Promised Land. All of these acts of salvation and deliverance are described as "wonderful." Over in the New Testament, we read how Jesus performs wonderful miracles. They were acts of salvation and deliverance as well. He also teaches wonderful truths. The single most wonderful thing Jesus ever did, however, is dying on the cross for your sins and mine and, then, rising from the dead. Because of what He did, your sins can be forgiven. Because of what He did, you can live a life of purpose and meaning. Because of what He did, you receive the gift of eternal life.

Let's remember a simple fact each and every Christmas. It's the wonder of Jesus' cross that makes Jesus' cradle so wonderful. When you kneel before the cross, only then can you begin to fully appreciate why Jesus came as a child. In the cross you see a wonderful love that's beyond understanding, a wonderful mercy that's beyond compare and a wonderful power that's beyond description. Jesus is Himself wonderful and He's done what is wonderful. But the impact of that wonder is given a particular focus in Isaiah's prophecy. It has here a specific content to it. He is Wonderful Counselor. Now, what does that mean?

HOW IS THIS CHILD A COUNSELOR?

Just like the word “wonderful”, the word we translate “counselor” means what you would expect it to mean. It means “to give counsel, to deliberate, to determine, to advise, to lead and to guide.” What makes this counsel and direction special is the One who possesses and then gives it. In another passage that points to Jesus, Isaiah says, “And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.” (Isaiah 11:2 NLT) Jesus’ wisdom stood out to people. The Bible says about Jesus, “He was filled with wisdom, and God’s favor was on him.” (Luke 2:40 NLT) Those who heard Him said things like, “...‘Where does he get this wisdom and the power to do miracles?’” (Matthew 13:54 NLT). The Bible also says this about Jesus, “In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Colossians 2:3 NLT)

It is primarily through Jesus that God offers you His personal wisdom, guidance and direction. The Bible says that from the moment you first put your trust in Jesus, you possess something it calls “the mind of Christ.” It says, “For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 2:16 NLT) Maybe you’ve had the experience of needing something either built or repaired. You take it to the appropriate craftsman and he gives you some options. Finally, you just end up saying, “Well, OK... tell you what, you just go ahead and do what you think best. You’re the expert.” When it comes to life and living - when it comes to what’s important and what matters - Jesus is the Expert. He never leads you astray. He gives direction for all of life.

So, what does this direction that Jesus provides look like? Most importantly, Jesus enables you to understand how to receive eternal life through faith. You could never figure out how to get to God without Jesus. You couldn’t figure out how to get your sins forgiven or how to live a life that has true purpose and meaning. Jesus provides that direction. Then, Jesus also enables you to understand the effect that following Jesus will have on your daily life. He tells you how to live wisely and well. Through the Bible, God provides direction explicitly or implicitly for every conceivable area of life and living. Every part of your life is now open to the leading and direction of Jesus through the Holy Spirit: your job, your relationships with others, your marriage, your role as a parent, your money, your sexuality, your health and your plans for the future. There is godly counsel available for everything.

Now, how do you get this direction? Is it something sort of magical or mystical? No. In fact, there’s nothing secretive about it at all. First and foremost, God’s personal, daily direction is a byproduct of a personal, daily relationship with God. The single best way to get to know God – and to grow a relationship with Him – is through a time of personal and consistent reading of the Bible and prayer. Now, don’t get me wrong. It’s not as if God is always telling you to do this or that. Instead, as you read God’s Word, as you study it by yourself and with others, and

as you talk to God simply and authentically, you absorb into your inner spirit God's principles and perspectives. You can then apply that to everything in life. The wisdom of Jesus – the mind of Christ – gradually becomes more and more a part of you so that you begin to recognize – almost like spiritual intuition – what Jesus would do in a given situation. It's like anything else: the more you do it the easier it becomes. Now, accumulating that wisdom takes time and it requires some personal effort to acquire it. So get started!

The reality TV show "Survivor" is in its umpteenth version right now. A while back, one of the contestants was a 24 year old youth ministries major named Dirk Been. Along with 15 others, Dirk was marooned on a deserted island in Malaysia wanting to be the lone survivor and winner of \$1 million. He was advised along with the other contestants that each of them could bring only one "luxury" item to their remote location in the South China Sea. Faced with that kind of choice, what would you take? Dirk took his Bible. He said, "I couldn't imagine not having my quiet time with the Lord for a single day, let alone 39." What was the hardest thing about being on "Survivor"? Dirk said it wasn't being forced to eat beetle larvae, endure insufficient sleep or navigate through all the politics of the game. It was having no one around who shared his beliefs. He said, "The spiritual isolation was tortuous." Dirk didn't win "Survivor" but I admire his hunger for God's Word and his understanding of where you get wisdom.

Second, God's direction comes to you through godly people. Maybe the words of a Sunday morning message strike home. Perhaps a teaching or a discussion in a Sunday School class or a small group gathering brings enlightenment. Maybe a conversation with a Christian friend helps you gain a new insight on some issue. On many occasions, I've been struggling with a decision or an issue not knowing the right way to go when God has brought along a Christian brother or sister who has had just the right word of wisdom at just the right time. That's why it's so important to be in relationship and community with other followers of Jesus. Worshipping regularly isn't enough if you want the Lord's daily direction. You need to study the Bible for yourself and you need to study it with other Jesus followers. Otherwise, you're just robbing yourself of God's direction for your life.

Third, God's direction comes to you through something called inner leadings of the Holy Spirit. God can speak into your inner spirit clearly and unmistakably. You feel a sudden, compelling urgency to do something or to say something. You feel a gentle, but consistent prodding to take action in some area. It can often have a sort of random, out of the blue feeling to it. Now, it's true, you do have to be careful with this kind of direction. On the one hand, God will never tell you do something that's contrary to His Word. On the other hand, He will sometimes ask you to do what's outside of your comfort zone. Often, it will involve an act of serving or humility I'd just as soon avoid. I've had it happen to me on several occasions when it meant taking the initiative to share with a person how he or she could find Jesus as Savior. When it comes to leadings, I've learned that I must ask this question, "Would the devil ever encourage me to

do or say such a thing?" If I can't figure out a way the devil would be pleased with what I'm being prompted to say or do, I can then be pretty sure the Lord is behind one of those inner leadings.

Here's a few closing observations about God's direction. One, receiving Jesus' direction requires humility. The Bible says, "If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom." (James 3:13 NLT) God's wisdom is never imparted to proud, self-sufficient people. The moment you sincerely reject the illusion of your own competency is the moment you open yourself to Jesus' direction. Let's remember that God desires to guide and counsel you far more than you want to receive that guidance and counsel. Another aspect of humility is the fact that sometimes you have to wait awhile for God to provide His direction. God will give you direction, but He does it when and how He wants to give it.

Two, receiving Jesus' direction requires that you step out in faith. The Bible says, "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking." (James 1:5 NLT) I'm quite sure you know people who already know what they should do about a problem, but they just refuse to act. When Jesus' directs you to do something, He will give you the assurance to act in faith, but He won't act for you. You still have to pull the trigger. You still have to step out. You still have to take a risk. So, then, read God's Word, open your heart to Him in prayer, seek the counsel of godly people, take seriously the inner leadings of the Holy Spirit – and then, by faith, do whatever it is God is leading you to do. Leave the results with Him.

Three, receiving Jesus' direction results in a peaceful heart. When you seek God's will and direction, when you act in faith, you can leave the results with Him. The Bible say, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:6-7 NLT) How wonderful it is to have a Counselor who knows all and is able to do above and beyond what you could ever ask or think! How wonderful to have a Counselor whose plans and purposes for you are good and eternal! What Child is this? Wonderful Counselor!

Robert Kupferschmid was 81 years old. He'd never had a lesson on how to fly a plane in his life. One day about 10 years ago, Robert and a 52 year old pilot friend, Wesley Sickle, were flying from Indianapolis to Muncie, Indiana. During the flight, Wesley (the pilot) suddenly slumped over the controls. He was dead – just like that. The Cessna 172 single engine plane began to nosedive. Robert grabbed the controls. He knew enough from watching his friend to get the plane level again and use the radio. He pleaded for help.

Nearby were two pilots who heard his radio call. Mount Comfort was the nearest airfield, and the two pilots gave Robert a steady stream of instructions. They gave him a crash course on climbing, steering – and the scariest part of all – landing. Those two experienced pilots circled the runway three times before a somewhat frantic and totally inexperienced pilot was ready to attempt the landing. Emergency vehicles were called out for what seemed like an approaching disaster. Witnesses said the plane's nose nudged the center line and bounced a few times before the tail hit the ground. The Cessna ended up in a patch of soggy grass next to the runway. Amazingly, Robert Kupferschmid wasn't injured. He listened and followed instructions as if his life depended on it – because it did.

Learning to listen to your Wonderful Counselor is just as important. Following the instructions He gives you is even more important. You should do it as if your life depends on it. Because, it does.