

## Listening to Wisdom's Voice

Proverbs 8:1-12

June 3, 2003

*Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?  
On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;  
beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out:  
"To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.  
O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it.  
Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right;  
for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips.  
All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.  
They are all straight to one who understands and right to those who find knowledge.  
Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold;  
for wisdom is better than jewels,  
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.  
I, wisdom, live with prudence, and I attain knowledge and discretion.*

Did you notice anything odd or peculiar in this passage? You'd have to be pretty astute to catch it. Let me read it to you again, and see if you can pick it up this time: "*Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out... Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold; for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.*"

Did you notice? Wisdom has a gender. Wisdom's a she. Now why do you think wisdom would be a woman? Well, I'm not going to ask you to answer that out loud because all of us males might not like the answers we get. But the real answer is that ancient Judaism understood that true wisdom requires a balance, a balance between male and female perspectives.

Let me explain why wisdom is a woman in Proverbs and the Old Testament. The Old Testament word for wisdom is "chokhmah." The Greek word, which is used in the Greek translations of the Old Testament, is "sophia." Both ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek are languages much like our modern French, Spanish, and Italian in which words are given male or female gender. For instance, in French the word for "dog" is male, but the word for car is "female." Don't ask me why. It just is. The ancient Hebrews understood that wisdom, or chokhmah, balances the "Word of God," which is male. In their understanding, The Word, which is male and comes to us from God through scripture and the law, is balanced by wisdom, which is female, and comes from God through our hearts and minds.

In the book of Proverbs, which is a book about wisdom, chokhmah is the feminine side of God. There was an understanding in ancient Judaism that even though they might use male language for God, God was both male and female.

Unfortunately, modern English has a harder time conveying that balance. Our language is gender neutral, but underlying it we tend to gravitate towards the male perspective on things. We call God “he.” We tend to call humanity “man.” We use male language whenever we aren’t sure whether to talk about he or she. “He” is the default. Our language problems also reveal a deeper societal problem, which is that it is very hard to balance the male and the female. Our culture is dominated by the male perspective. And this dominance of the male over the female interferes with our ability to appreciate wisdom, which balances the male and the female.

Let me show you how masculine ideals dominate. Think about what it means to be male. What words come to mind? Most people think of words such as strength, courage, stubbornness, intelligence, aggressiveness, ambition, selfishness, power, drive, and other words such as these. These are attributes that our culture pretty much values, with a few exceptions. Now think about words that come to mind when thinking about what it means to be female. They are words such as love, compassion, nurture, care, gentleness, intelligence, intuition, relationships, peacemakers, and other such words. While our culture doesn’t completely dismiss these attributes, in many ways these are considered to be of secondary value to the masculine words.

What would it mean in life to balance the male with the female? For example, how would we balance the female and the male in politics? The male words mentioned above are those valued in politics, but what if we balanced them. What if we valued strength *and* compassion? Aggressiveness *and* gentleness? Power *and* peace? Stubbornness *and* nurture? How much better might our politics be? Think the same way about business. What if we balanced the male and female in business? In fact, new research is showing that the best bosses and leaders in business are those who do have this kind of balance. These are leaders who are strong in their vision *and* gentle in their leadership; stubborn in their convictions *and* open in their relationships; have strong ambitions for the company and themselves *while also* being compassionate toward co-workers and employees.

Think about family life. The best marriages are ones in which the husband and wife not only balance each other, but become stronger in the areas they were weak in before by learning from the other. For instance, the husband learns to become more caring, compassionate, and nurturing from his wife, and the wife learns to become stronger and more assertive from her husband. And in their parenting they integrate the masculine and the feminine. They are able to both set clear boundaries with their children, while also being loving and caring. They are able to punish when need be and hug often. They resist the urge to be the boss of their kids, as well as their kids’ best buddies, but instead parent with balance and wisdom.

Wisdom comes when we balance the male and the female. It’s not just Christianity and Judaism that believes this. You find this in other faiths. The yin and the yang in Chinese Taoism is a balancing of the male and the female. Ancient mythology has the anima and the animus. Even in the Bible you have a balancing of Adam and Eve. The balance is everywhere.

Who is our model of wisdom in Christianity? You can look to great figures who seemed to have this balance; people like Mother Teresa, Martin Luther, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Genoa, Mary Madgalene, and Peter. All had that balance. But you also need look no further

than Jesus. He was the balance of male and female. He was strong enough to stand against the authorities, and compassionate enough to be a healer. He was courageous enough to go to the cross, and weak enough to be able to cry out to God as he suffered. He is the model of the integration of the male and the female. He is the manifestation of wisdom.

So how do you become wise in life, like Jesus? I believe that for men it means being willing to become more feminine, without losing their masculinity. For women it means being willing to become more masculine, but without losing their femininity. And I've noticed how this happens over time. I've noticed that as most men get older, they take on more and more feminine traits as they become more compassionate and nurturing. For women, I've noticed that they often become more masculine in terms of being willing to stand for themselves and what is right.

To be wise means to be balanced in the way scripture teaches. It means, for instance, being able to be both firm and gentle at the same time. It means being able to be both forceful and flexible at the same time. It means knowing how to stand firm and compromise at the same time. It means knowing how to be principled and compassionate at the same time.

We are called to let wisdom lie at the center of our lives. What role does wisdom play in your life?

Amen.