

Truth for Today

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Who Jesus is: Wonderful Counsellor

It was only two weeks ago that we celebrated Christmas. No doubt Isaiah 9:6-7 was read at many carol services up and down the UK: *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this"* (English Standard Version). But the Lord Jesus Christ is for everyday Christian life - not just for Christmas! So we shouldn't relegate Isaiah 9:6 to Christmas only.

Today we start a new series of talks entitled 'Who Jesus is', based on His four names in Isaiah 9:6. This morning I'll talk about the first name, 'Wonderful Counsellor', which, in most translations, is rendered as two names: 'Wonderful', comma, 'Counsellor'. But for this talk I'm using the English Standard Version translation in which 'Wonderful' is the adjective of the noun 'Counsellor'. However, it doesn't really matter for 'Wonderful' is also a name for the Lord Jesus.

The Name 'Wonderful'

You may remember the story of Samson in Judges 13:17-18, when his father, Manoah, asked the angel of the LORD, *"What is your name, so that, when your words come true, we may honour you?"* The angel of the LORD replied, *"Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?"*

Quite often in the Bible the name of a person describes his character; for example, *"Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him"*, 1 Samuel 25:25. For Manoah and his wife, 'Wonderful' was a fitting name for the angel of the LORD because He promised them their long-wished-for child. But 'Wonderful' is a name we use to describe the Lord Jesus, for example, we sing, *"Jesus, what a wonderful name!"* when we worship Him because of all that He is in Himself.

He was given the name "Jesus" at His birth: *"you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins"* (Matthew 1:21). His actions were also 'wonderful' - the greatest of all being His sacrifice on the cross. Sadly, not everyone appreciated what Jesus did. For example, Matthew 21:15 records that the chief priests and the scribes were indignant when they saw the wonderful things that He did, things which caused the children to cry out in the temple, *"Hosanna to the Son of David!"*

Old Testament saints rejoiced in the wonderful deeds of God:

- Gideon mentioned: *"all His wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?'"* (Judges 6:13).
- Job commented on: *"things too wonderful for me, which I did not know"* (Job 42:3).
- The psalmist said: *"I will recount all of Your wonderful deeds"* (Psalm 9:1).
- Isaiah rejoiced: *"O LORD, You are my God; I will exalt You; I will praise Your name, for You have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure"* (Isaiah 25:1).
- David said: *"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your works; my soul knows it very well"* (Psalm 139:14).

What (or who) is a Counsellor?

A counsellor is anyone who offers another person advice about how to live, conduct one's affairs and even what, or what not, to say. There are many examples of counsellors, both good and bad, in Scripture. King David used them as what nowadays we would call 'political advisers'. There was his uncle Jonathan, a man of understanding and a scribe. Along with Jehiel, he advised the king's sons (1 Chronicles 27:32). There was also Zechariah, who was a shrewd counsellor (1 Chronicles 26:14). Most famously, there was Ahithophel, the king's own counsellor, with whom David enjoyed 'sweet counsel' but who later conspired against him in Absalom's rebellion (Psalm 55:12-14; 1 Chronicles 27:33 and 2 Samuel 15:12).

The 'Wonderful Counsellor'

Isaiah prophesied that the child to be born would be called 'Wonderful Counsellor' (Isaiah 9:6). It's a God-given name, meaning He would be wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom (Isaiah 28:29) because the Spirit of the LORD would rest upon Him. That is, 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). In Isaiah 40:13, Isaiah asks: *"Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows Him His counsel?"* Yes, *"with God [alone] are wisdom and might; He has counsel and understanding"* (Job 12:13). *"[His] counsel ... stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations"* (Psalm 33:11). Psalm 1:1-3 states the blessednesses of the man who walks in these counsels.

The nation of Israel expected their coming Messiah would give them wonderful counsel. This is exactly what the Lord Jesus did, when He came as their promised King. It's in Matthew's Gospel, the Gospel of the King, that we find His sayings. There are seven discourses, but perhaps the best know of these is the first, the Sermon on the Mount. Let's now look at some of it which show that He is the 'Wonderful Counsellor'.

Wonderful counsel about salvation, Matthew 7:13-14

Jesus told how we can be saved: *"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few"* (Matthew 7:13-14). The narrow gate and the way to life are found by believing the Gospel message of salvation. The Lord Jesus is the Saviour: *"I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture ... I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep"* (John 10:9-11).

Jesus warned that the route to Hell is easy and is full of people, lulled by the present world with its pursuits, pleasures and riches. In Matthew 16:26, He raised this issue of salvation to the highest level by asking two pertinent questions about our attitude to life now, when compared with the eternal future:

- *"What will it profit [you] if [you] gain the whole world and forfeit [your] soul?"* and
- *"What shall a man give in return for his soul?"*

Then, He continued in Matthew 18:7-9: *"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire."* Let me ask:

- Which door of life have you gone through?
- Which road of life are you travelling on?
- What destiny will you arrive at?

Furthermore, in Matthew 7:21-27, the Lord described the dreadful judgment which will fall on those who profess to be, and who call themselves, 'Christians' but, who, have never really been converted! *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.'"*

Matthew 7:26-27 present two contrasting responses and outcomes we can have to His sayings about salvation:

1. *"Everyone then who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock."* Or:
2. *"Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."*

Wonderful counsel for believers, Matthew 11:28-30

If the gate to salvation is narrow and the way to life is a difficult road to traverse, what advice has the Saviour to offer believers, who go this way? He says: *"Come to Me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28-30). Are you a believer who is burdened with your own

shortcomings? Are you still trying your best to please God, for example, by trying hard to keep the commandments? Do you carry burdens or cares, such as an illness or difficult circumstances? Do you have sadness or sorrow? Or, are you simply finding being a Christian tough going? Well, there's a way to overcome. The Saviour invites you to come to Him. He promises to give you rest of soul if you take His yoke upon you, that is, the yoke of obedience to God. You are to learn from Him - become one of His disciples by following His teaching and example. And He promises that you'll find His yoke to be easy, and His burden to be light (Matthew 11:30).

Learning wonderful counsel from Him

'Come-take-learn' is the formula of Christian discipleship. Believers 'come' in prayer; they 'take' and 'learn' from studying the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, which detail the life of the Lord. I said earlier that Matthew's Gospel records, especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-7:29, many of Christ's sayings. We'll now explore some of these which give us wonderful counsel for Christian living.

Christian priorities, Matthew 6:19-33

The Lord Jesus gives His disciples different priorities to those the world think are important. He said believers should make the kingdom of God and His righteousness the first priority in life (Matthew 6:33). His advice about living starts in Matthew 6:24 with the admonition: *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."* He continues in Matthew 6:25: *"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"* These are very apposite words for us in today's world, which places much emphasis on these very things. But, for believers and by contrast, our heavenly Father knows all our needs and will provide all that is necessary for us. The Lord counsels us to have the faith to understand that *"all these things will be added unto you"* (Matthew 6:33). With respect to wealth, the Lord had previously commented in Matthew 6:19-21 about mammon, that is, money and/or possessions: *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

Christians and the world, Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus said that His disciples are to be salt and light in a corrupt, ungodly and unrighteous world. As such, it will not always agree with what we say or do, but if they see our good works they'll give glory to our heavenly Father. The world will always attempt to catch us out. In Matthew 22:16-21, they tried to do so with the Lord. The Pharisees and the Herodians deceitfully asked Him: *"Teacher, we know that You are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and You do not care about anyone's opinion, for You are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what You think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"* But Jesus was aware of their malice, and asked them to show Him the coins used to pay taxes. When Jesus asked, *'Whose likeness and inscription is on this [denarius]?' They replied, 'Caesar's.'* Then He said to them, *'Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'*" This saying, which has become part of our English language, is wonderful counsel to Christ's disciples. It's important to be law-abiding citizens in our society but it's more important to give our lives over to the service of God, in Whose image and likeness we have been made.

Christian attitudes

Much of the Sermon on the Mount is about His disciples exhibiting Christ-like attitudes, all of which contrast to prevalent worldly attitudes. Let me remind you of eleven sound bites of 'wonderful counsel':

1. In Matthew 5:1-12, He said the 'blessed' in God's kingdom are those: who are poor in spirit (the contrite and humble); grieve at all the wrong in the world; the meek; those who hunger and thirst after righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; the peacemakers; and all who are reviled or persecuted for Christ's sake.
2. In Matthew 5:21-26, He said that believers are to be self-controlled, not angry without cause, or insulting others. Any differences they have with other people must be sorted out before they come to worship God.
3. In Matthew 5:27-30, He said that lust resides in every human heart and that is where sin is actually committed. It must not be allowed to reign over us. (James urged this upon the readers of his letter: *"Each person is tempted [with evil] when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers"*, James 1:14-16.)
4. In Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus said that divorce is only allowed in very exceptional circumstances of married life. When questioned on this by the Jews in Matthew 19:4-6, the Lord said that divorce happens because of the hardness of people's hearts. He answered them: *"Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and*

hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let not man separate."

5. In Matthew 5:33-37, He counsels that if believers commit themselves to anything, they're to be true to their word. *"Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."*
6. In Matthew 5:38-42, He states that retaliation is out-of-bounds for believers and must be replaced by 'turning the other cheek', giving more than is due, and 'going the extra mile'! The golden rules are: *"whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them"* (Matthew 7:2); and *"[forgive your brother] seventy times seven"* (Matthew 18:22).
7. In Matthew 5:43-47, He demands that believers *"love their enemies."* (Paul elaborates on this injunction in Romans 12:14, 17-21: *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them ... Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*)
8. In Matthew 7:1-5, He states that believers must not be of a hyper-critical, or over-righteous, or hypocritical, spirit.
9. In Matthew 7:6, He requires believers to discriminate between what is holy and what is common, or natural, so that the things of God are properly revered.
10. In Matthew 7:15-20, He advises that believers must be alert to counterfeit Christians, 'wolves in sheep's clothing' He calls them. The test is: *"by their fruits you will recognise them."*
11. Finally, in Matthew 5:48, the Lord sets the standard for Christians: *"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

Special counsel for Christian giving, Matthew 6:1-4

When I was writing this talk in November 2010, 'Children in Need' was in vogue. In contrast to these worldly practices, where donations are made under the full glare of media spotlights, the Lord Jesus warns: *"Beware of practising your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you"* (Matthew 6:1-4).

Special counsel on prayer, Matthew 6:5-14

The Lord Jesus gives advice about where, and how, to pray. God the Father wants us to be totally focused on personal piety. Jesus said that prayer is to be made behind closed doors and 'in the secret place of the Most High'. It should follow the pattern of what is commonly known as the Lord's Prayer:

- God should be worshipped and the Father's name must be held as sacred (Matthew 6:9);
- There should be a desire for the whole world to come under the rule of God by bowing the knee to the Lord Jesus (Matthew 6:10);
- We should express our total dependence upon the Father for every daily provision (Matthew 6:11); and
- We should confess our sins, knowing that the Father, by virtue of Christ's blood, will forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness so that we will be kept from evil (Matthew 6:12-13).

Conclusion

The Lord Jesus is indeed the "Wonderful Counsellor" (Isaiah 9:6). There's no one who compares with Him: *"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counsellor?"* (Romans 11:34). He promises: *"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you"* (Psalm 32:8). Our response should always be: *"You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward You will receive me to glory"* (Psalm 73:24).

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