

IN THE MARGINS: The fine line between wisdom and intelligence

By Tony Martin
Editor

No one has ever accused me of being the smartest person in the room. That's fine with me. What I would aspire toward is being the wisest person in the room. There is a difference.

This wisdom thing is a virtue I've aspired toward for a long, long time. I've given a lot of thought as to why I've wanted so desperately to be wise, and I believe I've discovered my why. Here you go:

In our fast-paced, information-driven society, it's easy to conflate being smart with possessing wisdom. Both qualities are undoubtedly valuable, but as Christians, it's crucial to recognize the subtle yet profound differences between them. Intelligence often refers to one's capacity to acquire knowledge and skills and apply them effectively. Wisdom, however, is deeper – it's about discernment, making the right choices, and living in a way that aligns with God's principles.

Here's why, from a Christian worldview, wisdom stands out as not only desirable but essential:

The Nature of Wisdom vs. Intelligence

Intelligence: Typically measured through IQ tests and academic achievements, intelligence refers to mental sharpness, problem-solving abilities, and often, the retention of information.

Wisdom: This is about applying knowledge in a way that

reflects understanding and empathy. Biblically, wisdom starts with a fear of the Lord. *Proverbs 9:10* says, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."*

Wisdom is not just about knowing what is right but doing what is right. There is a difference!

Why Wisdom Is Better

Guidance in Decision-Making

Intelligence can help us navigate technical problems and logical dilemmas, but wisdom guides us through moral and ethical decisions. In *James 1:5*, we are told, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."* This scripture underscores that wisdom is a divine gift that helps us make choices that bring us closer to God's will. The less I mess things up, the happier I am.

Building Better Relationships

Smart individuals are often admired for their quick thinking and clever solutions, but wise individuals are cherished for their understanding and insight. Wisdom teaches us patience, humility, and kindness – traits essential for sustaining meaningful relationships. *Colossians 4:5-6* encourages us, *"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."*

Long-term Perspective

While intelligence might focus on immediate results and efficiencies, wisdom looks at the long-term impact of our actions. Wisdom involves seeing beyond the here and now, understanding the ripple effects of our actions on future generations. This aligns with the scriptural view found in *Jeremiah 29:11*, where God speaks of plans formed with an

eternal perspective in mind: *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

Moral Integrity

Intelligence can be used for good or ill; wisdom inherently seeks the good. I think that’s a critical point. It is deeply rooted in moral truths and virtues. Wisdom helps us navigate through life’s gray areas, where the right path isn’t always clear-cut. This principle is beautifully illustrated in *Proverbs 2:6-7*, *“For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He holds success in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless.”*

Peace and Contentment

Wisdom brings a sense of peace and contentment that mere intelligence often fails to deliver. In a world where people chase after the next big thing, wisdom teaches us contentment and gratitude, anchoring us in what truly matters. *Philippians 4:7* speaks of *“the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,”* guarding our hearts and minds – an invaluable attribute of divine wisdom. Who doesn’t want peace?

Cultivating Wisdom in a World that Values Intelligence

In a culture that often prizes intelligence – measured in degrees, accolades, and facts – it’s vital for Christians to cultivate wisdom. This doesn’t come from books or lectures alone but through a deep, ongoing relationship with God and a commitment to live out His teachings daily. Here are a few practical ways to cultivate wisdom:

Pray for Insight and Guidance: Continually ask God for wisdom as Solomon did, valuing it above wealth and longevity.

Study the Scriptures: Regularly engaging with the Bible not only educates but enlightens, offering God’s perspective on life’s complexities.

Learn from Others: Embrace the counsel of godly mentors and leaders who exhibit wisdom in their lives and decisions.

While intelligence is undoubtedly useful, wisdom is the key to living a life that fulfills God's purpose for us. It shapes not only what we do but who we are, echoing throughout our actions, decisions, and relationships. As we navigate the challenges and choices of this life, let's strive for wisdom, which is *"more precious than rubies"* and nothing we desire can compare with it (*Proverbs 3:15*).