

(Curated, highlighted, and shortened)

The Last Sermon, Preached in Eisleben, Matt. 11:25–30, February 15, 1546

On the Saturday following the preceding sermon Luther set out for Mansfeld to mediate a dispute between Count Albert and Count Gebhard. Most likely his last sermon was preached on Monday, February 15, not on February 14, to a large crowd which gathered from all over the countryside to hear him. On the day afterward while confined to his bed, he signed the treaty between the brothers, on the eighteenth he died, and on the twenty-second his body was buried in Wittenberg. The last four sermons, preached in Eisleben, were published in Wittenberg, 1546. Who the transcriber was cannot be determined.

Text in German; WA 51, 187–194.

This is a fine Gospel and it has a lot in it. Let us talk about part of it now, covering as much as we can and as God gives us grace.

The Lord here praises and extols his heavenly Father for having hidden these things from the wise and understanding. That is, he did not make his gospel known to the wise and understanding, but to infants and children who cannot speak and preach and are not knowing and wise. Thus he indicates that he is opposed to the wise and understanding and dearly loves those who are not wise and understanding but are rather like young children.

But to the world it is very foolish and offensive that God should be opposed to the wise and condemn them, **when, after all, we have the idea that God could not reign if he did not have wise and understanding people to help him.** But the meaning of the saying is this: the wise and understanding in the world so contrive things that God cannot be favorable and good to them. For they are always exerting themselves; they do things in the Christian church the way they want to themselves. Everything that God does they must improve, so that there is no poorer, more insignificant and despised disciple on earth than God; he must be everybody's pupil, **everybody wants to be his teacher and preceptor.** ... they are not satisfied with what God has done and instituted, they cannot let things be as they were ordained to be. They think they have to do something too, in order that they may be a bit better than other people and be able to boast: This is what I have done; what God has done is too poor and insignificant, even childish and foolish; I must add something to it. **This is the nature of the shameful wisdom of the world, especially in the Christian church, where one bishop and one pastor hacks and snaps at another and one obstructs and shoves the other, as we have seen at all times in the government of the church to its great detriment.** These are the real wiseacres, of whom Christ is speaking here, who put the cart before the horse and will not stay on the road which God himself has shown us, but always have to have and do something special in order that the people may say: **Ah, our pastor or preacher is nothing; there's the real man, he'll get things done!**

But is this behavior not a disgusting thing, and should not God grow impatient with it? Should he be so greatly pleased with these fellows who are all too smart and wise for him and are always wanting to send him back to school? As it says later in the same chapter, "Wisdom

must be justified by her own children" [Luke 7:35]. Things are in a fine state, indeed, when the egg wants to be wiser than the hen. A fine governance it must be when the children want to rule their father and mother, and the fools and simpletons the wise people. You see, this is the reason why the wise and understanding are condemned everywhere in the Scriptures.

The pope has also done the same thing. For example, when Christ established and instituted the ministry [*Predigtamt*] and the sacrament of his body and blood in order that Christians should use it to strengthen and fortify their faith, the pope cried: No, that's not the way it should be; it must be wisely handled! For his decree says that it is not good that the sacrament should be administered for the strengthening of the faith of Christians, but that when the priest reads the mass for the living or the dead it must be a sacrifice; for example, when a merchant is about to go on a journey, he should first have a mass read for him, and then it will turn out fortunately for him.

Likewise, the fact that God instituted baptism is a trifling thing to the pope and with him it soon became lost and impotent. In its place he created his shavelings, who wear cowls and tonsures; they are the ones who were going to save the world with their orders and monkery, so that anybody who entered such an order possessed a new and better baptism, by which not only he but also other people were to be helped if they wished to be saved...

In worldly affairs and government the same thing happens, as Aristotle too has written. A few people are often endowed with great wisdom and understanding, unlike ordinary people. Often God gives us a fine, noble, intelligent man, who could serve principalities and people with wisdom and counsel. But such persons flee from the business of government and it is hard to bring them to govern. On the other hand, however, there are others who want to be and to do it, but they have no ability. ... Conceit keeps the dance going. They imagine that because they are in the government and are higher-ups they must surely be wise. And one such fool in counsel hinders the others from getting on with anything at all; for he wants to be wise by force in the devil's name, and still he is a fool.

Now, if in worldly affairs one is quite rightly opposed to these people who want to be wise and are not, how much more irksome are those people, whom both God and men rightly dislike, who want to be wise in the holy Christian church and are not. For these people hinder the ministry, so that the people cannot come to God. Such in our time were Münzer, and the antisacramentarians, who prevent and obstruct the course of the gospel and mislead the people, imagining that they alone are wise and understanding because they are in the office and government of the church.

So the pope, too, wants to be a very wise man, indeed, the wisest of the wise, simply because he has a high position and claims to be the head of the church; whereupon the devil so puffs him up that he imagines that whatever he says and does is pure divine wisdom and everybody must accept and obey it, and nobody should ask whether it is God's Word or not. In his big fool's book, he presumes quite shamelessly to say that it is not likely that such an eminence, meaning himself, could err. So, too, the emperor, kings, and cardinals; because they sit in such high places, they too think they cannot err or be wrong.

... This, then, is what the Lord Christ is saying here. He is opposed to the wiseacres, he will not tolerate them in his Christian church, whether they be pope, emperors, kings, princes, or learned men, because they want to make themselves masters of his divine Word and with their

own wisdom rule in the high, great matters of faith and our salvation. We ourselves have experienced many such instances in a short time. ...

But most of all and for the longest time it has been the pope and the cardinals who have promoted this kind of wisdom and understanding and wanted to be God's master and rule Christendom themselves. But this God will not tolerate. He has no intention of being a pupil; they are to be the pupils. He is the eternal wisdom and he knows very well what he wishes to do or not to do. They think that, because they sit at the top of the government, they are the wisest, that they see more deeply into the Scriptures than other people. ...

It sounds almost as if, when Christ spoke these words: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven," etc. [Matt. 11:25], they were spoken with ill will. And yet there was no ill will or hatred in his heart; for, since he gave himself, body and life, for us, how could there be any ill will there? But his annoyance and displeasure comes from the fact that these miserable, foolish people presume to become masters of the divine Majesty. This he cannot and should not tolerate, and all devout hearts thank him for it, for otherwise there would be no end to this affected wisdom and mastery. The devil so rides these people that all they want from the Holy Scriptures and God's Word is a big name and their own praise and honor, and they want to be more than other people. But here we ought to say: **Dear heavenly Father, speak thou, I am willing to be a fool and a child and be silent; for if I were to rule with my own understanding, wisdom, and reason, the cart would long since have been stuck in the mire and the ship would long since have been wrecked. Therefore, dear God, do thou rule and guide it thyself; I will gladly put out my eyes, and my reason besides, and let thee alone rule through thy Word.**

But this cannot be achieved with the world. The sectarians rise up and at bottom seek nothing else except to gain great honor among the people, so that people will say of them: There's the right man; he'll do it! And with this praise they also want to strut and tickle their own vanity: This you have done, this is your work, you are the first-rate man, the real master. But that isn't even worth throwing to the dogs. **For right preachers should diligently and faithfully teach only the Word of God and seek only his honor and praise.** Likewise, the hearers also should say: I do not believe in my pastor, but he tells me of another Lord, whose name is Christ; him he shows to me; **I will listen to him, in so far as he leads me to the true Teacher and Master, God's Son.**

Then things would be right in the church and it would be well governed, and there would be harmony all around. Otherwise there will be the same displeasure as there is in secular government. A city council will not tolerate a fool who frequently gets the whole town into confusion, but casts him out, and the whole country is glad about it. **The same thing should happen here in the Christian church; none other should be preached or taught except the Son of God alone. Of him alone is it said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" [Matt. 17:5]—and of no other, be he emperor, pope, or cardinal.**

Therefore this is what we say: I grant that emperor, pope, cardinals, princes, and nobles are wise and understanding, but I shall believe in Christ; he is my Lord, he is the one God bids me to listen to, from him he bids me to learn what real, divine wisdom and understanding is.

But right here the pope and those who follow him cry out: No, no, this you should not do; you should be obedient to the governing authorities and do what we tell you to do. Yes, I reply, this I should do, but first you become one with the Lord, who here says: "All things have been delivered to me by my Father" [Matt. 11:25]. **Therefore, dear pope, emperor, king, prince, and**

lord, do not go on this way; I will gladly listen to you so far as secular government is concerned, but when you presume to be master in Christendom and claim power to determine what I should believe and do, this I will not accept, for then you are claiming to be wise and understanding at the point where you are a fool and nothing has been revealed to you. For here is the Lord, who is the only one we ought to hear in these matters, as he himself says: “No one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” [Matt. 11:27], that is, to the childlike and simple, who consider themselves neither wise nor understanding, but rather hear and accept his Word. So, if it is his Word you hold up to me and command, I shall gladly accept it, even though it be spoken by a little child, or even the ass that spoke to Balaam [Num. 22:21–30]. Here I will make no distinction between the persons who speak, whether they be wise men or fools; for it has been decided and commanded: “All things have been delivered to me” [Matt. 11:27], I alone am the Man who should teach and rule, despite all the wise and understanding, who should allow their eyes to be blinded, and their reason too.

For our wisdom and understanding in divine things is the eye which the devil opened for us in paradise, when Adam and Eve, too, wanted to be wise in the devil’s name. God himself taught them and gave them his Word, which they were to adhere to, if they wanted to be really wise. Then came the devil and made improvements; he closed the eyes with which they had previously seen God and not seen the devil. This is the plague which still continues to cling to us—that we want to be wise and understanding in the devil’s name.

But to combat this we must learn what this means: “All things have been delivered to me.” In other words: I must rule, teach, counsel, give orders, and command in my church. And when he said that, Christ openly confessed that he is true God; for no angel nor any other creature can say that all things have been delivered to him. It is true that the devil once tried to seat himself on the throne and be like God; but he was soon flung out of heaven for it. Therefore Christ says, “All things have been delivered to me,” that is, to me, to me you must be obedient. If you have my Word, then stick to it, and pay no attention to anybody who teaches and commands you differently. I will rule, protect, and save you well. Let the pope, emperor, the mighty, and the learned be wise; but don’t you follow them, even though they were a thousand times wiser than they are. Don’t you do what even an angel in heaven dare not do, take over the sovereignty and the power of being wise yourself or exercising power and rule in God’s government. And yet these poor, miserable people, the pope, emperor, kings, and all sectarians, do not hesitate to arrogate this to themselves. But God has set his Son at his right hand and said in Ps. 2 [:7], “You are my son”; I have made the whole world and all nations your possession; hear him, you kings and lords, if you would be wise; do homage to him as your Lord; and know that what he says to you I am saying to you.

This we Christians should learn and acknowledge, even though the world does not want to do it, and we should be grateful to God that he has so richly blessed us and granted that we ourselves are able to hear him, just as Christ himself here gives joyful thanks to his heavenly Father. In times past we would have run to the ends of the world if we had known of a place where we could have heard God speak. But now that we hear this every day in sermons, indeed, now that all books are full of it, we do not see this happening. You hear at home in your house, father and mother and children sing and speak of it, the preacher speaks of it in the

parish church—you ought to lift up your hands and rejoice that we have been given the honor of hearing God speaking to us through his Word.

Oh, people say, what is that? After all, there is preaching every day, often many times every day, so that we soon grow weary of it. What do we get out of it? All right, go ahead, dear brother, if you don't want God to speak to you every day at home in your house and in your parish church, then be wise and look for something else...But aren't we stupid and crazy, yes, blinded and possessed by the devil? There sits the decoy duck in Rome with his bag of tricks, luring to himself the whole world with its money and goods, and all the while anybody can go to baptism, the sacrament, and the pulpit! How highly honored and richly blessed we are to know that God speaks with us and feeds us with his Word, gives us his baptism, the keys [absolution], etc.! But these barbarous, godless people say: What, baptism, sacrament, God's Word?—Joseph's pants, that's what does it! It is the devil in the world who makes the high personages, the emperor and the kings, oblivious to such things and causes them to allow themselves to be so grossly duped and fooled and bespattered with filth by these first-class rascals and liars, the pope and his tonsured shavelings. But we should listen to God's Word, which tells us that he is our schoolmaster, and have nothing to do with Joseph's pants or the pope's juggling tricks.

This is the first point in this Gospel—that Christ and God the Father himself are opposed to the wise and understanding. For they vex him greatly; they mangle the sacrament and the church, and set themselves up in God's place and want themselves to be masters. To such all the angels in heaven and all Christians are opposed and we should say to them: **If you want to teach Christ to me, I shall gladly listen to you, otherwise not, even if you were an angel from heaven, as St. Paul says in Gal. 1 [:8]. "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed."**

When, therefore, the great lords, the emperor, pope, cardinals, and bishops are hostile and wrathful toward us because of all this, excommunicate us, and would gladly burn and murder us all, we must suffer it and say: We did not start this on account of the pope, the bishops, and the princes, nor shall we stop it on account of them. Christ says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden" [Matt. 11:28], and **it is as though he were saying: Just stick to me, hold on to my Word and let everything else go. If you are burned and beheaded for it, then have patience, I will make it so sweet for you that you easily would be able to bear it. ...I will give you the heart to laugh even though Turk, pope, emperor, and everybody else be filled with horrible wrath and rage. Only come to me; and if you are facing oppression, death, or torture, because the pope, the Turk, and emperor are attacking you, do not be afraid; it will not be heavy for you, but light and easy to bear, for I give you the Spirit, so that the burden, which for the world would be unbearable, becomes for you a light burden. For when you suffer for my sake, it is my yoke and my burden, which I lay upon you in grace, that you may know that this your suffering is well pleasing to God and to me and that I myself am helping you to carry it and giving you power and strength to do so. So also say Ps. 31 [:24] and Ps. 27 [:14]: "Let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord," i.e., all you who suffer for his sake. **Let misfortune, sin, death, and whatever the devil and the world loads upon you assail and assault you, if only you remain confident and undismayed, waiting upon the Lord in faith, you have already won, you have already escaped death and far surpassed the devil and the world.****

Lo, this means that the wise of this world are rejected, that we may learn not to think ourselves wise and to put away from our eyes all great personages, indeed, to shut our eyes altogether, and cling only to Christ's Word and come to him, as he so lovingly invites us to do, and say: Thou alone art my beloved Lord and Master, I am thy disciple.

This and much more might be said concerning this Gospel, but I am too weak and we shall let it go at that.