

The Attributes of a Wise Shepherd

(9) I Will Not Rule Over You

“Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian” But Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you” (Judges 8:22-23). This wonderful passage from the book of Judges establishes a very important principle in ministry which states that the authority in the church is that of the Lord and not the priest, his wife or his son. Although I talked about this topic before in the message of October 2015 when I discussed the subject of *“Spiritual Abuse”*, yet I like to add some other points to this very important subject. The high prevalence of this malignant illness among priests causes great offences to the served people.

Unfortunately, one of the most prevailing expression recently is *“Battered Sheep”* that is inspired from the well-known expression *“Battered wife”*. The following are among the signs of this syndrome:

(1) The priest claims that whatever he says is God’s words even if it is his own personal opinion *“But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die” (Deuteronomy 18:20).* What can be these *other gods* in whose name a priest can speaks other than the gods of ego and personal inclinations?

(2) The priest exaggerates in using the order to obey as a way to push the served people and scare them from the curse of disobeying a priest. *“But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20: 25-28)*

- (3) Giving instructions in an ordering way void of motivating and encouraging through love.
- (4) Employing all ways to induce pressure on served people instead of helping them and praying with them to know God's will for their lives.
- (5) The prevailing spirit is that of authority instead of that of support and help.
- (6) The priest seeks to make people absolutely dependent on him and his instructions.
- (7) Rigid and inflexible conversation under the title, *"I am a priest. Don't review what I say!!"*
- (8) The priest isolates himself away from his congregation and surrounds himself with an aura that builds thick walls between him and them and that makes him unavailable.
- (9) Turning the church into a personal organization centered upon the priest and his entourage instead of making it a divine organization centered upon Christ and His word.
- (10) All the priest's efforts and energy are directed towards and depleted in keeping his authority untouched instead of taking care of the congregation.
- (11) Controlling people through temper tantrums, threats and loud voice.
- (12) The priest does not allow people to express their opinions that oppose his. He punishes opponents either by ignoring, rejecting or scandalizing them *"Mental Castration of People"*.
- (13) Controlling people through guilt messages and pushing them to apologize for uncommitted mistakes.
- (14) A controlling priest has unrealistic expectations towards the people he serves and he never makes them feel he is satisfied with their performance.

Now, as we are about to begin a new Coptic year, I would like to whisper to the ear of every priest repeating what Daniel said before, *"Therefore, O king, let my advice be acceptable to you; break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity"* (Daniel 4:27)

The Virtue of Wisdom

Wisdom is one of the Holy Spirit's attributes mentioned in Isaiah 11:2, *"The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord."*

Talking about wisdom is satisfying and consoling to the heart and spirit because it is talking about the persona of our Lord Jesus Christ since He is the hypostasis of wisdom. *"The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding He established the heavens"* (Proverbs 3:19).

Wisdom is the one virtue our Lord asked us to adhere to in order to be able to live and survive this evil world. *"Go your way; behold, I send you out as lambs among wolves"* (Luke 10:3).

+ St. Anthony considered wisdom the prime virtue calling it the virtue of discernment and instructing us that any virtue practiced without the spirit of perceptiveness will turn into a vice. For example, practicing fasting without discernment might cause health problems. Guarding silence all the time might not be wise because there comes a time when speaking up becomes important. The same rule applies to teaching and advising when delivered without considering the spiritual and psychological level of listeners. It is true that God honors and rewards generous givers. *"Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine"* (Proverbs 3:9-10). However, giving alms should be carried out with discretion and discrimination lest it becomes abused or misused on alcohol or drugs.

+ Thus we arrive at the conclusion that everyone big or small, man or woman, rich or poor, scholar or common layman needs the virtue of wisdom. As a matter of fact, wisdom is the only virtue overtly recommended in the Holy Bible, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him"* (James 1:5).

+ Wisdom is personified in the blessed persona of Jesus Christ in Whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. Therefore, pursuing wisdom and asking for it is pleasing to God because it would be following the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. King Solomon praised the person in pursuit of wisdom saying, *"For whom the Lord loves He corrects, just as a father the son in whom he delights. Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains*

understanding; for her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her. Length of days is in her right hand, in her left hand riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who retain her" (Proverbs 3:12-18).

+ For the same reason God delighted in Solomon who had not asked for money nor victory over enemies. Instead, his reply to God was a request for God's treasures and not his pleasures (2 Chronicles 1:8-12).

+ Sage people have a great honor in every generation. They are favored by Kings and Noblemen. *"The wise shall inherit glory, but shame shall be the legacy of fools"* (Proverbs 3:35). A spiritual father distinguished for his spirit of wisdom is a source of joy and demand since he would be God's wise mouth.

The Holy Spirit and Wisdom

The Holy Spirit is the source of wisdom. God the father has promised, *"for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist"* (Luke 21:15). He is the One who guides the tongue to silence or to speech according to the need directing the thoughts and implementing decisions. He also chooses the words and the style for those who submit to Him. The Holy Spirit prompts the proper social interactions among people of different genres, social status, characters, personality types, and swinging moods. The Holy Spirit is ready to provide special prompts at different occasions and circumstances.

Jesus Christ and Wisdom

Jesus Christ has given the best examples concerning wise behavior. He did not chastise the Samaritan woman, but quite humbly He addressed her saying, *"Give Me a drink"* (John 4:7), thus proving that souls are gradually won through a sagacious approach. Another example is the woman caught in adultery. He was faced with two choices: either to refuse stoning her whereby He would be accused of breaking the law or accept the punishment and that would eventually prove to be against His compassionate nature. But He chose neither option; and in His wisdom established his golden precept, *"He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first"* (John 8:7). Concerning giving taxes to Caesar the Lord Jesus Christ wisely said to them, *"And He said to them, 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'" (Luke 20:25),* thereby teaching the Jews a lesson on the importance of not forgetting to give God what is worth giving and that is giving themselves over to Him.

The Saints and Wisdom

On entering Athens and seeing the false gods being worshiped, St. Paul was disturbed in his spirit. However, he started out by praising the worshippers saying, *"Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious"* (Acts 17:22). Then, he patiently explained to them that the unknown God (whom they had been worshipping) does not dwell in things made by hand. Another example of St. Paul's prudent performance is his dealing with the Sadducees and

Pharisees dividing each sect against the other by revealing his own identity, "*...I am a Pharisee, son of a Pharisee...*" (Acts 23:6).

St. Macarius, wanting to protect the monk who had committed adultery, he entered his cell and sat on the trunk under which the woman was hiding. God praised St. Macarius because he acted Christ-like in covering sins.

Abigail, through her humble and discerning diction, she stopped King David from avenging himself from her husband Nabal (1 Samuel 25:2-35)

Traits and Signs of Wisdom

1. Humbleness

Walking in humbleness and contrition is a prerequisite in obtaining wisdom. For, "*When pride comes, then comes shame; but with the humble is wisdom*" (Proverbs 11:2). A great example is the story of Rehoboam, King Solomon's son who treated his people with pride and hard headedness and as a result he lost his kingdom (2 Chronicles 12:14). Walking in humbleness and meekness expels demons and stops a lot of problems within homes and churches.

2. Tongue Control

Choosing when and what to say comes by controlling the tongue. This is one of the main signs of wisdom that caused Solomon to say "*Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive*" (Proverbs 17:28). St. James says that whoever controls his tongue is a perfect man. As the Lord has put it, "That You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged" (Romans 3:4). St. Arsanius says, "so often I spoke and so often I regretted but I never regretted having kept silent." A perfect example of the negative, deadly effect of harsh talk is manifested in Nabal's answer to David's servants as opposed to his wife's balmy answer, "*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness*" (Proverbs 15:1-2).

3. Prudence

Prudence is manifest in listening to advice especially when it comes from insightful people. "*The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise*" (Proverbs 12:15). This verse shows the outcome of being opinionated and stubborn. A wise person is ready to listen to advice and willing to take turns in talking while giving the others the chance to express their opinions without deriding or belittling "*The wise in heart will receive commands, but a prating fool will fall.*" (Proverbs 10:8). A wise person feels the need of perpetual learning; but a fool refuses counsel or advice.

How to Attain Wisdom

1. Prayers and requests:

Nothing is stronger or more effective than prayers in receiving wisdom, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."* (James 1:5)

2. Discipleship at the Lord's feet

Through regular reading of the word of God, we sense His breathe since the Scripture is the breath of God: *"The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;"* (Psalm 19:7).

"The mouth of the righteous speaks wisdom, and his tongue talks of justice. The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide." (Psalm 37:30-31)

"and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:15)

The Influence of the Surrounding

Our surroundings play a major role in shaping our personality and spirituality. *"He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed"* (Proverbs 13:20).

Saul sat among the prophets and he himself became one when the Holy Spirit descended upon him. St. Peter sat with the servants at the chief priest's house and ended up denying his master. *"Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars; Forsake foolishness and live, and go in the way of understanding"* (Proverbs 9:1,6).

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The writings of St. Anthony

St. Anthony has a lot of publications that constitute the basic foundation of monastic information and are the lighthouse for anyone living a monastic life. The most important of these writings are the twenty messages kept in a manuscript at the Monastery of St. Macarius. St. Anthony established a lot of monastic rules and regulations for his monks. He also wrote a special message to the monks at the Naqloon Monastery and another one to his disciple Bebnouda urging him to persevere in his fight against demons and their tricks and plots against the monks.

His Departure

Sensing the approach of his departure from this earthly life, St. Anthony commanded his

disciples to conceal his body but give his staff to St. Macarius, his attire to St. Athanasius, and his leather tunic to St. Serapion his disciple. Then he laid down on the ground and departed on the 31st of January the year 356 AD to be received by the angels and saints and ushered in into the everlasting life. St. Anthony lived for one hundred and five years in seclusion striving to attain the true perfect way. May the prayers of this great saint be with us.

St. Macarius the Father of the Monks of Scetis

To distinguish him from the other two saints bearing the same name, for example, St Macarius the Alexandrian, and St. Macarius bishop of Edco, Behera Province, St. Macarius the subject of our discussion, has been titled "Macarius the Great" or "Macarius the Egyptian". All three saints together are called the three saintly Macari.

St. Macarius is the first one to dwell the Scetis desert, present day Valley of Nitron. According to most historians, St. Macarius is considered the father of the Scetis monks. He was born the year 300 AD in Shabsheer-Menuf, in the province of Giza south of Cairo. His father, a priest, received a vision concerning the birth of St. Macarius. The child grew up nurtured by his righteous parents in the fear of God. He was referred to as the "wise youth". He was handsome and graceful in his manners. The village priests loved him so much and took him to be ordained a deacon by the village Bishop.

He continued to live a life of purity in the fear of God and recited the holy books in the church getting an inherent understanding in his heart of what he would read. So, the church priests urged him to serve in the church (by crowning him as a deacon in that church) and to the desire of his parents, they also wanted him to get married in order to be ordained a priest. But in his heart he longed for a life of solitude and virginity. So, after marriage, he abstained from marital relations with his wife. Soon after, his wife got sick and died. At the age of thirty he left his village to live a life of dedication to worship and prayer (perhaps in a cave or grave). Saturday evening he would go to the village to attend the praises, liturgy on Sunday to receive Holy Communion and then take provision supplies to return to his secluded life. The saint lived most of his life in this pattern.

A Sad and Difficult Incident

This story was found in a manuscript written by St. Serapion, St. Anthony's disciple. The story has it that a girl fell in adultery that resulted in pregnancy. Out of fear of the man she had committed the act with, she accused the hermit St. Macarius. Consequently, the girl's family attacked the saint severely beating him up and verbally offending and abusing him. Moreover, they wanted him to break his monastic vows and marry the girl. At his refusal, an elder in the village suggested that the saint would provide for the girl and her child. The saint toiled hard with sweat and tears always praying, "the bitterness permitted by God is better than the sweetness chosen by me". He would sell his straw handwork, give the girl's father some of his earnings and spend the rest on his provision.

The girl had a very hard time during labor. Feeling the punishment of God in what she was undergoing, she had the urge to confess her lies against the saint. She did that publicly and revealed the name of the real person. It was only after her confession that the baby was born.

Fear fell on the village people and they hurried to St. Macarius to ask for his forgiveness and absolution. Getting to know this from his servant, St. Macarius ran away to the wilderness from this coming earthly glorification.

At that time he was forty years old. St Macarius, accompanied by a cherubim, walked away from the village for two days till they arrived at the Valley of Nitron. St. Macarius asked the angel to find him a place to live. The angel replied "if I designate a place for you and then you leave it you would be disobeying God. But the whole wilderness is yours. Choose wherever you want to live." So, he lived in the inner wilderness which is present-day Monastery of El-Baramous. St. Macarius remained in that place in the year 340 AD. Three years later it occurred to him to go to St. Anthony to obtain his blessings, advice and direction concerning the monastic life that both had chosen.