“But wisdom is vindicated by her works.”

First of all, this little saying, “We played the flute for you, but you did not dance, we sang a dirge but you did not mourn,” That has to do with the fact that there is a certain pattern in life that is not up to us to determine. There is a time for dancing and there is a time for mourning, and we have to respond and not prefer to dance all the time or to mourn all the time or whatever. So it’s about being responsive. And this is a very simple teaching of wisdom, that life is not what we make it really. Life is something we respond to. We do not create it. We do not make it. We are its beneficiary, and we need to respond to it.

Now in the very specific instance he refers to of John the Baptist—now John the Baptist was by traditional standards a wise man. He belonged to a school of wisdom often in modern times called “asceticism,” meaning self-mastery through self-denial. All schools of wisdom teach some form of self-denial, self-discipline, the purpose of which is mastery of self, so that a person is not controlled by his or her appetites, desires, and so on. A basic idea in ancient wisdom—it is the basis of yoga; it is the basis of Buddhism. But it has its limits, something Jesus knew quite well. It implies almost that our welfare is, again, our work pure and simple. But it isn’t. Our cooperation, yes, our work, no. So it tends to elude the whole movement of grace, so that self-mastery could actually end up making a person worse if that self isn’t subject to the grace of God, the love of God.

This is something Jesus understood very well, and so he said, “If you want to be my disciple, you have to pick up your cross,” which is about the death of the self, not the mastery of the self. There is a difference. The death of the self in submission to what is beyond the self, namely, God and God’s love. That’s what discipleship is about; that’s what he taught. But his form of discipleship does not exclude eating and drinking and sharing with sinners. In fact, it is precisely for that that he came, to gather together those who are lost. And that’s why he is the epitome of wisdom. So he ends by saying, “But wisdom is vindicated by her works.