

Who Is Wise?

Sunday, September 19, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

James 3:13-18

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Who is wise? Thus begins our epistle lesson, and what a great question this is! Over the recent months I have many times touched upon the matter of wisdom and its great scarcity in our day. We have much technical information, but too little wisdom. It could also be added that we have a great shortage of wisdom in our political system. The halls of political power are full of people who know how to rally their voting base and to wield any power they can take for themselves, but we are sadly lacking in those who are wise. Today's lesson is long overdue. James takes the matter of wisdom head-on, and we do well to listen.

As we begin our look at the scripture, we need to remember the setting to which James wrote. The Epistles were letters written to specific congregations with specific problems. The problems addressed were often not explained by the writer and so we are left to determine the nature of the situation which made the letter necessary. This "reading between the lines" is not quite so hard as it may sound, and the problem James addresses was a common one. In the ancient world wisdom was held in very high esteem and many within the Church strove to be recognized as wise men and therefore, leaders. In many assemblies there arose a problem of the "insufferable wise" who were vying for leadership and causing much trouble. With this background in mind, listen again to the words of James. *Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.* James was calling out these ambitious leaders and forcing

them to consider their motives. If they think they are so wise, then let them prove it by means other than smooth talk.

When one hears of the problems of the wise, one may first think of Paul and particularly his difficult times in Corinth. This was the age of the philosopher and the orator, and people were quick to follow the ones who could appear wise and speak in an engaging and entertaining manner. Paul was a brilliant man and called by God to serve, but to many he was not exciting enough, so they ran after more interesting preachers, and these preachers were often competing with one another for greater influence. This competition even led many of the allegedly wise to deny Paul's authority as an apostle. Things got very ugly! James reports to us from a much more Jewish setting in the Jerusalem Church. Here there may have been competing teachers boasting of their superior training in the Law and of other Hebrew credentials, and though they were not always warm to Gentiles, the Jews could also become a little too enamored of eloquence. The problem among these many congregations was actually much the same, whether that congregation be primarily Hebrew or Gentile. Wise men were working hard to advance themselves in leadership, and ego very quickly played a large part in these men's lives.

Knowledge and truth, though good things, can do terrible damage to people's spirits. Consider your own expertise. We all have one, whether it be knowledge in an academic field or skilled in running a business, school, kitchen, office, or shop. Having spent many years of study myself, and this in the fields of Bible and theology, I am reminded of how hard I labored to gain a certain level of understanding. This was hard work. With great effort discoveries were made and opinions were formed, and I hold this knowledge dear. There are many matters about which I am convinced that I am right, and here begins the problem. The belief that one has attained significant understanding can easily lead to an inflated ego and a lack of kindness to those who may not fully agree. One can easily take it personally if challenged on a certain point and automatically respond with a counterattack. Perhaps the greatest danger is the sense of satisfaction one can feel when one develops a following because of their expertise. This is power, and power is seductive! So it was in the early Church.

Such arrogance and grasping for power have devastating effects upon the Church. Paul lamented the many divisions in Corinth as people seemed to be swearing allegiance to various leaders: *One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."* (1 Cor. 1:12) This is a divided Church and an insult to our Lord. Not only does the Church become split, but there is soon a noticeable lack of love, for rather than caring for each other Christ's people become focused upon proving others wrong and defending their faction. This is *not* an affirmation of Christ! C. S. Lewis, the great 20th century Christian thinker knew the temptation of wisdom as we see in this prayer of repentance which he offered. He prayed for God to forgive him and rescue him *From all the victories that*

I seemed to score; From cleverness shot forth on thy behalf, At which, while angels weep, the audience laugh.

So, what then is real wisdom? Do you believe that you are wise? Here is how your wisdom can be proven. Hear again the Apostle James' words. *Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.* Two initial marks of true wisdom are given. First is the leading of a good life. Remember that wisdom is always practical and applies itself to real daily life. Wisdom can be described as divine truth lived out at ground level. The impressive speakers may tell lofty and beautiful stories, but what about real, daily life? A truly wise person leads a life which is the kind that we would want to imitate. Think of a wise person that you know. You may admire their knowledge and understanding, but even more than that you are envious of how they live life so well. They have joy and a godly confidence in all that they do, and we wish that we could be more like them. To take a closer look at the smooth operators who were trying to advance themselves in the early Church one would find people of tainted character that we would never wish to imitate. Real wise people live good lives.

The other indicator of true wisdom given in v. 13 is its gentleness. The truly wise are kind and accepting of others. Think for a moment of a teacher, or the times which you have taught others. A wise teacher is one who knows their field well, but this is only the beginning. The truly wise, according to James, is one who can then gently teach those whose knowledge and ability is very weak. It is all too easy for us to be critical of the failings of the early learner, but Godly wisdom is gentle and always finds a reason to encourage and praise. It may be tempting to point out the dozens of mistakes made by a learner, but the wise teacher points up one area for improvement at a time. Knowledge can easily make us become arrogant and critical, but wisdom always remembers gentleness.

How we need gentleness in our world. We live in the day which has come to admire the activist – the protestor and crusader who always seems to be on the attack. It no longer seems sufficient to say that one supports a certain cause. One must become an activist. We think in terms of the Civil Rights movement when unjust laws needed to be changed and evil systems needed to be confronted. Now we have all kinds of activists who always seem to present their cause with an angry edge, and constantly campaign for more money from government sources, fully aware that monies sent to their cause may be diverted away from others. A gentle appeal is harder to come by, and now it seems that any great crusade needs to be presented in the combative manner of the activist. Gentle wisdom has apparently gone out of style!

Wisdom calls us to be a positive witness. Consider our day's readings. Psalm 1 exalts the person of faith. *Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. Quietly they*

live their faith, and their lives are richly blessed for it. This is wisdom. Proverbs 31, the lengthy discourse on the industrious woman is not only a tribute to women and to hard work, but it is a picture of wisdom. This is what life can look like when one walks by faith. Hers is a quiet, gentle, yet active and fruitful life, and we all do well to pay careful attention. *Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.* This is a wise woman!

James is merciless in his criticism of worldly wisdom, which he shows is actually personal advancement, and then he returns to describing and exalting true wisdom. *But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.* True heaven-sent wisdom is pure. It is honest to God and teaches and lives out biblical truth. It is honest to oneself and is free of hypocrisy. It is caring of others. This caring is not only for one's immediate circle of friends or for a single nation or group, but is for the whole world which God so loved.

Most amazing of all is James' insistence that true wisdom is *willing to yield*. You may be convinced that you are correct on a matter, but true wisdom does not insist upon having its own way. True wisdom may agree to disagree. One startling and overlooked characteristic of Jesus was his vast tolerance for those with differing views. The New Testament documents present many of our Lord's criticisms and arguments with various leaders and institutions of that day, and this can blind us to Jesus' actually amazing tolerance for those who were different. Yes, Jesus had his run-ins but consider his patience and gentleness toward those with whom he disagreed. Judaism in that day was divided into many sects, from the Pharisees to the Sadducees, to the Essenes, Zealots, Herodians, and on the list goes, and one might expect Jesus to give each one of these factions a piece of his mind! He was the Messiah and it seemed well within his rights to do so, but instead Jesus went about his gentle teaching of the Kingdom. When confronted, he held his own in debate, yet he never went looking for a fight. He felt no compulsion to weigh in on every controversy. Consider how Jesus generally honored and obeyed the Temple system, even though it was run by corrupt people. He told the Jews of that day to listen to and obey the official teachers of the Law, but not to live the corrupt lives which they led. Jesus could have poured buckets of criticism at the feet of all these groups and people, for they were misguided in so many ways, but he was restrained in his criticisms. Instead, Jesus gently taught of the Kingdom of God and looked forward to the day when His death and Resurrection would offer salvation to the world. He knew that in time the Holy Spirit would change hearts and lead people to the truth. Jesus taught with the kindness of a genuinely wise man.

Paul is another example of wisdom freely yielding to others. It was a sight to behold how tolerant he was of the differing approaches to faith between Jews and Gentiles. He was gentle and patient with these growing and learning congregations. There

were times when controversies and disagreements needed to be settled, but there were even more times when differences simply needed to be respected. There is an old expression used for someone who always seems to have some moral objection to some action or decision. We call them “a principled pain in the neck” (or worse!). Indeed, there are moments for principled objections, but the Bible never calls us to be such difficult people. Real wisdom is *willing to yield*.

Recently our conference minister, Dr. Carrie Call, penned an article on wisdom, and she spoke of true wisdom’s ability to create order out of chaos. She reminded us how the scriptures, personify and present wisdom as a woman, present at and participating in creation. Wisdom brought order out of disorder, creation out of chaos, and this is worthy of our attention. There may be untruths and deceptions which need to be unmasked and destroyed, but by and large the work of wisdom is that of building. Again, consider the wise woman of Proverbs 31—she builds! Hers is a harmonious and productive household. I laugh when I recall a t-shirt which my son used to wear which sported the following words. “Chaos, mayhem, confusion – My job here is done.” Many of the worldly-wise self-promoters of James’ day felt themselves wise as they advanced controversies which made them appear to be in the know, but in truth they should have been wearing my son’s t-shirt. Let us be wise. Let us build.

A key ingredient in wisdom from above is humility, even though humility may come hard to those who are convinced they are right. Wisdom walks humbly. There is something paradoxical in wisdom as the truly wise never claim to be wise, and those who claim to be wise should be held in great suspicion. Beware the self-appointed wise old man who begins every remark with “I’ve been around a long time, and I’ve learned a thing or two....”

The smart, the forceful and the provocative are often not the wise ones, but they do make us take notice of their presence. The truly wise are a humble and generally unnoticed bunch. Who are the wise among us? I see many of them. They are here, although not always immediately noticed. But that’s okay. That’s the way it is with the wise.