

Faith That Works: Wisdom In Action
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 19:7-11; Matthew 11:16-19; James 3:13-18

Our final Scripture reading today is from James 3:13-18. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”

Who is wise and understanding among you? That’s a question for today, isn’t it? Who do we trust to not only bring us correct information about the world situation today but to interpret it well? Our sources of information are vast like never before – we can read news from around the world, and everyone has a platform. We have access to news from sources as humongous as the corporate conglomerates all the way down to the independent journalist with a following on Facebook. We can get news reports from nations around the world translated for us in moments if we’re truly interested.

But wisdom about that news is perhaps at an all-time low. We have so much information thrown at us but so little good interpretation of it, especially when the information out there is contradictory. Everyone’s willing to give their viewpoint, but who is right? Who is truly wise and understanding among us? How can we know?

James steps in the middle of these questions and explains what Godly wisdom looks like. It was hard for the early church to discern true wisdom in their era, too, with different political and religious factions and controversies, just like now. James doesn’t tell us what wisdom *is*, because every situation requires its own wisdom. Instead, James tell us what wisdom lived out, wisdom in action, looks like, so we can recognize wise people and learn from them and become wise ourselves.

As you might remember from last week, James is still addressing those who might consider becoming teachers of the faith. When James asks his question, “Who is wise and understanding among you?”, he doesn’t ask his church leaders to take an essay exam to prove their biblical knowledge or an IQ test to show how smart they are. He doesn’t assume that there’s a difference between older and younger, rich or poor, that wisdom is reflected in any of those distinctions.

Instead, James goes back to the concept that he’s emphasized several times already in his letter: let your actions prove your wisdom. Specifically, James says a good life is characterized by “deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” Want to spot a person wise in the ways of God? Watch what they do. People can say anything – what they do tells the truth.

I'm going to stop for a moment and review for us the story of Solomon, because James was writing to primarily Jewish readers who would have known Solomon's story well. Up until Jesus, there were many wise men, great prophets God sent, but the wisdom of Solomon was legendary. 1 Kings 4:29 says, "God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore." He wrote 1,005 songs and 3,000 proverbs. Traditionally, the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs have been attributed to him.

But when it came to wisdom in action, Solomon was a very mixed bag. Unlike his father, he brought peace to the nation. He built the first temple of the LORD. His wisdom was sought after by all the peoples of the ancient Near East. With God's help, he amassed glory and riches for Israel. For a time, he had a great track record.

But then, his wisdom utterly failed him. He started marrying women from every tribe and nation around, 700 in fact, even those from places God had forbidden because their religious practices would turn Israel away from Him. Solomon had 300 concubines, essentially wives without royal status, just because he could. At first, it seemed like part of Solomon's peace-making deals, but it became an obsession. And sure enough, Solomon's wives led him astray. He built altars for all their gods! Solomon also wasn't wise enough to teach his son how to rule. Prince Rehoboam was so oppressive, all but one of the tribes of Israel deserted him! It all goes to show that wisdom, to be truly wise, must be lived out. Once Solomon stopped following the wisdom God poured out on him in abundance, he became foolish.

So what's the first sign of wisdom in action? Deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. What does that even mean? It means this: *wisdom gets dirty in the trenches alongside everyday ordinary people*. We tend to think of wisdom as an "ivory tower" sort of thing, an "elite" sort of thing. James says the exact opposite is true. Godly wisdom humbles us. Godly wisdom reveals that we are not better than other people. Paul says the same thing to us in Philippians 2:3 – "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." Our assurance of pardon today from Romans 3 says, "There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

True wisdom shows itself in deeds done in humility. There is no moral action or moral job beneath the dignity of a Christian. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples before the Last Supper, there was good reason for Peter to get upset and to initially refuse. This job was the lowest of the low in society – usually only done by a female bondservant, if at all. Jesus does it out of love for His disciples and told Peter the only way he could be a part of Jesus was to let Him do this for him.

In the same way, the wise Christian doesn't let society's views get in the way of their service for others. A janitor, a trash collector, a maid – if their work is done for the Lord, it has dignity. Wise Christians serve among the poor and lowly in society. They get their hands dirty. They serve humbly, not expecting praise or recognition. The wise Christian does what they do because their actions honor Christ and reflect Christ. As Jesus himself said, "What you do to the least of these my brethren, you do it unto me."

Now not everyone who serves in the church, even if they have the initial appearance of wisdom in their deeds, truly qualifies. James next leads into the heart issues involved. He says, “but if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.” Even in the early church, there were problems where bad actors attempted to use the church as a stepping stone to power, fortune, and fame. Paul mentions in his letter to the church in Philippi that there are some who are preaching Christ out of selfish ambition, hoping to stir up trouble for Paul while he is imprisoned. Paul warned the Galatian church about dissent and factions splitting up around ambitious leaders.

Ambition in the church based around power is nothing new. Prideful envy was around when the apostles were still traveling the world telling new nations about Jesus. The biggest splits and schisms in the church over the centuries were caused by this. Even now, one of the first things many ministers ask one another is, “What size is your church?” “How many did you baptize?” “What’s your budget?” Desire for God’s Kingdom to grow is good! But there is an amazing amount of envy and ambition there too. I’ve had to struggle with this. There was a point in my life that I wanted to be the expert, to be the Bible Answer Man, for whatever respect that might bring. I’ve had to fight that urge.

It’s not just a problem for church leaders but for everyone in the church. Do you want to be seen as wise by others? Why? What is motivating that? Is it because we don’t want to be questioned? Or is it OK if our wisdom goes unseen and unheralded, benefiting those who recognize it? We must examine ourselves and our motivations regularly.

We may have heard of the term “virtue signaling.” A lot of what passes for wisdom these days is virtue signaling. It’s not actually being virtuous. It’s by saying something, posting it, repeating it, we’re aligning with a group. Virtue signaling is a way of telling others, “I think the right way.” It doesn’t matter if we do anything that shows righteousness or supports it; what matters is the appearance, the signal. It’s become a form of boasting about our wisdom in the modern age. And the ambition is to get friends, followers, to be noticed, to be important. Our world gets its wisdom from media celebrities and talk show hosts and YouTubers who signal to us how we should think – people who have no claim to wisdom other than good looks or lots of money or fashion sense.

James says this isn’t godly wisdom at all but “earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” We see this in the church and the world both, don’t we? And it’s not about the size of the church or the corporation, but the desires of the people who lead. Ambition to see God glorified is a mighty and powerful thing. Some churches grow because people genuinely want the Kingdom to expand.

But when they don’t, watch out! The recent fall of Jerry Falwell, Jr., the problems surrounding so many mega-churches – where there’s pride and envy and growth so that our church looks good, all sorts of sins are sneaking in. Underneath the appearance of stability, underneath the veneer of wisdom, is chaos. This is why we should have our spiritual radar, our spiritual antenna, up so that we can recognize true wisdom from false, particularly in the church.

What is the wisdom of the Kingdom? “First of all,” Jesus says, “it is pure.” “Pure” is a word that I think we could stand to define further. The Greek meaning here is undefiled, innocent, blameless, without moral defect – the Greek word can even mean “holy,” being in a sense like God himself. Kingdom wisdom can be spotted because there’s nothing else mixed in – no fraud, no self-centeredness, no malice, no ulterior motives. Godly wisdom always promotes the love of God and love of neighbor. Godly wisdom always has godly motivations.

Godly wisdom is “peace-loving.” The underlying meaning here is peaceful, free from worry and anxiety. This isn’t just an absence of conflict, because we know the truth and wisdom of God causes conflict when we who are sinful are confronted with it. But it means that wisdom that comes from God isn’t induced by fear. Many poor decisions we make in the church and in our lives come out of fear. Not enough people are giving to the church – what should we do? Well, an anxious answer isn’t God’s answer. I’ve had it up to here with wearing my mask, conflict with my family, politicians – what’s the answer? A godly answer will reflect the peaceful nature of Christ, not the frustration of the moment. Even if the godly answer may include conflict, it will also include the seeds of reconciliation and restoration.

Godly wisdom is “considerate.” I like other translations here because they give more the spirit of the meaning – kind, courteous, gentle. Godly wisdom is not a bull in a china shop. Think about all the wisdom Jesus shared even with the Pharisees; they had decided He was a dangerous threat and tried to trap Him in His words constantly. Yet even then He was never aggressive towards them. He warned them often of their sinful hypocrisy, and yet still always showed them respect; when they invited Him into their homes, even though they had a habit of treating Him poorly, He always went. He treated the least in society with great kindness; He had compassion constantly, even those who had declared Him the enemy. Godly wisdom is gentle and knows how to use a soft touch, even in difficult situations.

Godly wisdom is “submissive.” We don’t like this word in the modern world, but here it’s actually the best translation. Here, it refers to being open to others, congenial, agreeable to others, not seeking after one’s own interests but submitting to others. We have a saying that defines the Evangelical Presbyterian Church – “in essentials, unity.” That means that there are basic Christian beliefs that we stand firm upon together. “In non-essentials, liberty.” That means that where Scripture gives us room for multiple views, we allow for them. Finally, “in all things, charity.” We think the best of all and act in ways that show love to all. We don’t demand that everyone agree with us. We’ll stand rock solid on the basics of the faith. But we won’t be looking to start arguments and disagreements about minor issues. Where our moral standing with God isn’t in question, we can graciously submit to others.

Godly wisdom is “full of mercy and good fruit.” God is characterized by mercy in how He deals with us according to who He is rather than what we deserve. He shows us grace; He shows us compassion. When we act out of God’s wisdom, we’ll display those same things to those around us. We’ll love those who are hard to love and show compassion to those in need. Good fruit are simply the results we see. Joy, peace, thankfulness – godly wisdom put into practice won’t always produce these results in everyone we touch, but they will be evident. We’ll also see those changes in our lives and the lives of others who practice godly wisdom. We’ll see that those who come into contact with them are changed for the better.

Finally, godly wisdom is “impartial and sincere.” These actually are best illustrated by their negatives. Godly wisdom is not partial – it doesn’t show favoritism (as we talked about a few weeks back in James’ letter) but shows love to all regardless of class or status or background. Godly wisdom is not insincere or hypocritical in any way. It’s genuine. If you will, godly wisdom applies to everyone. Godly wisdom is never for you and not me. For example, when the Pharisees said that it was ungodly to walk more than a mile from home on the Sabbath but you could leave clothing at someone’s house and travel there on the Sabbath, it was a loophole the rich could exploit. It wasn’t godly wisdom. Godly wisdom isn’t just for a show; it’s meant to be lived out by all. And as we saw at the very beginning of the passage, godly wisdom is lived out – so the person preaching it is also living it.

Finally, James adds a final word here: “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” This sums up the whole purpose and potential of godly wisdom. Those who practice godly wisdom are sowing “shalom,” that special kind of godly peace that isn’t just the absence of conflict but a state of rightness and wholeness with God and one another. If we are in the pursuit of godly wisdom and practice it, we’ll be sowing peace in our community – in our church, in our families, in our places of work.

The result will eventually be a harvest of righteousness. Living as people of God, living in His wisdom, living in obedience to His ways, creates righteousness as Christ brings more of His righteousness alive in us and brings it alive in others who come spiritually alive as they witness godly wisdom in action. It grows and grows. By living faithfully, by committing to let the Holy Spirit work within us and living by the wisdom He shares with us – that’s how the Kingdom of God grows right in our midst.

There’s a lot here, obviously – we’ve pieced through a number of different concepts and ideas about godly wisdom. I’m only going to give us one action point to write down, one thing for us to remember – *cling to godly wisdom*. Let’s commit to holding fast to godly wisdom. Because it stands in such striking contrast to the way the world works. So many of the hallmarks of godly wisdom are disappearing from our culture, even in the church. We think that these traits – kindness, meekness, gentleness, purity – just aren’t the way things get done, that they’re somehow ideal but not realistic or pragmatic.

But you know what? That’s what the ancient Greeks thought, and the ancient Romans even more so. Humility was considered a vice by many. Personal ambition was a virtue. Kindness was for the weak. Of course, you were partial to your friends and to the people in the social status above you; how were you going to get ahead in life otherwise?

Yet the ancient Roman world was radically changed by the followers of Jesus acting like wise disciples in His footsteps. The Romans could not deny the power of Christians forgiving the men who executed them. The Romans could not deny the power of Christians showing mercy to infants left outside to die and kindness to those dying of the plague. In the end, the Roman Empire became Christian because Jesus showed the way, Himself in very nature God, humbling Himself to become nothing for our sakes.

May we cling to God’s wisdom, live it, and see the world change as a result.