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Living Wisely

James 1:5-8, 3:13-18

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James 1:5-8

*“If any of you is lacking in **wisdom**, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.”*

There is no shortage of advice out there on how to live life wisely. Here is one practical summary called Golden Rules for Living that isn't too bad.

If you open it, close it.

If you turn it on, turn it off.

If you unlock it, lock it up.

If you break it, admit it.

If you can't fix it, call someone who can.

If you borrow it, return it.

If you value it, take care of it.

If you make a mess, clean it up.

If you move it, put it back.

If it belongs to someone else and you want to use it, get permission.

If you don't know how to operate it, leave it alone.

If it's none of your business, don't ask questions.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

If it will brighten someone's day, say it.

If it will tarnish someone's reputation, keep it to yourself.

James has already encouraged us in chapter one to ask God if we need wisdom. Then in chapter three he writes more about living wisely.

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.”

Last week we looked at the power of speech and what an important part speech plays in the Christian life. But talk is never sufficient. Our faith leads us toward proper speech, but it also must move us to living or acting wisely. Because *the way we live*, is even more important than the way *we talk*.

One Christian writer summarized The Letter of James this way:

“Faith without works cannot be called faith. It is dead, and a dead faith is worse than no faith at all. Faith must work; it must produce; it must be visible.

*Verbal faith is not enough; mental faith is insufficient. Faith must move into action. True faith endures trials; obeys God’s word; produces doers; harbors no prejudices; controls the tongue; and **acts wisely.**”¹*

Having knowledge about something means we know information.

Wisdom is knowledge applied to life. **Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life and skill in the art of living with each aspect of our life under God’s guidance and direction.**

The Bible has a great deal to say about living wisely. Looking at the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and James in particular we learn that **the wise person** seeks knowledge, wisdom, truth, and insight and applies what is learned to life’s situations and circumstances. The wise are known for their love for God, self control, well chosen words and deeds, and their generous concern for and service to others.

James says there are two kinds of wisdom that can and do shape our lives – wisdom from God, from above, and wisdom that is earthly. They produce two very different types of behavior. Wisdom that is earthly is marked by envy, selfish ambition, boasting, and falsehood; it is unspiritual and devilish; it leads to disorder and wickedness and is marked by partiality and hypocrisy.

On the other hand, James says, God’s wisdom from above leads to good and wise lives. A life shaped by God’s wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, good deeds, without partiality or hypocrisy.

A wise life therefore can usually be recognized by certain qualities. Similar to James, a Christian known as St. John of the Cross wrote that every quality or virtue that God produces in our souls has three distinguishing characteristics – Tranquility, Gentleness, and Strength. Our actions and behavior, especially in our relationships, are

¹ Bruce Wilkinson, Walk Thru The Bible, page 462.

to be peaceful, gentle, and strong. We even describe an individual whose behavior we find abrasive, rather than gentle, as someone who “rubs people the wrong way.”

A number of years ago former US Senator John Tower of Texas was one of 23 people killed in the crash of a commuter plane. A newspaper reported the cause of the accident. *“A stripped gear in the propeller controls of a commuter plane caused it to nose dive into the Georgia woods last April, killing former U.S. Senator John Tower of Texas and 22 others, the government concluded. A gear that adjusted the pitch of the left engine’s propellers was slowly worn away by an opposing part with a harder titanium coating, the National Transportation Safety Board said. ‘It acted like a file, and over time wore down the teeth that controlled the propeller,’ said acting board chair Susan Coughlin.”*²

Like the titanium-coated part that wore away the softer metal gear, so an unwise person can wear away the spirit of another. Some of us know what it is like to deal with harsh, abrasive people. We even use phrases like, *“I am worn out. I’m worn down.”*

We don’t usually talk that way after we’ve been with peaceful, gentle folks. We talk like that when we have been with abrasive people living more according to the wisdom and way of the world. We also don’t want to be that person who rubs folks the wrong way or wears people out.

James warns us especially against envy, selfish ambition and boasting – qualities that we have seen in the lives of many people who have been in the news related to the current global financial crisis. Proverbs says, *“Let another praise you and not your own lips,”* because pride goes before a fall.

The last couple of weeks as I have been greeting folks outside after the service a number of them have said goodbye because they are heading south to Florida, it is always sad for me seeing our folks go. It reminded me though of the turtle who wanted to spend the winter in Florida, but he knew he couldn’t walk that far. He convinced a couple of geese to help him, each one taking one end of a piece of rope, while he clamped his vise-like jaws in the center. The flight was going well until someone on the ground looked up in shock and admiration and asked, *“who in the world thought of that?”* Unable to resist the chance to boast, the turtle opened his mouth to shout, *“I did....”*

² The Chicago Tribune, April 29, 1992.

Gandhi said, *“It is unwise to be too sure of one’s own wisdom. It is healthy to be reminded that the strongest might weaken and the wisest might err.”*

Living according to the wisdom from above and not earthly wisdom means not being boastful or arrogant. It also means not being false to the truth, a disease that is all too common in the world and especially in a presidential election. I find it intensely disappointing that people running for the highest political office play so fast and loose with the truth. Lying and cheating are found at every level of society. A story in The Boston Globe yesterday pointed out how strict security measures were put in place for the 700 Boston police officers who were taking a promotional exam yesterday. The police officers were screened for electronic devices and told to empty their pockets and bags. These new measures are being taken in response to cheating during the Boston firefighter’s promotional exam nine months ago and the Boston police detective exam last year that led to the results of both exams being scrapped. These are men and women whose job is to uphold the law and to serve and protect citizens.

One time the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey ran a help-wanted ad for electricians with expertise at using Sontag connectors. It got 170 responses – even though there is no such thing as a Sontag connector. The authority ran the ad to find out how many applicants falsify resumes. Living wisely means not being false to the truth.

James also says living wisely as disciples of Jesus means we are peacemakers who are shaped by the wisdom from above that is **pure**.

A farmer went each week to a Farmer’s Market to sell, among other things, cottage cheese and apple butter made on his farm. Each product was in a large tub and the farmer used a ladle to place cottage cheese or apple butter into various size containers the regular customers brought. One day he got to the market and discovered he’d forgotten one of his ladles. He felt he had no choice but to use the one ladle he had for both products. Before long no one could tell which was the cottage cheese and which was the apple butter. Walter Cronkite would say, “And that’s the way it is” when we try to live and share the love of God using hearts, minds, and speech that are not pure but too recently and too frequently dipped in the envious, ambitious, one-up-man-ship of the world.

There is a saying in dealing with computers, *“Garbage in, garbage out,”* the same is true with our thoughts and lives. The wisdom from God is pure and it will shape our thoughts. Philippians 4:8, *“Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is **pure**, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if*

*there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, **think** about these things.”*

James is contrasting earthly, unspiritual wisdom which produces jealousy, selfish ambition, and disorder, with the wisdom from above that is peaceable. James is echoing the words of Jesus who said in Matthew 5:9, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”* Our goal is to be a peacemaker in our relationships and encounters with others. In tough times one of the blessings of being a part of a church is that we have each other for support, help, and encouragement.

The German philosopher Schopenhauer compared the human race to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter’s night. He wrote, *“The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth’s winter eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness.”* Yikes, that’s why I don’t spend much time reading the earthly wisdom of German philosophers.

When we receive pokes from the quills of others or hurt someone else, God has given us an alternative to drifting apart or lashing out – God has given us the wisdom to be peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and goodness. That enables us as Christians to stay together even in tough times.

Wisdom and godliness are closely connected. Job 28:28 says, *“Truly the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.”* When it comes to living wisely and well, it is so important to remember that we don’t have to treat everyone else the way they treat us.

Once there was a disciple of a Greek philosopher who was commanded by his Master for three years to give money to everyone who insulted him. When this period of trial was over, the Master said to him: Now you can go to Athens and learn wisdom. When the disciple was entering Athens he met a certain wise man, who sat at the gate insulting everyone who came and went. He also insulted the young disciple who immediately burst out laughing. *“Why do you laugh when I insult you?”* asked the wise man. The young man replied, *“For three years I have been paying for this kind of thing and now you give it to me for nothing.”* *“Enter the city,”* said the wise man, *“it is all yours.”*

When we learn the value of living wisely with the gentleness, tranquility, and strength that come from relying on God’s wisdom, we will be able to respond to other

people – whether they love us or insult us – in a way that honors God and blesses us as well.

Blessing:

Ephesians 5:15-17

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

A Few More Words of Wisdom

Proverbs 3:13-15

*Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding,
for her income is better than silver, and her revenue better than gold.*

She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

“Lay aside immaturity and live and walk in the way of insight.” Proverbs 9:6 (NRSV)

Ephesians 1:17-19

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, **may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him**, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

Colossians 4:5-6

Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time.

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

Henry David Thoreau, *“It is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.”*