

Wisdom From Above

“Who is wise and understanding among you?”

Show of hands?

That’s right, you all pass.

We all know the first rule of wisdom is that you can’t claim it for yourself.

You just hope everyone else is making the claim for you.

We know it comes with age, and lived experience, and it can’t be bought or sold.

Oh, and that you don’t want to be the other one.

The foolish one, or the wicked one.

Because those are the alternatives right?

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.”

Jesus’ concluding words on the Sermon on the Mount.

Proverbs is bursting at the seams with statements like this:

*“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”*

The very first Psalm is a wisdom psalm:

“Blessed is the one

*who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.”*

We can all get behind these statements.

But it's pretty obvious stuff.

What can James tell us about being wise that we don't already know and aim for?

Well, for starters, James implies that there are *two* kinds of wisdom: earthly wisdom and wisdom that comes from above, and the two kinds of wisdom oppose each other.

Now that is interesting. Because none of us seek foolishness, but we might seek wisdom in the wrong ways and for the wrong reasons.

We don't know a whole lot about the book of James.

We aren't sure who wrote it, or who he wrote it to.

But this idea that there are contrasting wisdom traditions is not unique in the New Testament. We find similar statements in John's Gospel, Paul's letter to the church in Corinth and in the apocalyptic writings of Revelation.

Casey Sigmon speaks of these two types of wisdom using the example of lifting.

Whether you are in the gym or lifting a heavy box of books in your home,
how many of you have heard the advice, “lift from your core?”

The basic idea is that form matters.

How many of you have forgotten to lift from your core and ended up flat out
for a week, unable to do much of anything?

James is asking: “Is the wisdom informing your action in the world from
above, from God? Or is it earthly wisdom?”

Because following Christ holistically is a matter of with what posture and
from what core your works emerge.

In your heart, what drives the choices you make?

So what distinguishes earthly wisdom from that wisdom which is of God?

Wisdom from above is gentle.

What beautiful and unexpected imagery.

Gentle. Not coercive. Invitational, not manipulating and bullying.

Not sarcastically biting memes on facebook wisdom.

You know what I’m talking about.

Posts that identify how obviously correct your position is and how dumb
anyone would have to be to think otherwise.

The post dripping in sarcasm that makes you smile and say
“yessss...reposting this.”

And you do.

And all your friends that agreed with you anyway like your post, which
makes you feel affirmed.

And yet nobody who disagreed with you is remotely closer to understanding
or empathizing with your opinion.

They are posting their own memes on their own pages and getting high fives from their own friends.

I feel comfortable using this example because I see myself in it and have experienced the catharsis of such memes, which are often educational and on point, but are not gentle. Not invitational. And do little for the building up of the Kingdom of God.

Or maybe for you the gentleness of godly wisdom is what helps you discern between your harsh inner critic and life-giving movement of the Spirit.

Wisdom from above is willing to yield.

Who's up for yielding these days? Not many.

All of us, regardless of where we stand on the political or religious spectrum, have experienced points during the last few years where we decided to throw yielding out the window.

Policies, statements, people so abhorrent that a statement on principle had to be made.

Pack your bags, we're leaving these people. They had their chance, they've made up their minds.

Don't even turn back, lest you be turned into a pillar of salt.

This is a hard one. Even Jesus knew when to toss temple tables. And we don't want to betray our cause for a false peace that is no peace at all.

And yet we still need to live with these people.

They work at the desk next to us, they cut our hair, we sit next to them at sporting events. They aren't going anywhere and neither are we.

Sigmon writes:

“Curiosity is a wise posture born of a willingness to yield. Judgment is not. It leads to defensiveness and may cause us to miss out on an invitation from God to try something new.”

If yieldedness sounds too much like giving in, try curiosity.

“Help me understand where you are coming from, because until proven otherwise I am going to assume you are doing the best you can with what you have, and I am obviously lacking some of the pieces that would allow me to understand you fully.”

Who knows. Maybe there is a part of *my* story that has created biases that blind me from seeing the whole picture.

Wisdom from above is full of mercy and good fruits.

Jesus said “by their fruits you will recognize them” and Paul identified these fruits as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.” (As anybody who has been to Camp Keola will sing for you).

Sigmon notes that “conflict or tension born of God’s wisdom in our dealings with one another can be different from conflict born of envy and selfish-ambition. Conflict that at times is willing to yield, be curious, or show mercy is full of good fruits that will nourish society.”

I have watched Jon and others in this congregation work so hard at this over the last months regarding our church’s disagreements on LGBTQ issues. Perhaps there is no better example of the hard work of discerning between earthly wisdom and wisdom from above than this issue, in which we are so deeply passionate and invested.

May we be a light to the Gospel through leaning into conflict that seeks to understand the other, stripping away our own selfish-ambition in the pursuit of shalom.

Finally, *wisdom from above is without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.*

Wow. What a big ask.

One of the first times I really considered that not all “wisdom” was necessarily from above was during a class at seminary called “Teaching the Bible in the congregation.”

One of our readings identified a difference between devotional and consumerist reading.

Sometimes you just read something to mine it for information, often to reinforce what you already think or to learn how to respond to the counter-arguments of others.

At the end of the book, or article, or chapter of scripture, you have gained knowledge, but not necessarily wisdom from above.

That was a startling realization for me.

Sometimes I consume knowledge for the purpose of looking smarter or acquiring power over or influence over others.

And sometimes I do so to write a sermon that will stir people’s hearts and bring them closer to God, the line is subtle and a good one to be aware of.

It is impossible to be completely impartial (as it is impossible to live a life completely free of hypocrisy).

But what would it look like to find someone with whom you disagree, Whose social media posts make you angry before you even read the headline, And ask them: What are you reading these days? Do you have a book recommendation for me?

And then to read it looking for the things that give them hope and meaning? To read the whole thing, and go back to that person and say “I read the book you suggested. Here are some things I really liked. And here are some things that I see differently.”

Sigmon concludes:

When our actions...are born from God's wisdom, our inner and outer worlds become a friendlier, holier, more peaceable place. When we lift from our core, we find that we have the collective strength to lift what once seemed an impossibly heavy burden to bear."

May we never cease to seek the wisdom from above. A wisdom whose source is not us, but beyond us.

In submitting ourselves to this wisdom may we continue to grow, individually and collectively, in the ways of Jesus, who modeled such godly wisdom in word and deed.