

“WISDOM FROM ABOVE”

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

September 20, 2009

I was raised in a home where church and Sunday School were weekly events. In Sunday School I remember learning Bible lessons, much like they teach today. We would hear the great stories like Noah and the ark, David and Goliath, Moses and the burning bush, and the 10 Commandments from the Old Testament. We would learn about Jesus' birth and his life and the formation of the church from the New Testament. As was the common method at that time, these stories were taught from a fairly literal perspective.

When I made the decision to go to seminary, it made good sense to attend a school right here in Minnesota. I chose United Theological Seminary in New Brighton, partly because one of my mentors and friends, Marva Jean Hutchens, had attended United and recommended it.

One of the things that I was warned about is that seminary in general, and Bible classes in particular, would really challenge my faith. In fact, I was prepared to have my “Sunday School” understanding of the Bible shattered by professors who applied a much more liberal interpretation of scripture. From one friend, I remember hearing a comment that went something like this – “Don't let all that learning destroy your faith.”

Far too often, people who go off to college and then to seminary come back with a jaded faith. What I learned from observing some of my classmates is that one can have so much knowledge about the Bible that it overshadows the ability to have a daily encounter with the Word of God. This doesn't have to happen, but it often does. I'm not suggesting that we stop learning, but what I am suggesting is that we not let our growing knowledge lessen our ability to read the Bible devotionally.

James seems to have sensed a similar problem with the early church. His warning came as he contrasted worldly wisdom with divine wisdom.

James begins by stating the question quite clearly: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Many people equate wisdom with knowledge. Much learning brings about much wisdom. But that's not always the case. Some might even say that's rarely the case. Think of a person you would say is wise. Does that person have a doctorate degree? A Masters? Some of the wisest people you know may have no more than a high school diploma...if that. James seems to see wisdom as the ability to discern God's principles for living. Understanding is being able to apply them to everyday life.

James seems to be very concerned about what he called earthly or unspiritual wisdom. His concern stemmed from the fact that it had spilled over into the church and was destroying the fellowship. Unfortunately, this same worldly wisdom makes itself known in today's church also. I'm always amazed at how relevant James' words are for the church in the 21st century. In chapter 4, verse 1, James lists two of the most common

causes of conflict in the church. Let me read it from Eugene Peterson's translation *The Message*:

Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don't have and are willing to kill to get it. You want what isn't yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it. You wouldn't think of just asking God for it, would you? And why not? Because you know you'd be asking for what you have no right to. You're spoiled children, each wanting your own way."

Harsh words...but only because we're often guilty. The church at Corinth was also guilty of these sins. There was no room there for reconciliation or redemption. Selfish ambition had led to divisive rivalry and a party spirit. As James makes clear, wherever this worldly wisdom lives it brings disorder and evil practice.

James simply has no room for personal cleverness in the godly life. This total reliance on one's self does not come from heaven but from the devil. It finds a place in our hearts and taints everything we do. This cleverness, this worldly wisdom, does not exhibit the characteristics of heavenly wisdom.

So what are the characteristics of this wisdom from above? James is glad you asked! And he gives us a list. Wisdom from above is:

- Pure – its motives are open and above board
- Peaceable – it is not there to confront and make enemies, but simply to support the principles of the Christian faith and life
- Gentle – or we might use a word like tolerant or open-minded
- Willing to yield – Eugene Peterson uses the word 'reasonable'
- Full of mercy – doesn't exalt itself to hurt others
- Full of good fruits – seeks to be of service to others
- Without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy – what you see is what you get; not hot one day and cold the next; not two-faced

Paul says something similar when he writes in 1 Corinthians 13 about love: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Wisdom from above is an application of this kind of love.

I don't have time to focus on each of the characteristics, but I do want to spend just a bit of time looking at one of them – peace. We in the 21st century are quick to come to a definition for peace as something like the absence of war or conflict. For James, peace meant something different - peace meant shalom.

In reading about peace, I learned that the Chinese have three different characters in their language that stand for peace. None of them have to do with war. The first deals with

peace in the home. Peace in the home means the absence of trouble. The second symbol means equality among people. It advocates the equal treatment of all. The third character indicates that peace comes when everyone has enough to eat. Maybe James is saying to us that wisdom from above comes when we establish strife-free homes, treat all people as equals, and when we provide for the basic needs of those around us.

James ends this lesson with by telling us the only way we can possibly create shalom in our lives. He offers an admonition that seems so simple, yet may be the single most difficult thing we ever do: “Submit to God.”

Do you know what that word ‘submit’ means? From my childhood days watching professional wrestling, when a wrestler was in a hold that was extremely painful and there was no way out, he would submit. He might say, “I give up,” or “I’m done.” The dictionary offers a similar definition, “To give in to the authority, power, or desires of another.”

Earthly wisdom says, “I’m doing fine on my own...I don’t need any help.” Earthly wisdom begs for control. “I want to chart my own course for my life. I want to follow my own plan. I want to make all of the decisions.” Earthly wisdom is all about power. Those who don’t have it, want it - even if it is just a smidgeon of power. It’s what some might call rationalism – the thought that each person becomes the center of his or her own universe by relying on his or her own rational abilities.

Wisdom from above relies on God. It requires a total submission to God.

I was doing some reading this week in preparation for teaching the adult Sunday School lesson on the heritage of the United Methodist Church. Much of the lesson focuses on John Wesley, the man who – along with his brother Charles – receive the credit for beginning the Methodist movement. When John Wesley was 23, he was reading a book called *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*, when he came across passages that led to his conversion. Wesley would write in one of his journals:

“Instantly I resolved to dedicate *all my life* to God, *all* my thoughts and words and actions, being thoroughly convinced there was no medium, but that *every* part of my life (not *some* only) must either be a sacrifice to God, or to myself; that is, in effect, to the devil.”

That’s submission! And that’s exactly what it takes to live a life of shalom. James says, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” When we have invited God into our hearts and lives, when we participate in those things that allow us to deepen and strengthen that relationship, when we practice self-discipline and ask God to help us turn away from those things that the devil is tempting us into, we draw near to God. And as we draw near to God, James says that God will draw near to us. And as God draws near to us, we find that all things are possible – the mountains can be moved, the sick can be healed, the foolish can be made wise, the conflicts can be ended, and life can be everlasting.

Worldly wisdom says follow the latest and greatest whim. But Psalm 1 reminds us, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take that path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers,” and our experience should remind us that whims only produce temporary results. Wisdom from above tells us to give up and give in to God. And when we do, we find that the results are forever. AMEN.