

“Wise Up!” James 1:5-8; 3:13-18 6/18/17

It's Father's Day! Have you noticed how fathers are often portrayed as clueless on TV sitcoms? Tim Taylor on “Tool Time.” Homer Simpson on “The Simpsons.” And how about Phil Dunphy on “Modern Family?” In one episode, Phil put together a book of his own wise sayings for his daughter, Haley, when she went to college. He called it, “Phils-osophy!” Here are a few of the gems of wisdom found in “Phils-osophy:”

“If you love something, set it free. Unless it's a tiger.”

“Watch a sunrise at least once a day.”

“You can tell a lot about someone from his Biography.”

“Success is 1% inspiration, 98% perspiration, and 2% attention to detail.”

“The most amazing things that can happen to a human being will happen to you, if you just lower your expectations.”

There are more, but I think you get the idea. And regardless of how inept Hollywood thinks we are, hopefully we Dad's will actually pass along a little wisdom to our kids!

We're in our last week of studying the letter of James together. Several of you have told me that you've really grown to appreciate James over these 5 weeks. I'm glad for that! The final theme of the book we're

going to look at is wisdom, which is extremely important during a time of rapid societal change like we have today. Krista Tippett, in her book, Becoming Wise, puts it like this, “This daunting and wondrous century is throwing open basic questions the twentieth century thought it had answered. Our questions are intimate and civilizational all at once- definitions of when life begins and when death happens; of the meaning of marriage and family and identity; of our relationship to the natural world; of our relationship to technology and our relationships *through* technology. The internet...is sending us into a new Reformation, but this time (a reformation) of all our institutions at once- political, educational, economic, and religious.” It seems to me that great wisdom is required to know how to act and react during the present time.

Wisdom is also a critical quality for employees. One of my jobs as a pastor is supervising employees- I currently supervise about ten of them, most them part-time. And over the years I’ve learned a few things about what I appreciate and need from church employees. Of course, I want them to have knowledge and skill in their area of responsibility- Christian Education, music, custodial work, secretarial work, etc. But even more important to me is that they have good judgment- in other words, wisdom! To be able to see the big picture and mission of our church and be sure that their actions further that mission and do not detract from it. A

motivated employee can quickly learn new skills and gain expertise, but it's very hard for someone to learn wisdom quickly! Wisdom is an acquired trait that usually develops over a long time. And, wisdom is absolutely necessary to help us navigate our way in a rapidly changing world, in the workplace, in families, and in governance. So how do we get wisdom?

Fortunately, James has an answer. The first readers of James also lived in a chaotic time. They desperately needed wisdom as they underwent persecution for their faith- they could be killed for following Jesus- so James writes this, *<sup>5</sup>If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.* (James 1:5)

Notice the good news here. First of all, God, being the source of wisdom, will give it to us if we simply ask! And since it is God's nature to be *generous*, God freely gives wisdom to all those who ask, not just to those who deserve it somehow, but to everyone! And God gives *ungrudgingly*. Have you ever received a gift from someone, only to discover that they expect you to continually show your appreciation for how costly the gift was, or who makes you feel small for needing their act of charity. Ooooooh. I hate that! Because it's not really a gift at all; It's an exchange. The gift, in exchange for the recipient acting immensely grateful and inadequate.

Thank God that God is not like that! God gives *ungrudgingly, freely!* I love that! Anyway, that's James' first thought about wisdom. It comes from God who will give it generously to anyone who asks. But there's more.

<sup>13</sup>*Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.* <sup>14</sup>*But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.* <sup>15</sup>*Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.* <sup>16</sup>*For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.* <sup>17</sup>*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.* <sup>18</sup>*And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.* (James 3:13-18)

Wisdom was a big deal in James' time. It was regarded as one of the primary virtues by Greek and Roman philosophers. In fact the Greek word for philosophy is comprised of the word for love (phileo) and the word for wisdom (Sophia). Philosophy literally means "love of wisdom." And the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in Proverbs and the Psalms, also lifted up the virtue of wisdom. It was a quality that people really strove for, but James understands that not everyone means the same thing when

they talk about wisdom. So he describes two kinds of wisdom- the kind of wisdom that God gives, and the wisdom of the world.

He begins by saying, “You think you’re wise? We’ll see about that! What kind of life are you living?” True and false wisdom produce different kinds of living. The wisdom of this world is characterized by envy and selfish ambition; it often seeks validation by insisting it is better than others, by needing to win at all costs. And the fruits of that kind of wisdom are disorder, fractured relationships, and disharmony. That kind of wisdom doesn’t lead to God’s design for human living. In fact, it is demonic in its destructiveness.

But godly wisdom produces a different quality of life. It is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits. You’ll notice that these character traits parallel what the Apostle Paul calls the “fruits of the Spirit” in Galatians 5. They are the opposite of a sum zero, winner-take-all, dog-eat-dog, I-win-you-lose view of the world. Ultimately, this kind of godly wisdom produces peace, says James. It enables people to find ways to live in peace with one another, and to be peace-makers as both Jesus and James call us to do.

Now, it’s important to point out that wisdom isn’t the same thing as knowledge. Some very well-educated people have little wisdom, and some unschooled people are very wise! Wisdom is the ability to size up a

situation and figure out the best course of action for the long-term. It knows what it doesn't know, and is willing to admit that so it can learn more; it is teachable. And wise people also know the importance of digging deeper, of not reacting to the first piece of information they receive.

In the late 1980's the National Park Service noticed that the Lincoln Memorial was slowly crumbling and deteriorating. Why? Part of the problem was exposure to water, both from acid rain and from the daily scrubbing of the Memorial. Someone could have stopped there and simply reduced the amount of scrubbing being done, but they learned that the daily scrubbing was necessary because of the huge mess left each day by sparrows and starlings. I guess they could have tried to discourage the birds from coming into the Memorial, but they looked deeper and asked why all those birds were gathering there. They discovered that the birds were there because of an abundance of spiders that they ate. OK. But why were so many spiders there? They were attracted by midges, untold thousands of small winged insects that breed in the mud along the nearby Potomac River. They swarm in the air for mating purposes and were drawn to the huge spotlights that shine on the Monument at night. They would smash into the limestone walls, and the spiders would feed on their remains, which drew the birds, which created the mess, which caused the workers to clean every day, which led to the erosion of the Memorial!

Only by looking deeply at the problem, one characteristic of wisdom, would the managers understand the root causes of the problem, and have any hope of addressing the situation. They learned that just turning off those spotlights for a while right after sunset cut the number of midges by almost 80%! Wisdom. We all need it. In relationships, at work, in government, and when facing big choices. How do we acquire it? By asking God for it, trusting that God will give it freely to us! And after we ask God for wisdom, we need to remain open to admitting what we don't know and learning more, be willing to dive deeply into issues of importance to us, and look for opportunities to learn wisdom from those God brings into our lives.

It's time to wise up!