

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“God’s Wisdom & Success”

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James 3:13-18; 4:7-8

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James asks a good and important question: Who is wise and understanding among you? It’s a good question because it makes you think about what traits other people have and demonstrate. It’s an important question because the answer you give says as much about you as about the person who got your vote. The answer we give reveals what we believe wisdom and understanding to be—it shows what we think is important. James thinks we’re probably going to get this wrong because we have demonstrated over and over again that we don’t know the difference between true wisdom and puffed-up knowledge, between true understanding and false pretense. We don’t know what should be important in life. In our judgment of what is good, true, and pure, we still haven’t graduated past those “Most likely to succeed” quizzes for the high school yearbook.

Remember those? Who is most likely to succeed? It depends on what you believe success is—what’s most important to you. In a generation past, the most likely to succeed might have been the one the other kids thought would run for congress someday and wield great power. In a later generation, most likely to succeed would have been the person the other kids pictured on Wall Street amassing great wealth. Today, most likely to succeed might be the person who will post a YouTube video that will reach the pantheon of the dancing squirrel, the sneezing panda, and the guy that does all those dances—the one who receives great fame. Most likely to succeed, like who is the wisest, depends on whom you ask: most likely to achieve power, wealth, or fame. Wisdom and success is judged by what is most important to achieve—and very rarely the way a person gets there.

Scripture says we have that backwards. James says that what often masks for wisdom is actually foolishness and what is actually godly wisdom can go unnoticed. It’s a universal indictment against humanity, and sadly against Christians. We get duped by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in our quest for what is supposed to be success. Two traits that lead over the next few verses to boasting, falsehood, disorder, vile practice, quarrels, fights, war of passions within you, murder, adultery, becoming an enemy of God, pride, double-mindedness, speaking evil against one another, speaking evil against the Law of God, judging your neighbor. So why do we entertain them? They work! Jealousy—wanting what someone else has, selfish ambition—the drive to achieve for yourself. Two traits that replace godly wisdom and wreck havoc in the community. Also, they are the cornerstones of capitalism.

Capitalism is the idea that individuals seeking their own benefit as they buy and sell will intersect in such a way as to make a whole economy work. So engineers graduate and design something—say a new fiber for black turtleneck sweaters. Marketing majors go out and sell it. Design majors figure out how to make it look nice. Management majors go out and organize people to produce it. Finance majors raise capital to fund it. And you English majors graduate and serve the coffee to the people

going to work to do all this on your way to law school to write the patents on the black turtleneck sweaters. And you philosophy majors buy the black turtleneck sweaters and drink the coffee that keeps the economy humming that you then debate. Everyone has a role.

We learned in the 1980s that jealousy and ambition in any field, are supposed to be virtues—or as it was famously said—greed is good. But even in Greek the words sound discordant: *zelon pikron* (bitter jealousy), *epitheian* (selfishness). The words that humans have formed to give articulation to these characteristics just already sound harsh and divisive. And that suggests that we know, deep down inside, despite appearances, there is something broken here, there must a better way.

There is a different way of wisdom for Christians, a way that may or may not be the world's way in any given generation or any given circumstance, but is the way of Christ no matter the circumstances and no matter the consequences. There is a better way of life.

It is a way of life that is not individualistic, but recognizes the connections we have with our brothers and sisters and neighbors. It is a way of life that is not self-seeking, but seeks the good of the community, trusting that the community's good is my good. It is a way of life that is humble and pure and willing to accept guidance from others and willing to share knowledge and goods with those in need. It is a way of life that is about journey, not just destination, about relinquishment, not just possession, about sharing, not just owning, about what you can give, not just about what you can get. It is a way of peacefulness and beauty and goodness, all the fruits of the spirit, all the virtues formed in us as we live as one body.

It even sounds nice. James 3:17 in Greek may be one of the most phonetically beautiful and carefully constructed sentences in the New Testament. Unlike Paul, who often gives us long, loopy, run-on sentences, James takes time with his words, at least these words. In 3:17, the first pair of words have similar endings, the second pair has another ending and chimes in rhythm and sound, followed by a pair of words with poetic balance, “full of compassion and good fruits,” and finally a pair of twin adjectives and a three chord-cadence. The verse begins with inner characteristics of Godly wisdom and then moves outward. And throughout the verse, the words that are used are often rare—sometimes this is the only time the exact word appears in the New Testament. And these virtues are rare—not only in the New Testament, but it seems, in life. Inward virtues: pure, peaceable. Outward qualities: gentle, open to persuasion, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, sincere.

It sounds nice and it literally sounds beautiful—to imagine a life that is as much poetry as prose, when the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. A life without bitterness or selfishness, and all the pain that is caused by that within us. A life characterized by purity within us and in our relationships. Sounds wonderful, especially when you already have a sense that there's something wrong out there in the real world.

But it's awfully hard to imagine in the real world. It's hard to imagine a person living in a way described by James 3:17, with a way of life characterized by “wisdom from above that is first pure, peaceable, gentle, open to persuasion, full of mercy and

good fruits, impartial, and sincere.” Can you be a person whose life is a harvest of righteousness sown in peace and making peace? It sounds nice, but it also rare.

Whatever field you college students go into: construction, engineering, law, business, or medicine, or even philosophy, you will find it hard to live like this. Those who are trying can tell you so. In business, the lamb gets eaten by the lion. In academia, the serpent sometimes climbs faster than the dove. In law and medicine, the gentle and kind often don’t win the hectic rat race. Try being full of mercy on a construction site and watch yourself get run over.

We are likely to conclude: This stuff sounds nice, but it just doesn’t work in the real world. It will not make me most likely to succeed. And we are probably right. When people start to follow God’s wisdom, their lives get turned inside out in all sorts of ways. Will Willimon tells about parents who wrote him an angry letter one year when he was chaplain at Duke University. “We sent our son to Duke to become a lawyer. And he got involved in your Bible Study, and now he says that he’s a Christian and he’s going to Africa to be a missionary. I don’t know what you are doing over there, putting these ideas in impressionable young minds. Fix him. We aren’t spending all this money on Duke to have our son throw his life away!”

I wonder if the parents of Jesus’ first disciples felt a similar way. These guys weren’t old guys. They were probably just in their late teens, maybe early 20s. Young guys. And they were beginning their careers as tax collectors, fishermen, carpenters. And then they threw it all away. Peter and James literally put down their nets and stepped off the boat. Matthew literally came around the tax collector booth and left it behind. These guys dropped what they were doing that would give them a livelihood, that made sense, that was what their fathers and their father’s fathers had done and left it behind to follow Jesus.

But they didn’t leave it all behind. Inside of them, there was still bitterness and jealousy. They had each done a courageous thing—to follow Christ, but there was still a small self inside who had a big voice. And so one day Jesus overhears them arguing with one another about who was going to be the greatest one in the kingdom. They left behind a way of life, but they didn’t leave behind the way they lived life. They just traded one ambition for another, a calculated gamble that the glories of life with Jesus were greater than the mundane life of catching and selling fish—one puts a roof over your head in Capernaum. The other gets you a mansion in heaven. Not a bad trade.

What were you talking about on the way here? Jesus asks. Um, uh. I wonder how we pastors would answer if Jesus came and asked us that question after most of our gatherings. Um, uh. Jesus knows. It didn’t matter the words they used, they were talking out of *zelon pikron* and *epitheian*. Selfish ambition and bitter jealousy. They were arguing about who was the greatest. That’s what the small self does. The small self is ashamed of its smallness, ambitious to prove its value and bitterly jealous of the honor or blessing that someone else might get. So the small self tries to tear down other people and anything in its way to grow big. But the small self can only grow smaller. It only grows darker.

So Jesus calls a huddle of his disciples and calls a child over and takes him in His arms. “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” In Matthew’s version, Jesus says, “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” What is more like a child than James 3:17? Pure, peaceable, gentle, open to persuasion, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere . . . are the attributes of a child. We don’t want to romanticize children—they are still a handful, but there’s something sweetly wonderful about the heart of a child.

And, again, that’s nice and all, but that sounds pretty tame in the real world. But that begs the question: Why do we call all this the real world rather than a dim image or distant echo of what is real? How is it that we assume that this broken, angry, selfish, individualistic, cynical world is the real world that demands something other than what God has said? It’s good to hear and be reminded of, but not in the real world? Not Monday-Friday. Not 8-5. Not at work. Not when it counts. Not when it’s real.

Perhaps our fundamental mistake when it comes to judging what is success and wisdom is to accept that what we see out there is determinatively the real world by which we then judge the efficacy of the virtues, the sweetness of the Spirit’s fruit, and wisdom of God’s ways. God turns our assumptions upside down. “The foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:25). The world as God imagines and intends it is the real world. You can only see God’s world with the eyes of faith.

So what do we do with the problem: If I do that . . . if I live according to God’s wisdom, will I succeed in life? Well, you might, you might not. It depends on what you call success.

A day will come when you’ll be looking over the books at your company and you’ll find a problem and you’ll take it to your boss, and he’ll ask you to look the other way. Your integrity or your career? What is God’s wisdom here?

A day will come when you’ll see that your lab data doesn’t exactly support the convincing sales pitch. Your honesty or your 401k. What’s God’s wisdom here?

A day will come when you’ll have to make really hard decisions about really complicated things.

A time will come when you’ll have to decide whether you’ll live by God’s wisdom or what the world calls wisdom. It will be a decision about how you order your life, what is most important, what you value and treasure. It will be a decision that will reveal your character and shape it.

That time is every moment of every day. To choose to live by God’s wisdom may or may not lead to what you think of when you think of success. It all depends on what you call success. For the Christian, it’s not about what you achieve on the outside; it’s about who you become on the inside.