

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

God's Wisdom of Life

James 3:13-18

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In today's New Testament reading, James teaches us about wisdom. What is wisdom? Is it the same thing as "smarts"? Is there only one kind of wisdom and you either have it or have some of it or you don't? How does a person or a community or a culture gain and live in wisdom? All kinds of good questions could fill a notebook when pondering this.

One way to think of wisdom is to contrast it with knowledge. You know, life wisdom vs. head knowledge. There's a commercial on the radio in which the speaker praises of the value of experts and the value of regular people too, implying that experts aren't regular people, I guess. But it's not hard to see the point. An expert on climate tells you how much carbon is in the atmosphere and how it compares to the amount millions of years ago from her analysis of ice core samples in the arctic. A regular person is a farmer who has to adapt because his crops aren't growing like they used to. A knowledgeable expert says the storm in the gulf is churning and it looks like it's going to rapidly intensify because the pressure in the eye is dropping rapidly. The person with wisdom says, it might be time to board up the windows and get out of town. You get the idea. Knowledge and wisdom. Someone taught me that the difference is knowledge is that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing not to add it to a fruit salad. Knowledge and wisdom.

Wisdom is not just knowing information, it's the way you understand what that information means. What it means for you, how it helps explain life and the great and grand purposes of life. The whole book of Proverbs is written to help young people develop wisdom about life and the world around them as they grow older. Humans have gained tremendous knowledge about the world since the time Proverbs was written. It's not clear we have exceeded its wisdom.

The book of James is a little like proverbs. It reads a little like proverbs, but James, writing to Christian communities, adds an element to the discussion about wisdom. For James, there are two kinds of wisdom, not just one. There're two kinds: the world's wisdom and God's wisdom. To call them both 'wisdom' can be a little confusing, but he has in mind there are two ways to follow---the world's wisdom and God's wisdom. Wisdom is the way you make sense of the world and operate in it. Wisdom of either kind is like a framework, a system, a scaffolding for how the world works and how you should live. For James, there's the world's wisdom and God's wisdom, the world's way and God's way.

And James is salty about it. So salty.

Chapter 1: if you think you're living God's way, and you don't bridle your tongue, you deceive your heart and your religion is worthless. For those of you who have just been cut off in traffic, James is salty.

Chapter 2: Here you are, look at you, look at how you favor the rich and shame the poor. Aren't the rich ones the ones oppressing you? Aren't they opposed to everything you stand for? Why are you tripping over yourself to get noticed by them? Salty.

What good is it to say you have faith, but you don't do anything with it to love your neighbor, to care for the person nearby you? Your faith is useless.

Chapter 3: Who is wise? By their good conduct let them show their works in gentleness born of God's wisdom. If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast that you have God's wisdom. You have an earthly way of life, the worldly way of life. It's not spiritual, except you can say it's of the evil spirit, even the devil. James is salty.

Messing around? Being nice? James doesn't have time for all that. He's far too aware of the dangers of the way of the world turns Christians into envious, selfish, ambitious evildoers. Submit yourself to God; resist the devil, and he will flee from you, James says in Chapter 4.

With James, we can recognize just how insidious these two traits are in the human heart, envy and ambition. "Envy is to desire what other people desire, learning to desire what others desire precisely because they desire it. It's a form of idolatry in which people idolize both their neighbors and their neighbors' desires until they relentless try to acquire the objects of the others' desire (Markey, *Moses in Pharaoh's House*, 45-46)." You want to become someone else. You want what they have and who they are. "You shall not covet" is one of the anchor commandments to sustain the people of God, a law given not just to direct individuals to pure hearts, but also to protect the community from poison of envy.

If we learn from the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve envy God's position over their own and desire to make it their own; if we learn from the 10th commandment; if we learn from James' warning, we search our hearts for traces of envy and jealousy of others, we confess it, and we ask God for peace in its place. A peace that passes understanding and surpasses our envy.

The other warning of James is equally as dangerous. Selfish ambition is a radical individualism that serves only the ambition, the desire, the good of myself. The other day, I muddled the words selfish ambition into "shambition." Then I decided that was pretty good, so I'm sticking with it. Shambition. With shambition I'm looking out for #1 in all things, whether it's for the good of others, or creation, or even my future self. Shambition can justify any actions, justify any means to serve myself. The root of the word for shambition is an old Greek word from wool making. To spin. Ancient Greeks used the word to describe a politician who will do anything and say anything and spin anything to get what he wants. That person is not seeking good or truth; he is seeking to win for himself and for his team. Basically, it's a college sports internet message board become sentient. Shambition sees the world as zero sum. If you get something more, that means I get something less. You must decrease so I can increase.

If we learn from Judas' betrayal of Jesus, from David's son's Absalom dishonoring of his father and the throne and the kingdom. If we learn from Jesus': love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love neighbor as yourself, if we learn from James' warning, we search our hearts for traces of selfishness ambition, to confess it, and ask God for love and compassion in its place.

The Christian community then and through all time is a gift and a challenge to live life by a different sort of wisdom, to learn to live with God's wisdom. Those who live by the way of the world will have their lives characterized by envying what other people have and who other people are. Their lives will be shaped by the desire to possess and to consume, and that desire will never be satisfied. It's a hole that you try to fill by digging deeper. A person's life so shaped by desire and consumption is a person whose consumption can bring no joy. Those who live by the way of the world will live for themselves. It's as if they are living by themselves. In competition with everyone else toward their destruction.

In the 1800s, Charles Darwin explosively explained that the world works this way, a natural world designed to work through competition to the death. The strong survives. The weak dies. Some people took this idea and applied it to human relationships in society. They called it "social Darwinism," justifying human injustices between rich and poor. As each person pursues their own gain, the strong get richer, and if they trample, abuse, and kill the poor while they're doing it, well, that's just how the world works.

Envy and the relentless consumption fueled by it and shambition and the radical individualism it births are so prevalent around us I'm not sure Darwin or we can even recognize it. I was reminded recently of the little parable-ish story shared by David Foster Wallace in a commencement address years ago, "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning boys, how's the water?' The two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'Hey, what's water?'" (<https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>) Wallace said "the point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. . . ."

Recent scholars have noted that Darwin was himself seeing the world through the lens of his social location. When he observed the natural wonders of the Galapagos, he was thoroughly formed by the social relationships of the early 19th century British industrial revolution. He saw nature, in part, as only cut-throat competitive because the world he lived in among humans was cut-throat competitive. And this is a very interesting observation. Darwin's culture of competition, industry, and individualism shows up right there in how he says the world must work. He didn't even know it.

We are so enmeshed in a particular culture and economy characterized by envy and selfishness, I'm not sure how we have the capacity to even know it when we see it—in the culture, in others, or particularly ourselves. It's like--this is who we are. It's our default mode of being. Our 'water'. What's water? Our culture, the 'water' we swim in is a fast moving, muddy river of

individualism, narcissism, pursuit of wealth and comfort, idolatry of personal freedom to operate as if you're alone at the center of creation. Or as James' puts it: a wisdom thoroughly leveraged by envy and shambition.

David Foster Wallace was salty, too, as he tried to describe our water to those new graduates. Those bright-eyed graduates about to go change the world. He said, "The so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings, because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self. Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom all to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course, there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talk about much in the great outside world of wanting and achieving.... The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad [ordinary] ways every day."

There are two kinds of wisdom—the wisdom of the world's ways and the wisdom of God. But there's also a third wisdom, the wisdom of the earth. Jesus drew on the wisdom of the earth all the time. How many of his parables began with sayings like: look at the fig tree, consider this soil, look at the clouds. I get the idea his first century audience could hear him and nod and say, "Hmmm, I see that." Today, we read that and have to go consult commentaries: "hmmm, I have no idea what he's talking about. Figs grow on trees and don't just come in little squares? Mustard comes from mustard plants not yellow squirt bottles? How interesting. Does honey come from little bear-shaped squeeze bottles?" But Jesus recognized that there really are two wisdoms: one is the wisdom of humans in all they do toward envy and ambition and the other is the wisdom of God which can be seen, sometimes, in the way of the earth if you have eyes to see and ears to hear.

On Wednesday, Butch Tindell, our farmer friend gave us eyes to see. He said if you scoop up a pound of good soil, you're holding 900 million forms of life, from single cell microorganisms to earthworms and beetles. And he said gently, we were taught that everything in nature is in competition with one another to the death. And so industrial farmers became soldiers in the war for dominance of the soil. Butch said a farmer friend of his said that he would wake every morning with only one question: what am I going to kill today? What weed, what bug, what fungus shall I spray and kill? That's my only job as a farmer. That's when he left industrial farming practices and transitioned everything he did to learning how to care for the soil. He returned to growing things. Butch said we're learning that the true wisdom of the soil is that there is more cooperation than competition as we were once taught. Those 900 million forms of life in a scoop of good soil need one another, they depend on one another, and they seem to work together as a community for the good of the whole.

What wisdom is there for us for humans? Is there some of God's wisdom somewhere in that scoop of good soil? Can good soil be a parable of good life? It can in the hands of Jesus.

If there was an era of imperialistic, racist social Darwinism, what might dawn in an era of social regenerative, cooperative soil-ism?

James has eyes to see a harvest of righteousness sown in peace by those who make peace. Jesus calls us to be servants of one another, to be servants of all. God's wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere. This good soil of this fruit is the Church in the world, a community of those men and women who wake each day not asking: "What must I kill today in the garden of life?", but who ask: "How can we live, truly live? where is life teeming? Where is God bringing life from death? On this day, how can I tend and keep the garden of God and feed the world that God may bless us all and keep us and make his face to shine upon us, and lift his pleasure upon us, and through us give the world peace?"

May this be our prayer. Amen.

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