

biblestudy: July 2023

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

July 2, 2023 Text: James 1:2-8 "Asking for Wisdom"

A few years ago I was at the checkout at a supermarket. I noticed the name tag on the clerk; it read "Sophia." Having just brushed up some on New Testament studies, I proudly said to her, "Ah, your name is Sophia. Did you know that that is the Greek word for wisdom?"

"It is not!" she exclaimed. "It's my grandmother's name." Uh, I guess both of us were right.

The Letter of James reminds those scattered communities (James 1:1) that they might indeed ask God for wisdom. If one is in a time of trial (v. 2) or finds one's faith to be tested (v. 3), one can ask God for wisdom (v. 5). This is not a request to do better on the SAT or complete the *New York Times* crossword puzzle without a dictionary. This kind of wisdom is more than that.

When Solomon (1 Kings 3:5-9) prayed for wisdom, he was seeking an understanding mind and the ability to discern between good and evil (v. 9). Now, James is telling his readers that God offers that gift to anyone who asks for it in faith. This kind of wisdom is not the accumulation of intellectual knowledge; it is an awareness of how to serve God and neighbor.

Later in the letter, James spells out a bit more about the kind of wisdom God will give. Look at James 3:13-18. The wisdom granted by God is "pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (v. 17). How well do you

think that would go as a political mantra in the next election? Alas, these qualities are not given much value in our twenty-first century culture.

Students of church history often note that Martin Luther did not think much of the Letter of James, calling it "an epistle of straw." Luther feared that James valued "good works" over "faith." A review of this week's focal text reveals a connection between faith and wisdom (James 1:2-7). James did say that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). An active faith produces wisdom and wisdom produces wise and loving decisions...good works, if you will.

The one who is not wise is doubleminded (James 1:8). The one who is wise is singularly focused on God: God's will, God's purposes, God's intent. And that kind of focus comes to the one who has faith and asks for it. Generous God offers that wisdom to any of us who seek it in faith (James 1:6). And I hope Sophia's grandmother is doing well.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Marva J. Dawn (*A Royal "Waste" of Time* (Eerdmans), has written: "In a culture that is overloaded with information but bereft of wisdom, Christian congregations need a piercing wake-up call to attend to the training of our children's minds."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Grant us wisdom..."

July 9, 2023 Text: James 3:1-12 "The Wisdom of Self-Control"

Often we think of wisdom having to do with the major decisions of life. In this week's focal text (James 3:1-12), the writer of James zeroes in on one of the smallest ways wisdom is expressed: the tongue. "So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits" (v. 5).

This emphasis on the tongue, on how we speak, does not give us anywhere to hide. The Scripture is not talking about high level political decisions; James is not giving advice to the bishops; these verses are not aimed at the prominent leaders. James is talking to us ordinary folks! We may think our situation in life is minimal, but James has said that our little tongue is a powerful weapon, a far-reaching influence. And it takes wisdom from God to be able to control the tongue.

We can use the tongue to praise God or to blast out our neighbor (James 3:9-10). James recognizes that most of us have a tongue with divided loyalties. He notes that divided loyalty is not the way God has created nature. [Fig trees don't grow olives (v. 12)!] Yet, we often violate the way God has created us to be and try to play both sides of the fence. If we cannot control the tongue, how dare we expect to use wisely the rest of our personhood?

Isn't it amazing that God would trust us to make good decisions about the use of our tongue? Sparks from our speaking can ignite a great fire (v. 5). Relationships can be broken by what we say to one another.

Grace-giving possibilities may be unfulfilled because of something someone has said.

James is not asking us always to keep quiet; nor is James saying we should always speak up. There is the wisdom of knowing when (and what) to speak and when (and what) to keep muted.

This text not just about using swear words. Evil things can be said in a very nice tone with good, polite language. What had you planned to say to Mr. Johnson the next time you saw him? This text invites you to run it through the filter of the grace of God's presence.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Jerome W. Berryman (*Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education*, Harper Collins) has written: "Listening is by nature a public experience. The speaker and the listener must both be present...Spoken communication is done with others actually present. This gives opportunity for...response of the (listener) to help shape the message itself."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Divine Word, come with me as I speak..."

July 16, 2023 Text: James 3:13-18 "Wisdom as a Gift from God"

This week's focal text seems to say that there is wisdom and then there is wisdom. One kind of wisdom produces envy and selfishness (v. 14). The other kind of wisdom produces peace, gentleness, mercy, good fruits (v. 17). Our lives are the evidence of which kind of wisdom guides us (v. 13).

In the Book of Job, the question emerges "Where then does wisdom come from (Job 28:20)? Perhaps you remember all the bad things that had happened to Job (Glance at the first couple of chapters in the Book of Job.) No wonder he ponders the source of wisdom! Is wisdom in the power of nature (Job 28:14)? Is wisdom in great wealth (Job 28:15)? Is wisdom in rare jewelry (Job 28:17)? Is wisdom found in the riches of others (Job 28:19)? No! Over and over in these verses, the text says "No!"

Wisdom that comes from God is pure (v. 17); that is, it does not have

have mixed motives.

Personally, I don't come equipped with purity. If there is any purity in my decisions, in my actions, it has come as a gift from God.

Often we think that wisdom comes along with age. Not necessarily! One of the wisest conversations I have had was with an eight year old boy who was working with me on his God and Family Scouting award. We were walking around the church fellowship center and I asked him to look in various directions and tell me what he saw. He looked out the window and said "I see slides and swings on the children's playground." I asked, "What does that mean?" He said, "It means that the Church that Jesus wants is open to all people." I pointed to the kitchen. My question was "What is the most important meal we eat at church?" (I figured he would say "those fellowship suppers.") Instead, he answered: "Holy Communion."

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We walked over to the church office where the administrative assistant was busy at work. “And now what do you see?” His reply: “I see that God uses people to help us in ways we never realize.” That eight year old boy was a lot wiser that day than this retired pastor.

Wisdom from God produces life-changing values. Wisdom from God brings with it sufficient grace. Wisdom from God is indeed an unearned gift from God.

July 23, 2023 Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-25 “Responding to Wisdom’s Call”

Perhaps I miscounted, but I think I spotted 6,214 points of interest in this week’s focal text. Wow! The apostle Paul has just started his letter to the church in Corinth and he has already mentioned agreement (v. 10), mind (v. 10), purpose (v. 10), quarrels among the brothers and sisters (11), tattletales (v. 11), loyalties (v. 12), baptism (v. 13), crucifixion (13), baptism again (vv. 15-17), preaching (v. 17), wisdom (v. 17), the cross (v. 18), salvation (v. 18) wisdom again (v. 20), Jews (v. 24), Greeks (v. 24), once again wisdom (v. 25), God (v. 25), privilege (v. 26), weak/strong (v. 27), boasting (v. 29), presence of God (v. 29)...oops, I have gone beyond the assigned text, but you get the idea. There is a lot here!

The context for much of what Paul was written here seems to be divisions in the Corinthian church. What is needed is the wisdom of God. What might make sense in the eyes of the world can be nonsense and foolishness in the eyes of God. Wisdom from God is always stronger than the best we believers can do on our own (v. 25).

How do I get in touch with that wisdom of God? Jesus Christ is the “power and wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). The word translated as “power” is *dunamis* (Recognize our English word “dynamite”?). The word carries with it the implication of miraculous strength and abundance. Jesus Christ has abundant grace and lives with the strength of miracles.

July 30, 2023 Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 “Wisdom and Discernment”

When is the time for us to bring to life the wisdom that God gives? Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 does not leave out much! In these poetic verses, the “Teacher” (Ecclesiastes 1:1) unfolds a list of life circumstances in which we need the touch of God’s gracious wisdom. The writer sees the daily journey one of decision after decision after decision. There is not much resting place from living out the will of God.

This morning I stopped at a nearby gas station to fill up my almost empty tank. (I paid \$4.59 a gallon. What is the price now?) At the pump next to where I was filling up there was a man I did not know. On the front of his truck was a plate that read: “Jesus is the answer.” Not able to resist the urge, I went over to him and said, “If Jesus is the answer, what is the question?” Without hesitation he replied, “The question is ‘What is the purpose of Life?’”

Indeed, what is the purpose of life that directs us in times of being born and dying (v. 2), times of crying and laughing (v. 4), times of loving and times of hating (v. 8)? What is the purpose of life that makes us choose one option over the other? What is the purpose of life that motivates our actions?

Sometimes we get it wrong. Robert Mullholland, Jr. has said that God intends for us to be perfect, but what God desires is perfection of intention not perfection of results.

What Someone Else Has Said:

I called the youth I mentioned above; he is now fourteen. I asked him, “What is the connection between God and wisdom?” He replied, “God is wise. If you love God, God can make you wise.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Giver of wisdom...”

It is interesting that Paul implies that it will take a miracle (*dunamis*) to bring peace to the divided church of Corinth. Evidently, the folks there had been choosing up sides (Paul...Apollos...Cephas...Christ) and now it will take the wisdom of God (Christ Jesus) to restore oneness, agreement (v. 10).

God’s wisdom may call us to some places and relationships we have not had before. God’s wisdom may call us to values and activity that argue with today’s culture. God’s wisdom calls us to be shaped like Jesus Christ.

Whose wisdom do I follow?

What Someone Else Has Said:

N. T. Wright (*Paul: A Biography*, Harper One) has written: “But for Paul himself, right across his letters, and it seems for the Jerusalem leadership as well, it mattered that the followers of Jesus should find a way of living together as a single family despite the inevitable tensions that a new but suddenly far-flung movement would experience.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, I turn to You...”

It helps to go back a few verses in Ecclesiastes. In 1:13, the writer exhorts us to seek out wisdom and notes that sometimes this is “unhappy” business. I think it is helpful to note the Hebrew word that the author chooses for “wisdom”: *chokmâh*. There are numerous words in the Old Testament that get translated as “wisdom,” but this particular one carries with it the implication of mind, word, and act.---what I think, what I say, what I do. Are they all the same? Do I do what I say and do I say what I think?

Oops. Caught me! Ecclesiastes has it right when it says some sometimes this is “unhappy business” (1:13).

What Someone Else Has Said:

David Gergen (*Hearts Touched with Fire*, Simon and Schuster) has quoted Joseph Campbell: “Our life evokes our character; you find out more about yourself as you go on. And it’s very nice to be able to put yourself in situations that will evoke your higher nature, rather than your lower.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “There is a lot on the plate of life, O God. Help me to eat wisely...”

Thank you to all of our military service members,
veterans, and their families for your sacrifice,
courage and honor.

We remember you in prayer with love and respect.

