

## "The Wisdom Challenge"

Reading: *Proverbs 1:20-33; James 1:17-27*

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One of the questions that has been rolling around in my head since before my daughter was born was what sort of person I really want to raise her to be. I'm sure this is old hat for those of you who are parents, but bear with me; I'm new at this. I really wanted to have a good concept of what qualities really matter in the things I teach her. Of course I intend to raise her with an encyclopedic knowledge of *Star Trek*, and of course I want to make sure she can list all the ways Batman could beat Superman, but of course there are more important things, too. I'd rather teach her to be kind than famous. I'd rather raise her to be generous than wealthy. I'd rather teach her to be curious than ambitious. And I'd rather raise her to seek wisdom than success.

It's that last one — wisdom — that will be our focus in our worship for the next several weeks. We're going to be spending time in the book of James, and I'm calling it the "Wisdom Challenge," because my hope is that each of us will examine the role of wisdom in our lives. Wisdom is not merely a nice virtue for life, it is a connection point between holiness and everyday life. Wisdom is a place where the religious life meets the secular world, where the gospel of Christ has a natural entry point into cultural conversations, where rather than preaching our beliefs at people, we can woo them with the beauty of wisdom. The book of James will guide us in this pursuit of wisdom.

Martin Luther had this to say about the book of James: "We should throw the Epistle of James out...for it doesn't amount to much. It contains not a syllable about Christ, except at the beginning.... He wrote not a word about the suffering and resurrection of Christ, although this is what all the apostles preach about. Besides, there's no order or method in the epistle. Now he discusses clothing and then he writes about wrath and is constantly shifting from one to the other.... The ancients recognized this, too, and therefore they didn't acknowledge this letter as one of the catholic epistles."

Of course Martin Luther was a genius who, even after five hundred years, the church is still catching up to in a lot of ways, and he's right that for several hundred years the church wasn't quite agreed that the letter of James was worth including in the Bible, and he's right that if you read straight through the book it does seem to be sort of a jumble. James has often been attacked for advocating what some consider a works-based righteousness; Martin Luther especially was a great champion of the fact that we are saved by God's grace alone, not by what we do or what we can earn. And so even though there are some verses in James that get trotted out fairly regularly, the book overall feels like one of those embarrassing relatives we have, the one we always have to explain and apologize for when we have company over.

But this strange little letter starts to make more sense if we realize that James was writing a book of wisdom. Wisdom is not something our culture takes very seriously. If you doubt me, invite some friends over for a wisdom party some time and tell them you're going to stay up until all hours talking about wise things; I doubt you'll have much of a group. I'm probably even in danger of losing your attention if I speak too long about wisdom. We don't pay much attention to wisdom today, but in ancient Israel, wisdom was a major concern. There is an entire section of the Old Testament devoted to discovering wisdom, and many of the nations around ancient Israel also had their own

versions of wisdom literature. There are several places in the Old Testament where the "sages" are mentioned; apparently there was a group of people whose role in society was to be wise.

If the Bible were a meal, we might think of Genesis as being the appetizer that sets the stage for everything that comes after, and the prophets might be some hot sauce to wake up our taste buds, and the gospels might be dessert, because of course the point of any meal is to get to dessert, but the wisdom books would be some bread and butter for the meal. They're the part that is solid food that no one is likely to disagree with. Read through the book of Proverbs some time and you'll see just that: some solid suggestions for how to live your life that most people are going to agree with as being good advice. That was the intent of all this wisdom, to look at life and make some sense out of it, to come up with a response to the problem of meaningless suffering, to find a way to live a life of worth and meaning and value. And that is what James is doing in this letter he wrote to his kinsmen: he is exploring this topic of wisdom in light of Christ.

There is something of a debate taking place between these various books of wisdom, though. Some of the sages, like those who contributed to the book of Proverbs, thought of wisdom as something that begins with us and reaches toward God. There is revelation that comes from God to us, certainly, but these writers of the Proverbs also saw that there are things we can do on our own that are generally in line with what God is doing. There are certain things we can deduce about a godly, worthwhile life just by observing enough people and how they live, they thought, and we can boil those observations down into some handy sayings that, if you follow these proverbs, will give you a generally worthwhile life. But there were other sages, like those who wrote the book of Job or the book of Ecclesiastes, who said that no, the wisdom that really matters is not something we can arrive at on our own, it is something that can only come from God. The writer of Ecclesiastes spends his whole life searching for meaning everywhere, but all is vanity, and so his conclusion is that fearing God and keeping his commandments is the point of humanity. Job has his whole life taken from him suddenly, and he and his friends search for meaning in that suffering, but in the end it is God himself who arrives and speaks and puts an end to the matter.

These sages don't settle the debate for us: is wisdom something we can find for ourselves, or can it only come from God? Is it like what Proverbs portrays, wisdom calling out in the public square, and all we have to do is pay attention and it's ours, or is it like the wisdom of Job, that could only be glimpsed when God shows up in person in the storm? Can human reason make any progress on its own, or are we so completely fallen that we need God's revelation to get anywhere at all? James, writing hundreds of years after the Old Testament writers, takes up the question of wisdom again, but he still refuses to answer it.

Usually the writers of the New Testament would spend the first half or so of their letters explaining what God has done through Christ in grand theological terms. They almost always begin with a profound description of what God has done for us and in us, and then they move on to the practical outcome. The book of Ephesians is a good example: Paul describes how, in Christ, God has revealed a great mystery of reconciliation and he has created the church, and then, halfway through the book, he gets to his command that therefore we should live a life worthy of the calling we have received.

James, however, does not start with any grand explanation of life in cosmic theological terms. He just jumps right into the wisdom without much preamble or introduction. He is reminding us that the wisdom we need for life in Christ is not always rooted in deep theology. A wise person according to James is not someone who has knowledge of great mysteries and can explain complex theology. Wisdom does not take a great intelligence or impressive academic degrees. Instead, a wise person is someone who knows that wisdom comes in the small, everyday things of life. A wise person is not one who can blow your mind with incredible insights, a wise person is one who knows when to keep their mouth shut, who doesn't show favoritism, who lives every moment of every day not doing profound acts of righteousness for all to see, but rather making the quiet choice to live every moment in a holy way. A wise person knows that wisdom is demonstrated by how much you listen, not by how much you talk. James is reminding us that wisdom is made up of the simple, mundane things in life. It is profound exactly because it is not profound. It is surprising because it is so ordinary. Wisdom is simple holiness lived quietly.

The thing about this wisdom is that it is a still, calm confrontation. James does not finally settle that debate about whether wisdom is something we can arrive at on our own or whether it takes God revealing wisdom to us, but he does want us to take a good, hard look at what we think about wisdom. He speaks of suffering and temptation and how we should respond to these things, and his answer to them is that all good and perfect gifts come from God. As far as James is concerned, all wise answers focus on God because all wisdom is centered on God. It doesn't matter to him whether wisdom starts with us or comes from God so long as it is centered on God. Do we accept this? Whether we stop and think about wisdom or not, at some point we have to accept someone or something as a source of wisdom for living our lives; have we accepted the right source of wisdom? Have we even stopped to think about what God would say about what we consider wise? Do we merely accept the wisdom of our age without at least reflecting on it? Or is our wisdom centered on God?

He also confronts us by asking how powerful our wisdom is: are we centered enough on Christ to let him change us? As we've already noticed, James often gets into trouble in some quarters for saying that faith without works is dead. It's not enough simply to hear the word and believe, James says, because you don't believe if you don't live it out. If you look in the mirror and see that you are now identified as being in Christ, and then you walk away from the mirror and forget that you have just seen yourself as a transformed ambassador of Christ, and you go about your daily life as though you are simply you as you've always been, what does that say about your true identity? What good is faith that does not overflow into an abundance of faithful actions? How much do you really believe if your so-called belief does not saturate you so much that you are different from head to toe because of it?

This wisdom is a lifestyle, really. James says, in the last verse of our reading for today, that "religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Take care of others and be holy, in other words. Or, as someone else put it, love your neighbor as yourself, and love the Lord your God. Simple words to say. Not so simple to live out. You can learn what the rules are in just a few seconds, but it will take a lifetime of living them out to learn what they mean. James is telling us that wisdom is not an academic pursuit for those of us who are in Christ. Wisdom is not just something wise old men with long, white beards sit and talk about. Wisdom is not something accessible to only a

select few who have been deemed especially wise. It's not something that we write on plaques and hang on our wall and nod thoughtfully about whenever we walk past it. Wisdom is for living. Wisdom changes every moment of our lives.

Other writers of the New Testament pointed out that Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God; it is embodied in the life and death and resurrection of Christ that we see what God truly considers wisdom. And that wisdom is foolish in the eyes of the world, even though God's wisdom in turn makes fools of those people the world considers wise. And James is telling us that God's wisdom is available to us today. When we are in Christ, we have a radically different source of wisdom than the world apart from Christ does, and because we have a different wisdom, we can live different lives. This wisdom is the holiness of Christ lived out in our lives and applied to our problems.

So this Wisdom Challenge, then, is that we would commit to being people who seek the wisdom of Christ. The invitation is to commit to reading one chapter of the book of Proverbs each day for the next month. There are 31 chapters in Proverbs, so it works out well. The goal is not just to be able to quote a bunch of new quotable verses, or to find new pithy sayings to hang on the wall. The goal is to let this ordinary holiness soak into our lives over the next month, to let the language of wisdom inform our prayers, and to learn a new vocabulary for sharing the good news of Christ and his holiness with our culture. This is what God has done for us! He has given us a wisdom in Christ that changes us and changes the world. Let us be those who do not merely listen to the word, but let us be those who go and do what it says. Amen.



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