

## "Magic, Science, and Wisdom"

*Reading: Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13-4:10*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Maybe you've noticed: the world is shifting right under your feet. These things happen from time to time. The last time it happened was about 300 years ago when a bunch of European philosophers and politicians started insisting that if there was a God, he, she, or it was too distant to bother with, and so humanity would be better off just going about their business without him. We could get on with some really nice progress if we stopped fighting about God and really put our minds to it, they thought. Among the results were things like the separation of church and state and science as we know it today. It was the height of the modern period, when objectivity and skepticism became virtues, especially skepticism toward mystical or religious things. Instead of defining reality according to magic or the spiritual realm, as had been the case in practically every culture since the beginning, people began to define reality according to the material, mechanical world of science.

We're so used to it now we think it's always been that way, but it hasn't. It was a shift in the world as big as any earthquake. The separation of religion from other spheres of life was simply unheard of before then. Everybody knew that God or the gods were involved in everything, so why on earth would we want to separate something like church and state, or why would we want to find an objective, natural explanation for anything? If you wanted to know what was going on in the world, you just went down the street to the witch doctor or oracle or prophet or priest -- someone who had one foot in the spiritual realm and one in the earthly realm -- gave them a sacrifice, and they told you what was going on in the world.

But the world changed, and witch doctors found themselves out of a job, because the world became skeptical of anything religious. Suddenly the witch doctors were no longer the experts; the scientists took their place. Scientists became the mediators of knowledge and reality. Notice how, on the evening news, whenever the reporter wants to convince you of a certain position, they always mention that "scientists say this," or "this is according to experts." And so, for the last few hundred years, the enlightened people have been those who are objective and skeptical.

But the world is changing again. Just like those first scientists were skeptical because religious people before them had done stupid and abusive things, many people today are looking at the abuses that have been committed in the name of science or the name of democracy or the name of whatever other authority figure and they are therefore becoming skeptical of anything or anyone who claims authority. That's one of the marks of post-modernism: post-modern people are often immediately suspicious of authority because they have seen what authority figures have done in the last few hundred years. And there is therefore also a growing sense that I need to do what is right for me, what I feel is right, what I want to do, because I can't trust what those other authority figures are telling me to do. Knowledge is less and less about what "experts" tell me, and it's less and less about what God tells me; it's more about what I decide I know.

Now I'm really not condemning either the modern way of looking at things or the post-modern. They both have their benefits and abuses. But what we have seen in these last few hundred years is exactly what James is warning us about. We have replaced heavenly wisdom with earthly wisdom. We have decided that we will determine what is true and right instead of accepting what

God determines is true and right. In the modern way of thinking, we gave that authority to science. Science has done all kinds of incredible, fantastic, amazing things, and I think it's great. But it's not God. In the post-modern period, we are in the process of shifting our knowledge from science to ourselves. But I'm not God, either, and neither are you.

James is a book of wisdom, as we've learned many times in these last few weeks, and what James is telling us here is that true wisdom is far, far bigger than you might think it is. True wisdom is not merely focused on this life and this world. In other words, wisdom is not pragmatic. It is not utilitarian. It does not boil down to a sequence of steps to help you get the most out of life. It is not a matter of figuring out what works for you and doing that, and wisdom is not really concerned with helping you live a good life, believe it or not. What it is concerned with is helping you live a *godly* life. To oversimplify things, the pre-modern world made no distinction between religion and magic and medicine; it was all the same thing. The modern world used science and reason, and the post-modern world we're in now is still figuring out where it's going, but all of them use different tools to try to get a grip on the world to make it work for us. Wisdom, however, is different: wisdom lets God get a grip on us.

You see, earthly wisdom is usually about figuring out what works. Science studies something, runs experiments on it, and figures out how it ticks. Science can therefore tell you that if you eat lots of oatmeal for breakfast, you will probably have lower cholesterol. Or there's the wisdom of myself, which says that if I like it, I should do it. They're both very pragmatic, very goal-oriented, very driven to find out what works. Follow that wisdom and you can live a healthier life before you die, and you might even be able to get ahead and get rich. But the wisdom of God doesn't care what works. God does not promise that following his commands and submitting and being humble and being a peacemaker is going to *work*. What he promises us is that we will be *blessed*. We will be nearer to God, and *that* is where his wisdom leads.

There are all these little moments in the story of the gospel when Jesus and his disciples are walking along talking about things and suddenly Jesus just smacks them in the face with the kingdom of God. They thought they were talking about one thing and all of a sudden Jesus completely kills the conversation by talking about how he's going to die. Or they start arguing about who's the best in the group, jockeying for position; maybe it was even as innocent as a bunch of guys telling "I bet you can't top *this* one" stories, and Jesus calls them out on it. "You can't be like that in my kingdom," he says, "you've got to be a servant, a child, or you'll never get it," and everyone starts wondering why Jesus is so grumpy today.

But you can hardly blame them. They were victims of earthly wisdom as much as you and I, they were thinking more about *doing* than they were thinking about *being*, but God's kingdom starts with being and then the doing flows out of that. These disciples looked at Jesus and they saw him as the Messiah, yes, but they assumed that the point of the Messiah was to beat the foreign invaders. They wanted a Messiah who *worked*, who took care of the mess the nation was in and established a glorious kingdom, and obviously it would be awfully hard for their Messiah to do that if he was killed in the process. Being saved by a condemned, shamed peasant who doesn't even try to stop his enemies from crucifying him doesn't make much sense in earthly wisdom. Obviously if God had sent an anointed one to save his people, that anointed one must be the biggest and strongest and best, and he must be able to destroy all his opponents, and so being great must matter in his kingdom,

right? But the servants and the last are the first in his kingdom? And vulnerable, little, innocent children are the ones he most closely identifies with? That doesn't make sense to earthly wisdom.

They saw the kingdom of God as a means to an end. They were looking forward to a restored, independent kingdom of Israel that vanquished all its enemies. We do the same thing. We look for the kingdom of God to make us happy or content or smart or successful or healthy or better people. But that's earthly wisdom. Godly wisdom leads to God. His kingdom is not a means to any end other than us being nearer to God. His wisdom is not concerned with anything other than us being closer to him. It's kind of crazy to think about that, isn't it? All the things God has done, all the wisdom he has given us, all the re-creating of the world, it's all so that you and I can join his family.

James gives us some of the characteristics of that wisdom from heaven, and these are not characteristics that promise success. It does not think getting ahead or being powerful is what matters. Purity matters. Being a peacemaker matters. Being considerate, submissive, merciful, and full of good fruit matter. Being impartial and sincere matter. These are things that focus us on God, and so they matter. I was a little surprised as I was reading our passage for today because I've heard James 4:7 quoted by itself so often: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you," as though it were a reminder that if we just show the devil some fang we can get him to go away so we can get back to whatever we were doing. But I'd forgotten that verse 8 comes right after it: "Come near to God and he will come near to you." It's not just about resisting the devil, it's about coming near to God. That's heavenly wisdom. It's not only about what *works*, it's also about what *matters*.

This has always been at the root of how God wants to relate to us, and we have so often gone wrong when we've taken his commands and tried to make them something that works for us rather than something that shapes us. This was at the root of the instructions God gave his people Israel, the Law or the Torah, the book of commandments that gave them their identity while they were wandering in the desert after they were set free from slavery in Egypt. There were 613 individual commandments ranging from what you eat to how you dress, and covering the legal system and rules for worship. And we look at them today and think they're so restrictive and strange; why did God care so much about these little details? But the goal was to shape the people into God's people. Or when Jesus gives us a new law in the Sermon on the Mount, and he points us to the fact that all those 613 laws can be boiled down to the commands to love God and love one another, Jesus begins with what we call the Beatitudes. It's not a list of things to do to please God, it's a list of ways to be blessed: by being poor in spirit, meek, merciful, and pure in heart, and by hungering and thirsting for righteousness. It's not about control or pragmatism, it's about being godly.

What we so often do is look at this wisdom from God which would shape us into beautiful new works of God's hands, and we nod our heads and agree that yes, those are some lovely thoughts, but there's work to be done, so my real priorities are things I can do. We nod at the wisdom of God without putting it into practice. We're in a season of presidential debates; I've often longed for someone to ask our presidential candidates how they would govern according to the Beatitudes, if they claim to be Christians. They're often asked to show that they're religious by quoting a Bible verse or two; the real question is how to govern according to the wisdom of God, rather than using God's wisdom as a prop. If we are truly seeking wisdom, we will seek to be the people God calls us to be first, and let the doing flow out of that. Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these other things will be added later.

It's so easy to look at both the world and the kingdom of God through the lens of that earthly wisdom, the wisdom that cares most about what works. I like how James has a mini-altar call at the beginning of our passage for today: "Who among you is wise and understanding?" And the assumption is that nobody is arrogant enough to raise their hand, and so everyone should be at the altar, listening to James's message. If we had an altar call today, I suspect just about every one of us should be there, confessing that we have been more concerned with making things work out for us than we are about being near to God. We use that earthly wisdom that is so handy and useful, rather than that heavenly wisdom that is so pure and submissive, so trusting in God and desiring God. And so, as our response, rather than clogging our altar, let us pray together the prayer Jesus gave us, a prayer that reminds us that our Father is our first concern, that we depend entirely on him, that we come before him as vulnerable as little children, simply so we can praise him and see his glory.



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