

Sunday July 16, 2023

Lesson 7: The Gift of True Wisdom

Scripture: Job 28: 12-28; James 1: 15; 3:13-18

**Context:**

Today we continue our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this third lesson of our second unit, “Wisdom,” we continue looking at how wisdom plays a prominent role as a gift from God to humanity. Today we will look at two texts, one from the Old Testament and another from the New Testament, to explain the difference in wisdom. The focus of today will be to explain the difference between wisdom, from above and earthbound wisdom and to affirm all true wisdom is a gift from God.

For Christians to fully understand wisdom literature, we must look to the Old Testament before we go to the New Testament. A central tenet of the Old Testament and Jewish tradition is the focus on wisdom with both proverbs (pithy statements about life) and narratives where individuals contemplated the theological and philosophical questions of life. Job is referred to as part of wisdom literature as the main protagonist deals with questions of theodicy (the will of God) and human suffering.

In chapter twenty-eight of the book of Job, Job peers into a mine to look for wisdom or something to counter his despair. His conclusion in verse twelve presents the quandary: wisdom is hard to find. From human commerce to the land, to even the wealth of gems, wisdom cannot be bought. The two practical activities in which human wisdom excels – technology and commerce – bring one nowhere near wisdom in its intrinsic character as the art of living meaningfully.<sup>1</sup> There cannot be a price for wisdom and it is not something one can buy.

The New Testament passage today presents the book of James, continuing our focus on this letter written to the early Christian community about how they are called to live. James asks with a question to stir the Christian community to think before answering: are any of you wise and understanding? The challenge is there as James is asserting how jealousy and strife can enter any Christian community and cause issues.

James’ counsel is for the Christians to watch their actions. They are to be humble and live as such in their interactions with each other. James warns of bitter jealousy, or *eritheia*, a rare word Aristotle used to refer to self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means.<sup>2</sup> For James, the Christian community should not provide another forum for human jealousy and ambition to work themselves out.<sup>3</sup> This wisdom is earthly, focused on self. James contends Christians should seek heavenly wisdom.

Heavenly wisdom is not focused on selfishness. The wisdom of our Lord is rooted on peacemaking with acts of justice and peace. Conflict resolution requires an openness to reason,

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<sup>1</sup> Janzen, Gerald J. “Job.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 195.

<sup>2</sup> Perkins, PHEME. “First and Second Peter, James, and Jude.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 121. See Aristotle’s *Politics* 5.3 [1302b, 4; 1303a, 14] for reference.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

mercy, impartiality, and sincerity.<sup>4</sup> If those virtues are not present, there will be a loss and humiliation for one side. Both sides to a dispute must feel there is a fair solution or there will be no peace.<sup>5</sup> Thus, for the Christian community we are to watch for human wisdom or heavenly wisdom when it comes to how we operate.

### **Application**

There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is possessing information, of being able to know data with statistics or numbers. Knowledge is seeing the resources in front of you and being able to repeat facts or explanations. Most people love knowledge because it opens the door to knowing more and, in some cases, building a narrative for what one thinks or believes.

Yet for Job and James, knowledge is not the goal. Wisdom is the true gift and yet it is elusive in some ways. Wisdom cannot be bought according to Job. And wisdom cannot be true if it focuses on one person or knowledge is used to bring war or division according to James. Wisdom is possessing the ability to process knowledge and strive for the highest virtues accessible to individuals. Wisdom involves relying on God and not acting on ourselves and what we think we know.

Often humans are good at using knowledge and the “wisdom” of knowing things to move through life. Think of technological advances and how we can now communicate or move across the world. The world of the academy (such as universities and colleges) is often expensive because they provide access to different disciplines and knowledge. Ask anyone who is successful, and they will tell you of all the things they did to reach such great heights.

For Christians though, knowledge and human wisdom are but one part of life. As followers of Jesus, we are called to pursue heavenly wisdom, seeing the gift of life through the lens of living in gratitude for God. Wisdom for us looks like things such as being humble and faithful, searching for peace during conflict and being fair to all.

This type of wisdom is often difficult and hard because it demands Christians give of themselves in ways which defy modern human ethics and thought processes. Heavenly wisdom comes with a cost when we consider how often, we cannot just think of self. We must think of the whole of Christian community and what does it mean to be pure, peaceful, gentle, obedient, and filled with good actions which are fair and genuine. Wisdom requires us to sow seeds of justice with peaceful and good acts.

I think we can see why James starts with a question. “Are any of you wise and understanding?” If we answer such a question, we must be honest about ourselves and what drives us. We must be willing to have our lives opened by the Lord God to answer questions to push and move us in the right direction. To be advocates for peace, we must examine what is inside of us and who God is calling us to be in chaos.

The other day I had a colleague in another area talk with me about a situation where someone who supposedly had great knowledge did not possess wisdom. The individual at hand was going around their community causing chaos by playing the victim with a “he said, she said,” situation. What was interesting is when the leaders in the community got together, they discovered a pattern: the individual causing the chaos would be asked neutral questions about the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 123.

situation when they were confronted one-on-one by the various leaders. The individual would either not answer the questions or get upset at what was asked. And thus, they would lie about what was said as they spread rumors and misinformation around the community.

This story is a cautionary tale for all of us. We at times might be tempted to use our own knowledge or what we deem wisdom to do things which are not healthy or good. We might even be able to use a good cover story for our actions.

However, our scriptures today remind us of the way of Jesus is not filled with pitting people against each other or having our own agenda honored. The way of Jesus is being filled with peace and integrity, seeking ways to love and support all in a community as different as they might be. Wisdom is knowing how to see the complexity in life and embrace it instead of choosing to act out of fear and anxiety. Wisdom is asking the Lord God to help us show us the way and to seek a heavenly wisdom which leads us on paths of peace and love.

What is the difference between wisdom and knowledge for you? Why do you think humans rely on earthly wisdom more than heavenly wisdom? Who are people who model true wisdom to you? How does wisdom help both individuals and communities flourish? What are ways you've seen wisdom lead to peace and love?

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