

Title: Faith Works: Wise-dealing

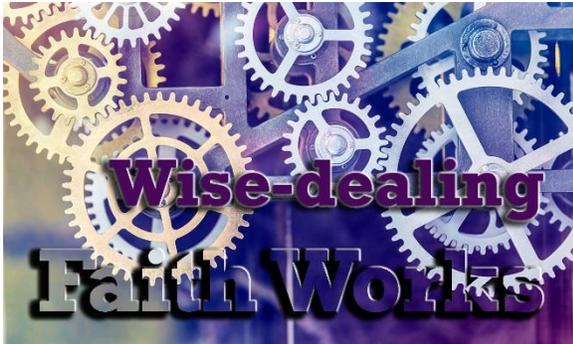
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Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

Text: James 3:13-18

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I never thought I would say it or for that matter, use it in a sermon. But I am just back from once again carrying my wife Ann's bags to an International Convention for Kiwanis. That is why we were absent last week. The convention wasn't in a far-off country but it felt like a foreign land to me. It was in Las Vegas and you know the expression

that I thought I'd never use in a sermon. "What happens in Las Vegas, stays in Las Vegas." After spending nearly a week there, I now know that the motto isn't just a clever marketing campaign. It really is a confession about excessive behavior which I found simply overwhelming to observe. I had to look long and hard to find redemptive qualities for this mega-vacation destination. If you've been there, you know there are a vast number of people not making wise decisions.

Wisdom is the theme today as we continue our study of the book of James. The question is this. "Who is wise and understanding among you?" (James 3:13a) When I asked my Men's group that question on Wednesday morning, they looked around the room at each other, acting like they were at the Last Supper. "Is it I, Lord? Is it I?" Go ahead. Look around. See if you can figure out who among us might be the answer to, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" In looking around, it keeps you from looking at me.

James tells us who is wise. In fact, James deals with wisdom throughout his letter. We've glimpsed it in each of the three weeks of this series called FaithWorks. There is a reason. James is steeped in a Jewish wisdom culture found throughout the Old Testament. Proverbs, for instance, is filled with wise sayings. One could argue that Proverbs is a how-to manual for gaining wisdom, like one of those yellow books from the "...for Dummies" series. You know, *Algebra for Dummies*. *Facebook for Dummies*. *Excel for Dummies*. There is even *Gambling for Dummies*, which sounds about right to me. Proverbs might be "wisdom for dummies." The thesis statement comes in the first chapter of Proverbs when it describes the book as, "For

learning about wisdom and instruction, for gaining instruction in **wise dealing**, righteousness, justice, and equity.” (Proverbs 1:2-3a)

James borrows heavily from this Old Testament tradition, using lots of short proverbs to encourage wise dealing, for lives that look like Jesus. He wants us to deal with one another the way Jesus cared for us. “Be doers of the words, not hearers only...” (James 1:22a) is James thesis statement and a proverb of sorts. It’s is one of 59 such challenges which is exactly half of the total number of verses. When it comes to following Jesus, James says, “Just do it.” But James would *NOT* want his book to have a yellow cover on it titled, “Christian Living for Dummies.” Why? Because those dummies books are about acquiring knowledge. It is why they are so popular. People want to know how to do something, they are seeking knowledge.

James understands that knowledge isn’t the issue. He’s right. We have more knowledge than we know what to do with.

Our generation has more data and knowledge than all of the previous generations put together. Until the year 1900, human knowledge approximately doubled every century.¹ By 1950 however, human knowledge doubled every 25 years; by 2000, human knowledge doubled every year. Today, it is estimated that our knowledge doubles almost 12 hours.”²

High school graduates today have been exposed to more information about the world than Plato, Galileo, Leonardo da Vinci and Benjamin Franklin combined. In terms of facts alone, neither Moses nor Solomon, Peter or Paul could pass a college entrance exam today. Yet by everyone’s standards, even with all our knowledge, today’s society is peopled with a bumper crop of brilliant failures who make poor choices and unwise decisions. Men and women educated to earn fabulous livings often don’t know anything about handling life itself. Alumni from noted universities have mastered information about a narrow slice of life, but couldn’t make it out of the first grade when it comes to living successfully with family and friends.³ Let’s face it; we are really smart but do dumb things.

You have to agree with me. Look around the world today. Does anyone see in the news people doing dumb things? Do you see poor decisions, bad choices, harmful exchanges or dangerous actions, toward family, friends, neighbors, strangers, countries, even our very own planet? What is wrong with us as human beings? What is wrong with me personally that I can do such stupid things in my life which I know are not good for me nor others? What is wrong with you personally that you can do such stupid things in your life which are not good for you nor for your family and others?

Why is it that we can be so smart and so dumb at the same time? James would say it is an issue of wisdom. Knowledge is not enough to meet life's problems. We need wisdom, the ability to be wise-dealing in our life decisions and choices.

In today's section from our study of the letter of James, James shows us what godly wisdom is and is not and he does so in a classic way. He compares and contrasts one against the other. That's how he begins and how we began today when I asked, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" It invites assessment and it is helpful to first take apart the question before looking at the examples.

The word wise in Greek is "sophia (Σοφία). It is a popular name in our culture today. You may know a Sophia. We have half a dozen in our church. The social security administration will tell you that it is the 5th most popular name for a girl this year but it was the number one name three years in a row from 2011-2013. I know someone from seminary whose last name is "Wise", who named his daughter **Sophia Wise**. I told him that it was redundant but he didn't care. He thought it clever to name her what is essentially "wise-wise."

He may have done it to be clever because he also knows what the New Testament teaches us about being wise. It is associated with being filled with the Spirit of Jesus because Jesus personifies wisdom by his radical acts of fidelity and love. Jesus is the extreme example of wise-dealing.⁴ This wisdom is something that is a gift and something that we can and should ask for. James says so as he begins the letter. "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you." (James 1:5)

Then, in the third chapter, he sets about to clarify what this gift of wisdom is and who has it. "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom." (James 3:13.) There's a start. Not a lot to go on. But gentleness is a characteristic. You might look around the room again since we are trying to identify who among us is wise. If you have your eye on someone, their good life must demonstrate gentleness.

Remember, James is writing to a number of Jewish Christian congregations and one of his concerns has to do with how they were treating each other. In the next chapter, we discover that there are conflicts within the churches who he is writing to. They are struggling to understand how God wants them to live and how to treat one another. It makes sense that this was happening.

Christianity was new and they were new to it, having left behind their Jewish communities and the rabbis who lead them. Plus, the Bible as we know it didn't exist. So what they had to go on was what they knew; they were relying on knowledge. But of course, we've already identified that earthy knowledge alone does not ensure success. There wasn't a lot of wise dealing behavior going on.

So James calls them out. I like the Eugene Peterson translation of this passage. "It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom - it's animal cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats." (James 3:13c-16, The Message)

James doesn't mince words. He gets right to the point. If you are mean-spirited, selfish in your ambition, boastful, think you are wise, twist the truth to make yourself look good, try to get the better of others, you aren't wise. You are sowing seeds of conflict and there will "...be disorder and wickedness of every kind." (James 13:16) James even has a description for Christians who exhibit this sort of behavior. He calls it double-minded.

Dare I ask you to sneak a peek around the room with this list of disqualifiers, to find examples of people who you can eliminate? No, don't do it. We have plenty of examples which come to mind because we encounter them personally and publically every day. Smart people who say and do dumb things.

James is saying that we don't automatically get heavenly wisdom. We have to ask it to come down on us, to rest on us, to fill us so that we don't use our earthly knowledge in ways that are "unspiritual, devilish, and wicked." (James 3: 15d, 16c). Earthly knowledge or worldly wisdom too often predominates our community. We have a lot of examples to point to and evidently, James did too. He was writing to "early Christians, who gathered to profess the faith of the glorious Lord Jesus Christ, but whose attitudes and actions are not yet fully in friendship with God." ⁵ They were double-minded, or two-faced. They said one thing; did something else.

Fortunately, James doesn't leave it at that. He just doesn't call out the bad behavior. He offers an example of divinely inspired wisdom which has no ulterior motives. Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits,

without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy, a harvest of righteousness sown in peace for those who make peace." (James 3:17-18).

Does it sound familiar? It should. James cites the positive traits of genuine wisdom that come from above and is a restating of the Sermon on the Mount. Wisdom from above is first pure and Jesus said,

"Blessed are the **pure** in heart, for they will see God." (Matthew 5:8) Then peaceable: "Blessed are the **peacemakers**, for they will be called children of God." (Matthew 5:9) Gentle: "Blessed are the **meek**, for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5) Full of mercy and good fruits: "Blessed are the **merciful**, for they will receive mercy." (Matthew 5:7) These aren't just challenges from a famous sermon. They are the characteristics of Jesus who was wise-dealing with everyone he encountered. James wants us to be wise dealing like Jesus. He was pure of heart and gentle, overflowing with mercy and blessings, a peacemaker who treated each with dignity and honor. It is the definition of wisdom from above.

I suppose there is no need to look around now. This list of descriptors is simply too comprehensive. But James is not condemning these congregations. Rather, James recognizes that there is a lifelong process of becoming wise. James knows that it is hard to resist the challenges that of worldly wisdom. The power of earthly knowledge is so great and it is hard and feels nearly impossible to resist the ways of the world. This is particularly true when the behavior and actions of the world are modeled and displayed in so many unhealthy ways.

But it was no different then than now. They were facing some of the same challenges and influences which is why he suggests that earthly knowledge, wisdom from below is not easy to abandon or avoid. It is a slow if not painful process won through many conversions. We don't just take Jesus and suddenly are filled with wisdom from above. It is a process of many conversions as we draw near to God and let God fill us with wisdom, cleansing and purifying our hearts.

We become wise dealing like Jesus, wise in the ways of the Spirit as we come to understand how to handle the daily issues that confront each one of us. We are forever asking Christ to give us wisdom and understanding of what to do in complicated issues and choices in our lives.

I like the ways C. S. Lewis described the long process by using a house -- a lifelong building project -- for a metaphor: He says, "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. ... But presently he starts knocking the house

about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on Earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of -- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself."

Wow. What an experience that would be. What an experience that is. God, living within you. James says you know that has happened when you are wise dealing in everything you do. Maybe that's the answer we are looking for when we asked, "Who among you is wise and understanding?" The answer is someone who is filled with the Spirit of Jesus dwelling within and it shows that all your work is gentle and wise dealing.

Nobody wants to be dummies. You don't have to be. You can be wise. All you have to do is ask, James says. If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you." (James 1:5) Ask and it will be given because James says, that's the way faith works.

¹ This theory is the "Knowledge Doubling Curve" and was created by Buckminster Fuller in 1982

² <https://lodestarsolutions.com/keeping-up-with-the-surge-of-information-and-human-knowledge/>

³ Modified from a sermon by Haddon Robinson as quoted in Wise and Otherwise, Mark Adams, November 17, 2002/

⁴ Wall, Robert W., The Wisdom of James, 2009. Center for Christian Ethics. Baylor University, page 29.

⁵ Johnson, Luke Timothy. Call to Conversion. Anchor Bible Commentary. Page 286.