

Wisdom: What it Ain't. What it Am. (James 3:13-18)**Mark Archibald****May 20, 2018**

We have unprecedented access to knowledge and education. There has never been so much information available to us at any time in history.

I'm referring to good information, too. There certainly is a lot of junk and falsehood out there. But there is also well resourced and researched material that we have access to. We have access to depth and expertise that we've never had access to before.

Our libraries are fantastic. The Chinook Arch system in Lethbridge and surrounding area is incredible. Libraries don't just stock things in the building; they have resources available online, too. If I want a copy of a book, I can access a digital copy of that book through the library, or I can order the book through an app on my phone.

Our church library is well stocked. Kathryn and others do a very good job of ordering books that are sources of excellent theology, research and teaching. (And fun!)

Through the internet we have incredible access to knowledge. We have answers to questions at our fingertips. We have an answer to any question at any time. I can access videos of challenging and reliable Bible teachers. I can access Ted Talks from a variety of experts. We have 2 seminary students at our church currently who are doing the vast majority of their work online.

We have unprecedented access to education and knowledge. . . .

There have never been so many books available in the world in history than there are right now. There have never been more teachers available to us. We have unprecedented knowledge,

so why are we so dumb?

Despite all this access to knowledge, we're still this population of tide-pod-eating, poor-decision-making, self-sabotaging fools.

Despite the ability to access and distribute intelligence online, we're mean-spirited, self-loathing, angry trolls.

Despite our capacity to be smart, we certainly seem to be lacking in wisdom. What good is all of this knowledge if it does not translate in practical, life-giving wisdom. What good is this knowledge if we never translate it into real life?

James 3:13-18 helps us focus on wisdom. Here we see what wisdom looks like, as well as the life wisdom produces.

¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.* ¹⁴ *But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.*

¹⁵ *Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.* ¹⁶ *For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

¹⁷ *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.* ¹⁸ *Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:13-18)*

When we think of wise people, we often think of smart people. Yet James’ description of wisdom mentions very little of knowledge. Complete the phrase we just read from verse 13:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their _____.

- **Knowledge?** Nope. James seems to be thinking even bigger than smarts.
- **Wit?** Nope. He does not seem concerned with the humour used to make a point, win an intellectual argument, or crush an opponent.
- **Ability to argue?** Nope. Wise does not translate in ability to prove a point, or even convert people to your point of view. Instead, wisdom is shown by a
- **Good life.** The way that we live our daily life proves wisdom. Living well is evidence of a life lived in wisdom. Living righteously, regardless of circumstances, is evidence of a life lived with wisdom.
- **Deeds done in humility.** Think of someone that you know that does good things for other people, but does them without seeking any credit whatsoever. It may take some time to think about this person, simply because they don’t seek the spotlight or the credit. Think about this: do you consider that person to be a wise person? Chances are really good that is someone you have always considered to be a wise person in your life.

Wisdom is shown through a good life, through deeds done in humility. This seems odd, because it says very little about being smart. But these descriptions of wisdom resonate with us. People that we truly consider wise live lives of centeredness, gravity and quietness. Wise people seem to live lives absent of panic and self-promotion.

James goes on to clearly define wisdom. According to James, here’s **what wisdom ain’t**:

- **Anything with a hint of envy.**
- **Anything with a hint of selfish ambition.**
- **Anything that reeks of arrogance.**
- **Anything that ignores our flaws.**

Wisdom cannot exist in the world of shameless self-promotion. It cannot be where there is jealousy of the skills, intelligence, or accomplishments of another. It cannot exist where someone takes pride in their perceived level of wisdom.

Let me know if you have ever done this, because I certainly have. Have you ever, just once, gotten something really right in your life? Maybe you did something really sacrificial or kind. Maybe you were really discerning in a difficult situation. What was your response after doing this? If you were me, you probably swelled up with pride and congratulated yourself with enthusiasm. When this is how we respond when we do good deeds, we're probably not living in wisdom.

Wisdom cannot happen when we refuse to see ourselves as we really are. When we think highly of ourselves while ignoring flaws and faults that is certainly not wise.

We can probably think of a number of people who think they are wise, but are disqualified from wisdom according to James. Instead here, according to James, is **what wisdom is**:

- **pure**
- **peace-loving**
- **considerate**
- **submissive**
- **full of mercy and good fruit**
- **impartial and sincere**

This list is absent of anything self-seeking or self-promoting. It comes in putting other people first. It comes in a life well and generously lived.

Good news everyone: Anyone can be wise! Wisdom doesn't require degrees. It's not about accumulation of knowledge. Any of us can be these things that James describes as wise. The dumbest person in any given room has the ability to be a wise person! We can be kind. We can put others before ourselves. We can do good instead of selfish things.

Bad news everyone: Being wise is nearly impossible

When I first look at the list, I think, "I can do these things". And then I live with myself for a minute and I think, "Oh, no. I'm doomed!" I'm not very peace-loving when I read attitudes and political ideas online that differ from my own. I become that mean-spirited troll that wants someone destroyed for their point of view. I'm not submissive to people in leadership over me when they ask me to do something that I really do not want to do. I'm not full of mercy when the person in the car ahead of me stops suddenly and makes a right hand turn without turning on their blinker!

As quickly as it seemed possible, becoming a wise person seems impossible. Can I ever be these things?

- **pure**
- **peace-loving**

- **considerate**
- **submissive**
- **full of mercy and good fruit**
- **impartial and sincere**

BUT! Good news everyone: True wisdom comes from God! Wisdom is not rooted in me. Wisdom is rooted completely in God. (Of course there are people that we know who are not Christians but are still wise – but couldn't that wisdom still be a gift from God?)

Before giving the qualifiers of wisdom, James writes, **“But the wisdom that comes from heaven . . .”** When we think of God, we think of a Being that is the source of all good things. When we think of heaven, we think of a place and state of being where people lack for nothing. True wisdom comes out of an attitude of abundance. There is more than enough to go around, so I will be generous and giving to others. There is more than enough to go around, so I won't be concerned about getting the credit. There is more than enough to go around, so I will put other people first. There is more than enough to go around because we will follow Jesus' commands to love one another. There is more than enough to go around because God is our provider, and he has provided everything our souls need through his Son Jesus Christ. When we are rooted in Christ, we see things differently. Wisdom results from this perspective of enough.

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. The end goal of wisdom is not knowledge, it seems. It's being a peacemaker. Peacemakers reconcile difficult and even impossible things.

I got to do a ride along with a Lethbridge police officer a couple of years ago. We ended up stopping at one call. It was a disturbance between arguing people. I realized then and there I could never do this job. Dealing with people in solving disputes that are highly animated to the point of bugging the neighbours? That's hard. That takes wisdom. That takes discernment. That takes something that is uncommon. Being a peacemaker requires wisdom. Wise people are peace makers.

The end result of wisdom (in James anyway) is the ability to make peace between people.

The story that is most commonly used to describe that extent of the wisdom of King Solomon is in settling a dispute between two people. (see 1 Kings 3) Wisdom doesn't win the argument. Wisdom has a calming effect that brings peace and brings people together.

Anyone can be wise. It's within your reach. BUT it's also impossible. Thanks be to God, who through Jesus reminds us that He is with us in all things, and is the source of all things good. May we be humble, selfless, generous people who are makers of peace in this world, just as Jesus has been a peace-maker for us.