

“Wisdom and Fruit Salad”

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Proverbs 1:20-23

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Wisdom has a few definitions, including “good sense or judgment” and “knowledge that is gained by having many experiences in life.” That last definition is one that seems to resonate. You get wisdom by “having many experiences in life.” You get wisdom by, dare I say it, becoming *old*, right? And, though I felt like I had attained quite a number of years on my fortieth birthday back in March, I know that forty years is certainly *not* a long life. No one says at forty, “I’ve lived a good long life.” Forty years is certainly not enough time to have developed wisdom! Wisdom is something that we associate with people twice my age, right? So, what do *I* know about wisdom? Well, I do know this - twice this past week, in regards to wisdom and the difference between it and knowledge, I heard the following: “Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.”

So, knowledge and wisdom are clearly two different things. Picture in your mind someone who is knowledgeable. I did searches for images and clipart for “knowledgeable person” and in the first few results were a young woman standing in a library, a middle-aged man wearing an academic gown, someone with thick glasses studying a large book, someone with a lightbulb lit up over their head, and a picture of Albert Einstein. You get the idea. Somewhere in that collection is perhaps what you pictured in your mind. These pictures and clipart were of people who were both younger and older, of many ethnicities, male and female. A fairly diverse group for those we think of as knowledgeable.

Now, picture in your mind someone who is wise. I did similar searches for images and clipart for “wise person” and the results were very different. Most often, the results were for old men with flowing white beards, often sitting on top of a mountain. Or Gandhi. Definitely someone whose face is creased with wrinkles. Perhaps this is what you pictured in your mind. Wisdom comes with age, right?

Maybe not -- or maybe we’re talking about something altogether different. We read a bit about wisdom from Proverbs and James today. Does this wisdom necessarily come with age? Does it require old age and being male? Does it have anything to do with tomatoes and fruit salad?

The answer to all of those questions is “no.” James makes it clear that, just as knowledge and wisdom are two different things, there are two different kinds of wisdom: earthly wisdom and wisdom from above. Earthly wisdom is the wisdom that we most often think of. We can develop earthly wisdom *without* having wisdom from above. James tells us that earthly wisdom can contain “bitter envy and selfish ambition.” Much of our cultural earthly wisdom tells us how to get ahead in

this life. It tells us how to advance in our careers, even when that means pushing others aside. It says that the little white lie is not a big deal. It reassures us that the ends justify the means. James says that this kind of wisdom “does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.” I’d say if something is devilish, that’s something we want to stay away from! This earthly wisdom leads to “disorder and wickedness of every kind.” A simple look around at the world will confirm that is true. Too often, the wisdom of the world has led to disorder and wickedness. People following this kind of wisdom are out for themselves, concerned primarily about their own wants. And, unfortunately, these are the kinds of people that our world commonly reveres! People driven by their egos and their coveting of what others have are often the people that our society holds up as role models. But this is not the wisdom that Christians should embrace, though we are often tempted by our culture. When we succumb to this type of earthly wisdom, it can even invade the church. We then think of church in terms of “what is in it for me,” rather than in terms of “how can I serve others?” In every church I’ve been a part of, there are always many places to serve and too few people filling those roles. Earthly wisdom leads us to not share our resources -- of time, talent, and finances. Earthly wisdom leads us to ignore the needs of others in our midst. Earthly wisdom leads us to holding on to the ways of the past, rather than stepping out in faith to embrace new visions and ministries God has given us. As James says it, we have “bitter envy and selfish ambition.” Let us not yield to earthly, unspiritual, devilish wisdom, particularly in the church!

In contrast, James teaches us about the wisdom that comes from above. James expects more out of believers than to just follow the wisdom of the world. We must follow the wisdom from above. What does this wisdom from above look like? James tells us it is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” This kind of wisdom loves peace, showing love to all, even enemies, rather than clawing its way to the top. This kind of wisdom is gentle and willing to yield, showing respect and deference to others, rather than insisting on its own way. It is full of mercy and good fruits, sharing the grace and forgiveness of God, rather than holding grudges. This wisdom doesn’t even have a *trace* of partiality or hypocrisy, looking out for the best for *all* of God’s children, rather than always looking out for itself.

Pretty easy -- at least on the surface -- to choose *that* kind of wisdom! Devilish wisdom or pure, peaceable, gentle wisdom? Not too tough a choice, is it? In practice, though, we stumble, and we often stumble because of the influence of the world around us. We turn our attention too often to what we see on television and in movies, in “reality” shows like *The Apprentice* or *Survivor*, where each person is looking out for themselves, to how *they* can end up on top, by whatever means necessary. We look to the corporate world, where too often the only thing that matters is the bottom line, rather than the good of the people who contribute to success. Our eyes are caught by the glitz of celebrity and gossip, rather than looking around to see the many ways we can serve God in our daily lives.

So, how do we turn to the wisdom from above? James puts it in simple terms. In Chapter 1, he writes “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of

the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.”

So, we must *ask God* for this wisdom to be given to us, and we must ask *in faith*. We are to be assured by the promises of scripture that our God wants good things for us. In Matthew, Jesus is recorded saying “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” God wants to bless us with this wisdom from above, so we should ask for it! And then, instead of the “disorder and wickedness of every kind” which follows the other kind of wisdom, *this* kind of wisdom comes with “a harvest of righteousness.” When we follow the wisdom of God, the outcome will be a blessing to us and to all who are around us. Living in the wisdom of the world will bring heartache and suffering. Living in the wisdom of God will bring peace and blessing.

And I know that all of that is easier said than done. It is a gradual process. Paul’s letter to the Romans gives us help here in what to do: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The renewing of our minds is not a one-time task. It is an ongoing process, led by God.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes:

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; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any 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 being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.¹

Or, as much as I enjoy it when my navigation system feeds my ego by saying “You have arrived,” we will never fully arrive. We will always have some earthly wisdom in us. The way of the world permeates our being, and we must fight against those impulses. We must continue to seek God’s way in all that we do. We ask God to give us this wisdom from above, and we ask that *daily!* And the result will be a transforming, a renewing of our lives. It also will be a transforming and renewing of our church.

Rev. Kathy Dawson, a member of the faculty at Columbia Theological Seminary writes, “What then does the life look like in the church community that lives by God’s wisdom? Here are some of the marks of a wise church that this passage provokes:

- Worship leadership is not just handled by paid staff, but is shared among the church membership of all ages and stations.
- Disputes are handled with mercy and love, seeking peace above selfish ambition.

¹ *Mere Christianity*, 205.

- Prayer is not selfish, asking for what will feed individual desires, but seeks the good fruits that will meet the needs of all.
- Peacemaking and social justice ministries become ways of addressing the earthly wisdom that surrounds us.
- Our primary identity is measured by our closeness to God rather than the possessions we accumulate.”²

So, friends, we must seek God’s wisdom, rather than the wisdom of the world, and then we must apply that wisdom to our everyday lives, in the church, in our families, in our work, in our play. The result will be lives that are marked by peace, gentleness, a willingness to yield, mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. That’s true wisdom! And that kind of wisdom -- that kind of fruit -- can be part of each of our lives, no matter how many wrinkles we have and no matter what kind of fruit salad we make. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4*, 90.