

# Can Wisdom Lead To Trouble?

*James 1:1-8; Acts 21:17-31*

Last week, we found James, the younger half-brother of Jesus, suddenly the ruling elder of the Jerusalem church because a great persecution had driven Peter and John and the whole first string of Jesus' apostles out of the Holy City. So the Christian disciples had looked to the quieter, more traditional James to lead them through their time of trouble. And what we read last week became our Call to Worship this morning, words from a letter James wrote to those believers who had fled for their lives from the city. Because James and all the Jewish disciples of Jesus still loved and still remembered the people who had left house and home and family to remain faithful to Jesus.

So James opened his letter with words of encouragement, he said: *"Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you are faced with many temptations."* And we said last week that, for James, a temptation was some sort of trouble, some sort of heartbreak, that demands a decision from the Christian who has to bear it. Temptations can be an occasion for joy, James said, because if we respond to our trouble by persevering at what God wants us to be, obeying the commandments, keeping faith with our loved ones at home and our brothers and sisters at church, if we simply endure at what we know is right, James tells us, God will teach us a maturity, lend us a wholeness that will bear us together through thick and thin all the way to heaven.

And today, in our Call to Worship, he went on, *"But if any one of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all generously and without reproach..."*. The point being that holding on, persevering with God, involves navigation. Here we are, fallen people trying to learn heaven's way of life down here, where there are twists and turns and shadows, where the lines between right and wrong, wisdom and cowardice, courage and folly can be hard to find and navigate. For instance, the people James writes to here have already made a hard choice, stay or flee. Do I stand my ground and die like Stephen in temple square or James, the brother of John, in Herod's dungeon?

Or do I flee? Well, James' readers have fled. They are *"the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad"*, Israelite Christians all over western Asia. But I'm going to guess that they didn't flee without some amount of soul searching. So James promises the far away disciples that if they ask God, he will supply them wisdom *"generously and without reproach"*. In other words, God both wants us to learn wisdom and he will not *"reproach"* us, he won't shame us for the wisdom we lack at a given moment.

*"But let him ask in faith with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like the waves of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that person expect to receive anything from the Lord."*

*He is a double minded person, unstable in all his ways.*” Now to my mind this verse has always been like a fastball that suddenly drops a foot when you go to swing at it. James tells us that God is *“generous and without reproach”* when we need him for wisdom, but if you doubt, if you don’t have faith, you don’t get anything? A person like me can find a doubt in some back corner of my mind every moment of every day! So just because I can feel some doubt I don’t get anything?

But I think we misread both James’ promise and what James warns us against because we don’t think of wisdom the way the Bible typically depicts wisdom. When we pray for wisdom, we tend to want a nice, shiny, discreet answer to some particular problem. So we’re asking to be made smart, to become the master of circumstances we could never manage ourselves. But our getting smarter, our being more agile and clever and successful in life is not the sort of wisdom James is promising here.

In the Bible, wisdom is an outlook, wisdom is an attitude that sees God as being big and right center-stage and us as being small and absolutely dependent on him. So Solomon warned his sons in the Proverbs: *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline...For from the LORD comes wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding...Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.”*

So what James invites us to pray for is not to be made smarter than our circumstances, but for us to become respectful toward, more responsive to God when we are faced with temptations that would draw us away from God’s promises and his commandments. Wisdom is the art of letting God be God when the rubber hits the road. I warned you last week from the words of Jesus that the way to heaven is through a *“narrow gate”*, a gate defined by the priorities taught in the gospel and the moral commandments taught in Moses’ law.

And point of the narrow gate is not that we have to keep every point of the law to squeeze onto the straight and narrow. Jesus wasn’t saying that, if we ever stumble or struggle with the commandments, the gate to heaven will close for us. What Jesus was saying, what James warns us against here is a sort of doubt, a sort of double-mindedness that tempts us to think that we can have God’s promises, we can be forgiven and comforted and helped through life, without taking to heart what God commands us to be and do in this life.

There’s forgiveness aplenty for genuine disciples who reach for the holiness and faithfulness and love that God commands and who fail, people who need time and help to bring their hearts under the sway of God’s Spirit, their minds to understand God’s Word. God is patient and generous and forgiving with people like that. But the person who asks for wisdom and doesn’t really want it, the person who thinks that his way is smarter and more noble and more generous than the straight and narrow Jesus taught, than the commandments Moses brought down Sinai, that

person will not find wisdom until he learns in his heart becomes willing to let God be God when the rubber meets the road.

We are “*double-minded*,” James tells us, “*driven and tossed by the wind, unstable in all his ways*” because we are subjective, defining the world by what suits our taste rather than waiting on and listening to what God’s says in his Word. “*Let not that person expect that he will receive anything from God.*”, James tells us. Because wisdom isn’t about being smarter and healthier and more functional and more successful. Wisdom is about being more in tune with God. Wisdom is learning and keeping those strange, heavenly values and priorities that came down Sinai with Moses and that Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount.

So Jesus taught that the meek inherit the earth, those who mourn and are lonely get comforted by God. Hungering and thirsting for what God says is righteous is what will satisfy our souls. Showing mercy to people within our power brings us mercy from God. Holiness and purity bring us close to God. Making peace with unlikely, unlovely people marks us as God’s children. Being rejected and hated by the powers that be ensures us a welcome in the kingdom to come. Rejection by the world wins us a place in heaven next to God’s prophets who were also hated by the world.

And nowhere is the topsy-turvy nature of God’s wisdom more evident than in the wild story James and Paul live through in our reading from Acts this morning. We’ve already noted that James and Paul both were second string leaders among the early Christians. Neither of them followed Jesus until after the cross and the resurrection. Both of them were late and reluctant disciples of Jesus, and yet God worked it out that James and Paul each became leaders of their own important communities among the early Christians. James was the leader of the Israelite disciples of Jesus in the holy city. And Paul was the leader of Christians from just about everywhere else.

So they might have been tempted to see each other as rivals and adversaries. The communities they led were at odds with each other, entirely different in background and culture. And yet Paul and James both were the sort of peacemakers Jesus blessed in the Sermon on the Mount. Once James and the Jewish elders of the Jerusalem church heard Paul’s story, they recognized Paul as a kindred spirit. They “*glorified God*” the text tells us for Paul and all those faraway Christians who would never be kosher, never see the world quite like them.

And Paul, for his part was willing to take part in a cockamamie scheme, an odd gesture to demonstrate good faith to all those Israelite Christians who had never really liked or trusted Paul. Paul would go to temple with some Jewish disciples and sponsor them in old ritual belonging to Moses and Israel’s past. But the long and the short of it was that the gesture was a disastrous failure.

Paul was so prominent and controversial that his enemies from old Israel, those Jews who had never believed in Jesus, immediately spotted Paul in the temple precinct and staged a riot which landed him in Roman custody and set him on the path that would lead to his execution in Rome. So, whatever gesture Paul hoped to make to the Jerusalem Christians was entirely lost in the upset, whatever reconciliation James hoped to accomplish went beyond his reach once Paul was under arrest.

And the question becomes, what was the point of the exercise? Was this reconciliation between Paul and James even wise to attempt? Did James forget to pray for wisdom? Was it foolish to allow Paul anywhere near the Jerusalem temple? And I'm going to say that what James and Paul attempted was wise even though it didn't succeed. It was wise for these two leaders to embark on a plan designed to teach different Christians from different places to trust and love each other.

Because the wisdom of God isn't about cleverness and success as the world measures it. If cleverness and success is the measure of wisdom, then Jesus was a very foolish man indeed. He wound up on a cross, mocked and despised by people who were clever and successful as the world measures success. But the real measure of wisdom is where our thoughts and words and actions land us with God, whether our lives reflect his values and priorities.

So Paul was wise to seek peace with the Jerusalem Christians, even if the gesture eventually cost him his life. Jesus was wise to go to the cross to make peace between his Father and guilty, sinful people like you and me. It turns out that to be wise as God defines wisdom will often require us to choose against what the world considers clever and productive and satisfying.

It is what the world thinks and what the world wants that will tempt our hearts to doubt and be double-minded about what God wants us to be and how God wants us to live. Wisdom is the art of letting God be God when the rubber hits the road. And that is what James wants us to pray for.