



## WISDOM ROAD

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When Isaac was a toddler, we got him his first set of blocks. Being a new dad, I was eager to introduce him to the joy of building, so I would start stacking blocks to make towers and show him what was possible. I would be in the middle of working on a castle or something cool when WHAM! He would sweep his arm through it and send blocks flying. I would get frustrated, but he thought that was the best part. He thought he was hilarious. Every time it was the same. It was like something out of a cartoon: I would no sooner finish a project then he would slap it down. There was no room for me to get attached to my creations, because he was always there, just waiting to demolish it.

James is a bit like a happy toddler with a stack of blocks. He takes great delight in knocking things down. Christians can get a little pretentious sometimes, and it's good for somebody to come along and pop a few bubbles, which James does well. He saw people talking big about their faith and WHAM! He knocks their words down by saying that faith is nothing if you don't act on it. He took the idea of trials and flipped it on its head by saying we can find joy in them. He looked at people who were playing favorites and showed how they were way off base because the gospel is for everybody. And he pointed out the inconsistency of saying good things about God when we complain about the people around us. James is more than happy to knock down any idea he sees as being misguided.

He does that again for us this morning on the topic of wisdom, and he starts out by asking a question:

### **James 3:13**

*Who is wise and understanding among you?*

Where is the wisdom? Who's got it? Do you find yourself asking that question? Who can help me? How can I make sense of the world? What's the secret?

I would define wisdom as know-how for life. It's that ability to make the right decision when it comes down to crunch time. It's the inner guidance that provides direction when things are messy and uncertain.

We crave that. "God, show me what to do." Somebody tell me the best course of action and I'll take it. I would like to be able to just go to the mailbox and find a little postcard

from heaven with complete instructions on how to live. I would like it written down in black and white so that I know without a doubt what I'm supposed to do. Wouldn't that be nice? You name the situation: Buying a house. Finding a job. Working through a family crisis. Getting out of debt. Choosing a spouse. Confronting a friend. Staying sober. Plodding through the daily grind. We all are in desperate need of wisdom on a moment by moment basis.

Everywhere you go, people are needing help managing their lives. That's why you find our culture filled with talk shows and advice columns and self help books on everything from dieting to finance to your love life.

There are so many voices out there telling us what to do. It's confusing and complicated. Who is wise and understanding among us? That's the million dollar question that we're asking right along with James.

### **James 3:13-18**

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

*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. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*

In these few verses, James once again upsets the apple cart. He overturns conventional thinking about wisdom and puts us on the road to find real wisdom. He starts by showing us how to find

### **The proof of wisdom**

Do you remember the car commercials from a few years ago that said, "This is not your father's Oldsmobile"? People associated Oldsmobile with making big boats driven by older people. The manufacturer wanted to make it clear that their new cars are a far cry from what people envisioned.

James is saying "This is not your father's wisdom." That picture you have in your head of getting some big revelation isn't what's going to happen. It would be great if there was always a crystal clear voice talking to us in our head, but that's not how it works most of the time and that isn't what we should expect.

Real wisdom is going to look much different than we envisioned. If we want to find it, we will need to be willing to let go of some misconceptions.

One of the biggest misconceptions we have about wisdom is that it is about information. We tend to fall into the trap of thinking if we only had a little more information, we could make a better decision. If we read one more book or heard one more seminar, then we'd know what to do. We get into a cycle of always feeling inadequate, needing one more word from an expert in order to make a sound choice.

But according to James, we don't need to know more – we need to live more. We need to put what we've already got into practice and not wait around for some special enlightenment. We will most likely be waiting a long time for that.

Do you remember when Tom Cruise was in the news for what he said to Matt Lauer? He went on air criticizing Brooke Shields and other people who have taken drugs to cope with chemical imbalances, such as occur after a baby is born. Matt Lauer said to him, "Sounds like you've really done your homework." Tom told Matt, "You don't know the history of psychiatry. I do."

His comments caused an immediate uproar. Brooke Shields responded by saying, "I'm going to take a wild guess that Mr. Cruise has never experienced post partum depression." She was right. He may have read a few books, and he may have researched his history, but he had no personal history with it himself. He never treated patients or lived through the hormonal changes of a pregnancy. His knowledge wasn't wisdom, because it wasn't rooted in real life. That's where real wisdom shines through – it rings true with experience.

James says we can look around and find truly wise people in two ways. **First is by the way they conduct themselves.** There will be a consistency between what they do and what they say.

I'll give you a practical example, and it's going to embarrass him, but I believe Dan Peek has a great deal of wisdom when it comes to financial matters. I would point anybody needing advice on that subject to him. He's passionate about helping families find financial freedom and manage their money well for God. He's done a lot of research on what the Bible says about the topic and has led study groups on finances.

But those things aren't how I know Dan is money wise. I know he's money wise because I know how he manages his own money. He is attempting to live by the principles he believes in. I trust his judgment when it comes to money – not because he can talk about it intelligently, but because he can speak from personal experience.

James approaches wisdom the same way he does faith and says, "Anybody can talk a good talk. The really wise people show their wisdom in their lifestyle."

Not only does it show up in the deeds people do: **He tells us it is also evident in their humility.** According to James, humility comes with wisdom.

The word for humility there means meekness or gentleness. Here's another place where James takes pleasure in contradicting the status quo. Because it feels like life wisdom should be accompanied by a degree of confidence and self assuredness – not meekness. That feels timid and indecisive.

In fact, James was out of step with the way other people of his own time saw wisdom. At the time, this word for meek or humble that James uses was used in a negative way. If someone called you that, it wasn't a compliment. In fact, Epictetus, a Greek philosopher who lived at the same time as James, listed this kind of humility as the number one moral failure! It doesn't make sense to the rest of the world.

That's still the way people hear that word today. But in God's eyes, real wisdom is closely linked with true humility. Juanita Ryan is an author who has written about what she learned when her son was using drugs. She writes,

*When our son was using, I thought I should be able to do all kinds of things that I could not do. I should be able to figure out when he was using and when he was not. I should be able to reason with him. I should be able to make him stop. I should be able to keep him away from his drug using friends. I should be able to get him the right help...*

*I tried. For months I tried. I could not do any of these things. Believing I should be able to do what I could not do, and endlessly trying to control what I could not control, left me in my own insanity. And it was only then that I was ready to learn new lessons in humility.*

*Humility helped to restore my sanity. I could not do for my son any of what I, as his parent, wanted so desperately to do. That simple truth was excruciatingly painful. Yet it was wonderfully freeing. And it ultimately was what opened the door for my healing and for our healing as a family, because healing could only occur as I lived in that humble truth and got out of God's way. I stopped trying to do what only God could do when I humbly admitted, "I cannot."*

We think wisdom should make us feel smarter and better about ourselves, because we know what we need to do. But when it is genuine wisdom, it is accompanied by humility, because we realize we don't have the answers in ourselves, and we need to step out of the way.

A life marked by consistent behavior and a humble attitude is the evidence we should be looking for when it comes to wisdom – It's not about more head knowledge or an inner sense of confidence that we've got the right answers. It's about recognizing our own dependence on God and seeking to live out what we already know.

Along our way toward finding true wisdom, James has a warning for us. Because there are some roadblocks that can get in the way.

## **The preventers of wisdom**

Look again at what he said:

*But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

The cabin we stayed at in Minnesota is on well water that is so full of iron it stains the sink. It's disconcerting to put kids in a bath tub full of orange water. Not only does it look nasty – it has a strong smell like sulfur. Supposedly, it is entirely safe to drink as is – but there's such a taste and odor to it that nobody gets a glass of water from the tap when they're at the cabin.

In verse 11, James used the word bitter to describe water from a well that didn't taste good, and now he uses the same word to describe a heart condition. Bitter envy leaves a bad taste in your mouth. The word for envy could better be translated zeal. It is a strong, bitter emotion, and when we hold it in our hearts, it clouds our judgment.

Bitterness can creep in and take over.

### **Hebrews 12:15**

*Keep a sharp eye out for weeds of bitter discontent. A thistle or two gone to seed can ruin a whole garden in no time.*

It's easy for bitterness to sneak into our hearts, because it usually starts from a kernel of truth. We get hurt or betrayed or passed up and suffer a genuine wrong. But then our feelings about what happened take an ugly turn. We become resentful. We become angry and envious. We assign blame and find fault.

In that setting, we say we're looking for wisdom, but we're really just looking for retribution. We want to settle the score or get what we deserve. And our desire affects our spiritual tastebuds. Everything God does tastes bad to us.

Because when we harbor bitterness, we are really saying we don't like how God is handling things. We don't like his choices, and we don't trust that he has our best interest in mind. Oswald Chambers once said, "We impoverish His ministry the moment we forget he is Almighty. We will come to Jesus as comforter or as Sympathizer, but we will not come to him as Almighty." And that's the sin of bitterness – it refuses to acknowledge God as God, to trust him with our well being.

When we've been hurt badly, our wounds just fester if we hang on to bitterness. But as we let go of that, God can bring healing and give us genuine wisdom for moving forward.

James also mentions something else that prevents us from finding wisdom, which he calls selfish ambition, or striving. When our motivation is simply to get ahead ourselves, we'll be blind to what's best in any given situation.

### **Philippians 2:3**

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.*

When we lived in California, Karin and I had two friends who were dating each other, while at the same time both pursuing an acting career. They were talented people who really cared about each other. But when one of them would land an audition or get a part, it was too difficult for the other person to watch. There was too much rivalry and ambition between them. They ended up breaking up because their mutual ambition was too strong for their relationship to handle.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow said,

*Most people would succeed in small things if they were not troubled by great ambitions.*

Sometimes we like to spiritualize it and say that God has created us for something more. He's got bigger plans for us. I've talked to people who have said, "I just know God has something big in store for me." And maybe he does. But most of the time, when we think that way, it won't get us any closer to wisdom. It won't get us any closer to knowing the right thing to do. It's a thinly disguised form of ambition. Ambition takes our focus off the present, which is where James has told us we'll find true wisdom. It's in the living here and now – not the big plans for the future, not the someday that may never come.

So how do we obtain real wisdom? James says there's only one source.

### **The provision: Know where it comes from**

*But the wisdom that comes from heaven...*

This isn't the first place where James has talked about heaven as the source for wisdom. Back in the very first chapter, he told us this:

### **James 1:5-6**

*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*

The way God chooses to give wisdom oozes grace.

1. He gives it to anyone and everyone.
2. He gives it generously – openly with no agenda
3. He gives it without pointing out our mistakes.
4. He gives it when we ask for it.

That's the same way he gives salvation. It is there for the taking – all we need to do is ask.

I think there's a reason why there's such a close link between how wisdom is given and how salvation is given. Because I believe wisdom that comes from heaven has a name. Wisdom is a person. Paul wrote these words to the Colossians:

### **Colossians 2:2-3**

*My purpose is that they...may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

Karin and I watched the movie *The Gospel* the other night. It's not a great movie by any means, so don't take this as an endorsement. But the story was interesting. The pastor of New Revelations Church is dying, so a new young minister is taking over. He's blinded by the ambition we talked about earlier – looking to make a name for himself, ready to take the church to new heights. But in the process he's stepping all over people.

Finally, near the end of the movie, his wife confronts him one night. She says,

*You're amazing. You quote Scripture like nobody I know. You know the Bible backward and forward. But you still have no clue...no clue... You need Jesus, Frank. You need Jesus.*

We can know a lot and not have a clue about true wisdom. True wisdom comes in relationship with Jesus himself. It's not found in a book. It's not kept in our head. It is a living, breathing relationship. We carry on a conversation with him in our heart. He promises his Spirit will then guide us into the truth.

It is in knowing Jesus in a real and personal way that we start to understand real wisdom, because he is real wisdom. He is the truth. We can see that in the way James says wisdom conducts itself:

*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.*

### **The practice: Know what to do**

Doesn't that list just sound like a description of Jesus? Pure. Full of mercy. Considerate. Peace loving. Each of those characteristics refers not only to wisdom, but also to the way Jesus lived his life.

We could spend an entire morning digging into each word on the list, but instead I want to make a general observation. Everything on the list is in the context of relationship. Each attribute deals with wisdom as an interaction in life. You can't be considerate

without other people. You can't show mercy without other people. You can't be impartial without other people. And so on.

As I thought about that, I realized that when I normally look for God's wisdom, I go inward. I become very self absorbed and reflective. I think about wisdom in terms of myself and my own personal direction, what I need from God.

But wisdom is most comfortable in community. We need to move outside ourselves, to see where we stand in relationship to others. That's where our path begins to gain clarity.

Probably the most famous instance of someone seeking wisdom was King Solomon. When he was just a young man, his father died and put him on the throne. God asked him what he wanted to ask for

### **1 Kings 3:8-12**

*"Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"*

*The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be."*

God liked the fact that Solomon was selfless in his request. His heart was for God's people, and he wanted wisdom for their sake.

In 1999, a man named Robert Bogucki was also asking God for wisdom. He wanted God to speak to him and let him know he was real. For 10 years he was haunted by the question, to the point where he didn't want to live anymore if he didn't know for sure.

He was so desperate that he decided he needed to go for a 40 day fast in the wilderness like Jesus to find the answer. So he set off in Australia's Great Sandy Desert, which is so brutal of a wasteland that even the aborigines don't live there.

When he didn't return, a massive search was conducted for him and after 6 weeks in the desert, a helicopter finally spotted him. He had lost 44 lbs., but otherwise he was fine.

God spoke to him there. Robert found the answers he was looking for, but he told interviewers that isn't the way he would seek wisdom anymore. He didn't need to go without food and water to find God. And then he said, "It's better to show compassion and kindness."

It's better to show compassion and kindness. Not the words you'd expect from a man who just had a profound encounter with God. You would think he would be telling people to follow his idea and head for the desert to find a similar revelation. Instead he

discovered that the best way to learn and grow in wisdom is through acts of compassion and kindness and that peace making James talks about. We find the wisdom we're looking for where we would least expect it – as we pour out ourselves on behalf of others.

As we do that, James gives us a promise.

**The promise: Know what to expect**

*Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*

Peace making is a good way to summarize the list of wisdom's attributes. It encompasses all the different traits of being considerate, impartial, sincere, merciful, etc.

Peace making sounds like a very passive job. But it's not. The very fact that you have to make peace means there is conflict. And making peace where there is none is hard work. Just ask Condoleeza Rice. It takes determination. It takes a tremendous amount of effort. And it is a long-term effort.

It is a selfless, thankless job, an attitude that says, "I am more committed to you and having a good relationship with you than I am to getting my own way or proving that I'm right."

James himself demonstrated that commitment in the early church. Twice in the book of Acts, we have stories of James working to preserve agreement among different parties within the church, living out his message of peace. There were huge arguments, and his wisdom came shining through as he navigated his way to a solution.

Here again, we want to go the opposite way. When someone doesn't agree with us, we separate. When someone does something to offend us or hurt our feelings, we distance ourselves. That's what feels like the appropriate response. And James would have us overcome those instincts of self preservation. He promises good things to us when we make sacrifices to restore relationships.

Peace making is a costly thing that often looks like it will have no results. That's why the picture James gives us of planting and reaping are so appropriate. We plant the seeds of peace that seem small and insignificant. We bury them in the ground, and they look nothing like what we think we need. Then it is as though those seeds are dead and gone – we can't see any results. Until one day – they're resurrected in a new form. New life springs out of the soil.

The kind of church we will become will not be because we tried to be a really wise church, a sophisticated and smart group of people. Anything good won't be the result of discovering the best new secret for reaching families of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will reap what we sow in terms of working to show love to each other. We will reap what we sow in terms of how hard we work to maintain unity – to make peace where there are divisions and disagreements.

The time is coming, if it hasn't already arrived, when somebody in this church is going to get on your nerves. They're going to hurt you, they're going to say something that sets you off, they're going to slight you in some way. As Eugene Peterson would say, what do you expect when you get 100 sinners together? It's inevitable. And you'll be faced with a question of what to do. Will you work to find a way to address the problem and still make peace?

It is in that work where we move close to the heartbeat of Christ and discover the wisdom we've been looking for all along.

### **Colossians 1:19-20**

*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

God expressed himself perfectly in Christ. If you want God's wisdom, you can find it here – at the Lord's Supper. The story of a man who died to bring peace – making sacrifices to restore the relationship between us and God. It's a story that completely contradicts everything we'd expect. It's a story that looks like it will go nowhere. But it's a story that ends with a harvest of righteousness.

We're about to remember the wisdom of God by taking part in the Lord's Supper together. Here are some things to consider as you prepare your own heart and dialogue with God this morning.

1. What area of my life am I most needing wisdom? James says it's ours for the asking. Tell God what you need this morning.
2. Am I struggling with bitterness? Be honest with yourself. Has a wound become infected with resentment? Confess that to God and let him heal you up.
3. Is ambition clouding my judgment? You say you want wisdom, but is that motivated by a personal agenda to get somewhere? Is your heart in the right place?
4. Am I running to Jesus for wisdom? Am I investing in that personal relationship with him? He's the real source of real wisdom.