

## The Book of James: Ancient Wisdom For Right now

James 3.13-18, "Proof of Wisdom", June 7, 2020

*"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"* (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.) We'll hear more from Dr. King throughout today's sermon, not just because we need to hear from Dr. King this week, but because of how he embodied the heart of this passage in James.

Sometimes you learn something that you very quickly realize most everyone else seems to already know. Penguins are a good example. There's someone every day that learns that penguins don't live in the *north pole* but in the *south pole*. The truth about penguins hasn't changed in millennia, but some of us are only learning the real facts about penguins right now.

James is the book in the Bible that fact checks our inner lives. One of the facts it checks is our understanding of the word *wisdom*. Going around believing that penguins live in the north pole when, in fact, they live in the south pole might be wrong but it's relatively harmless. Going around with the wrong definition of *wisdom* can do some real damage and limit our potential to put others in touch with the real God. Many people's definition of wisdom sounds just like they're definition for knowledge. James insists that wisdom is not about how much you know, but about how well you live; wisdom is living like God lives. That's one way of thinking about Jesus. Jesus is tremendously wise because Jesus *lived* as God lives, fleshing out God's character for us clearly. So wisdom is not about how much we know, but is *proved* by how much our character looks and sounds like God's character.

So here in the middle of his letter James spells it out definitively, *"If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honourable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom."* Two thoughts stand out to me in this

bit of James. First, *humility is the true proof of wisdom*. And second, *a humble life, and therefor wise life, is made possible for us because of Jesus*.

### ***Humility is the true proof of wisdom.***

There's a story in the gospels which always cracks me up. Jesus and his disciples are traveling to a town called Capernaum. When they finally get settled into their lodgings Jesus asks his friends what they were talking about on the way, as he noticed they'd been having a heated discussion. But the story goes that nobody answered him because they had been fighting about which one of them was the best disciple, and they were too embarrassed to own up to it. I like to think a great big smirk spread over Jesus' face when he sat them down, looked them each in the eye and said, "Whoever wants to be first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else." (Mark 9.33-35).

So often in the gospels we see the disciples getting things the wrong way around. They're fighting about who's the greatest, they're shoving children away from Jesus telling their mothers he's got no time for kids, they're telling Jesus what to do and where to go. There's a strange comfort in reading that. Like the disciples we get God stuff the wrong way around too. It's Jesus who gently shows us how backward, how foolish, we can be, and kindly turns us the right way around. He does this time and again through his own example.

All James is doing here is echoing Jesus' life. We're not living wisely, the right way around, says James, when we're selfish, arrogant or deceitful. That's not how God lives, that's a foolish way, not a wise way to live. That kind of living will only ever produce chaos and evil will creep out of its every corner. What kind of evil creeps out? Racism, sexism, fear of the other, ambivalence toward the poor. It was to this this reality Dr. King said, *"We must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or perish together as fools."*

The trouble is of course that selfishness and arrogance (the roots of things like racism and discrimination) aren't always things we see in ourselves clearly. They're the kinds of things that lurk, that sneak around within us. Thank God for Jesus who shows us that our humanity and our humility needn't be mutually exclusive. Jesus invites us out of foolishness and into wisdom. When selfishness and arrogance pops up, Jesus sits us down and graciously and firmly points us in the right direction. Jesus invites us out of selfishness and into humility. So humility, says James, is the real proof of wisdom.

Humility was Jesus' defining characteristic. Humility is what makes Jesus memorable in history. Probably the best definition of humility, the clearest example of what James calls "*wisdom from above*", has to be found in John's gospel during the foot washing scene. Jesus' preforms a menial and undignified task by washing his disciple's feet. That humble moment gave Jesus' friends a chance to accept a heart transplant, as God's heart was on full display through Jesus in that moment. In Jesus own words, "*Since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.*" (John 13).

If we say someone is "God-like" what image does that stir up? A Superhero image? An image of dominance or supremacy? James argues being God-like means being humble. If we want to know what God's like, the image we should hold in our minds is of Jesus washing feet. And that image of humility is the image of the real God, but also an image of *true humanity*. This is what makes Jesus such a compelling character. Jesus fleshes out true "*wisdom from above*" down below, and invites the rest of humanity do the same. This is also what makes people like Dr. King such a wonderful example of true humanity seen through true humility. He understood that Jesus gave us a way forward, and that by sticking to Christ's example of nonviolence and love the world really would change:

*“Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve... You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”*

At the end of our passage James says, *“those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of justice”*. As a preacher I imagine Dr. King was very familiar with those words. Again, Dr. King once said, *“I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”* James calls this kind of humility as *“wisdom from above”*. It’s peace loving, always gentle, always willing to let another go first, brimming with mercy, doesn’t play favourites, and is honest. *Humility isn’t weakness or just being nice. No, humility is about changing our world in the way Jesus’ changed the world. Humility, says James, is the real proof of wisdom.*

### **Humility, and therefore wisdom, is within our grasp because of Jesus.**

When Jesus washed the feet of his friends and enemies, he wasn’t only setting an example, he was explaining what his death was going to do for them. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, they could leave all of their backwards and foolish ways behind; they could stop fighting about which one of them was the best disciple, and start loving one another instead. They could die to themselves, in St. Paul’s words, and live for one another. Somehow mysteriously Jesus makes this possible through the cross.

It can be deflating to know how we’d like to live, to be inspired by the life of Jesus, but to keep going wrong, be that as individuals or as communities, nations. But that’s again where we can thank God for Jesus who gives us chance after chance, to throw our hands up, acknowledge how backward we can be, to pick up some grace, and keep going. C.S. Lewis wrote, *“A Christian is not a person who never goes wrong, but a person who repents and picks themselves up and begins over again after each*

*stumble - because the Christ-life is inside them, repairing them all the time.*" Another writer said that that defining characteristic of the Church shouldn't be that we think we're always right, but that we're always ready and willing to admit that we're often wrong (Rowan Williams). Where have we gone wrong as persons, or as communities? Facing those realities, and they need to be faced, is tough work, but it's God's work. So what do we do when we go wrong and face up to it? Dr. King said, "*Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude.*" God has a constant attitude of forgiveness towards humanity. A fresh start, a life of humility and love, of wisdom, is always within our grasp because of Jesus.

## **In Closing**

This pandemic has put many of us under a lot of pressure, and pressure always reveals character. What are we noticing about our character these days? What pops up when the going gets tough? If we're noticing some selfishness, some arrogance, some lack of compassion for others, today is a great day to trade in that *foolishness* for some *wisdom from above*; to sit down with Jesus, and let him graciously turn us the right way around.

Communion is where we sit down with Jesus and each other. It's the meal which reminds us of Jesus' life, and inspires us to be foot washers rather than argument winners. The world changes, one foot at a time.

Communion also insists that our foolishness can always be traded for wisdom at the drop of a hat. It insists that Jesus' humility leads us into a renewal and rediscovery of our true humanity. Dr. King said, "By opening our lives to God in Christ, we become new creatures. This experience, which Jesus spoke of as the new birth, is essential if we are to be transformed nonconformists ... Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit."

We've imagined a couple of intimate scenes together today. The disciples sitting with Jesus after a journey and an argument, and him lovingly setting them straight. The disciples having their feet washed by Jesus. To share communion means to share an intimate moment together. Let's imagine Jesus sitting with us and inviting us to trade in what we know is foolishness for wisdom, letting his humility renew our humanity in this simple moment. Let's do this as persons, as family units, as a church together today.

Let me leave you with one more quote from Dr. King, but this final one a prayer: *"Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself."* And to that we can all say, Amen.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Where do you notice selfishness and arrogance popping up in your life?
- What kinds of systemic issues do we deal with globally because of selfishness and arrogance?
- How does being a Christian help us with these problematic tendencies we have as humans?
- Who has been an inspiring humble figure you have learned from? Where have you seen God working out his humility and love in your life recently? Celebrate that good work!