

How The World Works
James 3:13-4:10
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Preparing for today, I Googled “How The World Works.” Several different books popped up, each with that title, each trying to explain some aspect of the political, scientific, social, economic and philosophical machinations that we build our lives around. There are collections of essays, academic dissertations, and a children’s book all bearing the same appellation. This is a question that we ponder and address regularly, even if many of the answers become outdated as soon as we’ve spoken them into existence.

In addition to all of these books, there’s a song called “How The World Works.” Written by comedian Bo Burnham during the pandemic, the song’s first verse extols the virtues of unity and collaboration through natural metaphors. He discusses how bees end up pollinating flowers when drinking their nectar, and squirrels unintentionally plant trees when burying nuts, then concludes that “the secret is the world can only work when everything works together.” It’s a sweet little verse...but (while it’s cleverly rhymed) it’s not particularly funny, which is surprising since Burnham is primarily a comedian.

Then comes the second verse, ostensibly sung by a sock puppet, and it undoes everything that the first verse established, insisting that the workings of the world are classist, bloody, exploitative, and generally grounded in conspiracy.¹ In addition to swinging the vocabulary of the song 180 degrees, the second verse also presents a completely different theory of how the world works, one that has nothing to do with working together. The contrast makes for a funny joke, but it’s definitely a weird joke, an acquired taste with some ribald language, a bizarre little song.

The song has these two widely different explanations for how the world works in part because it’s going for that—it’s trying to accentuate differences—but also in part because we arrive at different conclusions about how the world works based on what kind of scholarship we value. Burnham’s first way of explaining how the world works—“everything works together”—is an explanation grounded in what I’m going to call insight. His second way of explaining how the world works is an explanation grounded in knowledge, and even though he hits it second, that seems like a better place to start.

We live in an era where knowledge is extraordinarily prized. The college enrollment rate in America is rising more quickly than anything except, possibly, the college tuition rate. The internet has introduced us to theories and statistics from parts of the world that we previously knew little about, Wikipedia and Google have made it almost impossible to stump someone with a trivia question, and we carry devices in our pockets that let us access all of this knowledge immediately and from anywhere. In 2021, knowledge is king.

¹ Burnham, Bo. 2021. “[How The World Works](#).” *Bo Burnham: Inside*. Retrieved November 5, 2021. Again, Bo’s lyrics would garner him an R rating...I wouldn’t recommend listening to this song around children or if certain words deeply offend you.

I feel like I most frequently encountered this trend while talking with students who would trade eating well, sleeping well, their faith lives, developing relationships with their family and friends, traveling, and actually enjoying life for a simple “+” next to their latest letter grade. I would regularly tell them that homework is overrated, which garnered me some “cool points” with the “hip kids these days” but otherwise had minimal impact on their prioritization of life.

And while it’s easy to identify this trend with students, we are all susceptible to crowning knowledge as royalty. As the World Series wrapped up, I had a conversation with my dad about the current strategy of baseball. He was baffled by the infield shift, a strategy where a defensive team puts all of its players on one side of the field because it thinks that the batters won’t or can’t hit it to the other side.

“Why don’t they just bunt the ball into all that grass?” Dad asked.

I tried to explain to him the latest analytic thinking, which basically uses pages of data to argue that batters should always try to hit a home run because that increases the likelihood of their team winning, so batters should never try anything else...again, based entirely on probability. This theory has been developed by baseball geeks and is therefore beyond much of my grasp even though I’ve followed the sport closely since I was six. And part of why it’s hard to understand or explain is that, in the end, it doesn’t quite hold up. It’s an argument built entirely on numbers and theory, and while those are useful tools, they’re not reality. We have to watch the game and not just watch the numbers.

This happens not only in sports but also in government, medicine, education, business, and law. It’s how we end up evaluating who’s a good teacher based solely on their students’ standardized test scores, how innocence or guilt can be determined by technicalities, and how surefire companies fail. In 2021, we think that knowledge can control and predict everything, the Great Prognosticator, but the world where knowledge is 100% reliable is different from our own reality. And this is where insight comes in.

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Gene Hackman’s final role before retiring was in the much-maligned 2004 film *Welcome to Mooseport*. (It’s a far cry from *The French Connection*.) In it, he plays an ex-president who enjoyed two extremely successful terms and then retired to his hometown. The town asks him to be their mayor, which he graciously accepts...but then a local handyman decides to run against him to impress his girlfriend. Hilarity and hijinks ensue.

There’s a scene where the two candidates have a debate, and one townspeople asks the candidates how they would solve a problem with a particular intersection in town. The ex-president goes first and delivers an eloquent statement about forming a committee to study the problem thoroughly, then consulting with advisors about how to act upon the recommendation of the committee. It’s well-put, well-rehearsed, and grounded in the knowledge that the president has gained during his successful run as the most powerful man on Earth.

Then it’s the handyman’s turn. He starts to try to match the president’s well of experience before stopping mid-sentence and turning to the guy who asked the question. “What, exactly, is the problem with that intersection?” he asks.

“When cars stop at it, they shine their headlights right into my bedroom.”

“I can fix that for you. Come by my hardware store and I’ll show you some blackout shades. Just got a new shipment in,” says the handyman.

Knowledge alone isn’t how the world works. There has to be a healthy application of that knowledge, one that includes a little common sense, some intellectual curiosity, and some real-world experience. There has to be some insight.

And, to be clear, insight without knowledge leads to treacly platitudes, and those aren’t particularly helpful either. This is how Burnham’s song really works: he presents one argument based solely on insight and another based solely on knowledge, and both are lacking something really important and therefore each argument is comical. And deep down, those lyrics suggest that, perhaps now more than ever, we don’t really have a clue how the world works.

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As Christians, when it comes to determining how the world works, our typical default is to turn to the scripture. One of the fascinating things about scripture is that it frequently explains the same situation to us from different angles. We get the Ten Commandments twice, once spoken by God in Exodus and once spoken by Moses in Deuteronomy. The nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke barely line up, each emphasizing different characters and themes and virtually only repeating the fact that Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth and Jesus was born in Bethlehem.² All four of the gospels include different details when telling the story of Jesus’ miracles of feeding crowds, his interactions with the Pharisees, and his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. Some people may argue that this is another example of the Bible contradicting itself, but I tend to view it more as telling the same story from different perspectives, which can be a helpful tool when trying to see things more clearly.

This method for presenting a narrative or an argument is so pervasive that it first occurs at the very beginning of our scripture, in the first two chapters of Genesis. Chapter one gives us one creation account, the verses that count down what God creates on each day before culminating with God making mankind in God’s own image. Chapter two starts at the beginning, but instead of focusing on the creation of heaven and earth, darkness and light, it focuses almost entirely on the creation of humanity. In chapter one, God speaks humanity into existence; in chapter two, God forms man “from the dust of the ground and breath[s] into his nostrils the breath of life.”³

These are different creation stories, one emphasizing that we as humans are like God and one emphasizing that we as humans are mortal. Humanity is indeed both like God and mortal. In actuality, these passages are not telling different stories; they’re accentuating different points within the same story.

You could argue, I think, that this is also what happens with the Bo Burnham song: part of how the world works is dependent on everyone coming together...and, unfortunately, part of how the world works means that when everyone does come together, it’s not always very pretty. We choose to emphasize different parts of that truth at different times for different audiences, but they remain, like Genesis, part of the same story.

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² Minnicks, Margaret. 2019. “[Birth of Jesus: Gospels of Matthew and Luke Compared.](#)” *Letterpile*. Retrieved November 5, 2021.

³ Genesis 2:7 (NRSV)

You haven't heard me preach a ton, but you still may have already figured out that I tend to be someone who suggests that, most of the time, neither Option A nor Option B is the right answer but instead that we should put both A & B together. I will apologize now for the number of "both-and" messages you're going to hear from me—both holy and human, both mercy and justice. A couple of weeks ago you heard both faith and works. It'll be a recurring theme. But that's not what's happening today.

Again, as Christians, our answer to "how the world works" is in the scripture. And so it is that, after three pages and nearly 1700 words, your surprisingly loquacious preacher finally gets to today's scripture from James.

The scripture today is concerned with neither knowledge nor insight but rather with wisdom. Throughout these verses, James praises wisdom that comes from God and denigrates its earthly counterparts. Given how much we value knowledge and even insight, this is actually a pretty radical message. James is attacking something that lies at the very foundation of our earthly world, especially our contemporary earthly world.

He also, helpfully, characterizes this wisdom with a packed list of descriptors: "wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."⁴ Nowhere in that list does James mention that wisdom is learned, intellectual, or knowledgeable; nowhere does he imply that wisdom has a pricetag; nowhere does he suggest that it can be Googled. Like the other blessings in our lives, it is something we receive because God gives it freely, not because we earn it ourselves.

Instead, this verse in James accentuates three traits about sacred wisdom.⁵ The first of these is that wisdom is pure and genuine—no surprise, given how much James has emphasized authenticity previously in this book. The second is that wisdom is humble and meek, and a wise person does not tout or shout out his own expertise. Wisdom evinces itself through actions, not through bragged claims. It is basically the opposite of the actions of so-called experts on TV. Don't get me started on the actions of so-called experts on Facebook.

And third, wisdom is both a path to peace and a source of peace. Peace is a part of this list, but it's also the center of the following verse, where James stresses that these qualities of wisdom are "sown in peace for those who make peace," both the soil and the harvest—the genesis and the result—are peace.

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I have spent more years of my life in school than out of it. I understand the value of knowledge. And while I regularly told my students that homework was overrated, I still made it a habit to complete what was assigned to me. Mostly. And I also deeply value insight. The lessons that have been imparted to me through my own experience or, more frequently, through the experience of others I love and trust—those lessons are memorable and impressive.

But neither of those things, and not even those two things put together, matters as much as the wisdom that God gifts to us.

⁴ James 3:17 (NRSV)

⁵ McCullar, Michael D. (2001) *Sessions with James: Explorations in Faith and Works*. Smyth & Helwys, 61-63.

When I look at the parts of our world that seem broken or chaotic or incompetent, they seem to rely far too much on knowledge or insight or both and not enough on wisdom. They are concerned with “my side winning” instead of with humility and peace. They are far from pure or impartial, instead imbued with the negative qualities that James lambasts in chapter 4. They are combative, jealous, spiteful and arrogant...and so while they may be grounded in knowledge and insight, they cannot be wise.

But, unfortunately, these parts of our world are of course still there. In that sense, this is how the world works?

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How does the world work? I can give you an avalanche of facts, data piled high that has been carefully researched and evaluated, not one number out of place. I can name theory after theory built upon those facts, statements that cannot even honestly be called “opinions” because they are so carefully rooted in the evidence of history and science. I will inevitably leave out something, but the things I name will be true and impossible to argue with. But that, alone, is not how the world works.

How does the world work? I can recite for you philosophies and postulates that are self-evident, truths that show up in nature and business and humanity itself, moving adages that look great framed and hung on the wall and mottos that individuals and companies have successfully fashioned their whole lives around. But that, too, is not how the world works.

How does the world work? When it really works, when the gears turn smoothly and faces light up with smiles and we bask in a heavenly light, it works through genuine, humble, peaceful wisdom from God. That is what guides us toward the end set before us by a loving Creator and the lessons of Jesus himself. When it functions as it ought to, that is how the world works.