

**“PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY:
WISDOM FROM ABOVE”**

James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

September 23, 2018

Over the next several months, our eight Confirmation candidates will be exposed to a vast amount of information and hopefully acquire a good bit of knowledge. The expectation is that any young person who professes faith in Christ should know the broad outline and major milestones of the biblical story; should know what Christians believe about God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit; should know what it means to be a committed disciple of Jesus. Any youth who becomes a full member of a United Methodist Church needs to know about our founding father, John Wesley; about the history and distinctive characteristics of “the people called Methodists”; and about the benefits and expectations that come with being a church member.

Why is it important for our Confirmands to have this knowledge? During their orientation session earlier this morning, they were told that Confirmation involves making an informed decision about becoming a follower of Jesus Christ and a member of Christ’s Body. These youth certainly understand the importance of making informed decisions in other areas of the lives. When they are a few years older, they will not choose to attend a particular college without knowing a lot about it beforehand. They’ll be asking, “How far away from home is this college? Is it academically strong in the field of study I want to pursue? How much will it cost, and is financial aid available? Do the campus and the student body feel like a good fit for me?” In the same way, any youth who considers becoming a Christian and a church member needs to know what he or she is getting into. He or she should make an informed decision. So it is our job as a church to provide as much information as possible.

However, we want to provide something more than this. We want our Confirmands to be more than knowledgeable; we also want them to be wise. Having knowledge about the Christian faith is not the same as having the wisdom to live a faithful Christian life. According to the dictionary, wisdom is the “power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action, based on knowledge, experience, [and] understanding.” It is one thing for a Confirmand to know that Jesus taught his disciples to be compassionate and forgiving; it is another thing to know how to respond to a fellow student who bullies classmates or peddles drugs. Knowledge is the possession of information, which is easy enough to attain; wisdom is the capacity for good judgment, which is much harder to come by. It is common, of course, for persons to have knowledge without having wisdom.

As I was growing up, there was a man in my home church whom my father called an “egghead.” This was my dear ol’ dad’s way of saying that this man was highly intelligent, but in a specialized, limited sort of way. He was a corporate financial officer by profession and an absolute genius in math. He was asked to serve on the church’s Finance Committee, but his role was purely one-dimensional. He could crunch numbers, and that was it. He made sure that receipts and expenditures were in balance; but when it came to the theology of stewardship, or encouraging people to give their money, or determining how the money should be allocated for

the work of God's kingdom, he was speechless. This man had plenty of knowledge about finances, but he had no wisdom about the actual use of the church's monetary resources.

We see this phenomenon in all walks of life – having knowledge and having wisdom are two different things. But notice that the writer of James takes the matter one step further. Today's text distinguishes between two types of wisdom: that which does not come "from above" and that which is "from above."

James says the wisdom that is not from above is "earthly, unspiritual, [and] devilish." Wisdom can be sabotaged by evil forces and desires; it can be corrupted by persons whose outlook and motives are totally self-centered. In particular, wisdom is undermined by "bitter envy and selfish ambition."

Over against this negative portrait, James presents a positive alternative: "wisdom from above" is said to be "pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." If this seems like a tall order, James reminds us that wisdom of this kind is not a natural attribute; it is a gift from God; and best of all, it is a gift that keeps on giving. Wisdom from above produces a "harvest of righteousness" that is "sown in peace by those who make peace." When you and I embody true spiritual wisdom, then righteousness is extended beyond ourselves to our relationships, and we become peacemakers.

Read your daily newspaper or watch the latest TV newscast, and you'll find plenty of examples of people whose wisdom does not come from above. Being a big sports fan, I'm constantly dismayed by reports of gifted professional athletes who use performance-enhancing drugs. These players will apparently do anything to become stronger and faster than their competitors. This leads them to take substances that are banned by their sport; and when they get caught, they often suffer serious consequences. Now, these men are not intellectually challenged; they are often very smart. They are not only knowledgeable about the sport they play; they also possess a certain kind of wisdom – the kind that knows how to be clever and cagey, that knows how to get ahead and gain an advantage over their opponents, that knows how to succeed at all costs. According to James, this is the wisdom that "does not come down from above," driven by selfish ambition. We see it everywhere today – on Wall Street and Main Street, in sports, entertainment, and politics.

But again, remember that James is not talking to the corrupt athletes, celebrities, and power brokers of the world. He is talking to churches; he is addressing the behavior of professing Christians who possess both kinds of wisdom, the bad and the good.

Several years ago I returned to visit the first church I ever pastored, the Temple Baptist Church in Champaign, Illinois. It was easy for me to recall why, as a brand new pastor fresh out of divinity school, I regarded that congregation with such admiration and respect. When I started serving that church in 1976, it was dormant and stuck in many ways. It had the potential for growth but wasn't growing. The lay leaders of the church were restless and dissatisfied, and so was I.

We decided to attend a one-day seminar that introduced us to the "church growth movement," which was big at the time. The church growth movement was designed to help declining congregations start attracting new members, and it was fueled by two assumptions. First, it was assumed that every church could grow, regardless of its present circumstance or

location. That was encouraging to hear, of course. But the second assumption was based on something called the “homogeneous unit principle.” The theory was that “birds of a feather flock together” – that new people are attracted to existing groups of people who are like themselves. In the realm of church life, this means that the more uniform the congregation is in its makeup, the more likely it is to grow. For example, if you are a middle class, white congregation, your best bet for adding new members is to seek out other middle class whites.

This may have been the conventional wisdom at the time, but I am proud to say that the leaders of that church regarded the homogeneous unit principle as wisdom that does not “come from above.” They saw it as driven by selfish ambition which leads to exclusiveness. If our church had followed that principle, we would never have reached out to people of color, to people at lower levels of income and education, to people who were different in outlook or lifestyle. That strategy struck us as contrary to the spirit of the gospel. So we wound up rejecting the homogeneous unit principle and extended our invitation to everyone in the community, regardless of their background or status. We embraced what we believed to be the wisdom that “comes from above”; and, just for the record, that church proceeded to grow in number as well as spiritual maturity.

At a recent district meeting, I visited with a neighboring pastor who told me a remarkable story. A year ago, her church was sharply divided on the issue of worship style. You know how it goes. The older, veteran members of the congregation preferred traditional worship, with the classic hymns of the church and thoughtful liturgy. Younger, newer members were clamoring for more contemporary music and greater freedom and spontaneity in worship. Criticism of those with differing points of view often became personal. “He’s a radical, a revolutionary; he wants to do away with everything we cherish” . . . “She’s an old-fashioned stick-in-the mud.” The debate raged on and the congregation was at an impasse. The pastor tinkered with the order of worship, but people on both sides began boycotting the worship service, regardless of what the pastor served up on Sunday mornings.

Then, at the beginning of 2018, the Worship Committee of the church got a new chair, who happened to be a white-haired woman who had been a member of the congregation for forty years. Those who had been pushing for a change were disappointed and pessimistic. They assumed that the worship service would continue to be traditional and predictable. But the new Worship chair surprised everyone. She proceeded to call a congregational meeting where people on both sides of the issue could talk to each other rather than about each other. After listening to the discussion for half an hour, the Worship chair intervened and dared to speak the truth. She commented, in so many words, that both sides spoke with wisdom. Good arguments could be made for both traditional worship and contemporary worship. But both sides were exhibiting the wisdom that does not “come from above.” Their wisdom was essentially selfish – “my way or the highway.” Neither side was really attuned to the needs of the other. The church needed to find a way to appeal to the tastes of all of its members. So this woman made a proposal. On the first and third Sundays of the month, the worship service would be predominantly traditional, but with contemporary elements like praise choruses. On the second and fourth Sundays of the month, the service would be mostly contemporary, but with traditional elements like the Lord’s Prayer and the Doxology. On fifth Sundays, the style of worship would be up to the pastor’s discretion.

This solution sounded simple enough, but the danger still existed that people would come to worship only on those Sundays when their preferred style was being offered. So the Worship chair called for a concrete commitment. She asked that people on both sides of the issue be present for worship on all Sundays – no pouting, no picking and choosing, no boycotting. And, amazingly, the congregation agreed to this proposal and the experiment has worked. Those who prefer traditional music have made their peace with praise choruses, and those who prefer contemporary worship have made their peace with 18th Century hymns.

Friends, worship style is just one issue that divides congregations today, and there are many ways that this particular conflict could be addressed and resolved. I mention the debate about worship only as an example of how congregations can embody the wisdom that “comes from above.” Remember, the kind of wisdom that James commends is “pure, then peaceable, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” True wisdom takes a stand, but it is generous enough to respect and accommodate the stand of others. Impossible, you say? There are too many hard heads in our midst to make it work. Well, true wisdom doesn’t come naturally to any of us; it truly is a gift from God. God help us to receive this gift and offer it to others.