

“In Search of the Wisdom from Above”
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8; Mark 9:30-37

Mark 9:30-37

³⁰Jesus and his followers went on and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?”

³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”

³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

¹⁷But the 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.

¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

^{4:1}Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?

²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask.

³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and the devil will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

The Sermon

Ted Loder began one of his long, poetic and adventurous prayers like this:

O God, turn your spirit loose now—and me with it,
that I may go to where the edge is
to face with you the shape of my mortality:

the inescapable struggle and loneliness and pain
which remind me that I am not god after all,
that you have made me with hard limits,
limits to my strength, my knowledge, my days.

Facing those limits, Lord,
grant me grace to live to the limit
of being unflinchingly alive, fully alive,

of experiencing every fragile, miraculous,
bloody, juicy, aching, beautiful ounce
of being a human being;

of doing my duty, and a little more;
of loving the people around me,
my friends and my enemies;
of humbling myself to take others seriously
and delightedly;
of applying my heart to the wisdom of simplicity,
the freedom of honesty.ⁱ

Loder's prayer is to be fully, unflinchingly alive, to experience
"every ounce of being a human being."

What do you need, in order to be the person God created you to
be? And how has the answer to that question evolved over the
course of your life?

When you think about when you were small—what you know about yourself when you were an infant or a toddler, or from your earliest childhood memories, what did you need then?

Protection, feeding, changing—the physical basics—but what else did you need?

Research has proven what humanity has always known: the need of infants for touch, for the smiling face of love, for caring arms, for attention.

We needed, without knowing it, freedom from unremitting dread. We needed somebody to hear and respond when we cried.

We needed a place to play; things to look at; stories, pictures and images to unleash our capacity to imagine and dream.

For those who are older than teenagers, what did you need when you were a little bit bigger? 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14 years old, somewhere in there? And if that's your age now, what do you need?

Kids need to know they're not bad. That there's a great future for them. That they're valued and loved and appreciated and just accepted. That they can and will get through whatever scares or worries them right now.

What else does 13-year-old You need? Do you need something stable, something or some place or some thought world that feels like home?

Your social life is changing; your body is changing; your world is changing; relationships with your family are changing. Do you need a rock solid assurance that people aren't going to leave you, and that it's still safe to be you?

What about an older teenager: 16, 17, 18? What did or does older-teenager You need? Do you need someone to tell you they're proud of you? Someone to tell you you're not too big or too small or too skinny, or tall, or small, or awkward, but you're wonderful the way you are?

Or young adult you?

Or you forty years ago, or 20 years ago?

Or you right now?

Whether it's what you have or what you lack, what do you need?

Family? Friends? Good neighbors?

Strength? Physical endurance; psychological strength; mental agility; emotional stability?

Memories?

A reason to get up in the morning?

Hope that it's going to get better?

Certainty that some things are eternal?

Confidence that you are a beloved child of God?

The specifics of our needs change and develop and evolve over the course of a lifetime. But the fundamentals remain fairly consistent:

having enough strength to get through,
and someone to help when I don't;
the feeling that it's OK, and safe, to be me;
memories, hope, imagination, and the capacity to dream;
a sense of the eternal, and confidence that I am part of it;
smiling faces, caring arms,
feeding, attention, acceptance, love.

We live in a divisive time,

in a world that has a thousand ways to tell you
the details of how bad everything is,
and ten thousand ways to exploit both the divisiveness
and the technology
to try to tell you which atrocities
you should be outraged about
and which ones you're supposed to think are acceptable
because they're happening to people
who probably deserve it.

Cynicism is so much a part of our discourse,
and hypocrisy is such a constant presence,
that it feels kind of quaint to mention them;

and we always have our myths of self-reliance,
and trendy attitudes about not being too bothered by
what anyone else has to deal with,

as if we all started off on equal footing
and some people were just too dumb or lazy
to go for it like we winners did.

That world, constructed by humans for humans, is in many ways
the polar opposite of the things we were just thinking about in
terms of what we need—what each of us needs, and what all of
us collectively need.

During the First Century after Jesus was born, a “Greek-
speaking Jewish Christian”ⁱⁱ was sure that there is a realm in
which those human needs make sense,

as opposed to the world we have created, governed by
conventional wisdom, political wisdom, strategic wisdom...

Earthly wisdom is mired in
our tireless obsession with self-interest
and our fear-based thirst
for the accumulation of personal power
no matter what it takes,
no matter what effect it has on anyone else.

But from deep in Old Testament times, people have known
about another wisdom—a wisdom, as James says, from above.

Proverbs taught it; Ecclesiastes meditated on it; the Psalms are the prayers of people who crave it and want to give everything to pursue it:

“Make me know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths;”^{25:4}

“Put false ways far from me; and graciously teach me your law;”^{119:29}

“Teach me your statutes;”^{119:12}

“I will ‘run the way of your commandments, if you enlarge my understanding;’”(119:32, Dahood translationⁱⁱⁱ);

“Teach me good judgment and knowledge;”^{119:66}

“Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul...

“Teach me to do your will...

“Let your good spirit lead me on a level path;”^{143:8, 10}

“Teach me wisdom in my secret heart.”^{51:6}

The wisdom from above, said James, is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality or hypocrisy.

And, he said, people who make peace
are like farmers, planters who sow their seeds
of gentle, unhypocritical peaceability
in the soil of God's peace,
and from that planting in good, well-tended soil,
they reap a harvest of *righteousness*:
they're right with their Creator,
they're right with all of creation,
and they're right with all of their neighbors,
which Jesus taught us means everyone on earth.

“Those conflicts and disputes among you,” said James—“where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?”

There is a higher wisdom, and the way to access that wisdom doesn't require a permanent retreat to a desert monastery, or an elite level of intelligence and endless years of study. The wisdom from above is not exclusive.

But it's also not a gift that we receive passively, sitting back and congratulating ourselves on being wise enough as we are.

It has to be sought;
it's not conventional wisdom,
and it remains disappointingly counter-cultural.

But it's not complicated.

James says, “Bitter envy and selfish ambition are not products of wisdom from above, but a pretend wisdom that is entirely earthly—unspiritual—Satanic.”

“Where there is envy and selfish ambition,” he says, “there *will* be disorder and wickedness of every kind.”

Some of the disciples, in a moment they probably would rather hadn’t been preserved for all time in sacred scripture, had gotten into an argument about which of them was the greatest—while Jesus was trying to explain to them that he was going to be killed for their sake, by the way. (Great going, fellas.)

When they got to where they were going, Jesus sat down, called the disciples over, and said, “Whoever wants to be first has to be last of all and servant of all.”

Then he saw a small child, and presumably with the agreement of the parents, brought the child into the circle, took her into his arms, and said:

“When you welcome a child, like this one, in my name, you welcome me. And whoever welcomes me is welcoming the one who sent me.”

“Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

Ryun King and Jeremiah Swift are tattoo artists in Kentucky.^{iv} In 2020, they started a campaign to offer, at no charge, their own skills and time to cover up people's hateful, gang-related, white supremacist tattoos for people who couldn't afford the hundreds of dollars it usually takes to get a tattoo removed or covered over.

At first, they heard from a few dozen people.

One guy came to them with a big, racist symbol, and said he knew he was raised better than that, but as a young person he had fallen in with the wrong crowd.

And now, finally getting the chance to be rid of the shame he had been literally wearing on his own skin for so many years, he said by way of explanation, "One day, you just realize this racist thing is stupid. Everyone's equal."

What began as a few dozen requests grew into the hundreds, from all across the United States, from Canada, South Korea, Ireland, South Africa...

One of the tattoo artists said, about helping each of these people cover up the shameful evil etched into their skin, "It's a really good feeling to get rid of that, gone forever from the world."^v

The other one said, "It was pretty much the only way to use what I can do to help. I'm pretty small town, so—just trying to do my part."^{vi}

What's the great secret to gaining access to the wisdom from above?

“Show by your good life that your works
are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

“Grant me grace,” said Ted Loder, “to live to the limit
of experiencing every ounce of being a human being;

“of doing my duty,
and a little more;
of loving the people around me,
my friends and my enemies;
of humbling myself to take others seriously
and delightedly;
of applying my heart to the wisdom of simplicity,
the freedom of honesty.”

“And so,” that prayer concludes, “despite the dark uncertainty of tomorrow,

I trust
in the light of my todays,
in the cross,
and in a kingdom coming,

and, so, I move on and pray on
with Jesus, my friend and redeemer.^{vii}

Will you pray with me...

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
September 19, 2021

ⁱ Ted Loder, “Turn Your Spirit Loose,” in Loder, *Guerillas of Grace* (LuraMedia, 1984), 106

ⁱⁱ PHEME PERKINS, *First and Second Peter, James, and Jude* (Interpretation commentary. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 85

ⁱⁱⁱ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III, 101-150* (Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1970), 162

^{iv} Kathleen Toner, “These Kentucky artists are ridding the world of hate, one tattoo at a time” (CNN.com, April 1, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/01/us/tattoo-artists-kentucky-covering-hate-symbols-cnnheroes/index.html?utm_term=161745132824292d67577f918&utm_source=cnn_The+Good+Stuff+04%2F03%2F21&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=1617451328244&bt_ee=5ysH3I59K1sfgJRAgh51Qsmx36pyMDQkefErdMpSgEwakKSpQ31FF8TWvvNzU97D&bt_user_id&bt_ts=1617451328244)

^v The Good Stuff (CNN.com, April 3, 2021)

^{vi} Toner, “Kentucky Tattoo Artists”

^{vii} Loder, “Turn Your Spirit Loose,” 108