

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WORLDLY AND GODLY WISDOM

James 3:13-18

One day a rabbi was sitting in his office looking out the window. He saw a beggar across the street scratching his back against the fence. He went out and talked with the man. He learned this poor guy had not been able to afford a bath for weeks. So he gave this beggar money and a change of underwear. Word of the rabbi's compassion got around the village, and two other men ran to the fence and began scratching themselves against it. The rabbi saw them and went to them, but instead of giving them a handout, he began to beat them with his cane. "You can't fool me," he cried. "You are fakes!"

The two were bewildered and asked, "Why did you believe the other guy but not us?"

The rabbi answered, "Because he was alone and naturally had to use the fence to relieve his itching. But you are two and if you were not fakes, you would scratch each others' back."

This is classic Jewish humor. The story has three stock characters found in many Jewish jokes. **There is a CHELMITE – the first beggar who scratched on the fence.** A Chelmiter was always mentally slow in Jewish anecdotes. Chelmites hailed from the village of Chelm, which became legendary for the outrageous stupidity of its inhabitants. The poor Chelmites became the butt of volumes of jokes, like the "moron" jokes of my youth. (As in, Why did the moron tiptoe passed the medicine cabinet? He didn't want to wake the sleeping pills.)

The second stock character is a SCHNORRER – someone who believes he is a smart, clever person (the two men who sought to cash in on easy money). A Schnorrer is a professional mooch. He's as quick witted as a Chelmite is slow.

The third stock character is the RABBI – the truly wise one. He is a champion of wisdom. The rabbi epitomizes wisdom in Jewish thought and so is greatly revered. Jesus was addressed as rabbi by his disciples because folks perceived him as very wise. (1)

The basic truth in these anecdotes with their stock characters is that wisdom not only triumphs over stupidity but also over intelligent but deceitful cunning. The point is this: godly wisdom is greater than worldly wisdom. This is James point in today's scripture reading as well. Plus, James adds a distinctly Christian twist.

James wants us to be sure to know the difference between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom. He wants us to pursue godly wisdom. He describes worldly wisdom as being bitterly envious and selfishly motivated. In contrast, he says godly wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, merciful, impartial, and sincere. James says worldly wisdom engenders a self-serving attitude that envies others. It strives to gain advantage and prestige. The result is disharmony and disorder. This is because worldly wisdom is always centered on oneself. It says, "If you are smart, you will grab whatever you can get. Look out for Number One." It breeds bitterness, jealousy, vengeance. It leads to divisions and conflict.

Joanie and I have watched every episode of the BBC mystery series “Inspector Lewis.” It is set in Oxford, England, and most often focuses on people related to the university. It features Inspector Lewis and Detective Hathaway. Lewis was educated in what we’d call public schools, without higher degrees. Hathaway was educated in Catholic schools and graduated from Cambridge. He is quietly brilliant. He studied for the priesthood but left the seminary, yet retained his faith. Most often the murderer is a professor or student from Oxford, who believes he/she will not be caught because he/she is intellectually brilliant and superior to the police. They are condescending, smug, and arrogant with Lewis and Hathaway. Their hearts are full of envy and ambition and it drives them to murder. Lewis and Hathaway are humbler; they are wise regarding human nature. Their hearts focus on seeing justice done. It is their source of wisdom.

Worldly wisdom is pseudo-wisdom. Its fakery fools itself in the long run. It’s a Schnorrer kind of wisdom – quick witted but shortsighted and false to the real truth. Worldly wisdom claims intelligence. It is practiced by many with high IQs. However, its works show its true colors. James asks, “*Who among you is wise and understanding? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.*” Worldly wisdom is false and its works show it to be false. True wisdom also shows itself in its works and proves to be godly.

The difference is that, while worldly wisdom is self-centered, godly wisdom is other-directed. James describes it byproducts as being pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, merciful, impartial, and sincere. Each of these adjectives describes a quality of relating to others in ways

that make for peace and justice and not disharmony and exploitation. The most significant adjective is merciful.

In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* there is a moving scene in which godly wisdom is displayed.

Jean Valjean confronts the bishop from whom he stole silver candlesticks. Jean is on the run after escaping from prison. The bishop befriends him and helps him. Jean crassly repays the bishop by sneaking off at night with the altarware. The next day the housekeeper discovers the missing silver and tries to warn the bishop. But, before she can get the message to him there is a knock at the door. The bishop opens the door and is confronted by Jean Valjean in the custody of two policemen. They have the stolen candlesticks. "Ah, there you are!" the bishop says, "I told you to have the silver candle sticks. Why have you returned them?"

"Then what he says is true," replies the policeman. The police leave and the bishop and the thief stand face to face. The bishop speaks slowly. "Jean Valjean, you no longer belong to evil but to good. I have purchased your soul with these candlesticks."

The story is a beautiful example of godly wisdom based on God's redeeming grace.

In Christ's death and resurrection God has purchased our souls from evil and now we belong to good. The bishop appears to be a fool by worldly wisdom. Jean Valjean is the one with street smarts, but he got into trouble of his own doing. His envy and selfish ambition drove him to steal. By worldly wisdom the bishop should have pressed charges against Valjean. However, by godly wisdom's direction, the bishop showed the true wisdom of recognizing the worth of a human life

and potential over that of silver candlesticks. In the process of extending mercy, he saved a lost soul. (2)

Sometimes it is necessary to hold a person accountable for their wrongdoing in order to teach them self-discipline. Other times it is necessary to extend grace. Godly wisdom knows the difference. It knows that the only way a life is turned around and changed for the better is through the gracious love of God extended by God's people.

Godly wisdom comes to some through suffering and to others the moment they refuse to suffer anymore. It can be expressed on silence or in carefully crafted phrases. It is often equated with common sense, but common sense can be its enemy as well. Admittedly, when we talk of wisdom, and particularly godly wisdom, it can be a profoundly obscure topic. There is a key to it, however. It lies in fact that James, a Christian, is writing to Christians. The Epistle of James has been called "Christian wisdom literature," similar to Proverbs in the Old Testament. Fortunate for us, we 21st century Christians have his letter as a directive for our faith and practice. The key is our common love and respect of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Godly wisdom comes in union with Christ. It comes from understanding that God instigated this relationship and recognizing the fact that all of us are loved by God through Christ. (3) Organizing our thinking and living around the love of God through Christ opens us to the wisdom of God. All of life's issues and questions are then filtered through the perspective of that relationship.

Paul Cedar was the pastor of the largest congregational church in the world - Lake Avenue Congregational in

Pasadena, CA. In one of his books he says something very relevant to James message to us:

I have known many godly men and women who have little formal education but were wise beyond human comprehension. For example we had a woman in a parish which I served early in my ministry. She had limited mental capacities and a simple faith in Jesus Christ. She became an effective prayer warrior, who grew significantly more and more like her Lord. As she grew in stature and wisdom, I found myself turning to her for counsel and prayer. In fact, when I faced a major decision, I usually turned to her for her wise counsel, rather than to my pastor or therapist friends.
(4) She had genuine godly wisdom.

Here's the point: James wants Christians to know that there is worldly wisdom and there is godly wisdom, and they are different. Worldly wisdom is self-centered. It says do what you need to do to get ahead of others. It breeds division, jealousy, and greed. Godly wisdom puts God first, others second, and self third. It says love God and love neighbors. It results in a spirit of grace, compassion, and generosity. Everyone is blessed by it. James says, "*Pursue godly wisdom!*" It comes to folks who accept the love of God extended through Jesus Christ.

SOURCES:

1. *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 9, No. 1, p.17.
2. *Pulpit Resource*, cited above, p. 18.
3. George McCauley S.J. "No Fooling"
4. I have lost the reference for this illustration.