

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 17, 2020**

WHERE TO FIND WISDOM

James 1:5-8; 3:13-18

Beginning on the Sunday after Easter, we have focused on some really important words, like *fear* (and what to do with it); *hope* (and where it comes from); finding *joy* in the trials and troubles of life, like the coronavirus pandemic; and *peace* – specifically, *peace-making*, and the blessedness of being *peace-makers* as God’s children and servants in a world ravaged by conflict and hate and strife. Today I want you to think with me about another word: *Wisdom* (and where to find it).

For some biblical perspective, we’ll go back to James 1 (which we read two weeks ago) and then jump ahead to James 3. So, follow along in your Bible, on your favorite device, or on your screen as the words appear there. Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word, from James 1:5-8 and then James 3:13-18.

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This may seem like a strange way to begin, but I want to share with you an obituary a man wrote for himself shortly before his death. (That in itself is enough to make it kind of strange.) Here is a slightly condensed version of this autobiographical obituary written by a man named Ken Fuson, which was published in the Des Moines *Register* newspaper:

“Ken Fuson, born June 23, 1956, died January 3, 2020, at Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, of liver cirrhosis, and is stunned to learn that the world is somehow able to go on without him. Ken grew up in Granger (IA), and decided when he was a sophomore (in high school) that he wanted to be a newspaper reporter.

“He attended the University of Missouri-Columbia’s famous school of Journalism, which is a clever way of saying ‘almost graduated but didn’t.’ Facing a choice between covering a story for the Columbia *Daily Tribune* or taking his final exams, Ken went for the story. He never claimed to be smart, just committed.

“In 1981, Ken landed his dream job, working as a reporter for the Des Moines *Register*, where he was probably best known for writing a one-paragraph, one-sentence weather story that has been reprinted in four books. [If you google ‘Ken Fuson weather story,’ you will find it.]

“In 1996, Ken took the principled stand of leaving the *Register* because the *Sun* in Baltimore offered him more money. Three years later, having blown most of that money at Pimlico Race Track, he returned to the *Register*, where he remained until 2008.

“In his newspaper work, Ken won several national feature-writing awards, including the Ernie Pyle Award, ASNE Distinguished Writing Award, National Headliner Award ... and

Distinguished Writing Award in the Best of Gannett contest (five times, but who's counting?). No, he didn't win a Pulitzer Prize, but he's dead now, so get off his back.

“In 2011, Ken accepted a job in the marketing department at Simpson College, where he remained until 2018. He was diagnosed with liver disease at the beginning of 2019, which is pretty ironic given how little he drank. Eat your fruits and vegetables, kids.

“He is survived by his two sons ... and his stepson ... who all brought Ken unsurpassed joy. He hopes they will forgive him for not making the point more often. He loved his boys and was (and is) extraordinarily proud to be their father.

“For most of his life, Ken suffered from a compulsive gambling addiction that nearly destroyed him. But his church friends, and the loving people at Gamblers Anonymous, never gave up on him. Ken last placed a bet on September 5, 2009. He died clean. He hopes that anyone who needs help will seek it, which is hard, and accept it, which is even harder. Miracles abound.

“Ken's pastor says God can work miracles for you and through you. Skepticism may be cool, and for too many years Ken embraced it, but it was faith in Jesus Christ that transformed his life. That was the one thing he never regretted. It changed everything.

“Ken had many character flaws – if he still owes you money, he's sorry, sincerely – but he liked to think that he had a good sense of humor and a deep compassion for others. He prided himself on letting other drivers cut in line. He would give you the shirt off his back, even with the ever-present food stain. Thank goodness nobody asked. It wouldn't have been pretty. He also was a master Jumbles (word puzzle) solver.

“God is good. Embrace every moment, even the bad ones. See you in heaven. Ken promises to let you cut in line.”

(The Des Moines *Register*, January 8-9, 2020)

Do you like that? I share it with you for several reasons. It is funny. It is touching. It is honest. And it points to the truth that life – true life, the life that is truly life – is to be found through faith in Jesus Christ. To know this, to believe it and embrace it in a personal relationship of trust in, love for, dependence upon, and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ is wisdom.

The Bible has tons to say about wisdom, not just in these two passages in James 1 and 3. The Hebrew word for ‘wisdom,’ *hokmah*, is used 149 times in the Old Testament. As an adjective, ‘wise’ occurs 135 times in the Old Testament, while the verb ‘to be wise,’ is used 26 times. The highest concentration of these words in the Old Testament is found in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which makes sense, since these books are centerpieces of the Wisdom Literature in the Old Testament. (The Books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon are usually considered the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament. Sometimes they are referred to as ‘The Writings,’ to distinguish them from the Law and the Prophets.)

The New Testament word for ‘wisdom,’ *sophia*, is used 51 times in the New Testament, including four times in James (1:5; 3:13, 15, 17). *Sophos*, the word for ‘wise,’ is used 22 times, including James 3:13. This alone ought to be enough to show us the importance of wisdom and the priority – the urgency – of getting wisdom if you want to live a life that is pleasing to God.

Do you need wisdom in your life? I sure do! Now, for sure, but not just in trying times like these. Not just when we find ourselves in uncharted territory as is the case today, dealing with a pandemic caused by an invisible enemy, an economy that is on life-support, rules and guidelines for social distancing, and uncertainty about exactly how to protect the vulnerable and restore a sense of normalcy to life. Not just in times like these, though our need for wisdom as individuals and families and communities, as a church and as a nation, seems as acute as it ever has been. There is never a time when we are not in need of wisdom. But it seems especially true now. We stand in need of wisdom and courage and grace for the living of these days and for the facing of this particular hour in our lives and history.

Do you need wisdom? Do you know where wisdom is found? Maybe I should ask: Do you know what wisdom is? Wisdom is *not* the same thing as knowledge, though the two are usually connected to one another. Wisdom is more than knowledge. And knowledge is more than information. You can know everything there is to know about one subject or another and still lack wisdom. Wisdom is understanding for living. It is not just knowing things; that’s knowledge. It is not just knowing facts; that’s information. Wisdom is knowing how to live. I like this definition of wisdom: “Wisdom is the ability to make good decisions about what to do and what not to do” (Steve May, ‘Wise Up,’ www.preachingtoday.com, June 2006). Wisdom is the ability to rightly apply knowledge to life. It is God-given and God-centered discernment applied to the practical issues in life (ESV Study Bible, 2391).

Wisdom has more to do with how you live than how much you know. Ken Fuson’s life is an example of this. He was a brilliant writer, an award-winning reporter. But, by his own admission, for much of his life he did not live wisely. Not until he became a follower of Jesus did he begin to see and live life through the prism of the gospel. Only then did he see the immensity of his need – *our* need – for a Savior and of the sufficiency of Jesus and His grace to do for him – for *us* – what we can never do for ourselves. To see ourselves as God sees us and to embrace with our hearts what He has done for us is one of the essential characteristics of biblical wisdom.

Faith in Jesus doesn’t automatically make you wise regarding all the issues of life. You can believe in Jesus and still be an infant with respect to a life of wisdom. But faith in Jesus does make you wise for salvation. It makes you wise for eternal life. It really doesn’t matter what else you know, how much understanding you have of how to weather the storms of this life, or how great you are at solving complex problems, if you don’t know Jesus – if you do not trust in Him alone as He is offered to you in the gospel, if you do not receive Him as your Savior and Lord – you will miss out on what is most important in the end. Which is why, from the perspective of God’s Word, you cannot be truly wise without knowing Jesus, who is, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30, “wisdom from God.”

Listen to what Paul writes about the wisdom of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 1, starting in verse 20: “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know Him, it pleased God through the foolishness of what we preach” – the gospel – “to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks (Gentiles), Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than all the strength we could ever muster.

“Brothers and sisters, consider what you were when God called you. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were powerful or of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world’s eyes to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly and despised, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are (exalted), so that no one may boast in the presence of God. It is because of Him” – because of God and what He has done – “that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:20-30).

Jesus *is* the wisdom of God. You cannot be wise in the eyes of God apart from Him, no matter how brilliant or eloquent or talented you may be.

Think about Albert Einstein for a moment. He *has to be* one of the smartest men who ever lived. Maybe *the smartest* ever. No one can doubt he was a genius in atomic theory. His understanding of scientific theories and mathematical equations was unparalleled. And yet. And yet, near the end of his life, he wrote in a letter to a philosopher (Eric Gutkind) that “the word *god* is for me nothing more than the expression of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish. No interpretation no matter how subtle can change this (for me).” (James Randerson, “Childish superstition: Einstein’s letter makes view of religion relatively clear,” www.guardian.co.uk, May 13, 2008, accessed via www.preachingtoday.com.)

No matter how highly we esteem Einstein as a scientist, it does not appear that he ever gained a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12) in spiritual things. Instead, he seems to have rejected the wisdom of God revealed in the Bible and in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Where do you go to gain wisdom? What should you do, where should you go, to get wisdom when you need it? I’ve already at least hinted at two answers. First, you go to Jesus, trusting Him for salvation and for His direction in all of life. As it says in Proverbs 3:5-6:

(You) trust in the Lord with all your heart;
 (You) lean not on your own understanding.
 In all your ways (you) acknowledge Him (as Lord),
 And He will direct your paths.

He *will* show you the way you should go. He *will* lead you in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake (Psalm 23:3). He *will* guide you in the way of wisdom. *He will*.

But, as Solomon goes on to say in the next verse (Proverbs 3:7), you must not be wise in your own eyes. You must not think you know it all or have it all figured out on your own. That is a fatal mistake. Isaiah gives this warning in Isaiah 5:21: "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight."

Can you have 'worldly' wisdom without Jesus? Of course you can. In James 3, we see the contrast between worldly wisdom and God's wisdom – the wisdom from above. True wisdom, though, is rooted in a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. I want to talk more about these two kinds of wisdom next Sunday.

The second answer I have hinted at is that wisdom is found in God's Word. The Bible is the ultimate treasure trove of wisdom from God. I want to talk more about this next Sunday also.

There is also the answer given in James 1:5. What does James say? "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." *The Message* says it this way: "If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father. He loves to help. You'll get His help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it."

God won't put you down or turn you down when you ask for wisdom. He won't embarrass you or give you a hard time. If you need wisdom for any situation, go to God and ask for it. He will not turn you away. *But* – there is a *but* – you have to ask in faith. You need to believe that God can and will give you the wisdom you need. James is very clear: You have to believe and not doubt – which means, you can't vacillate between trusting God and trusting the world or your own abilities to figure things out. You can't go back and forth between seeing your need for God's wisdom and thinking you don't need God.

You gotta have faith – a faith characterized by humility before God. As it says in Hebrews 11:6: "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Faith – trusting in God – is "the essence of spiritual life" (R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 28). You can't live a God-pleasing life without it.

Do you need wisdom to navigate the challenges of life in the age of the coronavirus? I do. Our leaders do. We all do.

So, let's do something bold and radical. Let's take God at His Word. Let's ask Him for the wisdom we need for each day, for each situation, for each challenge, for each decision. Let's trust Him to give us the wisdom we need (which is always in agreement with what He has taught us in the Bible). And let's act on the wisdom He gives us, trusting Him always to direct our paths.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.

