

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 24, 2020**

**WHERE WISDOM COMES FROM (2)
James 3:13-18**

I want to talk briefly about two things before we dig into God's Word this morning. The first is that I will miss Mike Bittenbender's leadership in our youth ministry. *We* will miss his leadership in our youth ministry. He will not be stepping down as our Director of Youth Ministries for another 6 weeks or so, but we will miss him when he does.

Mike has devoted the last 6 years to our youth ministry. He has loved and led and discipled our middle school and high school students, and has come alongside and supported parents in a variety of ways. He has served the Lord and our church family well, with energy, intelligence, enthusiasm, and love. I am sad that Mike is stepping down. No question about it. At the same time, I am grateful for his time of service in our youth ministry. Six years is way, way beyond the average time a youth director ordinarily stays at a church. So, we have been blessed both by Mike's leadership and by the continuity of his leadership for the last 6 years. His investment in the lives of our students and their families has been huge.

The Session is developing plans to conduct a search for new leadership in both youth ministry and children's ministry (with Julie's departure 2 months ago). We want there to be no doubt that the discipleship, spiritual development and well-being of our children, youth, and families are of paramount importance in God's purpose for our church.

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The second thing I want to address is the question of when we may re-open the church building for in-person worship services or other church activities. The short answer is: We don't know yet. It is a fluid situation, with coronavirus cases still on the rise in the DMV region. On Friday the President declared churches and other houses of worship to be essential to the life and health of our nation, and called on state governments to permit the re-opening of churches, consistent with practices recommended in CDC guidelines, immediately. Whether state and local governments, including ours here in northern Virginia, will heed the President's directive, remains to be seen.

The Session is working to develop a plan and a timeline for the re-opening of our church. The target date right now is sometime in July. We want to be as sure as we can be that we can re-open safely, without putting any of you at unnecessary or unreasonable risk of either spreading or contracting the coronavirus.

Until we re-open the church for worship, we will continue our live-streaming every Sunday morning. Praise God for the technology that enables us to do this, and for the skills of our technical team to make it happen each week.

After we re-open, we will continue our live-streaming for the benefit of those who are unable to come to the church building, or who are in a higher-risk category and don't think it wise to attend in-person worship services yet.

When we re-open, we will carefully observe CDC guidelines and state or local mandates regarding social distancing, wearing masks, and other practices designed to safeguard the health of all who choose to come.

Most likely, when we re-open, it will initially be for worship only – no Sunday School, no Children's Church, no child care, no coffee hour, no physical contact. We will still need to limit ourselves to virtual hugs and high fives! ☺ Based on our understanding of governmental guidelines, we will initially be limited to a maximum of 85 attenders in the Sanctuary. That is the total number of people we can accommodate if we use every other pew and have people sitting 6 feet apart (except for family groups).

Being able to meet together in-person for worship and other activities is something we long for. It is something we cherish. We cherish the rights and freedoms guaranteed to us in the US Constitution. We also desire to safeguard the health and well-being of every member of our church family, including those who may be particularly vulnerable to this invisible enemy. While valuing our rights, we also want to carry out our mandate from heaven to love God, one another, and our neighbors at all times, in the name of Jesus.

I'm sorry to say that one of the highlights of the year for our church, our annual Vacation Bible School week in July, will not be held this year. Under the circumstances, until the threat of the coronavirus is effectively dealt with, it is just not wise for us to hold our regular VBS this July.

We will try to keep you apprised of further developments in our plans for the re-opening of the church in the coming weeks. *Until* things return to something more resembling normal, we will remain the church scattered – but with *unity* in the essentials of our faith, *liberty* in the non-essentials, and *charity (love)* in all things. For the glory of God, for the well-being of the church, and for the blessing of the world.

Now, let's look together at God's Word as we find it in James 3:13-18. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Wisdom, we said last Sunday, is the ability to make good decisions about what to do and what not to do (Steve May). It is not the same thing as knowledge. There is more to wisdom than just knowing a lot of facts or information. When I was a boy, I *loved* baseball. I devoured baseball statistics. I memorized box scores, hitting averages, pitching records. I had a huge collection of baseball cards. (Don't ask me what happened to them. ☹ It's a sad story.) I was like a walking computer of baseball statistics. But this doesn't mean I was a source of wisdom about baseball or anything else.

Wisdom is knowing what to do with knowledge. It is the ability to apply knowledge to real life situations. It is knowing how to live. It has more to do with how you live than exactly what or how much you know. The Oxford English Dictionary defines wisdom as ‘the capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct.’ So, it is not simply the accumulation of knowledge. Wisdom is pre-eminently practical. It is insight for living.

Wisdom consists not only in knowing what to do or what not to do in a particular situation. It also has to do with knowing what to do (or where to turn) when you don’t know what to do. In this respect, Judah’s King Jehoshaphat is the poster boy for wisdom. When faced with an imminent attack by an overwhelming enemy army, what did he do? It says in 2 Chronicles 20 that he called a prayer meeting. He cried out to the Lord for help. He acknowledged his need and the need of his people for God’s intervention. He prayed: “Lord, we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. *We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You*” (2 Chronicles 20:12, emphasis added).

I suggest to you that this is a prayer we need to pray more often. It is a prayer I need to pray more often. It is a prayer our leaders in Washington, in Richmond, in every state and territory of the US, in every city, county, and other municipality, need to pray more often. It is the epitome of *un-wisdom* (if I can make up a new word) to think that we ourselves are the fount of wisdom or that we have the wisdom sufficient for whatever challenges or crises we will ever encounter. It is the epitome of *un-wisdom* for our leaders – local, state, or national – to believe or act as if they have the right answers for every situation.

Knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do is exactly what James is talking about when he says: “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. But when you ask,” he continues, “you must ask in faith and not doubt” that God will answer your prayer for wisdom (James 1:5-6).

Where do you get wisdom? What should you do when you need wisdom in any given situation? The place to begin is to ask God for it. God is not stingy. He is not stingy with His love. He lavishes it upon us. He is not stingy with His mercy. He is not stingy with His grace. It is God’s nature to give. Giving is what God does.

We see it in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He” – what? – “gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

We see it in Acts 17:25, where Paul says: “(God) is not served by human hands, as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives to everyone life and breath and everything else.” Everything we have – everything we need for this life and for eternity – comes to us from God, who is the source of “every good and perfect gift” (James 1:17).

We see the giving nature of God in Romans 8:32, where Paul says that God “did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with His Son, graciously give us all things?”

We see it in 1 John 4:9-10, which says: “This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent (gave) His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

God is not stingy. He is ‘the constantly giving God,’ as one writer puts it (D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistle of James*, 81). He is not stingy with His wisdom. He doesn’t make us jump through a series of hoops or complete a lot of bureaucratic paperwork. He simply says: “If you need wisdom, ask me for it.”

Abraham Lincoln, who carried enormous burdens as President during the Civil War, said: “I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day.” Our burdens may not be as heavy as his, but our need for wisdom is every bit as great.

If you need wisdom for any situation – *when* you need wisdom (as we all do) – the first thing to do is to pray. Go to God in humility and faith, and ask Him for it.

A second avenue for receiving wisdom, as I mentioned last Sunday, is by coming to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, trusting Him as Savior and Lord of your life. If you remember from last week, this is what Ken Fuson (the guy who wrote his own obituary that I read last Sunday) discovered. By his own admission, despite all his successes as a newspaper reporter, he had made a mess of his life. “It was faith in Jesus Christ,” he wrote, “that transformed his life. That was the one thing he never regretted. It changed everything.”

You may have lots of regrets about things you’ve done that you wish you could un-do, or things you’ve said that you wish you could un-say. You may have regrets about situations you wish you had handled differently. We all do. Wisdom is knowing that Jesus is bigger than all the things you regret (and all the things you should regret but maybe don’t). Wisdom is coming to Jesus with all your sins and regrets and unbelief, and trusting Him with your life; trusting Him to forgive all your sins; trusting Him to give you a new relationship of peace with God; trusting Him with your future, knowing that heaven is promised not to people who are perfect but to people who are forgiven through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross for us.

If you have never come to Jesus in honest, humble repentance for all your sins, trusting not in yourself or anything else but His saving work on your behalf, the wisest thing you can ever do is to come to Him in faith today. The most unwise thing you can do is to refuse His offer of forgiveness and salvation. The most unwise thing you can do is to say “No” to Jesus and His love. The most unwise thing you can do is to put off making a decision to trust and follow Jesus. Not to decide to follow Jesus in response to His amazing grace is to decide. You can decide to put it off until another time. But the time will come when it is too late. And none of us knows when that time will come.

If you want to be wise and to grow in wisdom, you’ve got to come to Jesus, who alone has the words and power of eternal life (John 6:68). I urge you to do so today. Tell Jesus you’re sorry for all your sins. Ask Him to forgive your sins and to replace your unbelief with trusting faith. Ask Him to replace all your sins and regrets with His peace. Ask Him to give you a changed

heart so that you can live for Him. To do this is wisdom. If you take this step of faith today, I invite you to contact me by phone, text, or email. I'd love to know about it and to encourage you in your faith.

A third avenue for gaining wisdom is the Bible itself. The Word of God conveys the wisdom of God. In it is found the whole counsel of God. Does the Bible speak directly and specifically to every conceivable problem or situation you will ever experience in this life? No. It does speak directly to many of the ordinary (and even extraordinary) difficulties or dilemmas you may encounter. But where it does not give us explicit direction in a given situation, it gives us God-centered values and practical principles to help us.

The Bible, for example, does not tell us what to do in the event of a pandemic. It does not tell us the most prudent actions for our governments to take in a time like this. It does not tell us when we should re-open the church for in-person services and other activities. The Bible is not a handbook for what to do in case of a pandemic. At the same time, the Bible does tell us what kind of people we are to be, pandemic or no pandemic. The Bible consistently tells us of the qualities we are to cultivate and exhibit in our conduct. The Bible reminds us of the priority of loving God, loving one another, loving our neighbors, and putting our love into both words and actions. The Bible tells us that the needs and well-being of others take precedence over our rights. The Bible tells us that our witness – our words and actions, including our posts on social media – can have a major impact on how outsiders view God, the church, and the gospel. For good or bad. For better or worse.

Listen to Eugene Peterson: “When we find ourselves deficient in wisdom, it is not because the Word of God has pages missing, but because we have not seen all there is on the pages we already have. It is not another book we need, but better attention to the book we have; it is not more knowledge we require, but better vision to see what has already been revealed in Jesus Christ.” (Peterson, “Living the Message,” *Christianity Today*, Vol.40, no. 7.)

As the Word of God, the Bible conveys the wisdom of God. If you want to become wise, immerse yourself in the Bible. There you will find the heart and mind of God. Mastery of Bible trivia will not make you wise, any more than my knowledge of baseball statistics made me a baseball expert. But as you soak in the Word of God and allow its message to take root in you, you will gain what Moses called a ‘heart of wisdom’ (Psalm 90:12). As God’s Word takes root in your heart, God will bring to mind the truths, principles, and specific verses you need to act with wisdom in different situations. Remember what Paul says in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.” Where do we get wisdom? We get wisdom from the Bible, which is the Word of God.

There is a fourth avenue for gaining wisdom, which is connected to all three I have mentioned so far. This fourth avenue is reverence for God. Solomon refers to it as ‘the fear of the Lord’ in Proverbs 9:10 (cf. 1:7), as does the unnamed author of Psalm 111. Listen to the words of Psalm 111:

1 Praise the LORD.

I will extol the LORD with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.

2 Great are the works of the LORD;
they are pondered by all who delight in them.

3 Glorious and majestic are His deeds,
and His righteousness endures forever.

4 He has caused His wonders to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and compassionate.

5 He provides food for those who fear Him;
He remembers His covenant forever.

6 He has shown His people the power of His works,
giving them the lands of other nations.

7 The works of His hands are faithful and just;
all His precepts are trustworthy.

8 They are steadfast for ever and ever,
done in faithfulness and uprightness.

9 He provided redemption for His people;
He ordained His covenant forever –
holy and awesome is His name.

10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow His precepts have good understanding.
To Him belongs eternal praise.

What is the beginning, the foundation, the starting point of wisdom? “The fear of the Lord.” To rightly fear the Lord does not mean to cower in terror before Him, or to try to hide from His terrible swift sword. As the Bible says, it *is* “a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31), if all you can expect from God is the judgment you – and we all – deserve. But this is not our destiny as followers of Jesus, as sinners saved by God’s grace, as rebels redeemed by the blood of the Son of God, who gave His life for us.

This dreadful, cowering fear is completely out of place in the lives of God’s people. To fear God is to regard Him with reverence, to give Him and His name the respect and honor and obedience He both desires and deserves. Reverence for God requires humility. It requires recognizing that He and He alone is God and I am not.

As Kent Hughes says, when you see God for who He is – holy, awesome, loving, gracious, and sovereign – and embrace a proper posture of reverence toward Him, you are at the doorway of wisdom. You step through that door when you acknowledge your own finiteness and inability to direct your life. Unless or until you see the greatness and worthiness of God and your own littleness by contrast, you will never become truly wise in God’s eyes. But when we see God as He is and ourselves as we are, we become humble, teachable, and receptive to God’s wisdom (Adapted from Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 132).

We’ll come back to this next week, because there is more here in James 3, and more in the biblical teaching on wisdom, that I want us to think about together.

As you go through your week this week, seek God and His wisdom in the ways He has made it available to us:

1. Through prayer: Go to God and ask Him in faith believing for the wisdom you need.
2. Through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, since He is 'the wisdom of God and the power of God' (1 Corinthians 1:30).
3. Through the Bible, which is God-breathed and bears the imprint of the only wise God from cover to cover.
4. Through 'the fear of the Lord,' a proper attitude of reverence for and gracious submission to the God from whom all blessings flow. Including all wisdom. A right attitude toward God is the foundation for wisdom.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.