

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 7 2020**

**TWO KINDS OF WISDOM  
James 3:13-18**

I'm sorry I couldn't be here to lead Worship and preach last Sunday. I am grateful that my coronavirus test was negative and that Mike did not come down with any symptoms, despite testing positive for the virus.

I am grateful to Helen Franssell for her leadership in Worship last Sunday. Aren't we blessed to have her as a member of our church family here at Faith? Yes, we are. She is a treasure.

I am grateful to my friend Jim Byrne for stepping in to preach last Sunday on short notice. I am grateful for Jim's message – for his honesty, his vulnerability, and his call to all of us to repent of the sin that resides in our hearts, to receive the healing touch of Jesus, and to respond with the love of Jesus to people everywhere, especially to those who are mistreated due to the color of their skin, their accent or national origin.

I grieve for the family of George Floyd. I grieve for the family of Ahmaud Arbery and every victim of racial prejudice. Racism is a deadly virus. It is “a deeply rooted disease that infects the soul of America” (Scott Sunquist, President of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, “Pastoral Letter,” 6-5-20). The historic mistreatment of African-Americans, going back to 1619, when the first African slaves arrived in Virginia, is our nation's original sin. That racism is still with us is undeniable. Ultimately, the only totally effective cure for racism is the gospel, which declares our unity and equality in Jesus Christ our Lord. “In Christ's family,” as it says in Galatians 3:28, “there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female” (*MSG*) – to which we may add black and white, along with every other difference used to divide people, to devalue some and give preferential treatment to others.

The gospel declares that all believers are united in Christ. All who trust in Christ are members of His family. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. All people are created in God's image and of inestimable value in His sight.

We must confess that too often the church in America has failed to recognize the full implications of the gospel as it relates to race. We have too often failed to live up to the gospel, to the detriment of our sisters and brothers of color.

I hope none of you will take offense at what I have to say today. I hope you will hear my heart. Even more, I hope you will hear the heart of God in what I have to say.

I am deeply grieved and shocked – horrified – by the callous killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis on May 25. It was a terrible, unconscionable thing that should never, ever happen. There is no way to justify it. There is no way to justify the unequal treatment of African-Americans or any other group in our society.

I must also say that I support, respect, and thank God for good, honorable law enforcement officers who seek to treat all people with respect and to enforce the law with fairness. I grieve the loss of police and other law enforcement officers in the line of duty, as well as those who suffer injuries while serving the public good.

In addition, I must say that I support and respect the rights of all Americans to engage in peaceful, nonviolent protests. As I said in my pastoral letter this past week, “peaceful demonstrations that express the conscience of America are part of our DNA as a people.” At the same time, I do not and we cannot condone protests that devolve into violence, rioting, and looting. We must never allow such behavior to become normalized.

I hope we can all agree on these things. As followers of Jesus Christ who acknowledge and submit to the authority of the Bible as God’s Word, we must also acknowledge that we are all more sinful than we know. We are, all of us, more guilty before God than we can imagine. Only God sees the true depth of our depravity. Only God knows how desperately wicked we are in our fallenness. All of which goes to show how truly amazing, powerful, and transforming His grace is, and how desperate we (and all people) are for that grace. You see that, don’t you?

Those of us who are white are, I’m afraid, more guilty of racism than we know. I don’t like to admit that. But I’m coming to understand it more. America has come a long way in race relations. We can rejoice in the progress we have made. But white privilege is real. Generations of white Americans have benefitted from it, to one degree or another. Generations of African-Americans and other minorities have suffered because of it. It grieves my heart. I trust it grieves your heart, too. I believe it grieves the heart of God, who from one man made the entire human race (Acts 17:26) and showered His goodness on us all (Matthew 5:45). Even though we have come a long way in many places from the way things used to be, we must still acknowledge that the way things are is not the way God intends them to be.

If you say there is no residual of racism in you, you’re still not off the hook. The Bible doesn’t let any of us off the hook. It instructs us to “remember those ... who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” the same mistreatment (Hebrews 13:3). Because we live in a society where racism still exists, we all have a duty and a calling from God to do what is in our power to bring it to an end. None of us is exempt from responsibility. We’re all in it together.

As you have heard, our denomination (the EPC) has declared tomorrow, June 8, to be a special day of lament, fasting, and prayer for our nation. A lament is a passionate expression of sorrow or grief. If you go to the EPC web site, which is simply [epc.org](http://epc.org), you will find the following laments:

*We lament the pain and anger that have been unleashed with the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and too many others.*

*We lament the evil of racism that denies we are all created in the image of God and are precious and equal as His standard bearers.*

*We lament the reality of racism, which has resulted in inequality and injustice in far too many communities.*

*We lament the reality that while the ideal in the United States is that all enjoy equal treatment before the law, that ideal has fallen so short of becoming the standard for so many people.*

*We lament the reality that while all should be treated with dignity and respect by law enforcement, in too many instances people of color – especially African-American men – are subject to violence and even death at the hands of those who have sworn an oath to never betray the public trust.*

*We lament that in too many instances in history, the Church has failed to understand and empathize with the deep-seated pain, grief, anger, and confusion felt by the African-American community.*

Can we agree in the name of Jesus to lament – to grieve – all these things? To fast and pray for the healing of our hearts and our land from the scourge of racism in all its forms? And to speak and act in the name of Jesus to end racism?

Lord, let it be so.

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Now, let's talk about wisdom.

If ever there was a time we needed wisdom, it is now. If ever our nation's leaders needed wisdom, it is now. If ever our state, county, and city leaders needed wisdom, it is now. If ever our law enforcement officers needed wisdom, it is now. If ever our military leaders needed wisdom, it is now. If ever the medical community needed wisdom, it is now. If ever parents needed wisdom, it is now. If ever the church needed wisdom, it is now.

The essence of wisdom, as we have noted before, is the ability to make good decisions about what to do and what not to do in any given situation. It is not simply the accumulation of information or data. It is the application of knowledge to real life circumstances. In short, wisdom is insight for living.

“Being wise,” according to Kent Hughes, “does not mean we understand everything that is going on because of our superior knowledge, but that we do the right thing as life comes along” (Hughes, *James: Faith that Works*, 132). While there are several avenues through which we can gain wisdom – we talked about them two weeks ago – the bottom line is that true wisdom comes from God. It comes from a right relationship with God and a proper attitude of reverence or respect for Him. It comes from the understanding and application of God's Word in every area of life. It comes from knowing that God Himself is the ultimate

source of truth and wisdom. It comes from being humble enough to ask God for the wisdom we need for every situation we face. Including the tremendous challenges confronting both our nation and our church.

In James 3, James describes two kinds of wisdom. One kind is God's kind. This is the wisdom that comes from heaven (3:16). The other kind, as it says in verse 15, is "earthly, unspiritual, (and) of the devil." This is the unholy trinity of the world (in its opposition to God), the flesh (with its sinful desires), and the devil that continually wage war against the purposes and plans of God for our lives.

This worldly kind of wisdom is bogus wisdom. It is pseudo-wisdom. You don't have to look very hard to see it in the world today. You can see it in the news media. You can see it on social media. You can see it in the entertainment world. You can see it in the political world. You can see it on both the right and the left and in many who are dismissive of both the right and the left. You see it in non-stop self-promotion, virtue-signaling, proud boasting, and distortions of the truth on various sides of the political and social spectrum. As James points out in verses 14-16, whenever you hold onto bitterness, envy, and selfish ambition, you shouldn't be surprised to see disorder and all kinds of evil breaking out.

Do you want to know what wisdom is not? Wisdom is not mean-spirited ambition. Wisdom is not boasting about how wise you are. Wisdom is not twisting facts to suit a chosen narrative. Wisdom is not trying to look better than others or trying to make others look bad. Wisdom is not trying to get the better of others. (Adapted from James 3:14-16, *MSG*.) This is bogus wisdom.

What does bogus wisdom produce? Bitterness. Resentment. Arrogance. Vengeance. Which too often fuel violence and destruction. Worldly wisdom produces chaos and evil of all kinds. It poisons relationships. It destroys trust.

The other kind of wisdom – God's kind – looks much different. Do you know how you can tell if someone is wise? James says in verse 13 that real wisdom is demonstrated not by what or how much you know or how much you have, but by how you live: by your good life, by your godly conduct, by your good deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 'It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts' (3:13, *MSG*).

Then, in verse 17, James gives 7 defining characteristics of the wisdom that comes from God: 'The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive (ESV: open to reason), full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.'

Let's take a brief look at each one:

True wisdom is first of all *pure*. The word James uses is *hagne*, which contains the idea of being above reproach in your conduct. Paul uses this same word when he says in Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true ... noble ... right, whatever is *pure* ... lovely ... admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things." Whatever is *pure*. In other words, do not pollute or poison your minds or hearts by focusing or

dwelling on anything that is unworthy of your life as a follower of Jesus and a beloved son or daughter of your Father in heaven.

Remember what Jesus says in the Beatitudes? “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). To be pure in heart is to be wholly devoted to God, with no mixed motives. Wisdom that comes from God is always pure, single-minded, and above reproach, even if it is rejected as impractical or foolish by the “wise” people of the world.

Second, true wisdom is *peace-loving*. A truly wise person has an irenic spirit. A wise person doesn’t seek to divide people, to create conflict where it does not exist, or to use divisions for selfish gain. This is not to say that wisdom refuses to recognize divisions or conflicts that exist. Not at all. But, as Paul says, it is a sign of wisdom to “make every effort to do what leads to peace” (Romans 14:19) and “to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

You probably know the famous prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. Mary Sue and I included it in our wedding service a few years ago (43 years, to be exact). The first part of the prayer goes like this:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace.  
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
 Where there is injury, pardon.  
 Where there is doubt, faith.  
 Where there is despair, hope.  
 Where there is darkness, light.  
 Where there is sadness, joy.

What does Jesus say? “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). Blessed are those who love peace and work to bring it about. That is a sign of wisdom.

Third, the wise are *gentle* (ESV) or *considerate* (NIV). They are not harsh or mean-spirited. Nor are they weak. The meekness Jesus commends to us in the Beatitudes is not weakness (Matthew 5:5). It is a form of self-control, which Paul identifies as a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23. In 1 Timothy 3:3, Paul says church leaders should be “not violent but gentle.” It is a sign of true wisdom.

The person who is gentle or considerate recognizes his or her own weaknesses, and makes allowances for the weaknesses or ignorance of others. This kind of person is not easily offended.

Fourth, the person who exhibits true wisdom is *submissive* (NIV) or *open to reason* (ESV). This is the only place in the New Testament where this particular word *eupēithēs* is used. It is a sign of wisdom to be willing to listen to others, to have a teachable spirit.

Fifth, says James, true wisdom is *full of mercy and good fruit*. Mercy is compassion in action. James links wisdom to action – in particular, to acts of mercy and love that give legs to our faith and a heartbeat to our wisdom. James intends us to see that if our lives are not marked by acts of mercy done to bless others, then we are not truly wise.

In James 2, James warns against a life or a heart devoid of mercy. He urges us to “speak and act as those who will be judged by the law that gives freedom” – that is, the law of Christ’s redeeming love for us – “because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful” to others. Then he makes this beautiful gospel declaration: “Mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:12-13). Praise God for the wonders of His grace, mercy, and love.

I wonder if James was present when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, even though he was not yet a follower of Jesus. There are so many echoes of the Sermon in these verses from James. Here is another. Jesus says: “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7).

If you want God to show you mercy, show mercy to others. If you want to be wise in God’s eyes, let your life be full of mercy and good works. As the prophet Micah reminds us, what the Lord desires of us is to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). You might say that is the distilled essence of wisdom.

Sixth, true wisdom is *impartial*. As with the word for “submissive” or “open to reason,” this is the only place in the New Testament where this word *adiakritos* is used. It is a word of extreme relevance in the midst of the social unrest we are experiencing right now. *Adiakritos* means not biased. Not prejudiced. Fair. To all people. Anything less is not true wisdom and falls short of God’s design for all people created in His image.

Seventh, true wisdom is *sincere*. There is nothing phony or fake or feigned about it. It is not duplicitous or deceptive. It is authentic. Paul uses this word in Romans 12:9, where he says our love for one another must be sincere. Peter uses the same word in 1 Peter 1:22 in urging us to love one another deeply, from the heart. Love must be sincere. So must our faith, because, as Paul writes in 1 Timothy 1:5, a life of love that truly honors God is rooted in a heart purified by God, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.

If there was ever a time when we all needed wisdom – the kind of wisdom that comes from God – it is now.

Do you want to be wise in God’s eyes? Do you want to grow in God’s kind of wisdom? Then, by God’s grace, be all the more eager to be:

- Pure in your conduct and devotion to God
- Peace-loving
- Gentle (Considerate)
- Submissive (Open to reason)
- Full of mercy and good fruit

- Impartial
- Sincere

As you and I exhibit these qualities increasingly, God will be glorified, and both the church and the world will be blessed. Lord, let it be so. Amen.