

## **“Mission – Possible: Wise Faith”**

September 19, 2021

A wise and religious man sat under a mango tree in his garden in the noonday heat, and he looked at his pumpkin vines growing nearby. He said to himself, “How foolish God is. Here God puts a big heavy pumpkin onto a weak vine, which can’t do anything but just lie on the ground. And then God hangs those small mangoes onto a tree, which can hold the weight of a man. If I were God, I think I could do better than that.”

Just then a bit of a breeze came up and knocked a loose mango off the tree. It fell right on the man’s head. Now he had a bump on his head, which made him a sadder, but also a little wiser.

“Suppose,” he thought now, “that there had been a pumpkin up there, instead of a mango .... Never again will I try to plan the world for God, but I shall thank God that he has done so well.”

It’s a story about wisdom – wisdom we sometimes *think* we have and the wisdom we *learn* we don’t have. The man thought that he had it figured out, but no such luck. In our faith life, we’re on a journey to gain wisdom - to have wise faith. In good Methodist fashion, John Wesley put it, we’re “going onto perfection.” And Wesley held that the book of James was central to our faith and life as Christians, especially because James held the importance of both faith and good works as a way to live our faith fully. Wesley called it “personal holiness” and “social holiness.”

James challenges us to claim the struggle of gaining wisdom – that it’s a daily exercise for each of us – no matter how long we’ve been following Jesus. Wisdom is not an instant gift when we claim a relationship with God through Christ; wisdom is a gift from God that grows every day as we follow Christ.

And James makes sure to tell us that wisdom comes in two forms. We should strive for the kind that comes from above – from God. It’s gentle, humble, merciful, impartial, and true. Does it remind you of the fruit of the Spirit? We might call it the power of the Holy Spirit. What a world it would be if all of us sought after this wisdom constantly!

Unfortunately, times haven’t changed much since James wrote to early Christians. He warns against earthly wisdom – that self-serving, envious, over-ambitious, bragging sense we have inside of us that rears its ugly head from time to time. Socrates described envy as the “ulcer of the soul.”

Perhaps that’s what James is trying to get us to understand, which may be why he talks about the power of words. Words can hurt and harm – whether we’re speaking

directly, sending a message, or sharing a post. I'm convinced that if James was standing here, he'd tell us to pay attention to what we say and what we write.

Words can also heal, and we're called to pay closer attention to our own speech. I can think of a time when words have hurt me - and a time when words have helped. Maybe you can, too. I wonder if President Calvin Coolidge read James because he's credited with saying, "I have never been hurt by something I didn't say." Our speech - both what comes out of our mouths and what we write - is a reflection of who we are. And if we seek to follow Jesus, it's offering the world a reflection of who we believe him to be.

The words we use and the way we speak them must be in line with what we claim to believe. God gave us words and speech as a gift. The Creation story tells us that. Adam is given the power to name all of the animals that God created. So, with such a special gift entrusted to us, we must use it to the building up of God's kingdom, not the tearing down of people who are made in God's image. Think of it - when we use hurtful words, we destroy what God has created. And how can we bless God and curse God's creation?

The earthly wisdom we tend to work with destroys us and others. It eats away at our ability to live together in peace. It breaks down the community of love, forgiveness, and encouragement that Jesus calls us to be.

We've asked questions during this series as we've been studying the book of James. First, James challenged us to look at each other without partiality and see the connection of faith and works. *What does it look like to follow Jesus? And what does it sound like to follow Jesus?*

Remember that the author of this letter is sending it to many groups of Christians who have settled outside of Jerusalem. So, much of what he writes is about maintaining Christian identity and having integrity (making sure our words and actions match) - looking, acting, speaking, and living like Jesus in a world where it's tough to do. To start, traits like humility and gentleness were considered weakness in the Greco-Roman world where the early church was growing. I think we're still up against some of the same thinking.

And, these early Christians didn't have doctrine written down. They didn't have creeds written down. And it was common for them to separate themselves from one another. Maybe there was a disagreement or conflict - can you imagine? - so some went off to form their own congregation rather than trying to work through the issue.

So, James says, "Watch your mouth!" That's where James goes after telling us that if faith isn't reflected in our actions, then we need to examine ourselves. And he starts with something we need to hear.

James gave a warning to those who were teachers to mind their work. Teachers and leaders in these new Christian communities held lots of power, and so their leadership and their willingness to work together was a model for others. When James asks, “who is wise and understanding among you?” it’s not a contest, but a question to get us thinking about how we all function as teachers and leaders. We can claim to have wisdom all we want, but if our motives are selfish, if we lack humility, then we’re on the wrong track.

James is clear that teachers and leaders have influence in the places where they serve. The way we work together for the good of all is important. It doesn’t mean that we will always agree, yet there’s something to this argument about seeking wisdom from God rather than going with our gut without any attention to God. We have to strive for authentic community.

That earthly wisdom infects us, too. Who’s in charge? Who’s the boss? Who’s the best? It isn’t that we should shun the idea of leadership; leadership is vital to do God’s ministry. But we can get so wrapped up in a hunger for control and power for position that our focus gets way off Christ and way onto us. It’s true in the church; it’s true in our workplaces; it’s true in our homes and families; it’s true wherever we are. We have to curb our human desire to live for just ourselves.

The story is told about a man who got a new boomerang, and then spent the rest of his life trying to throw away his old one. You get the joke – it just kept coming back! It’s a funny picture in our minds, but we have the same struggles sometimes. We have those spiritual boomerangs that keep returning to us because we fail to deal with them. We have ways of relating that destroy us and others. We hang onto habits that hurt us and affect those around us. We react to things instantly rather than taking time to think before we speak. Is this helpful to say?

To develop wisdom from above, we must seek God’s help. James’ advice is that we understand that seeking wisdom is a continual part of our faith. He encourages us to “Draw near to God.” When our inner focus shifts from self to God, we become different people. With the Holy Spirit working in us, we are changed. We are transformed and can do something we never could before.

If you’ve ever read or seen later interviews with singer Johnny Cash, he was very open about his struggle with drug abuse and illness. And he was clear that even after being sober, the old demons lurked. He said, “They don’t come knocking on a regular basis. They just kind of hold their distance. I could invite them in: the sex demon, the drug demon. But I don’t. They’re very sinister. You got to watch ‘em.”

Cash’s take on our daily struggle for wisdom is what James is talking about. One writer says, “When James urges Christians to act wisely in their community of faith, he is

differentiating between *those who know more and those who know better.*” Do we know more or know better? Wisdom isn’t about being greater or smarter, but being connected to God and living in the Spirit. In ancient Israel and then in the Christian tradition, wisdom is a part of a compassionate person’s life. Wisdom is practical – how do we live to honor God and honor one another?

James talks about “a harvest of righteousness” that comes when we ask for wisdom from above. But it can’t happen without planting the right seeds. I’ve heard it said – “Pride is the flip side of grace.” James calls us to examine our hearts and move closer to God’s desire for us. This harvest can’t come from seeds of selfishness, envy, bragging, competition or jealousy – just like apples don’t grow from pumpkin seeds!

God has given us the seeds we need to sow – mercy, peace, gentleness, and humility. God makes a covenant with each of us - whoever we are. Our identity who we are at the root of it all – doesn’t rest in getting more, having more, or competing with one another, or even knowing more. It’s about knowing better. Our identity is in God through Jesus Christ.

And we make the choice every day to seek wisdom from God or go through this life trusting our own wisdom. May we know better. May we stop using words that hurt and start using words that help - because it matters to our relationships and our witness. May we choose the wisdom from above that gives life and brings peace, that calls us to gentleness and humility, that we would grow closer to the One who created us, and that we would have even more love for all of God’s people. Thanks be to God. AMEN.