

Automaker Henry Ford asked electrical genius Charlie Steinmetz to build the generators for his factory. One day the generators ground to a halt, and the repairmen couldn't find the problem. So Ford called Steinmetz, who tinkered with the machines for a few hours and then threw the switch. The generators whirled to life--but Ford got a bill for \$10,000 from Steinmetz. Flabbergasted, the rather tightfisted car maker inquired why the bill was so high.

Steinmetz's reply: For tinkering with the generators, \$10. For knowing where to tinker, \$9,990. Ford paid the bill.

There's kind of a tongue-in-cheek wisdom on display in that story; but it's no joke that the Bible says wisdom is a quality we should want to have. This comes up in the middle of the book of James. James, you may recall, is the apostle who sounds a lot like Jesus, in part because Jesus was his half-brother; in part because like Jesus, he was very concerned with how faith and behavior go together. In this letter, James says that people who love God will pursue wisdom, and wisdom will inform and drive behavior. Now that sounds great, but some of you may be wondering, what is wisdom, really? I think we'll see that wisdom is knowing something, but it's much more than than knowing facts.

There is an interesting definition of wisdom put forward by psychologist Alan Castel in his book “Better with Age: The Psychology of Successful Aging.” Writing about the benefits of age and experience, Castel says that “often wisdom allows people to see the obvious, or to use common sense without second-guessing themselves or the outcomes.”

Dr. Timothy Keller, a pastor in New York, says “wisdom is not less than being moral and good. But it is quite a bit more. It is knowing what is the right decision in the majority of situations that the moral rules don't address.”

1 Kings 3 describes a momentous incident in which God says to King Solomon, “Ask me for anything and its yours.” Solomon famously asks for wisdom. He said, “Give your servant an understanding mind—literally, a “hearing heart”—to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil...”

Then we have the unconventional wisdom of Jesus, who says to be great is to be a servant. To be great is to help people who can't help you back. And when you do that, you meet God.

So what can we say about wisdom? Let me suggest that wisdom is a way of seeing; it is a way of interpreting the facts of any situation in light of God's truth, and this understanding leads to behavior that honors God. James makes this connection in his letter. Let's look at how he puts it.

He writes: “Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down

from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”

Now what James is saying here is that wisdom is recognizable. You’ll know it when you see it. A wise person does good in meekness, meaning doing good without craving attention and accolades. That’s contrasted with jealousy and selfish ambition, which results in doing good to get somewhere; to get noticed; to get the applause, and James links that to disorder and disgusting activities. In other words, it is not wise to do good for the wrong reason. Wisdom looks to quietly do good for the sake of the other person.

Where does wisdom like this come from? James tells us. He calls it the “wisdom that comes down from above.” If it is wisdom coming down from above, that means it wasn’t in us originally. It’s coming from somewhere else. Specifically, it’s coming from God down to us. And even more specifically, the wisdom of God came down to us in the person of His Son, Jesus. So if you want this wisdom, get to know him. Because deep inside, we know that on our own, we are not wise. Jealousy and selfishness do ruin our motives. But Jesus came down from above to do take on our sin debts and pay for them as if they were his. He came down from above to do what we could never do, and to give us gifts we could never earn. So if you want wisdom, get to know Jesus, and he will transfer his wisdom to you.

James says this wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. We are able to recognize this wisdom when we see it, because it is so completely different than what the world values. I mean, reverse the values in this list. The wisdom from below is impure, quarrelsome, violent, set in its ways, full of revenge and bad behavior, biased, and hypocritical. Sadly, that’s what we’re used to both ‘out there’ and ‘in here.’ But as we stay in contact with Jesus; as we stay in contact with his words in the Bible; as we stay in contact with his body and blood, served to us at his table, his wisdom is planted in us, and takes root, and grows, and begins to take over.

It comes down to this. Something is going to grow in you. It will either be the wisdom from below, or the wisdom from above. The wisdom from below comes naturally but will eventually wreck your life. Get to know Jesus, and embrace the wisdom that comes down from above, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

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