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### Who Is Wise?

**Text:** James 3:13-4:3; St. Mark 9:30-37, 10:35-44.

My knowledge is limited in the matter, but it appears to me that all languages, and thus all people, make a distinction between “knowledge” and “wisdom.” For example, the French distinguish *connaissance* and *sagesse*. Latin distinguishes *scientia* (from whence comes our word science) and *sapientia*, and Greek distinguishes *epistemē* and *sophia*. Even when we insist that real knowledge involves understanding, so that we do not count parroting words, even the right words, as knowledge, the distinction remains. For while the wise would normally be thought to have knowledge with understanding, even knowledge that is understood does not always result in wisdom. For example, we may presume that Lex Luther, Superman’s nemesis, or any other mad scientist, for that matter, has scientific knowledge and really does understand atoms and protons and neutrons and other mysteries of the universe such as kryptonite. Nobody, however, has ever suggested that Lex Luther or any other mad scientist is wise. That is why we call them *mad* scientists.

It may even be the case on occasion that the wise do not have a lot of knowledge at all. It is certainly the case that by itself being smart is not good enough to be considered wise. Consider the fools in Shakespeare. They are often closer to wisdom than anybody else in a play, and speak the words of greatest depth, even while they are fooling around – an activity that usually mocks the foolishness of the knowing. Compare King Lear’s foolish vanity with the words of his fool and ask who is wiser. Lear rejects the genuine love of one daughter, Cordelia, and favors his other two daughters, Goneril and Regan, and gives away his kingdom to them because they

flatter him. Soon after they throw him out of the house. Lear's fool speaks wise words when he tells Lear that he made those girls his mother, that is, the one who spans him, "for thou gavest them the rod, and put'st down thine own breeches." And he goes on to tell Lear, "I had rather be any kind of thing than a fool: and yet I would not be thee; thou has pared thy wit o'both sides and left nothing i' the middle."

So, if wisdom is not the same thing as being smart, or the same thing as knowledge, even knowledge with understanding, what then is wisdom? Who then is really wise? This is the question that St. James asks in this morning's epistle lesson when he asks: "Who is wise and understanding among you?"

The answer that James gives to his question about who is wise is one that puts its finger on exactly where the distinction between knowledge and wisdom lies. For, in the first place, he suggests that the wise person has a good life, with works that show that they come from wisdom. The person who is envious and selfishly ambitious, or boastful or false is not wise. Rather, the wise person is the one who has a wisdom that is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, and without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy." James, like everybody else, doesn't think that wisdom rests on being smart; he thinks it rests in being virtuous. He thinks it is demonstrated in a way of living, just as the quality of a tree is demonstrated by the fruit it bears. But if it is demonstrated in a way of living, it is also *made* in a way of living. God gives the gift of wisdom through the way we live. The fruit is the result of our sowing.

What James is claiming is not all that astounding a claim. At least it wouldn't have been in the ancient world, for in the ancient world, one of the stock characters on the stage of life was the philosopher. The word "philosophy" means "love of *sophia*, or wisdom," and the philosopher

was one who pursued wisdom. Ancient philosophers were not quite like modern philosophers, who get degrees from universities, then get jobs in universities teaching ( if they are really lucky), and publish articles that nobody else other than philosophers can understand. Rather, ancient philosophers pursued philosophy as a way of life. Harkening back to the teaching of Socrates, they believed that the good life comes from real knowledge and understanding, but also that real knowledge and understanding come from living rightly, from living virtuously. If you lived rightly, you would see rightly and if you saw rightly you would live happily. Theory thus never stood by itself since any nut could have a theory and usually does; rather, theory had to be linked to a way of life if it was to be philosophy, a love of wisdom.

Now, these philosophers were serious about life, and dedicated themselves to the art of living well, which rarely meant living by common standards. That is why they dressed and acted in distinctive ways, for they intended to show that life needed to be lived by standards and in ways other than common ones, the ones that everybody else aspired to. In the world of ancient Rome, those common standards, the ideal sorts of life to which most people aspired, were pretty much like ours: they were opulent and magnificent but self-indulgent and proud. Having power was the key to a good life, for having power meant that you could indulge your passions to the fullest, and could reward your friends and punish your enemies, and could have a reputation for being important. Philosophers, however, realized how fleeting these things were, and how they enslaved the mind and spirit, and thus they sought to pursue another way of life. Occasionally they even convinced the powerful. The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius became a philosopher, and sought to realize in his own life the importance of pursuing life according to different standards. The book which has come down to us as his *Meditations* is simply a record of the spiritual exercises by which he sought to realize deep down that being an emperor and having

power was, in the grand scheme of things, a pretty insignificant thing, and that life needed to be lived according to a higher calling.

The point of talking here about the ancient philosophers and their views about seeking wisdom and saying that there is comparison between them and what St. James exhorts his readers to, is twofold. First, it is to suggest that Christianity's faith is a search for wisdom and is not anti-intellectual; its emphasis on right living so that we could see clearly was also that of the philosophers. In this sense, the Christian search for wisdom was – and is – living the philosophical life. Second, the point of the comparison is to stress that faith's search for wisdom was for a different, extraordinary sort of life, one that left behind the common standards.

This was so much so that many early Christians went further in their search for wisdom than the philosophers ever did. That is why in the early centuries of Christianity those men and women who fled the City of Man for the wild deserts of Egypt could be called, without any hint of irony, Christian philosophers. These men and women were not particularly intellectual, although some certainly were, and among them were most certainly geniuses of the spiritual life. Rather, they simply had a sense that God had called them to wisdom, and to extraordinary lives, and they knew that they certainly were not going to have those lives living by the common standards of the Roman empire. Those standards oppressed life itself.

Often when we look at these men and women we find them exceedingly strange, and indeed some of their spiritual athleticism and heroics appear bizarre to us. St. Simon Stylites who lived on top of a pillar day and night for many years in the desert is the example most cited. But we shouldn't let this occasional bizarreness obscure the simple motives that lay behind what they were trying to do. On the one hand, they were trying to quiet the "cravings at war within" that James talked about and that led to conflicts and disputes. But they were *not* trying to squelch

human nature, so much as to free it from the effects of having lived badly under low standards. ( I recall seeing a refrigerator magnet once that said “Martinis: Lowering standards since 1927.” I don’t know about martinis; I do know that a lot of what is proposed by the larger culture as admirable usually always lowers and doesn’t raise the standards for a good life.) Second, they were positively trying to find a way of living that would make them wise, something that doesn’t come simply from giving up bad habits. They knew that those bad habits had to be replaced with good ones. Thus, for example, Evagrius of Pontus, one of the better known writers on spirituality during this time, recommended that one when encountered a vice in oneself such as anger, that one should dissipate it by practicing the virtue to which it was opposed. If one was angry with somebody, one should practice generosity and should give gifts. Why? Because anger is usually rooted in our resentment of others, and we resent others because of self-centeredness. Giving things away removes us from being the center of the world for we are no longer trying to gather all value around *us*. In learning that we are not the center of the world, and that God is, we then learn the most essential part of wisdom. That is really what is meant when it is said that “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

The point of life for these seekers of extraordinary life, these seekers of wisdom, these Christian philosophers, was that expressed in a prayer of John Cassian, the great chronicler of their lives. The prayer goes simply this way: “O God, be all my love, all my hope, all my striving; let my thoughts and words flow from you, my daily life be in you, and every breath I take for you.” To have that prayer answered, and to live as it wishes we might live, is to have an extraordinary life, and it surely is to be wise, and not just clever.

Now there is a particular point I want to draw your attention to with respect to this way of looking at wisdom. It is the reason why cleverness or smartness or knowledge, at least by itself,

does not yield wisdom. It is because wisdom is a matter of living according to extraordinary and not common standards. If the standards in all cases were the same, then the game would in all likelihood go to the cleverest and the smartest. That is what it means to be clever or smart – you excel at what ordinary folks do ordinarily. But the difference between King Lear and his fool is something different. It is a matter of vision, a matter of what each thinks is important. So if you are smarter than anybody else about what is ordinary, it doesn't mean that you can see the extraordinary at all. In fact, you probably can't.

It is in this respect that I want us to understand something about the early Christian philosophers, those wild guys in the desert. They were not just a continuation of the Greek quest for wisdom; they weren't just more intense than Plato or Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius and that is all. Instead, they went beyond the common philosophical life just as the common philosophical life went beyond the life of the Roman citizen, even the most highly placed Roman citizen.

How? In each case, there is a different sense of greatness. The Roman citizen thinks greatness consists in power and reputation, in being able to get what you want, and to punish your enemies and reward your friends. The philosopher thinks greatness consists in living in harmony with the universe itself, even if that defies convention. And the Christian philosopher? Consider what Jesus says in the Gospel of Mark to see what she thinks is greatness.

In today's lesson, as Jesus and the disciples are walking along, the disciples fall into an argument about who was the greatest. Jesus upbraids them for doing so, and says, "Whoever wants to be first, must be last of all and servant of all." He points out welcoming children as something an important person does, and it was not something that most lords or important teachers would ever do. Apparently the disciples do not get his drift, however, for two days later, James and John come up to Jesus and ask him a favor. They want to sit at his right hand and his

left hand when he comes into glory. They have here a definite sense of what is important, and it is pretty clear that they have gotten it from the way kings and worldly lords behave. But Jesus tells them and all the disciples (who are bit angry that James and John beat them to the punch), that they are not to act like the rulers of the Gentiles, who lord it over everybody and who are tyrants. Rather, “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” He gives them a different sense of what is important. Knowing that is wisdom.

The Roman citizen’s, the American upwardly mobile citizen’s, view of greatness is usually something like power – power to get what you want, power to get others to serve so that you can be free from having to do things you don’t want. The philosopher’s view of greatness is higher and it involves a freedom from the oppression of the power mongering in the world. But the Christian philosopher’s view of greatness is simply that of service in imitation of its Lord who served. That is, of course, why James defines wisdom as involving peaceableness, gentleness, and willingness to yield, as well as being full of mercy. Christ’s wisdom is not a wisdom of power or of pride, but one that sees that service as what is most important.

Often Protestantism when looking at the early desert fathers and mothers, the early monks and nuns, does so with contempt. But remember that the reason the Reformers disliked monasticism was because it suggested that the Christian’s higher calling belonged only to a few and those few needed to be squirreled away in a monastery. The Reformers thought, on the contrary, that the Christian’s higher calling belonged to *everybody*; the point of the Reformation was to extend the calling to an extraordinary life to everybody.

That doesn’t mean that all of you are expected to head to the desert. But it does mean that

you are called to an extraordinary life of service with a different sense of what is great, and that you are called thereby to become wise – for wisdom is recognizing what is really valuable and what is not.

In a few minutes, as we end worship you can go out to the Georgetown Room and find a lot of tables offering a lot of opportunities to become wise. These are not requests for help, although if you do something, you will be helping. They really are opportunities, if you will get involved, to make something of yourself, to engage in a way of living, and are opportunities to learn a new way of wisdom. Go out and take them. Be wise, and in doing that be the sort of people and the sort of church that your Lord actually envisioned.