

Sermon by Rev. Allison J. Beaulieu  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
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## **Get Wisdom: Just Do It**

So, what do you think it means to be “wise”? Some of you brave people have ventured up to my office, which is an off-shoot of the youth room. Many of you stop to check out various cartoons I have hung on my wall. Most of them are from a website called “Revered Fun” which contains a bunch of cartoons designed specifically for pastors to laugh at amidst the serious work of praying, planning bible studies, going to meetings, and researching. My favorite cartoons usually involve one of two people: Zaccheus and Solomon. One of the funniest cartoons is a picture of Solomon holding a completed rubix cube, which was a popular mechanical puzzle in the early 80’s that intrigued and stumped most of the population, including me. In this cartoon, everyone is standing around Solomon in utter amazement. The caption reads, “This feat left no doubt as to Solomon’s wisdom.” Another cartoon shows Solomon with his head down on a table and bunch of older women screaming around him. It reads, “Although Solomon was the wisest man on earth he could not figure an easy solution for having hundreds of mother-in-laws.” Poor Solomon!

Although these cartoons are meant to make us laugh they do raise a serious issue that is echoed in our scripture reading—what does it mean to be “wise”? Does it mean that you are a genius at figuring out puzzles, like the rubix cube? Does it mean that you are a pro at your relationships with others, such as your in-laws? Well, let’s take a closer look at the text in James.

James writes that there are two kinds of wisdom, which he deems wisdom from above and wisdom from below. Wisdom from below is characterized by envy, selfish ambition, wickedness, and disorder. Wisdom from above, on the other hand is characterized by purity, peace, gentleness, willingness to yield, and mercy. When we read scripture like this—where there are lots of lists—it’s easy to get lost in the adjectives. If we were to tease out all those adjectives, we would be here way past Pittsburgh Steeler time! (And I know that’s just not an option!) So, let’s boil it down to

two—not to reduce the scripture by any means, but to take a closer look rather than a more general one. Let’s say that wisdom from below manifests in the form of arrogance and wisdom from above manifests in the form of humility.

When the Bible refers to “wisdom”, it does not mean intellectual brilliance or having an abundance of knowledge. Wisdom is knowing how to live according to God’s ways. “True wisdom is manifested in one’s [humble] conduct” (Frances Taylor Gench, *Hebrews and James*). Wisdom is a way of life that runs parallel to God’s will for us. Let me give you an example of the two different kinds of wisdom by referring to a movie many of you have probably seen: Jurassic Park, which was based on a book by Michael Crichton in the early 90’s. It was made into a super blockbuster movie by Steven Spielberg. In the movie, there is a super smart man, named John Hammond, who uses DNA obtained from a fossilized mosquito to create various species of dinosaurs. He then “plays God” and manipulates the DNA, thereby re-creating real dinosaurs, which he naively supposes he can contain in a sort of amusement park. Well, needless to say, the experiment goes terribly wrong at the exact time he is trying to get endorsements for his park. Moreover, a team of dinosaur experts and paleontologists along with the man’s grandchildren are caught in the Jurassic Park in the midst of a tropical storm. The storm shuts off the power to the park...and the electrical fences used to contain the human-eating dinosaurs. What follows is the type of drama and suspense that only Spielberg can deliver. For our purposes, John Hammond is of extreme importance. Here is a man of copious intellect who has defied the laws of biology and done something scientifically extraordinary. And yet, he lacks the wisdom to understand that this is literally a disaster waiting to happen. He was drunk with power, fueled by arrogance, and consumed with selfish ambition. His self-centeredness put innocent people at risk, along with his grandchildren.

Unfortunately, a lot of us are no different than John Hammond. The wisdom from below has saturated our culture and our hearts. Because of this we focus on our *own* wants and desires rather than *God’s* wants and desires (for us). This is where all that arrogance comes from. The thing that worries me most is not so much our arrogance but what it creates. Arrogance operates within a system of competition for scarce resources. In a consumerist culture, a person’s identity is reliant on what they possess and what they

can acquire. The more you have, the greater the possibility that it may feed into your sense of arrogance. The more we acquire, the more we move forward into self-aggrandizement and away from the humility that Jesus himself calls us to. We live in a world of limited resources and we are, therefore, “fundamentally in competition with each other. (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Interpreter’s Bible*) Wisdom from below tells us that we should compete for these resources, make as much money as we can, buy ourselves and our family more than our parents could have ever bought us, and succeed in all areas of our life –in our job, our family, all our commitments, etc. etc. And so we compete. We enter the race and we give it all our energy—everything we got.

How destructive is this mentality of competition? We don’t have to look any further than our own children. Jamie Lee Curtis wrote a children’s book based on a question her son, who is five, asked her, “Mommy, is there really a human race?” He goes on in the book to ask, “Is it going on now all over the place? When did it start? Who said “Ready, set, go”? Did it start on my birthday, I really must know. And on this page, there is a great picture of babies in the hospital nursery in all kinds of professional apparel—there’s a pro baseball player, a baby with an Oscar trophy, one dressed as a physician. This page is very telling of the expectations we put on our children as soon as they come into this world. As soon as they are born, we enter them into this competition. Her son goes on to ask, “Do some of us win? Do some of us lose? Is winning or losing something I choose? Why am I racing? What am I winning? Does all my running keep the world spinning?” And, then in this children’s book, comes a nugget of pure wisdom—and this time I am speaking about wisdom from above. This boy’s mommy stops all the questions and says, “Sometimes its better not to go fast. There are beautiful sights to be seen when you’re last. Shouldn’t it be that you just try your best? And that’s more important than beating the rest? Shouldn’t it be looking back at the end that you judge your own race by the help that you lend?”

Are you tired of competing in the human race? Are you tired of trying to be the best? Are you exhausted from trying to live up to someone else’s expectations of you? Are you worn out from trying to get what other people have and measuring your worth by the material things that you posses? Are you ready to throw in the towel? Than to use the famous Nike quotes “Just do it”. Pull yourself out of the rat race and ask God to help you

live with wisdom from above rather than wisdom from below. Ask God to give you a peaceful, humble heart rather than a competitive, arrogant spirit. Ask God that when you pray, you will not pray with selfish motives but with unselfish ones. Pray that you are granted the insight to know the difference between what you want to get ahead and what you truly need so that you can serve.

I wish I could tie up this sermon in a nice little package for you and tell you exactly what this scripture means and what we should do. The truth of the matter is that there are some challenging questions left for us such as “Is ambition always wrong?” “Does ‘willing to yield’ mean that God essentially wants us to be a doormat?” “Does boasting always stem from the wisdom of below—what if you are boasting in Christ Jesus?” “What is a ‘selfish’ prayer?” “What kind of competition is constructive and what kind of competition is destructive?” And, finally, “Isn’t competing in the rat race of life, to some degree, essential to our existence?” There are no easy questions and no easy answers. The wisdom from below and the wisdom from above are not always clear-cut to us. We are left to struggle with this passage and live in the ambiguity of it all.

And yet, even in the questions, there is good news. The good news is that we are in and among the audience to whom James is speaking. Here we are, people of God, trying to live in God’s ways, all the while stumbling and making bad choices and succumbing to the wisdom of this world. We are given grace. The wisdom of this present age does not have the last word. God’s wisdom will ultimately reign and we will live and abide in that wisdom eternally. And for those of you who are running the race—engrossed in the competition of it all—know that God made each one of us and loves us—the winners, the losers, even the ones who never finish. That’s the good news. Stay humble, my friends, and pray for God’s wisdom—do it for our children’s sake—maybe in our foolishness we will teach them how to be wise (Anna Carter Florence from sermon, “Bread on the Water”).