# True Wisdom

Will Fitzgerald  
Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship  
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One of the things I think about is wisdom, and what it is.

You might be surprised to know there is a tiny field of computer science called “computational wisdom,” or “artificial sapience.” I was glancing at a paper in this field the other day, and the paper distinguished among data, information, knowledge, and wisdom. Data are the raw facts — here are these shopping lists, and what people are looking for. Information is the recognition of relationships seen in the data — apples and bananas often appear on the same shopping lists! Knowledge is the discovery of rule patterns — if people are shopping for apples, they’re more likely to be shopping for bananas (and vice versa). And wisdom — the end of the data/information/knowledge/wisdom chain — is applied knowledge — Hey! I can increase sales if I put apples and bananas together!

Yes, I’m afraid it’s true what you’ve heard — computer science is now largely concerned with figuring out how to sell you more stuff. In other words, in Jeff Hammerbacher’s words, “The best minds of my generation are thinking about how to make people click ads.”

James asks the same question in his letter. “Who is wise and understanding among you?”, he asks. In fact, I think he’s asking it a bit sarcastically; I think the church he’s writing to has a lot of people who want to be seen as teachers, and he’s warning them that being a teacher, being a speaker is a risky and dangerous business, as we read in last week’s Scripture (James 3:1-12). But this helps us on our quest for understanding what true wisdom is, because James goes on to tell us what it is, and what it is not. Or more precisely, he first says what wisdom looks like, what it doesn’t look like, and then returns to what it looks like.

What does wisdom look like? First, James says that, if you are truly wise, you will show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. In other words, wisdom will show itself acted out in what we do. When we do the right things, the good things, and do this in gentleness, we are showing our wisdom. For James, remember what pure religion is, “to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world,” to show no partiality to those who are rich, to endure temptations and trials patiently, to be generous, to not speak evil against your brothers or sisters, to be modest in what we predict we can do on our own, to pray and care for the sick. These are the acts of a wise person.

In contrast, James shows us what wisdom is not like — “But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth.” Remembering that he is especially talking to those who want to be called teachers and leaders, he reminds us we are not to seek out our own advancement.

We all know this kind of wisdom. That is, the kind of so-called wisdom that helps us get on and achieve more in our occupations and relationships. Think about such proverbs as “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” “It is better to be feared than loved, if you can’t have both,” “Be careful how you treat people on your way up; you may need them on your way down.” This kind of wisdom is about *power*, how to get it and how to maintain it. We see someone else’s power, and we envy it. We see someone else’s power and we seek to get it for ourselves. We get power, and we boast that we have. We get power, and we lie to keep it.

Wisdom about getting and keeping power is a kind of wisdom, but James reveals its true nature: it is “earthly, unspiritual, devilish.” In other words, at its best, this worldly wisdom is just what we can achieve on our own, in our own earthly and unspiritual ways. The word, “unspiritual” here, might literally be translated as “psychological,” meaning (I think) fitting to our psyches on their own, without respect to God. At its worst, this worldly wisdom is demonic, inspired by the worst spiritual urges we have, to use our powers to crush and harm others, leading to “disorder and wickedness of every kind.”

After wading through this muck of worldly wisdom, James returns again to a description of good wisdom, godly wisdom; or, as he calls it, “wisdom from above.”

This wisdom is “pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

Pure, here, I think means “distinct,” unstained (as we said earlier) by the taint of the world. Pure wisdom works in pursuit of discovering how to achieve the goals of true religion we mentioned earlier. It is peaceable and gentle, not only in what it is trying to achieve, but in how it tries to achieve it. If we can’t be peaceable while trying to achieve peace, we are being foolish, not wise. As God’s light shines through us, we don’t need to achieve our goals harshly; we live in gentleness and peace with those around us. What do we need to conquer others, when we know that Jesus is already Lord of All? Why do we need to pursue ambition when, as Paul says, we already “shine like stars”?

Similarly we can be “willing to yield.” James means, I think, that we should be open to reason, apt to listen to what other’s have to say, open to persuasion. Now, I believe that all truth is God’s truth, and we should be open to however God is speaking that to us. With our faith in God, we don’t have to worry about the dangerous and risky task of taking other ideas seriously. Indeed, I try to enter every conversation with an attitude of what I can learn from the person I’m talking to — willing to yield, open to persuasion — rather than trying to earn debating points.

Finally, James says this wisdom should be “full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” He returns to his themes — wisdom is shown by how we act in trying to live out our lives of true religion, which is merciful, fruitful, impartial, and sincere.

I hope these words of James’ and my words have been helpful in understanding a bit better what true wisdom is. It’s a deep, deep subject. I think about the other lectionary passages we read this morning (Proverbs 31, Jeremiah 11:18-20, Mark 9:30-37) — how the “Proverbs wife” shows wisdom in the way she cares for her household, how Jeremiah showed a road of suffering, and Jesus walked that road, and declared his wisdom for getting ahead in his kingdom, which is not of this world: “Whoever would be greatest must be the least and servant of all.”

But perhaps it is a start. What ways is God showing you the path to wisdom?