

**SERMON TITLE:** "Last Things First"

**TEXT:** Mark 9:30-37; James 3:13-4:3

**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Last week we began a three-week foray into the theme of "wisdom" based in part on the lectionary readings from the book of James.

(We are looking at other Scriptures as well, but James will be a consistent thread that runs through these three weeks.)

A reminder: Wisdom literature is fundamentally practical in nature.

We are not in the realm of heavy-duty theology or doctrine here. Rather, wisdom literature in Scripture is concerned with a very basic question—a question that has occupied human beings for as long as we have been around to think about such things:

***What is the best way for a human being to live?***

This is about as basic a question as you could hope to ask—and it is asked and answered in a wide variety of ways every day, explicitly and implicitly, by every human being on the planet who has the capacity to reflect upon their lives.

Some spend more time and effort on the question than others; some come to more elaborate and interesting conclusions than others; some answer this question only in the negative—explaining or justifying why they are not presently living as they feel they ought to.

However we approach it, this is a question that is basic to what it means to be a human being.

But is James, in particular, or wisdom literature in general really just about how life "works best?"

Is it kind of like saying, "rather than focusing on all that doctrine and belief stuff, just concentrate on how you live?"

Is wisdom literature just good advice? Is it just a collection of strategies and behaviours that have proven *useful* to this or that community over the years?

Many people certainly think so, as I discovered again this week.

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Perhaps perversely, I have long been drawn to reading angry critiques of Christianity.

A few years ago, I spent my Masters thesis reading and writing about a very angry collection of atheists who were very eager to dismantle religious belief. Ever since then, I have kept a file of popular critiques of God, religion, Christianity, etc.

This week, I came across another one. Some of you may have heard the name Francis Schaeffer. He was the founder of the L'Abri community in Switzerland (kind of like retreat or study centres which began in Switzerland and are now operating in many other countries), a hero of many twentieth century evangelicals, and a pretty famous apologist for Christianity.

His son's name is Frank. Frank has taken a bit of a different path—at least recently. He has written a number of books that are quite scathingly critical of his father and his father's Christian belief (i.e., *Crazy for God* and *Patience with God*). His biography on one website described him as "a survivor of both polio and fundamentalist evangelical Christianity."

Unlike his father who spent a lifetime *defending* Christianity, Frank has carved out a bit of a niche for himself *criticizing* Christians—at least, Christians of a very particular sort, namely, Christians who aren't like him, people who are obsessed with what Schaeffer calls "fact based religion."

Here's some of what Schaeffer had to say in an article called "The Deadly Cost of Worshiping the Bible Instead of God":

The problem is that this approach to faith... flies in the face of all the rest of human experience... Life is lived on an experiential plain that has less to do with coming up with the right formulations than with passing on wisdom gained by our experience...

In reality church for most folks is about community, family and continuity rather than about believing the ideas spouted from the pulpit. For most people the truth is that sitting through sermons is the passport to the coffee hour when the real business of church is conducted in conversations with family and old friends.

Most things we do have a human community reasons for doing them rather than an ideological or theological "reason." I go to church because of my grandchildren. I enjoy taking them to the liturgy. But I'm fortunate because the liturgy I take them to the Greek Orthodox service that revolves around doing of liturgical practice rather than talking about belief systems. What you believe isn't the point. Showing up is. We light candles, take communion, make the sign of the cross, and kiss icons. The comfort I derive from these inane rituals is much the same as the comfort I get from gardening....

**Faith is about finding contexts where we feel comfortable and where we don't have to constantly question ourselves on our motives or how we feel about the "facts" or if we "believe" this or that. Instead we just are.<sup>1</sup>**

Well. It's certainly an interesting view about wisdom and belief and the (lack of) connection between the two!

Is Mr. Schaeffer right? Is wisdom really just about trial and error and learning as we go? Is belief really irrelevant? Is faith really about "finding contexts where we feel comfortable" and where we don't have to "question ourselves" about what we believe and why?

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Let's see what James has to say.

In our text today, James contrasts two kinds of wisdom: wisdom that "comes from heaven" and wisdom that is "earthly," "unspiritual," and "demonic."

Heavenly wisdom:

- pure (3:17)
- peaceable (3:17)
- gentle (3:17)
- willing to yield (3:17)
- full of mercy and good fruit (fruit of the spirit?) (3:17)
- without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy (3:17)
- result: a "harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace" (3:18)

"Earthly wisdom":

- envy (3:14; 16)
- selfish ambition (3:14)
- cravings at war within us (4:1)
- covetousness, conflict (4:2)

Frank Schaeffer tells us not to worry about beliefs and to just pay attention to the accumulated wisdom of human experience.

But one of the questions that occurred to me as I held these lists beside each other this week was this: Is the wisdom James describes as "heavenly" the sort of thing that could just be picked up by experience?

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-schaeffer/the-deadly-cost-of-worshi\\_b\\_1892812.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/frank-schaeffer/the-deadly-cost-of-worshi_b_1892812.html)

Would experience teach us that being merciful, gentle, pure, and willing to yield is the best way to live in our world?

I'm not so sure. Our culture may pay lip service to these traits, but in fact, it seems that we reward their exact opposite.

Whether in the world of business, or academia, or even in the world of relationships, more often than not, it is those who measure out mercy very carefully who get ahead.

Purity is mocked as archaic and repressive. Gentleness is a good way to get walked all over.

"Be ambitious," we are told, "even selfish" (to a point)! "You deserve it!"

"If you want something, go get it. If it leads to conflict, so be it! Cravings exist to be satisfied not resisted!"

If you doubt any of this, have a look at prime-time television (including advertising!) to see what we value, admire, and reward as a culture.

**If we were to look exclusively to experience for our wisdom, I think we would be drawn to what James labels "earthly wisdom."**

**But**, perhaps we aren't convinced. Perhaps we think that even if James lays it on a bit thicker than most, there are plenty of people out there who are gentle, peaceable, etc, and who have no formal connection to Jesus or to his church.

In our second reading from the gospel of Mark, Jesus takes us even further than James.

We are in the context of an argument. Jesus' disciples are fighting about which one of them was the greatest. They were acting according to conventional wisdom—trying to get ahead, to position themselves according to accepted patterns, power structures, and value judgments.

How does Jesus respond?

Mark 9:35: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

This is not "discovered" wisdom. This is not the fruit of years of human trial and error, and gradual learning, etc.

This isn't an obvious way to get ahead in life or to win power and status and influence.

**This is a way of live *revealed, by God, in the person of Jesus Christ.***

And, the testimony of those who have embraced the pattern of Jesus, the true wisdom of God, is that this is the way to peace and wholeness—with God, with creation, with the world.

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But, despite our admiration of this wisdom, we often don't seem to trust it—even in the church!

We explain Jesus' wisdom away. We are very good at this!

Nearly every week I come across impressive looking invitations to Christian conferences and workshops and leadership seminars. I am enthusiastically encouraged to sign up to learn motivational strategies, communication skills, and how to manage group dynamics.

The leaders of these workshops and conferences often have a long string of letters behind their names and have written multiple books. They are often wearing power suits and have very shiny white teeth and big smiles. They are "experts" who are admired for their knowledge, their power, their ambition.

But it's not just the experts.

Even ordinary Christians like you and me can find it very easy to get trapped in the mentality that bigger and newer and flashier and more efficient and that more power and influence is better.

We can find it easy to pursue the methods and the goals of the upwardly mobile, whether in our jobs, in our churches, or in our relationships.

Often, we don't seem to trust that the way of Jesus is the best way to live in our world.

We certainly admire it. We may even long for it. But it's not practical, and it's difficult. So we avoid it.

G.K. Chesterton famously said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

This past Thursday, I attended a lecture at the University of Lethbridge. The speaker's name was Izzeldin Abuelaish and his story was a truly remarkable one.

He was born in Palestinian refugee camp and had worked his way out, becoming the first Palestinian medical doctor to hold a position at an Israeli hospital.

In 2009, during the Gaza War, an Israeli bomb took the lives of three of his daughters and one of his nieces.

Mr. Abuelaish made headlines around the world for refusing to respond with hatred, and for continuing to work to promote reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis.

In honour of his three daughters, he established a foundation called "Daughters for Life" which is focused on the education of girls and women from the Middle East.

Abuelaish believes that the education of girls is vital for the future of our world, for a future of peace. Women hold the key to the future, he said. At one point, he said "women are the only hope for our world."

It was a strong message—perhaps some of the men in the room grew a bit uncomfortable at this point.

But then he asked a question: how have men been doing in leading the world? What have been the fruits of several millennia of almost exclusively male leadership in our world? Violence and war.

Even if women didn't do better, could they possibly do worse?

***What might the future look like if women were entrusted with leadership?***

It was an interesting question, to be sure.

Throughout the rest of the week, as I thought about the lecture and as I continued to reflect on our texts today, I found myself thinking about a similar question:

***What might the future look like if followers of Jesus were to really and truly embrace the wisdom of Christ instead of the wisdom of the world?***

What might our relationships and our families look like if followers of Jesus were gentle, pure, peaceable?

What might our churches and schools and workplaces look like if followers of Jesus refused to be guided by selfish craving and competition, if there was no trace of partiality or hypocrisy to be found, if we were willing to yield rather than demanding that our voices be heard and our interests served?

What might our world look like today if, for the last two millennia and going into the future, followers of Jesus believed that Jesus really meant what he said in Mark 9:35?

***Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.***

What would the world look like if the church consistently practiced the wisdom of Christ?

Perhaps more importantly, *how* might the church do this?

This is where we get back to Frank Schaeffer and his call to just forget about beliefs and focus on experience.

The way of Jesus shows us that beliefs matter. What we believe to be true about reality matters. A lot.

We cannot live according to the wisdom of Christ if we do not embrace that Jesus is telling us the truth about how the world works best.

About how *human lives* work best.

**If Jesus isn't telling us the truth about what God is like, about what the kingdom of God is like, about what *reality* is like, then living like Jesus in the world isn't really very wise.**

**If Jesus is wrong about reality, then the wisdom of James 3 is just plain foolish.**

The truth of the matter, *matters*.

This past week one of my former professors from Regent College put out a "tweet" to preachers everywhere:

Preachers: Problem or Payoff. Either help me with something wrong or show me what could be better. Don't just tell me truth: Ho hum.

I have a lot of respect for this man. I have read many of his books and taken a handful of his classes. But here, I think he is dead wrong.

The task of preaching is to tell the truth, whether it is deemed to be ho hum or inspiring. Whether it is considered to have an immediate or obvious "practical payoff" or not.

The truth matters because what we believe shows up in how we behave.

The truth matters because we hear a lot of lies everyday about who we are and what we are for.

The truth matters because we were created for the truth and because truth is the way to life.

The truth matters because we do not automatically know the best way to live, because we chase after all kinds of false paths, and because we need to be shown the road that is best.

This is the truth—and with these words, I close. From the Apostle Paul (written to the church in Corinth):

<sup>26</sup> Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> **But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.** <sup>28</sup> **God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,** <sup>29</sup> **so that no one may boast before him.** <sup>30</sup> It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

May God help us to embrace this foolishness, this weakness, this lowly and despised way as the truest and wisest way for a human being to live.

Amen.