

Being wise in political engagement

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It's not always easy knowing or discerning what the extent and nature of our political engagement as followers of Jesus should be; even more so, it's hard practicing what we know. There are so many factors to consider. For example: What obligations do we have as citizens of this republic? To what extent should we be involved? How passionately? And how do we factor in the truth that we are also citizens of heaven; and more *fundamentally* citizens of heaven? What do I mean by that - *fundamentally*? I mean while it's true that we are both citizens of the US and citizens of heaven, our first allegiance is to our God and not to our country. In fact, our country doesn't even get priority over our church family. And when is it ok to serve as an instrument of the state? Can I be a state executioner of those found guilty of murder? Can I be an operator of a drone aircraft that drops bombs in Afghanistan? Can I be a debt collector for the IRS?

These things are not easy to discern. Something that I have been convicted by is my need for wisdom. I need the wisdom of God to help me process how I ought to live in relation to the ways in which the state impacts and influences my life. That's what this sermon is about this morning; my prayer is that we would see in God's word what true wisdom looks like so that we are wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

I'm going to try to avoid pointing fingers in this sermon; I'd invite you to do the same. There's a part of me that wants to; I want to point fingers at politicians and state officials to wise up. But, guess what I become when I point fingers: self-righteous; my master wants me to care more about my own ugly self-righteousness than other people's foolishness. I don't want to go there. What's more important is to point the thumb at myself. Because here's the deal: as wise or as foolish, as insightful or as silly those around us may be (even those in power), our God calls us to clothe ourselves with his wisdom. And we can be wise even in the midst of a foolish and crooked generation. So, yes, while what we will learn today may help us consider if a particular presidential hopeful is wise giving us a better understanding if they should get our vote, let's make our earnest prayer to grow in wisdom ourselves.

I don't think we give wisdom its due; I think we should bump God's wisdom from icing on the cake to the meat and potatoes of the Christian life. Wisdom herself tells us in Proverbs 8 (vs. 10-11), "Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is better than jewels and all that you may desire cannot compare with her." In mid-January the Powerball jackpot reached \$1.5B. It was big news. (PIC) Here's the line outside a store on the border between California and Nevada on January 9. People drove hours upon hours, they crossed state lines to play the powerball. The odds of winning are 292 million to 1. If I'm understanding Prov. 8 correctly, that's the kind of passion the people of God should have for wisdom. We should want it and look for it like desperate Americans looking for a \$1.5B jackpot.

What's better? The Bible tells us; I pray that makes you hungry for wisdom and our passage today.

Turn with me to James 3 (READ vs. 13ff). You can see from the opening verse that James' plan is to describe and define a wise person. That's the aim of this passage; let's learn who is wise. He summarizes the answer in the second half of vs.13; "By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." That's what wisdom looks like, James says. There are two parts to wisdom. The first thing we learn about wisdom is that it concerns itself with good behavior or conduct. By his good conduct let him show his works. This is incredibly important to consider: wisdom is not about what you know, but what you do. Banish from your mind, my dear brothers and sisters, that wisdom is about having theological insight or knowledge, that wisdom is about having keen perspective or a sharp mind. You need some of that to be wise, but it's not enough. Wisdom is about doing the right that you know you ought to do. Wisdom is discerning the right course of action and then actually doing it.

Don't be a cerebral Christian. Cerebral Christians don't exist. Christians are not those who know the right information about God, who know what following Jesus looks like, but who don't follow! Christians actually do that which they know to do. The rich young ruler knew he ought to leave everything to follow Jesus, but he wouldn't. And James echoes this truth throughout his book; you may remember his famous line from a chapter earlier (James 2:26), "For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead."

Wisdom is found in what we do. That I obey the government, that I regularly read my Bible, that I pay the taxes I owe, that I love my neighbor is the measuring stick of wisdom. So, let me ask you: Are you wise? Some of you are not. Not because you don't know better, but because you don't do better. You know (Prov. 26:4), "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself," but that doesn't stop you from entering into foolish, unfruitful, ungodly political debates.

The second thing we learn is that wisdom is not merely doing the right thing, but doing the right thing the right way. He says wisdom is shown in our good conduct "in the meekness of wisdom." So, put those two things together: wisdom is what I do and how I do it (REPEAT). Wisdom is doing the good I ought to do, but doing so in a humble, meek manner. You're not wise if you actually practice what God says, but do so proudly or boastfully. Think about that. Why is that the case? Why does the manner in which I do the right I'm supposed to do matter? Why must you and I do the good works of wisdom and also do them humbly? I'm paying my taxes, I'm obeying the laws, I'm apply the principles of healthy relationships found in scriptures, I'm delighting in the wife of my youth and not chasing the forbidden woman, I'm doing everything the Bible says a wise person does; why does it matter how I do those things? Humility or meekness show my understanding of my place - my place in relationship with God; my place in relationship with others. The foundation of wisdom isn't merely doing what God commands (though that is wise to do), but knowing why I do them (because of who he is, because of who I am in relation to him and to others.) That's all about humility and meekness.

Prov. 1:7 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." Humility and meekness are at the heart of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is precisely that which produces humility of heart in me and then a gentle, meek disposition towards others. Without it, I have no wisdom.

Notice the contrast to wisdom in vs. 14, which, of course, is a foolish life (READ). A foolish life stems from bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. That's about ungodly desires. Wanting what doesn't belong to you - jealousy; wanting things, fame, recognition, wealth for your own purposes and your own present rewards - selfish ambition.

The Bible labels the desires that flow naturally out of our hearts in negative terms. They're not good. Jesus said out of the heart of a man or a woman come evil desires. Certainly, it's the case that we can have good, godly desires; in fact, we're commanded to have godly desires. The psalmists says, "As the deer pants for water, so my soul pants for you, Oh God." That happens, but it happens only by the disciplines of grace. We don't naturally want God or the things of God. We only want God when we are trained by grace. Apart from grace the desires that we have are jealousy and selfish ambition. Take a peak at 4:1-2 (READ). Where do sin, fights and quarrels come from? They come from our desires; our passions.

We live in a passionate world. What I mean by that is we do much of our living based on how we feel and what we want. How many times have you justified or explained a decision by saying, "This *feels* right; this is what my heart wants." We even have teachers of God who encourage this kind of decision making; follow your heart, listen to your desires. The argument usually goes something like this: when you were born again, God gave you a new heart with new desires. So now, as Christians, you can trust your desires to lead you to a good place. You won't find that teaching in the Bible. The error of this teaching is the error of an over realized eschatology. Now, what in the world does that mean? The problem with that line of thinking is failing to see that when we are born again we are not yet liberated from the brokenness and sinfulness of our flesh that constantly is looking to be satisfied by the things of the earth. Being saved does not instantly change our desires; we oftentimes still want the wrong thing. Why is that? Because we live in between worlds; the coming age has appeared, but the present age hasn't yet passed away. It's the already, but not yet. I already have a new heart, but my desires have not yet been made pure. I already have a new desire for God; but my earthly desires have not yet been trained. That's why we need the training of grace. There's a reason why Paul says in 1 Cor. 9 that he beats his body into submission; otherwise, he won't have the discipline or stamina to complete the work has called him to complete; his desires will lead him astray. And that's why you never, ever hear the Bible encourage followers of Jesus to make decision based on their feelings or on their wants even if you're saved.

I'd humbly say to you, my dear brothers and sisters, do not listen to teaching that encourages you to listen and to trust your desires and feelings. Trust the sure word of God; it's a lamp to your feet and a light to your path and put your feelings and desires in submission to that which you know is right and good from the scriptures.

If foolishness is the pursuit of selfish desires and being boastful in what you think you know, then there's good application here to political engagement. As you seek to wisely contribute and participate in the political process, examine your desires? What's guiding your actions? Is it the good of others with a humble spirit? Or, is your political participation, your voting, your discussions and debates motivated by selfish ambition and bitter jealousy? I want more than I have, therefore, I'm going to vote this way! I don't like that so-n-so has more than me so I'm going to do this and that! I don't like being wrong, therefore I'm going to win this debate at all costs! Wise living (wise voting, wise political engagement) is about good conduct; it's about working and serving the good of others. It's about a humility of spirit that is slow on making demands, slow on making strong conclusions and denunciations without examining all the facts and without proper self-examination. And also (I said I wouldn't go here much, but let's do so now), am I voting for people like that? Who's getting your support? The one who has terrible conduct and doesn't have a meek bone in his or her body (but I like his or her policies), or the one who looks like they exhibit godly wisdom?

Now, before we get practical and look at James' list defining a wise person, notice vs. 15 (READ). James brings a level of sobriety to the discussion with this verse. Lest you think a discussion on wisdom and foolishness is a matter of little concern, James provides helpful correction. This foolishness that's motivated by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition comes from the pit of hell. It's demonic. It's not inconsequential. It's a big deal, friends. Don't be foolish! Be wise! The difference between the two is the difference between a life led and governed by the Holy Spirit versus one led by the Devil himself.

How do we know such foolishness is demonic? That's vs. 16. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. That's what Satan produces. Chaos. Anarchy. Ungodly behavior and actions. That's the result of a life moved by jealousy and selfish ambition; that's where a life of ungodly desires goes. This is a big deal.

James gets practical in vs. 17-18; he just spells out what wisdom looks like. Or maybe it's better stated: what wisdom does. Remember, wisdom is action. Wisdom is conduct. So, what is that? Here's the list of qualities or actions of a wise person

- pure
- gentle
- full of mercy and good fruits
- produces a harvest of righteousness in peace
- peaceable
- open to reason
- impartial and sincere

Let's just walk through this list.

Pure: Pure means blameless and innocent. This is the essence of good conduct, right? Your behavior is free from impurity and sin. You might say this word summarizes the entire list; everything underneath this is what it means to be pure. That's why James says wisdom from above (so, notice, true wisdom is a gift from God) is *first* pure.

Peaceable: Peace is a theme in this section. Look at vs. 18; the harvest of righteousness (that means, good works) comes from a life of peace by peace-loving people. Wise people seek to live at peace with others. You can't live at peace when you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, can you? Over these next few months until November, look for ways to build peace with people in political discussions. Care more about peace than proving yourself right!

Gentle: Wise people are gentle. They are not harsh and demeaning; they are not rude or insulting (just consider the name calling by presidential hopes; it's embarrassing. Let's not join that party). Tough is not the opposite of gentleness. You can be both tough and gentle; in fact, every Christian dad needs to learn how to be both tough and gentle. The opposite of gentle is mean-spirited and harsh; that's not what a wise person is like.

Open to reason: This quality jumps out to me when talking about politics. Why does openness to reason vanish in political discussions. We see this quality lacking in those seeking office, but don't worry about them so much. Worry more about yourself. Why aren't *you* open to reason? Imagine having a political discussion this afternoon about presidential candidates or policy issues; you're talking with people who disagree with you. Are you open to reason? Are you willing to consider; are you easily persuaded to the truth wherever it leads and wherever it comes from? Not a lot of us have that kind of humility, but we should.

Full of mercy and good fruits: These two go together because the qualifier "full" is goes with both. Full of mercy; full of good fruits. Remember, wisdom isn't about being right; it's about being good. And what's better (what's more like God) than being merciful to others.

Impartial and sincere: Wise people are genuine and true in all circumstances. Even if we are in relations to a good friend or an enemy, it's right to show no partiality and to be sincere and true in what we say.

Look back again at vs. 13 and hear the call: Who is wise and understanding among you? It's a question, but it's also an invitation. It reminds me of lady wisdom's call in Prov. 9 (vs. 5-6), "Come, eat my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight." Friends, may our political engagements be wise. Focused on good works in a gentle, humble spirit that looks to find peace with others. In doing so, we will please God.

Key verse: James 3:17 ~ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

Small Group Questions

Sermon Series: In God We Trust

Feb. 21, 2016 ~ Wisdom: the people of God in political engagement

1. Can you name any foolish things you've seen (or done) related to politics? What ways are we tempted to act foolishly in times like this?
2. What was the most impactful word you heard this morning in the sermon?
3. Someone read Prov. 8:10-11; how would you summarize the point the wisdom writer is making? What steps should you take to find wisdom? Why don't you?
4. Where is wisdom found? Read 1 Cor. 1:30-31 for a hint. Who is our wisdom according to vs. 30? So, where (or *in whom*) do we find wisdom? What difference should this make?
5. Read James 3:13-18 together as a group and discuss the following questions.
 - a. Have you ever thought of wisdom as "good conduct?" Why is that important and how is that different than *knowing* the right thing?
 - b. How does learning that foolishness is demonic change your thoughts or actions (vs. 15)? How might that impact our search for wisdom?
 - c. Do you ever wonder if your desires or motives are pure? What are ways we can discern or judge our desires so they are blameless rather than selfish or motivated by jealousy?
 - d. What qualities or actions of wisdom from vs. 17-18 would you like more of? How come?
6. How might the temptations towards jealousy and selfish ambition impact our political thoughts and engagement? It might be easy for us to see that in others; how about ourselves?
7. Peace is a significant theme in James 3. How should this emphasis of peace and being peace-loving people impact our political engagement and discussions?
8. Name some areas of concern related to the upcoming election that you feel the church needs the wisdom of God.
9. What prayer requests do you have because of what you've heard from James 3?