

Wisdom works: James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

The crucified and resurrected Christ becomes the standard against which to measure all accounts of wisdom.

by [Stephen E. Fowl](#) in the [September 19, 2006](#) issue

What is the point of pursuing wisdom? Well, to become wise. That is, wisdom is its own end, or its own reward. This sort of answer may suffice for philosophers (those who are “lovers of wisdom”), but James has other ideas. There are at least two respects in which James and other Christians might think differently about wisdom.

The first is that wisdom is not solely a contemplative attainment, but must manifest itself in particular actions. The wise person does not demonstrate wisdom primarily by thinking wise thoughts or uttering wise sayings. Rather, he or she lives a life punctuated by “deeds of gentleness born of wisdom.” James elaborates on this by noting that the wisdom from above is “pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits.” Moreover, wisdom is linked with the activity of peacemaking, which yields “a harvest of righteousness.” Although he does not say it quite this way, one can imagine James saying, “Wisdom without works (of a certain kind) is dead (or, not real wisdom).”

It is also striking to note how similar the works of wisdom are to the characteristics of love as Paul lays them out in 1 Corinthians 13. Both love in that chapter and wisdom in James are marked by practices that restore and deepen relationships between believers. Mercy, peacemaking and the willingness to yield all operate in situations of conflict or potential conflict. These are the dispositions and practices that keep our relationships in good working order and help to repair them when they break. Indeed, one might even say that gentleness, mercy and peacemaking are practices that characterize God’s action in reconciling all things to God in Christ.

It is not surprising that James moves from a discussion of wisdom to an examination of the sources of conflicts and disputes among believers. He locates conflict and

discord in the frustration of desire and says that not only do we suffer from frustrated desires, desires are at war within us.

Contrary to some popular misconceptions, Christians are not opposed to desire and desires. Scripture manifests a rich vocabulary of desire: “My soul thirsts for God”; “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness”; “I press on to grab hold of that for which Christ first grabbed hold of me.” Of course, there is also the Song of Songs. No, the problem is not desire but, as James rightly sees, the problem is the objects we desire, how we order our desires, and the motives we have in pursuing them. According to James, we are a mass of conflicting desires, each one screaming for priority and action. Such inner conflicts lead to conflict and discord in our relations with others. How could it be otherwise? Given what James has said so far, then, one of wisdom’s proper roles concerns the shaping and ordering of our desires.

In the light of James’s discussion of the works of wisdom, we have good reason to think that our desires are being rightly shaped and ordered if our relationships with our brothers and sisters are in good working order, and if we are eager and able to repair them when they suffer damage. This will result in lives that are peaceable, gentle and merciful.

There is a second issue for Christians to consider regarding wisdom, one that ties in more directly with the Gospel reading. From the very earliest days of the church, Christians have recognized that their notions of wisdom were in competition with other notions of wisdom. Thus, although nobody in the first century or today would be opposed to wisdom, one might expect some profound disagreements about what constitutes wisdom and wise action.

In the Gospel reading Jesus introduces the issue that is the linchpin of all Christian accounts of wisdom: the cross. What Jesus fleetingly introduces, Paul later makes into a theme. The cross is the central moment at which the wisdom of God is displayed against the wisdom of the world. Christ’s true wisdom is self-giving, self-offering obedience to God for the benefit of others. Like the Corinthians to whom Paul wrote, the disciples seem unable to grasp this as anything like wisdom. As it turns out, their desires and hopes have been shaped in ways that make it impossible for them to see the cross and resurrection as the fitting climax to God’s dealings with the world.

This becomes more pronounced in the second part of the reading from Mark. The disciples have been arguing about who among them is greatest. Interestingly, Jesus does not rebuke them for aspiring to greatness. Indeed, his remarks seem to encourage such aspirations and desires. The problem comes from the fact that apart from understanding the cross, it is impossible to understand how becoming the last of all and a servant of all constitutes greatness. The wisdom of the cross is the same wisdom that is capable of welcoming a child in Christ's name. Too often Christians appear to view greatness just as everyone else does. Power and wealth become the defining characteristics of those the churches hold up as great. Those who welcome the children are generally invisible.

The crucified and resurrected Christ becomes the standard against which to measure all accounts of wisdom. As often as we fail to grasp this we will lack the wisdom needed for shaping and regulating our desires for greatness or anything else. As James indicates, such a failure will lead to conflicts and disputes with others, while robbing us of resources for resolving those disputes peaceably. Most significantly, we will not be capable of properly welcoming those children whom Christ sends into our lives and may thereby lose the ability to welcome God.