

The Peaceful Wisdom of a Godly Heart

a sermon

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James 3:13–4:3, 7–8a

Maybe it's been this way for awhile. But have you noticed that there are so many new movies and TV shows that are remakes or reboots or sequels of something older?

I sure have.

Star Wars.

Star Trek.

Murphy Brown.

Roseanne (well, until it wasn't).

Jurassic Park.

Spider-Man.

Superman.

Batman.

Oh, man!

Yeah, this is not new. Remakes and sequels are at least as old as *Rocky II*. Oh yeah, there is *The Last Remake of Beau Geste*, which came out two years before *Rocky II*. The movie buffs among you can probably name even earlier ones.

But lately it seems that much of everything is a repackaging of something that has a proven record of success.

Now, with some of these “franchises” (a term that makes me vaguely queasy), you'll find legions of fans with strong opinions on which version or which episode or *which-ever* is the best. These strong opinions get hashed out ad-infinity ad-nauseum online, and occasionally seem to rise in volume and intensity to the level of a holy war.

(Of course, the rest of us, the non-fans, we just don't care.)

(Don't tell them. It might hurt their feelings.)

Often the disagreement will come down to different understandings of what genuinely represents the heart of the story, its essence, its central meaning. For those who love the original, nothing else can come close.

My son, Jonathan, feels this way about books and movies, as his almost absolutely consistent experience with movies based on books is that the movies are a disappointment. He even has a T-shirt that says: “The Book Was Better.”

To many in the know about the original, everything else is a shadow of the real deal. All other versions are pretenders. Their flaws betray the purity and goodness of the original.



In the Bible verses I just read, I think I see a similar rejection of pretenders and counterfeits. But this isn't about something as trivial as TV shows and movies. Instead, it's about *wisdom*.

James tells us that there are different kinds of wisdom. And the thing with these varieties of wisdom:

they are not all the same;
they are not all equally valid;
one is not just as good as all the others.

Instead, for James, there is wisdom from above, and there is wisdom from below.

There is wisdom that comes from God, and there is wisdom that comes from what is opposed to God.

There is the real deal. And there's the bad deal.

And the difference between one kind of wisdom and the other is seen in the behaviors of those who adhere to and are shaped by these various kinds of wisdom. Just by looking at how people act, and watching what they do, and listening to what they say and how they say it, you can tell not only whether they are wise, but what kind of wisdom they follow.

*Who is wise and understanding among you?
Show by your good life
that your works are done with gentleness
born of wisdom (James 3:13).*

Now, what was so troubling to James is that he knew of people in the church, Christian people, who claimed to have wisdom, but whose wisdom was clearly from below.

They were schemers.

They were connivers.

They plotted and gossiped.

They were driven by envy and fear.

Their values were selfish and their vision was short sighted.

*[I]f you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts,
do not be boastful and false to the truth.*

*Such wisdom does not come down from above,
but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.*

*For where there is envy and selfish ambition,
there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind (James 3:14–16).*

For them, wisdom was a skill you used to get ahead and stay there.

For them, wisdom was an instrument for securing your place in the world and navigating your way successfully through it.

For them, the same tools for dominance they learned outside of church, before they came to faith in Jesus, were perfectly acceptable to use inside the church, after they had confessed his name and had been baptized and had become part of the community of faith.

For them, the highest values were success and security and victory, even or especially when it came to living as Christians.

James saw this as proof that they were not truly wise. It proved that their wisdom, what they called “wisdom,” was not godly wisdom. It did not come from God, nor did it reflect a heart that truly loved God, honored God, served God.

Such wisdom (if one could call it that) was the opposite of Jesus Christ, in whom the love of God and the power of God took the shape of a humiliating death on an instrument used by the government to carry out its power to kill.

And so that so-called wisdom, this wisdom from below that James was pained to see in too many in the church, was the opposite of the wisdom James wanted to see, desired to see, knew he should be seeing: the wisdom from above.

And *that* wisdom, the real deal, the godly wisdom of the people of Jesus, was marked by *humility*: the humility all those who love Christ are called to show in their lives, a joyful humbling of the self before the God

whose supreme power is matched by supreme love,
whose immeasurable justice is embraced by immeasurable mercy,
whose boundless purity is joined to boundless wisdom.



We don't talk much about wisdom.

I think that's mostly because, well, I experience you all to be for the most part pretty humble. You're not braggy. Certainly not about spiritual matters.

And that's a good thing. Someone going around saying, “I'm so wise” — that just wouldn't sound right. Right? It would kind of prove the opposite.

It's kind of a good thing — right? — that we don't find around here people going around claiming to be so wise, so spiritual, so exceptionally Christian. We aren't awash in a soup of super-Christians arrogantly throwing their weight around and throwing shade on the sincerity of your faith and mine.

Thank God for that.

Even so, I think it would be good for us to consider the place of godly wisdom in all we do and say as Christians. Because I believe that a life shaped by and reflective of such wisdom is what Jesus wants from each and every one of us.



Hear again some more of what James says:

*[T]he wisdom from above is first pure,
then peaceable,
gentle,
willing to yield,
full of mercy and good fruits,
without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.
And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace
for those who make peace (James 3:17–18).*

The godly people I know who are wise? They are peaceful.

The godly people I know who are wise? They have a centeredness to them and have perspective of faith that makes them more surefooted in the face of life's challenges.

The godly people I know who are wise? They seem to know what to say — and what not to say — when there's a conflict. And this knowledge, this understanding, helps diffuse such situations.

And with such godly, wise people, I know that this isn't just a bunch of tricks they've learned. The wisdom they have is much deeper than that. It lies in their hearts.

How? How have they become wise?

That's a tricky thing. It's kind of a "both/and."

They are wise because God has made them wise. And they are wise because they have been open to God making them wise.

God has worked on them, and they have in turn worked on those things that God has been working within them.

That work is spiritual work. It is heart work. It is *hard* work.

It takes prayer. It takes study.

It takes repentance. It takes forgiveness.

It takes looking into scripture, learning it, letting those words engrave themselves on your heart from frequent interaction with them, having their rhythm and their meaning become so familiar to you that your soul is shaped by them, so that you, as do they, will point to God.

That is heart work. And it is hard work. And in such work God makes the heart more godly, peaceful, and wise.

It takes prayer, frequent and consistent, prayer that speaks and prayer that listens, prayer that pours out to God the whole gamut of human emotion, prayer that becomes part of the rhythm of your life.

That is heart work. And it is hard work. And in such work God makes the heart more godly, peaceful, and wise.

It takes looking in the mirror, and rejoicing in what you see, and forgiving what you see, letting go of the ugly and embracing the beautiful — and even embracing the ugly! — but in any case, *really seeing*.

That is heart work. And it is hard work. And in such work God makes the heart more godly, peaceful, and wise.

It takes looking around you, to those with whom you interact: your family, your friends, your co-workers, the pains-in-the-neck who give you grief, the yahoo who cuts you off on 490 — looking at *them*, and forgiving what you see, and rejoicing in what you see, letting go of the ugly and embracing the beautiful — and even embracing the ugly! — but in any case, *really seeing*.

That is heart work. And it is hard work. And in such work God makes the heart more godly, peaceful, and wise.

This is the way of the peaceful wisdom of a godly heart.



And yet it's not just for the spiritual giants among us. Don't you think that it's just for others, for the few, for the pros. Don't you dare think that!

No, it is the calling of all of us. It really is.

To have a godly and wise heart is the opportunity Christ gives *you*, and it is what he demands of *you*.

So, my friends, engage in the heart work and the hard work of growing in the ways of godly wisdom, conforming your thoughts and your words and your actions more and more to Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, who desires all of us to possess and to share the peaceful wisdom of a godly heart.