

# Faith that Works 3: *The Wisdom of Gentleness*

By  
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from the pulpit of  
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Mark 8:27-38

<sup>27</sup>Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” <sup>28</sup>And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup>He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup>Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>34</sup>He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their

cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup>For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

<sup>13</sup>Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. <sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. <sup>15</sup>Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. <sup>16</sup>For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

<sup>17</sup>But the 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. <sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? <sup>2</sup>You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup>You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. <sup>7</sup>Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup>Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

American novelist David Foster Wallace began a commencement address at Kenyon College with this anecdote: There are two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish nods at them and says, “Morning guys, how’s the water?” The two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and says, “What the heck is water?”

Wallace went on to deliver a gently searing critique of the way most people operate, day in and day out, so immersed, as he put it, in our skull-sized kingdoms, so focused on where we are going we cannot see what is around us. Our culture, he argued, had become too much about the ubiquitous “me” ... Then Wallace ties his observation to faith, saying: “the fact is that, in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, there is no such thing as atheism, because everyone worships something. If you worship money and things, then you will never have enough. Worship your body and beauty and you will always feel less than your ideal self. Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid. Wallace came to this conclusion: “It is within our power to choose. The choice we get is what to worship.” The experience in the environment around us, he said, is crowded, loud, slow, fast and conflicted, but also meaningful and sacred if we remember that the same force that created the stars – lights the world with compassion, love, and the sub-surface unity of all things.”<sup>1</sup>

By choosing what or who we worship, the water in which we swim recognizable meaning, a sacred surrounding. The reading from James is addressing how Christians live in a world of conflicting values. How would the early church - demonstrate its core values in a cultural context that was oppressive, violent, and rigid in its social divisions? Immersed in a world of the “ubiquitous me” how do we show forth our r immersion in the baptismal waters of compassion, love, and the sub-surface unity of all things.

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<sup>1</sup> Erin Keys, Moveable Feast preaching seminar unpublished paper, quoting and paraphrasing David Foster Wallace, This is Water, 2005 Kenyon College.

That's why James wrote to warn those early Christians about the effects of what he called "selfish ambition" on people and on the communities they belonged to. He says, "Whenever people are jealous or selfish, they cause trouble and do all sorts of cruel things." The alternative choice, James writes, is to heed "the wisdom that comes from above." The wisdom from above leads us to be pure in our motives, gentle, sensible, kind, helpful, and genuinely faithful. The goal of the one who seeks the meaning of life is this *wisdom*. The wisdom of gentleness. It is a way of life defined by walking in God's ways with humility, integrity, and peace.

So, if the water we swim in obscures the meaning of life by insisting on worldly measures of success based upon: what we can achieve; or what we acquire in wealth; or what we gain among like-minded people we cling to as we put ourselves against another. Then we will lose sight of God's vision for genuine human community. In our "what the heck is water" kind of existence, James helps us hear the call to a countercultural way of life as we seek to take our religious faith and make it work in daily life. It's hard, it's a challenge, and we need one another to help us be faithful.

Our gospel lesson shows this by Jesus' example. The disciples have been following Jesus all this way, watching him heal and perform miracles, hearing him teach and preach about the unexpected grace and mercy of God. Jesus asks them who do people - in the wake of these wonderful works - think he is? They respond quickly: some say John the Baptist, others think you're Elijah. So, Jesus says, What about you, who do you think I am. Peter gives the right answer, You are the Messiah! But as soon as he blurts it out, and Jesus starts talking about suffering and death, Peter tries to stop him. Jesus responds - with words we hear echoed throughout James - Peter, you are confusing the ways of the world with the way of God. The world says success means being first in line; my disciples, on the other hand, follow me into suffering and loss and give up their lives in order to save them.

In the next chapter, Jesus will put it this way: If you want to be “the best” in the Kingdom, then you should become the servant of everybody else. He brings a child into their midst, to show them plainly, from Jesus’ perspective, true wisdom, true strength, true greatness is found in the gentleness and kindness you show to the most vulnerable people in our world. That’s what James envisions when he calls us to live by the gentleness born of wisdom.

Biblical scholar Alan Brehm writes of wise gentleness, saying: “It is a way of life that comes from walking humbly with God. When you live like that, you develop a kind of confidence about life. When you walk like that, you become consciously aware of God’s presence. The wisdom of gentleness becomes a source of inner strength that manifests itself in humility, in self-sacrifice, and in kindness... The point of this is not really to give us another yardstick by which to measure others and point out all the ways in which they fall short, tempting as that may be. The point is that we each look to ourselves and evaluate the character of our lives.”

We ask ourselves; he goes on: How do I speak to people in such a way that dignifies the image and likeness of God that is within them? How much respect do I show people who are essentially invisible in our world? How concerned am I about the rights and the quality of life of those that – for the most part nobody really cares about? Following this path will not lead you to “success,” or “fame,” or “wealth,” in the sense of how our culture defines them. But he concludes, Jesus said that this is the path that leads to life; the path of the Kingdom of God Jesus calls us to follow with him. The beautiful result of showing forth the wisdom of gentleness is ultimately a way of life that promotes peace, God’s peace, lasting peace.<sup>2</sup>

Friends, the water in which we swim is longing for us to be bearers of peace born of wise gentleness. I imagine some of you read the recent

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Brehm, Biblical Scholar and Pastor, [textweek.com](http://textweek.com).

news about the fact that there are only two Shakers left, living in community at Sabbath day Lake in Maine. Other Shaker communities have largely become museums for tourists to learn about how the Shakers were once part of the Quaker community in England, how they brought into their worship such Spirit-filled ecstatic dances they became known as the Shaking Quakers. The Shakers sought to create a Utopian Christian community of equality among the sexes and races; they prayed to Father and Mother God; They were hard-working and industrious people who designed the clothes pin, developed the first system of packaging seed for sale; they thought the round broom was impractical and flattened it out to the shape we use in our homes today. It was a Shaker Sister who first noticed that half of the motion of a straight saw was wasted, and while working at her spinning wheel had the idea of attaching saw teeth, thus inventing the circular saw.

With only two Shakers left - Sister June is 86 and Brother Arnold is 67 – you could say the end of their religious community was inevitable. In order to live this life of simplicity and industry all for the glory of God, they gave up worldly attachments, including marriage, to live in community. The only hope of a future has been by evangelism and rigorous orientation to a way of life that obviously no longer attracts interest. So before the Shaker community becomes completely a thing of the past, there are lessons to be learned from their working faith. We are not called, according to James, to remove ourselves from the world as they believe, but they – nonetheless - model for us a faith that works – in service to others, in seeing every aspect of their lives as opportunity to glorify God, in the simplicity of gentleness. In their motto: “Hands to work and hearts to God.” They commit to help the poor, to partner with neighbors by building barns and growing crops and sharing their bounty, especially with those in need. They live by their founder’s instruction: “If I owned the whole world, I would turn it into joyfulness; I would not say to the poor ‘Be ye warmed and be ye clothed without giving them the wherewithal to do it... if you are saved by Christ, you show it by walking as he walked.

Brother Arnold knows that the future of the Shaker community may not live on, but he says the work will continue. For “the world is hungry for what we have to teach... community where you don’t have to like each other but you have to love one another. The world is hungry, he says for generosity, hard work, a sustainable relationship to the land, a belief that everyone has something important to contribute.” Our physical labor is our spiritual work, he says, as we live “in the eye of eternity.”<sup>3</sup>

The Letter of James is encouraging us to these kinds of values, although he implores us not to withdraw from the world in order to live a faith that works. The world is a hard and complicated place to practice our faith. but we have this to guide us: the wisdom that comes from above, the wisdom of gentleness. To take that humble walk with God is up to us. It is our choice. It is our highest calling.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Jordan Kisner, “There are Only Two Shakers Left. They’ve Still Got Utopia in their Sights,” The New York Times, 9/13/24.