

Living Wisely • James 3:13

Much of life is figuring out how to live. It's understanding the system in which we live. Learning the ropes. Becoming street wise.

Let me give you a couple of examples. When I was in school, which was most of my life, I learned that a big percentage of my grade depended on "psyching out the teacher". If I could figure out what the teacher liked and didn't like — what he considered important or how she wrote her tests — I knew I could improve my grade by at least a letter if not two. It wasn't just what I learned but how well I understood the teacher.

But I'm not always so smart! For example, recently I took my car to the car wash. After a thorough vacuuming I drove into the car wash. The attendant gave me a cloth and a spray bottle to clean the inside while the car traveled through the automatic washer. I cleaned the dash and the windows. Everything went great until I started wiping the driver's side window and hit the express down window button. Halfway through the wash my window went down and the water and suds flooded in. As quickly as I could I pushed the button up. Right idea. Wrong results. The window went up and closed the cloth washing strips inside the car. So, I had to open the window and let the strips out and more water in. I was soaked. I was stupid. I was not smart.

It's like being a sophomore. That word comes from a combination of two Greek words: *sophus* which means "wise" and *moros* which means "fool". So a sophomore is a "wise fool". Which do you think describes you better? Are you more wise or more foolish? Do you think you have life mostly figured out? Or do you think you are mostly stupid when it comes to life?

It is the question God asks in the Bible. In James 3:13 it asks, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" If you had to answer,

what would you check? Would you check, "Yes, that's me. I'm wise and understanding. I pretty much have life figured out." Or, "No, that's not me at all. I'm kind of stupid when it comes to life. I never quite know what to do."

Let's assume that most of us check, "Yes, that's me." That's good! I'm glad so many of us are wise and understanding. That means that we have most things in life figured out. We're wise in knowing what to do, in having good judgment.

What God wants next is for smart people to show it. Wisdom and understanding refer to far more than the words we speak. It's living the good life in deeds and humility.

The good life is not necessarily life that is lived luxuriously. The good life is life that is lived Christianly. James 3:13 continues, "Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom." So, number one, we're to do good. Christians are people who do good for others. Wise people do good for others. So, wise Christians are do-gooders.

Because America has so many Christian principles woven into our history, doing good is a major part of our culture. One of the evidences of that is the way we volunteer to help other people. Last year in the United States over 9 billion hours of volunteer work was done to help others. The estimated economic value of volunteer time in America is \$112 billion, making volunteerism one of the large industries in our economy. The average American volunteer gives 17 hours per week on behalf of others through some non-profit organization.

The Bible has a special way of looking at life. The person who is smart is not the person who drives the hardest bargain, gets the most from employees for the least pay or rips people off to get ahead. The person who is smart and wise is the person who does good for other

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people.

I like the billboards that say, “Commit a random act of kindness.” That is very Christian. That is very wise. It’s biblical.

We must be careful that we are not caught up in the cyclone of selfishness that has swept across America in our generation. We are working more hours. We value leisure time. We are really into sports and fun. We emphasize taking care of ourselves. But, what about others?

The good life always helps others. As those who are Christian and those who are wise and understanding we must make time to welcome newcomers to the neighborhood, to tutor children who need help, to teach Sunday School, to do chores for the elderly, to send notes of encouragement, to be friends to the hurting.

But it’s also a financial issue. It is easy for us in our culture to take any size income and selfishly expand our lifestyle to meet that amount of money. So, the house payment increases, car payments are added, vacations are increased, club memberships are added and all of those things are put together until they eventually expand to, if not exceed beyond, the income that becomes available to us. And giving to others is squeezed out.

As Christians, high priority is to do good with our donations to help refugees from war-torn areas, give food to the food shelf and support missionaries and the church. You see, the Christian way and the wise way is to say that very high up in our priorities are the needs of others and doing good for others.

Doing good includes kindness to neighbors who aren’t nice, smiles for co-workers, holding the door for the person coming behind us, letting a car cut in front of us and speaking kindly about people who are a different race, who have mental or physical disabilities or who struggle with problems that we don’t have.

God says that the measure of a person is not money, clothes, title or power. The measure of a person is the good we do for others and the attitude we have when we do it. The number one way to show wisdom and live the

good life is to do good.

The second way to show wisdom and live the good life is to be humble. It’s hard to be humble, especially if we understand what humility really is. And it’s hard to do it right.

The Greek word for humility was most often applied to slaves and servants. Good slaves were never arrogant, proud, pushy or mean. They were cool and calm even when they were overworked and abused.

Most first century Greeks did not consider it a compliment to be humble. When the Bible called Christians to be humble they were expected to act like servants and have an attitude that was opposite of what was valued in their society.

Think about our culture. What does it value?

Minnesota had a primary election in which politicians of both parties aggressively ran “attack ads” which tried to tear down the opponent. One local TV station did a special feature story with a sampling of different ads. A university professor was asked why this particular election had been especially vicious. The answer was simply, “Minnesota is just catching up to the politics of the rest of the country.” When a political strategist from one of the parties was interviewed and asked why these attacks were used, the answer was equally simple: “Voters remember them better than ads promoting the candidates and their positions.”

In other words, our culture is convinced of the opposite of what the Bible teaches in James 3:13. Humility that is gentle and kind and servant-like won’t work. So like the first century, we in the 20th century also have to decide whether we’re going to follow the culture or we’re going to follow the Christ.

Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

As Christians, our prototype is Jesus Christ, and he says that he is gentle and humble.

1 Peter 3:13-16 answers our very practical

question, “Are we supposed to be humble nice-guys when others are vicious and rotten to us?” It says:

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience

Will this work? 2 Timothy 2:24-26 says that “the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.” It then goes on to explain that this is the best means to bring an opponent to repentance and to escape from the trap of the devil. In other words, humility works! Most of all, it works because it pleases God. It also foils Satan and changes the lives of other people for good.

So, how do you become humble? Isn’t there a sense in which anyone who thinks he is humble probably isn’t? Who would dare write a book entitled *Humility and How I Attained It?*

There is a way to become humble. It is to totally trust God. When I trust God to handle situations, I don’t have to be controlling and manipulative. If I believe that God will take care of me, then I no longer have to be ultimately responsible for taking care of myself. If someone hurts me intentionally or unintentionally, I don’t have to get even. God will take care of it for me.

On the other side, when I’m generous, kind, gentle and friendly, I realize that I’m doing it most of all to please God, although I know it has an effect upon other people and on me. When I lose my temper and when I become proud and arrogant, I have to realize that what I’m doing is centering on myself, trusting myself and leaving God out. Trusting God is the

key to humility.

Two stories of humility have impressed me. One is from the highest international levels of society and the other is from the lowest. The first is an account that I read by a journalist describing his experience in Great Britain with Billy Graham. He told how one day in London he requested to have an interview with Mr. Graham. He suggested it be over lunch the following day. Mr. Graham expressed regret, saying that he already had a commitment for lunch the next day. The writer thought little of it until 24 hours later when he picked up a London newspaper and there read that Billy Graham had lunch that day at Buckingham Palace with Queen Elizabeth.

Think about it. What would most people have said? “I can’t meet with you tomorrow because I’m already scheduled to have lunch with her royal majesty!” Most of us would delight to build ourselves up and indirectly put the other person down. Mr. Graham spoke Christianly. He lived wisely. He did good. He was humble.

The other is a story I heard first-hand from a man who bore the scars of a difficult and painful life. He was a Chinese Christian who was arrested and spent most of his life separated from his family in prisons and concentration camps. He resolved that he would live humbly and Christianly no matter what was

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done to him. And we would count the things done to him to be atrocious at best. No matter what they said, no matter what they did, he responded with gentleness and kindness and consideration for others.

As he aged, for he was in a prison camp for a very long time, apparently the guards conspired to figure out what they could do that would be the worst assignment for this Christian to hurt him and perhaps provoke him. They decided to give him a permanent assignment to work 8 to 12 hours a day in the prison camp

cesspool. It would be his assignment to rake and shovel out the human sludge at the bottom of the cesspool, standing waist deep all day long.

This Christian man did the very best job he could. He wanted to do his job well. And as he worked he prayed and asked God to show good in what other people meant as evil. He said that God showed him that he was being given a privileged opportunity to be alone all day to pray and to sing Christian hymns and songs of praise to God out loud. He discovered that the guards never bothered him. They stayed away from him.

As he was telling the story, he began to sing one of his favorite songs from the cesspool called *In the Garden*. The words say that Jesus “walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own.” Think about it. What would others have done? He lived Christianly. He lived wisely. He did good. He was humble.

Now this all comes back to us. What am I going to do? What are you going to do? How are we going to live? Whether it’s in the best of circumstances or in the worst of circumstances.

Live like Jesus.

Live Christianly.

Live wisely.

Do good.

Be humble.

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