

WISDOM FROM ABOVE

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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. (James 3:17)

Earlier this year the Texas A&M Transportation institute conducted a study to determine which city in the United States has the worst traffic. The winner? New York City. It's true. We even beat out Los Angeles. If ever you need convincing, just for fun block out three or four hours of a Saturday afternoon and try to get into Manhattan through the Holland Tunnel. Oftentimes, seven lanes of bumper-to-bumper traffic need to zipper, or merge into just two lanes. It requires everyone to take turns – to allow the car in the next lane slightly ahead to go first before falling in behind yourself. Every driver must be willing to yield. If they are so willing, traffic moves along like the teeth of a zipper merging together as one.

The vast majority of motorists understand the process and abide by it. Taking turns and not cutting in line are essential life lessons. They are the rules of the road if you want to drive as a child of the light. A few Saturdays ago Stacie and I were approaching the tunnel on the NJ Turnpike after depositing Luke at college. It was smooth sailing all the way – until it wasn't. Still perhaps a mile away from the entrance traffic slowed to a crawl. As we inched our way along we resigned ourselves to a long wait. Such was the wisdom from above. Nevertheless, other members of the vehicular community chose instead to drive by a wisdom from below – a devilish wisdom. What they did was cut into the shoulder on the right and race past hundreds of other cars. The only challenge for them would be when the shoulder eventually narrows to nothing. Then they would have to count on other drivers – drivers who waited their turn – to allow them back in line.

You've probably guessed by now that I was vowing not to yield to one of these children of darkness if the opportunity presented itself. Sure enough, at the critical juncture, an Uber driver in a late-model, planet-killing SUV expected me to yield and allow him back in line. I was disinclined to do so, and the game of chicken commenced. I reasoned that in our 19-year old minivan I had much less to lose than he did were we to hit. I had the law, God, Jesus, and the saints on my side. Alas, he bullied his way in and I flinched. I yielded, but not happily. I leaned on my horn and with a string of language unbecoming a child of the light, I wished him a perfectly miserable remainder to his squalid little life.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield. Today we've heard a reading from the Letter of James. James is a book of the Bible that has always struggled for legitimacy. For centuries it got no respect. It came late to the party, and some early lists of canonical books don't include it. In the sixteenth century the reformer Martin Luther declared it to be "an Epistle of straw" that preached salvation by works instead of faith. He actually wanted James removed from the Bible because he thought it was just a list of moral injunctions: do's and don'ts by which you could pretend to earn your way into heaven. Traditionally, the authorship of the letter has been ascribed to James, the brother of Jesus. But many have said that its Greek composition is too refined to come from an uneducated, Aramaic-speaking Nazarene. So the implication has always been that the whole letter should be taken with a grain of salt. "Yes, yes, it may say this or that in James, but it isn't really James, and Martin Luther didn't like it. So don't take it too seriously."

Lately, however, in the land where Biblical scholars dwell, James is undergoing something of a rehabilitation.¹ Who is to say the author could not be James, the brother of Jesus? James could have learned Greek, just as many of his contemporaries in Palestine did. Or perhaps he wrote the letter in his native Aramaic and what survives is a Greek translation. What is more, they say, the letter bears all the marks of a first-generation Christian document. It is from very early on in the Jesus movement.

Most of all, the writing breathes with the grace of God from beginning to end. Salvation is a gift for us to receive with meekness. It is the implanted word that has the power to save our souls (1:21). The wisdom from above that we heard about today comes from God, and is always available for us to claim. The way of peace and gentleness is always of offer for us as a gift to choose. Translated to the rules of the road, the wisdom from above is being willing to yield. Last week we talked much about Biblical wisdom literature and how it often resembles common sense. True, being willing to yield may be a matter of common sense. It can save you from being wrecked by the side of the road. It can keep your insurance premiums down. It surely saved me from what would have been an undoubtedly unpleasant altercation of rough justice in the open air. Alas, I can hear the complaints of the Protestant police: “We preach not common sense, but Christ crucified,” they’ll say. But why should common sense not be understood in the larger scheme of things to be a gift from God? Common sense is to practice wisdom from above, even to live by grace. Imagine, someone as close to Jesus as his brother, who grew up in the same household, may be the one who is offering the gift.

Wisdom from above may be a gift from God, and it may also be good common sense. But the fact remains that being willing to yield isn’t always fair. Why should cheaters be allowed to cut to the front of the line at the Holland Tunnel or anywhere else? How about this instead: the state of New Jersey decides to increase its revenue stream by posting cameras along the shoulder of the turnpike, then leveling a thousand-dollar fine to every miscreant, deviant driver photographed in it? Would doing so put an end to the ways of selfish ambition? I hardly think so. It runs too deep in human nature.

We heard in today’s reading from the Gospel of Mark (9:30-37) how even the disciples of Jesus argued among themselves about which one of them was the greatest. Their thinking was that Jesus, the Messiah, was heading to Jerusalem to take charge of a physical, earthly kingdom of God. Clearly, Jesus would need an administration of able appointees to carry out the business of government: from the army, to the treasury, to diplomacy, to transportation, all the way down to sanitation. “Here is why I think that I should occupy the most important role,” is what they argued about along the road to Jerusalem. In other words, what they envisioned was really more of the same: another kingdom in which the first would be first, and the last would be last. Such is the way the world works. It is what James would imply is wisdom from below – devilish and unspiritual.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield. Do you want to walk as a child of the light? Do you want to follow Jesus? Then the challenge before us – or the gift to claim, if you prefer – is the willingness to yield. Those are the three words that stop me short this week: willing to yield. Mind you now, life in Christ does not mean always yielding. Wisdom and discernment is required to determine when to yield and when to hold your ground. It isn’t always entirely clear. If you ride along the Hudson River bike path, before every pedestrian crosswalk you will see a sign painted in the asphalt that reads, from top to bottom: PEDS TO YIELD. Good news for me: pedestrians are to yield to cyclists, so I can just blow my way through the intersection. The law is on my side. But another interpretation of the sign reads the words from bottom to top, in the order that cyclists cross over them: YIELD TO PEDS. Ah, so the sign is upside-down. Pedestrians have the right of way and cyclists should yield. Good to know! So what is it? PEDS TO YIELD or

¹ See, for example, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol XII.

YIELD TO PEDS? I might suggest that the wisdom from above would advise that everyone be willing to yield. Everyone would do well to look up in service to the other.

Jesus said to his disciples, *“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”* Rank and status will be turned upside down in the kingdom of God. God does not measure our value by how quick or clever we are. First place in the kingdom does not go to those who have shoved and shouted their way to the front of the line. To make his point about status, Jesus took a child in his arms and said, *“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”* A child could not be a mover and a shaker – not then and not now. Yet here was Jesus echoing Isaiah’s prophecy that a little child would lead the peaceable kingdom (Isaiah 11:6). The child is an upside-down example of who is great. Jesus himself was an upside-down example of earthly greatness. Jesus was heading to Jerusalem to inaugurate the kingdom of God through his death, not by way of earthly might. He would implant in our hearts the word that has the power to save our souls not by force, but with love and suffering. (Now I am preaching Christ crucified.) The kingdom would come and operate in an upside-way from the way we normally read the signs. That’s right: read the signs upside-down.

The British love to sing a hymn called *I Vow to Thee My Country*. The second verse speaks of the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God:

*And there’s another country I’ve heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know.
We may not count her armies, we may not see her King.
Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering.
And soul by soul, and silently, her shining bounds increase.
And her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her pathways peace.*

Nobody sings hymns like the British, and if you go to YouTube you can hear them at Westminster Abbey or St. Paul’s Cathedral. *I Vow to Thee My Country* is essentially a yearning that their country – that every earthly kingdom – might resemble the upside-down ways of gentleness and peace that are the hallmarks of God’s kingdom. Obviously we have a long way to go – I have a long way to go. So even though we want to walk as children of the light, none of us can sing the hymn without a trace of hypocrisy. But we need not fear or despair. By the light of renewed appreciation for the Epistle of James, the Biblical scholars are coming to understand that the letter’s moral injunctions were never meant to be a long scolding, or a demand to achieve an impossible ethical ideal. Rather, they are a steady encouragement along the road to conversion. Indeed, James understands that we are all works in progress, and that none of us have arrived. Conversion is not a one-time thing but a lifelong process. Even the saintliest of saints have trouble fully forsaking the wisdom from below.

As for me, I’m going to keep the Letter of James in mind the next time I am stuck in traffic at the Holland Tunnel, or the Lincoln Tunnel, or on the George Washington Bridge, or anywhere else. My confession to you is that my journey to become a child of the light is incomplete. My family will attest to it. So I will remind myself that Jesus has implanted in me his word that has the power to save my soul. It is a gift for me to live into at all times and in all places. The Spirit and the gifts are ours.

As for the drivers who cheat their way to the head of the line, the upside-down call of Jesus would have me let them in, let them go, and wish them well. It may be just common sense, or perhaps it is much more – even the gift of God, *the wisdom from above that is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.*