



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **The First Thing to Wisdom**

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**James 3:17-18**

*James 3:17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*

Is it a fad? Yes. The original was about a high school jock and the girl who convinces him to try out for the musical. (I'm going to spare all of us parents of preteens because "we're all in this together," who don't have to getcha head in the game", who don't find it's hard to believe, for whom it's the start of something anything-but-new. It's spun off a reality TV show, touring ice shows, merchandising, and gone well over a billion dollars around the world. But it's hit the big screen. High School Musical III, breaking early box office sales records. Goofy? Yes. But it sets a different climate than the movies of the '80s and TV shows of the '90s and today. And even kids seem to want it. It's a climate that kids enjoy. By not pushing boundaries, the High School Musical has been a welcomed break from the pressure within high school life today.

I was in high school ministry in Birmingham, MI on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999. That was the date 2 boys at Columbine High School outside Denver killed 12 students and a teacher, as well as wounding 23 others, before killing themselves. The deadliest high school shooting in US history. It hit very close to home because a new girl in our youth group named Amanda had just moved from Columbine H.S. 6 months earlier. Her best friend from "home" was Cassy Bernall, one of the girls shot and killed in the library. It was a powerful, awful, crazy time. One amazing thing: it took the local news media less than 24 hours to discover this girl Amanda in B'ham, and try to interview her on camera.

It launched a lot of debate regarding gun violence, cliques, subcultures, bullying, violent video games, anti-depressants, and internet usage. But I think the biggest problem is what our children's ministry director at B'ham said the morning after the horrific shooting. She said "Even the good kids only talk to the other good kids." We've become so tribal that no one talks to anyone outside their "group." Nothing ties people together much anymore.

We as a church family need to raise the kind of kids who can transcend all the pre-conceived cliques and labels. Kids like that change the world. Kids like that don't just hang with the Christian kids. They try to connect with everybody. They set the climate. And relationships get established, so that a kid who's falling off the deep end gets treated with respect and not ignored to the point of what happened in Columbine.

The question that haunts me to this day is "**How many normal, caring interactions would it have taken to prevent something like this from happening? 3? 5? 10? 20?**" But instead we go around ignoring people because they're not in our "club" or interest group or faith. We go around thinking people want to be left alone, when all along we know that people need to be cared for. Maybe you're like me, and you wonder what can be done today.

The good news/bad news is that this is not new. James wrote this to the Christ followers scattered abroad in the first century. (Now these were people in the church): "*But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition*

*in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice."* James 3:14-16. We're experiencing it today in our schools, our work, our politics, and our homes. And you can be in the church and harbor bitter envy. You can be in the church and harbor selfish ambition in your hearts. Some people do, and they call it "wisdom."

James, the half brother of Jesus, is concerned with how we live. He wants you and me to learn first things first in how we live. As a matter of fact, the only way to show you have spiritual wisdom is by how you live. Don Shula, the former head coach for the Miami Dolphins, says that "learning is defined as a change in behavior. You haven't learned a thing until you can take action and use it." Just like faith: Faith isn't faith until you put it into action. Up until then, it's just belief. If you've been waiting for God to just show up, see what happens if you show up first. James says it *this way* in verse 3:13: *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*"

**Do you put first things first? James calls it "wisdom from heaven."** It shows up in a changed life: "*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*" Not demonstrated by talk, but by actions. There is false wisdom, which finds its roots in bitterness and selfish ambition. But the way we know God's wisdom is that **God's wisdom always changes the way we behave**. That means if you and I haven't changed, we can't claim having put first things first.

The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all:

**Pure.** This doesn't mean anything sexual. It means there's an absence of sinful attitude, or motive. So, when you are interacting, you really aren't thinking about your position or manipulating. You're just "being." If you put first things first, you will relax a lot more, because you're not trying to "get" anything from them. There is no angle you're trying to take. This is the inner quality God wants you to have first. Pure in the moment. Pure in being. Pure in no worries. Just being God's representative in this moment now. It leads to every other first things first characteristic in you. Look what comes from it:

**Peace-loving.** As opposed to competitiveness and defensiveness. It comes from the Greek root meaning "The termination of strife; and the absence of quarreling." James says the first thing to living it out is you go out of your way to create unity. Make it a habit to avoid arguing with people. Just like judging, sometimes we breed a strain of persons who oppose everything and everyone. Chuck Swindoll describes these people: "Some of you are causing tremendous problems because of your attitude. You are capable. You are intelligent. You are qualified and maybe even respected for your competence. But your attitude is taking a toll on those who are near you – those you live with, those you work with, those you touch in life. For some of you, your home (and church) is a battleground, a mixture of negativism, sarcasm, pressure, cutting comments, and blame. You are laughing less and complaining more..."

Did you know there is more in the New Testament written on unity in the church than many other more commonly talked about issues? God the Father does not want his children to fight with each other. Why? **Because disunity in a church drives people away from Jesus**. Jesus Himself prayed we would be one "*to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved me.*" John 17:23. Unity creates belief. (The status quo is to remain isolated and apart.) Even politically, bipartisanship creates a climate of believing something can be done, and everyone can be involved.

**Considerate.** This word is used in the Old Testament to describe God's disposition as King: gentle & kind, even though He has every right to be stern and demeaning, correcting us. Would people describe you as considerate? As non-combative? If you seek Godly wisdom, you probably won't be getting the last word as much as you once did...so get over it. (You'll end up happier in the long run). And more importantly, our spiritual and emotional and even physical health is hugely dependent upon our attitude toward those who hurt us and even sin against us. **You will spiritually grow up or spiritually wither up depending on your ability to forgive others**. (Our marriages will thrive or die based on this). You can't just wait to hurt them back.

**Submissive.** (Everyone's favorite). In other words, be ready to yield. Who said yielding was any sign of weakness? And why would you believe *them*? One biblical image of this is a strong horse able to handle a bridle, in order to harness your strength. It doesn't mean gullible. It means flexible. Not in biblical truths; but in the rest of life. (The only thing is, you can't spend the next 2 years complaining about it! ☺)

**Full of mercy and good fruit.** Are you ready to help those in need in practical ways? Because mercy is not about how you feel. It's an action. When you see a need, you don't always have to pray about it. If you see a need, help! It can lead to some crazy and interesting situations! Maybe a son who's failing college, or a daughter who drinks too much, or a wife who you think isn't the woman you married, or a friend who violated a confidence, or a church that hasn't met your expectation. Of course some people are in need of mercy due to their own bad choices. Of course some people take advantage of mercy. But it's a risk we take if we want to put first things first.

**Impartial.** Easy. It's for everyone. John 3:16 says it: "*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...*" Don't treat people like your Halloween candy, and only care about your favorites, throwing the rest away.

**Sincere.** Literally *anhypocritos* "without hypocrisy", meaning first, get the log out. Allow God to work on *you*, so God can prepare you to speak to someone else.

What does it mean to be a "*peacemaker who sows in peace*"? The result is it "*brings a harvest of righteousness.*" In other words, you can't create all the good that God has for us in a climate of bitterness and self-seeking, but that's what we all live with! A farmer has to make sure the climate is right for the fruit he is growing. In this case, love and kindness will grow only in a climate of peace. It must be sown and cultivated by the "peacemakers."

This week, if you want to experience the wisdom of God, the harvest He desires in our communities, live out the power of kindness. create conditions of peace. You create the climate. Imagine if a group this large began showing how to treat other people like treasured people and not like objects or weirdoes.

Maybe kindness means you walk away. Not huff away, not stomp away, but walk away.

Maybe kindness means you quit losing it all the time. That's powerfully kind.

Maybe kindness means you get home earlier and save your energy for home, rather than giving it all away at work.

Maybe kindness means you don't walk away. It means you stay. You be the one to help.

Maybe kindness means you be the one to walk up to the relationship that needs fixing; even to your child or parent or classmate—the one that you have the harder time relating to.

Imagine the steps we would take if we put first things back into first place? If we lived out this power of kindness? *God* didn't keep his wisdom and kindness aloof and lofty and esoteric or to Himself. He came to earth and died on a cross, to live to help others and pay the penalty for our sins. He lived it out. And God wants you to put your heart into it. Won't you put your heart into Him?

### STUDY GUIDE:

**Monday: Review James 3:17-18, and your sermon notes.** Enter into an extended time of prayer. Mediate for a full minute on each of the character of heavenly wisdom, and think of a specific situation God can apply to your life in each case. Heavenly wisdom that is: Pure... Peace-loving... Considerate... Submissive... Full of mercy... Full of good fruit... Impartial... Sincere... Finally, thank God for the goodness of His gift of kindness to you and in you.

**Tuesday: Read James 1:19-22.** In these verses, James writes to the Christ followers about a terrific way to put first things first. In our culture today it is difficult to listen and not speak. Why is it so hard? If you struggle, why do you think you are so tired? Are you getting enough sleep? Have you become addicted to entertainment to such an extent that real life, conversations, and interactions are dull or annoying? Pray for God to open your ears and close your mouth. Consider active listening a spiritual discipline of submission for the rest of the week.

**Wednesday: Read James 2:14-26.** These are the classic verses in Scripture about living out your faith, the key to spiritual wisdom. In many ways, wisdom is like willpower. Making the jump to doing what you know. Confess to God your lack of belief in action, and then claim God's right ways and start living your faith into your life.

**Thursday: Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.** This idea Paul has about wisdom smacks in the face of the world's idea of wisdom. Paul actually faced trouble in Corinth because he was not a great orator. There were "apostles" who were much better leaders and more charismatic speakers. Paul, on the other hand, only wanted to boast in God. This is a powerful passage. What stronghold of human wisdom did God recently destroy in your life? What stronghold of human wisdom does God appear to be working on next? Pray to ask God for strength to allow Him access to your mind, that you might have access to His wisdom.

**Friday: Read Ephesians 1:17-23.** Read this passage as a prayer, which the Apostle Paul prayed for each of us, through all the ages. Now read it again as a celebration. Take a few minutes and raise your hands in prayer to the power of God.