

“Wisdom: Dos and Don’ts”

Fr. Thomas Ryden

September 8, 2024

Apostles Anglican Church

Scriptures: James 1:17–27; Mark 7:31–37

“What is the next step?” This is a question that I have found to be a powerful force to battle procrastination, tune out distraction, and increase productivity. I am someone who has trouble keeping my spaces clean and ordered. One needs only to peek into my office to get a glimpse into the truth of that statement. But I am working on it, and as part of my continued sanctification, we cleaned out our garage this Monday having Labor Day off. It became much easier for me to do my part in accomplishing this task when I had one thing to do at a time. When I go into a disorganized space, one of the reasons I avoid cleaning it up is because I find the overall task so overwhelming. Having one next thing to do makes all the difference. And, task by task, our garage got organized!

Our lives, and our faith, can feel at times like a messy garage, and we can be so overwhelmed with the task of getting things in order that we never start. So here’s a good check-in for your spiritual health - “what is the next step?”

And I use that language of health intentionally. A trap we have a tendency to fall into when it comes to our spiritual lives is to be constantly looking for the next level, as if there are tiers in the faith like some kind of loyalty rewards program. I remember as a kid about this time of year when my school would send out the fundraising catalog of candies and wrapping paper, asking me to go door to door to sell things to support the school. And of course included with the catalog was the glossy and loud page of prizes. If you sold a certain amount of stuff, you got to pick better and better prizes from the prize page. When we think about taking our faith to the next level or taking the next step, it is easy to think

in these kinds of transactional images, that somehow we are earning God's favor. That the more we do, the more we get right translates to what we receive.

The idea of our spiritual health is much more helpful I think and much closer to the way Scripture teaches us to view our faith. God has made us and desires our good. By giving us free will, he allows us to choose whether we live according to his ways or not. The more we live according to his ways, the more we have the good life he intends for all of his image bearers to have. We take steps, either in the direction of health or unhealth, and it is this image I want us to think of when we ask ourselves, "What is the next step?"

This way of thinking about our faith highlights the need for wisdom. In a transactional relationship, you do the task, you get the agreed upon compensation or reward for that task. If I sold 250 boxes of candy, I got the inflatable TV you could put in a pool. The relationship is not much more complicated than that. When assessing our spiritual health, we need wisdom, we need discernment to evaluate where we are and what should come next. Often, we even need an outside perspective.

We begin the book of James in our Sunday lectionary readings today, and it is in many ways a book of wisdom. Reading through James draws our minds to other passages of Scripture, notably the Wisdom books of the Old Testament and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, which has a lot in common with Wisdom literature itself. As you listen to the words of James over these next few weeks, see if they remind you of Proverbs: the conciseness of some of the teaching, the overtly practical nature of some of the directives. James wants followers of Jesus to be wise. That is always the next step. What is wise? The particulars of what next thing you need to tackle may vary depending on circumstances, but the move towards spiritual health is always marked by wisdom.

So as we seek to do the next wise thing, let's dig in to our passage from James today, along with our Gospel reading a little later, which give us several words of wisdom when we are wondering what is next. We'll look at them this morning as a series of four pairs of "don'ts" and "dos."

The first "don't" comes in James 1:17; **Don't squander God's good gifts.** You have probably heard the verse before, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." It is interesting to me that the ethical content of the rest of our passage is framed in this language of recognizing the generous, giving nature of God. If it is good, it comes from him. To not live wisely would be to ignore the gift of wisdom that he has offered to us and to waste the many other things he gives us to begin with, notably, life itself. Further, those who receive his good gifts have a standard to live up to, there is a "do" to which we are called: **Do produce good fruit that displays God's abundance.** James puts it this way: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

God gives good gifts. We (his people) are the firstfruits of his creatures. We receive and represent to the world the good gifts of God. We are blessed to be a blessing. This is at the heart of wise and godly living. It is our proper response to the God who gives all good things to us. **Don't squander the gift. Do produce good fruit.**

James then moves to the more specific "dos" and "don'ts" of wisdom, making more plain the sort of good fruit that the life of one of God's people will produce. Continuing in verse 19: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put

away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”¹

This passage begins with the “don’t.” **Don’t be carried by anger.** A common theme in the wisdom literature of the Scriptures is to not be controlled by the passions. Anger can be chief among those passions which are difficult to control. This rule of St. James: quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to become angry, is something you have heard from this pulpit before and it bears repeating. These three simple commands form much of the bedrock of wisdom. They seem almost too obvious to repeat and yet, how often do we find ourselves slow to hear, quick to speak, and quick to become angry? If that is something you have mastered, you and I need to have lunch because I need to know your secret!

We are familiar with that “don’t,” but I noticed on this read of James that there is a direct command that is intended to aid us in living according to the rule of St. James: “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” Receive the word with meekness. The word referenced here is the good word of the Gospel and salvation,² implanted in us by the farmer who sows the good seed. Our minds are also drawn to Jesus, the Word of God, in whom we have life. But we are also right to think here of the Scriptures, through which we know of Jesus and have heard the Gospel of God. It is through the Scriptures that we know the Word. The solution to not being ruled by anger is by partaking of the word that God has given to us. **Don’t be carried by anger. Do let yourself be carried by God’s Word.**

And so I will make this plug here at the beginning of our time in James for the memorization of Scripture. These wisdom passages make for a great introduction to Scripture memorization. They are typically shorter and concise, they contain whole ideas in

¹ James 1:19-21

² See Blomberg, Craig and Mariam Kammel, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James*, James 1:21.

smaller statements. Wisdom grows by repetition. The rule of St. James is a great place to start.

This is quite simple in practice. When you are encountered with something that makes you want to blurt out a diatribe in anger, simply practice saying these few verses to yourself, or maybe even just the rule: quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to become angry. That's probably not going to diffuse you all the way the first time, just like your first attempt at a basketball shot from half court will probably fall short. But as you keep it up and your instincts are trained toward the Scriptures you have memorized, I think you will be surprised at just how much you can handle. **Don't be carried by anger. Do let yourself be carried by God's Word.**

We now turn to our final pair set of a "don't" and a "do" from James: **Don't disconnect your ears from your hands. Do practice integrity of life.** Listen to the rest of our passage:

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."³

³ James 1:22-27

This is one of the classic arguments you hear from James and it is really a rearticulation of what we hear from Jesus in the Gospels - we are not just to hear God's word, but to put it into practice. We ought not to be deceived, James says: if we have an angry, loose cannon of a tongue, if we let ourselves be corrupted by the self-centeredness of the world, if we do not care for the orphans and widows and all who are in need among us, it is as if we have never heard the word in the first place.

At the heart of a life lived in wisdom is a life lived with integrity. There is an integrity of life that must be present in those of us who claim to follow Jesus. Jesus himself talks about good trees producing good fruit and bad trees, bad fruit. He says that it is what comes out of a person that defiles, putting a priority on our behavior. We have been given much, God's very word, and so we are accountable to that gift. **Don't disconnect your ears from your hands. Do practice integrity of life.**

Living a life of wisdom is a daunting task, one that will make us feel as if we just can't live up to it. And so, I want us to think of one more "don't" and one more "do" as we try to be not merely hearers, but doers of God's word. For this set, we turn to our Gospel, both for humility and encouragement: **Don't forget that you were deaf. Do give thanks for God's gift of healing.**

We encounter in today's Gospel reading our Lord who can open closed ears and loose mute tongues. If there is a definite wisdom-killer, it is the haughtiness of thinking we are not in need of healing. Some of us have been hearing from God for so long that we can easily forget there was a time when he needed to open our ears. In fact, we will often find that the more we listen to God's voice, the more we realize our continued need for healing. I have heard from several sources that are older in the faith than I am who express what the Wesleyan theologian Laurence Wood says well: "...[The] sanctified are more aware of their

weaknesses and sins and thus are more capable of growth in grace because of the openness of their hearts to their true situation.”⁴

Here is the good news for those of us who think this wisdom thing is too much to handle - The God who opened our ears the first time is able to do it again and again and again. Our deafness to his ways is not an obstacle he can't overcome. Rather than make us haughty, his gift to us should remind us to give thanks, and take that good gift into our ears and out into the world through our words and actions. **Don't forget that you were deaf. Do give thanks for God's gift of healing.**

⁴ Wood, Laurence. *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*. Accessed via <https://cavman.wordpress.com/2014/09/18/considering-a-wesleyan-view-of-sanctification/>