

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

June 26, 2016



THE POWER OF GENTLENESS

Discussion Guide

The Wisdom of Gentleness

Connecting:
45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?

- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (GRACIOUSLY THANK GROUP MEMBERS FOR THEIR HONESTY IF THEY STATE THEY HAVE HELD BACK.)

Getting Started:
10 minutes

- What does it take to become somebody in this world?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

USING THE NOTES, DISCUSS THE BACKGROUND OF LUKE 9 HIGHLIGHTING THE MESSIANIC HOPES OF THOSE WITH JESUS.

- Using the notes, discuss the background of wisdom and the letter of James.
- Read James 3.13-18 aloud. Pause and reread the text, seeking to hear these words as a member of a Church in which people are pushing and shoving in order to obtain power and influence.
- James discusses two types of wisdom, ways of making it through life in an attempt to accomplish something: God's wisdom and earthly wisdom. What are the marks of these two types of wisdom?
- Which of these two types of wisdom do people typically follow? Could you elaborate?
- React to the following statement: We believe gentle people can't succeed because of our definition of success.
- In what ways are the two forms of wisdom James outlines defining success?
- Which of these versions of success is rooted in the growth of the Kingdom of God? Could you explain?
- What, if anything, makes the pursuit of this version of success difficult for people? For you?
- What might it look like to move through life gently? How might this lead to success for the Kingdom of God?
- Consider closing in prayer, asking the Spirit to guide you into gentleness, with one another and with the world.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

WISDOM

Wisdom is typically defined as the ability to make a sound judgment with regard to life and conduct. In this sense, wisdom incorporates both mental and physical components: an understanding about life and actions or skills rooted in this understanding. Scripture presents wisdom in much the same manner. However, in Scripture, we discover wisdom originates from one of two sources. Wisdom may come from people who have pondered life using their own powers of observation and deduction or from God. Both forms of wisdom lead to an understanding of life and an equipping of skills and abilities to navigate life. However, human wisdom is presented in Scripture as something which leads to grief and frustration (Ecclesiastes 1.12; 2.9-11) while wisdom from God, heavenly wisdom, leads to a good and profitable life (Proverbs 2.6; Ecclesiastes 2.26).

Throughout the Old Testament, heavenly wisdom is understood to be a gift of the Holy Spirit which leads people to action. This wisdom equips the people of God to act directly to accomplish projects like the building of the Tabernacle (Exodus 28.3; 31.3), to engage in commerce through sailing (Psalm 107.30), or to govern well (Deuteronomy 34.9). God's wisdom also equips people to act indirectly, leading them to obey God (Proverbs 1.7; 9.10). In each case, God's gift of wisdom is seen in the actions of people. This is because God's wisdom is always demonstrated in action, such as in the creation of the world (Proverbs 3.19; 8.22-31).

In the New Testament, heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom are once again contrasted. Heavenly wisdom is primarily discussed in the letters of the New Testament where it is presented as a good gift of grace (James 1.5-8, 16-18) which produces virtue in the lives of those who receive it (James 3.13-18). In keeping with the Old Testament connection between wisdom and action, those who claim to be wise demonstrate their wisdom through their actions (James 3.13). Jesus is upheld as

the ultimate example of a wise life because he is the wisdom of God personified (1 Corinthians 1.30-31) with all other forms of wisdom leading to futile ends (1 Corinthians 1.18-20). Therefore, those who are truly wise are those who take up the life of Christ.

THE TEXT

JAMES 3.13-18: GENTLENESS AS A WISE APPROACH

The epistle (letter) of James was penned by James, probably about twenty years after Jesus' resurrection. James was the brother of Jesus and one of the first leaders of the Jerusalem Church (Mark 6.3; Acts 12.17; 15.13-21; 21.18; 1 Corinthians 9.5; Galatians 1.19; 2.9, 12). The letter of James can appear to be choppy, shifting throughout between extended exhortations and proverbial sayings. However, the letter does have a single unifying purpose which can be discovered by exploring the three stated themes of testing, wealth, and wisdom (James 1.2-27). Reading backward, it seems that James is writing to a church which predominantly consists of peasants. These peasants are suffering because they have had their land stolen by wealthy landowners through unjust means (James 2.6; 5.4-6), a common problem in Palestine at the time. However, in this setting, some within the Church are courting these same wealthy landowners to join the Church because of the wealth and power they bring with them (James 2.1-4). This dynamic appears to have created something of a sectarian split(s?) within the Church, not based on doctrine, but on practice with some teachers using their words to divide the congregation (James 3.1-12). James writes to this congregation, seeking to help them navigate the realities of this situation. In so doing, he pens a wonderful letter which explores the physical and practical outworking of faith. According to James, the journey of true faith can only be tested by observing one's actions. He provides principles and examples of the actions to which true faith leads, providing even modern readers with guidance in how they might live

their faith out in their own world and setting.

In chapter 3, James addresses the teachers who are creating sectarian divisions within the Church with their words, warning them of the great power of words (James 3.1-12). He then seeks to disabuse these groups of any idea that they, through their divisive actions, have actually lived a God-honoring life. He begins this discussion by asking those within the congregation who believe they are wise to identify themselves. With this question, James is basically asking for people to state whether they believe they understand what God truly desires for life. He reminds them that real wisdom is always seen in one's actions, not just their doctrine (James 2.18-19) and notes that the primary mark of wisdom in one's life should be actions of gentleness.

However, many within this congregation are anything but gentle. They are struggling for power and prestige, jockeying for the leadership and influence they imagine others to have. James calls this for what it is, envy and selfish ambition, and admonishes the congregation to admit these desires rather than to deny they exist. While this jockeying for position and the grabbing of power which is held by others has been presented in spiritual terms—"I am the one you should follow because I know the true way!"—James argues that this behavior is based upon wisdom which does not come from God. This way of life is rooted in the thinking of people (earthly) not God (unspiritual) and might be considered demonic! This is quite the blow to call the sectarian teachers demonic! However, he supports his claim by noting that when envy and selfish ambition are present, disorder and evil are the result, demonic outcomes. Basically, James is working backwards from the present situation. The Church is divided, filled with hostility and strife. They are literally fighting with one another (James 4.1, 11) over the leadership of the sectarian teachers. This kind of outcome cannot come from God.

James urges this congregation to remember that heavenly wisdom leads people to a life

which resembles the life of God. He then provides a list of virtues rooted in the character of God: purity, peace, consideration, submission, mercy, impartiality, and sincerity. The virtue of impartiality is a direct blow against the factions because it speaks of the indivisible nature of God which should be among his people. James concludes this discussion with a proverb before moving to directly address the fighting present in the congregation, noting that it is those who seek peace (wholeness) who are lead to the life God desires (righteousness).

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

How do we deal with people who refuse and reject us? If we want the Kingdom of God to grow, we respond to them gently. This sounds great in theory, but often I object to this way of life because it seems impractical in real life. Among the numerous reasons which I offer to support my objection is the following: Gentleness won't work because gentle people don't succeed in life. In life, if you want something you have to grab it, before someone else does. You have to be willing to push and shove your way to the front of the line. Anything else is impractical. If you are gentle, you don't go around grabbing, pushing or shoving which means you don't actually get anywhere in life. Gentle people get overlooked for promotions. Gentle people get picked last for the team. Gentle people move through life only to become forgotten nobodies who never made a name for themselves. . . or so I think. There is some truth behind my objections, but I am learning to test their validity. I am learning that perhaps what I define as success isn't what God defines as success. Perhaps success isn't found in a big pay check or a big office or a big house. If it isn't found in these things then I don't really need to go through life grabbing, pushing, and shoving because I don't really need the things which are obtained in this way. Perhaps in gentleness I can succeed in life, a life which is about something other than "big." The words of Jesus about the last being first run through my mind when I think this way, and I am almost persuaded, although I must be honest that when I look at the "big" things the world offers I am tempted. But then I look at what it takes to succeed in this way, at the wake of brokenness

my grabbing, pushing, and shoving bring about, I am convinced. A gentle way is better because while I may not succeed in obtaining something "big" with gentleness, I leave a wake of wholeness. In the Kingdom, that is true success.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

How do we deal with people who resist or reject us? We are gentle. This is the way of Christ, but it is often not our way. It is not our way because we cannot imagine how a gentle way can work in our world. This is particularly true when we think of success. In our minds, gentle people don't ever succeed. They can't succeed because success is marked with big pay checks, big offices, and even bigger titles, and gentle people don't get these things because these things must be taken. You have to push and shove your way to the front of the line if you want these things. You have to see what you want and just take it. Certainly not your average definition of gentleness. Then again, is true success really getting something bigger? It is if we are building our Kingdom, but the Kingdom of God isn't really about us getting bigger things. Certainly we have needs and God promises to meet these, even lavishly. But, success in God's Kingdom is not us standing at the top because to get to the top we have to leave a trail of bodies and broken relationships. Success in God's Kingdom is found in the restoration of all things, in peace being brought. Pushing and shoving will never bring about that peace, but gentleness can. This week consider continuing to practice gentleness in the context of safe community with fellow Christ-followers. You might also consider asking God to reveal ways in which you have pushed and shoved in life and the harm, if any, you have caused. Confess these to God, and people if necessary, and ask for forgiveness which is one of the first gentle steps toward wholeness.



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