

Let me ask you a question, when I say the word “humility”, do you have a positive connotation with that word or a negative one? Is a humble person someone we should raise up and emulate to the best of our ability; or, when I say humility, do you think of someone who is life’s doormat, someone who allows others to walk all over them, someone who doesn’t speak up, or is wishy-washy, or someone who doesn’t take advantage of the opportunities given them and if they just worked harder, or spoke up for themselves, that they would be better off?

Just by this description, you can see that 21st century America has a particular (negative) opinion of a humble person. That is not the opinion of followers of Jesus in the 1st century. The humble person was someone who was seen as wise, as God-like, as a trusted partner and friend. Humility was a station in life to work towards. As such, it’s difficult for us to understand in our day and time. Nevertheless, let’s give it a shot. Let’s see the manifestations of wisdom in being humble.

The Letter of James raises up the notion of humility and encourages us to be a humble person. He introduces wisdom and humility in this way: there are two types of wisdom in the world. One type of wisdom which comes from the world and it is “unspiritual” and “devilish”. Both are good English translations of those words he wrote originally in Greek. The other type of wisdom comes down from heaven. Both types, the worldly wisdom (unspiritual and devilish) and heavenly wisdom have physical manifestations that we can see. The earthly-wise cannot control their tongue, they use it to divide and to make themselves look better. They use their so-called wisdom for selfish ambition, disorder, wickedness and envy. The heavenly-wise, on the other hand, manifest their wisdom in this list that he wrote in chapter 3: *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. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.*

As some of you know, I’m doing some summer reading from the book Wuest’s New Testament Word Studies. Professor Kenneth Wuest believes that word order in the Greek New Testament is important in order to understand the text in English. In James’s text, and in particular the list mentioned above, has an order to it which is intentional. The first listed is most important and most difficult and most rare. The second is second important, a little easier and a little more common; so forth and so on. I’m going to share that list with you again, but, this time, I’m going to do something different and I’m going to ask you to do something different too. I’m going to elaborate on the Greek text into English and I ask that you prioritize what I am going to say in order of importance – first “pure” then peaceable, then gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits.

One more thing, before I get into “pure”, James is a Greek writer but he thinks in Hebrew. Greek is a second language to him, or, more to the point, the theology and epistemology of Hebrew is first and foremost in his mind. So, here we go.

Pure means a sincere belief for God's purposes, not one's own.

Peaceable is more like peace-loving.

Gentle is closer to non-combative (someone who can hold their tongue or at least say things without unnecessarily ruffling of feathers).

Willing to yield is someone who is willing to learn, to learn from anyone and everyone, a willingness to be corrected, or, a humble student.

Full of mercy and good fruit is someone who is charitable, or giving.

You see the first and most important, and most difficult and rare, is someone with a sincere belief in God's purposes, not their own. Is it any wonder, therefore, that in the Lord's prayer, we start with these words, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That is a "pure" person – someone who prays, and sincerely believes in God's purposes, God's kingdom, and that it will be done on earth just as it is in heaven.

If I can rewind for just a moment, there are two types of wisdom: earthly and heavenly. The earthly type is manifested in envy, disorder, wickedness and selfish ambition. The heavenly type of wisdom is manifested in humility which is first "pure" – sincere belief in God's purposes here on earth. An expression of this is found in rabbinic teaching in the centuries leading up to the first century which is this: make God's will your will. In the garden before his trial and crucifixion, Jesus said: your will not my will. Jesus is the first and also the standard bearer for sincere belief in God's kingdom. That is the first sign of humility shown in wisdom – putting God's will as your own.

The second on the list is what I translated as peace-loving. This isn't the type of peace that one keeps at Thanksgiving where the topic of politics is forbidden to come up. That's silence, or ignoring the topic. Peace-loving is asking your outspoken, loudmouth, opinionated uncle why he feels that way about politics. Not to argue with him, or to prove him wrong, but to have a loving sense of peace for what he believes and what everyone else believes and yet to be able to share dinner at the same table – because peace-loving means there are much more important things that everyone agreeing with each other on every topic.

The third – non-combative – is like the second. I'll give you an example of these two – peace-loving and non-combative – that I saw on CBS Saturday morning news show. There is an owner and operator of a white-water rafting company who intentionally sought out people of different political stripes, to raft together and learn from each other. He put three on one side of the raft and three on the other. They rafted, had lunch, rafted, had dinner and a campfire, spent the night, had breakfast, rafted some more and then got to their destination. The rafters interviewed said it was a great experience. It didn't matter that the other people in the boat believed something different, they were together, rafting, taking care of each other, and finding they have a lot more in common than what they disagree on. That is humility. That is wisdom from heaven.

Gentle, willing to learn, full of mercy and good fruits (generous). Those are all visible signs of wisdom through humility. Jesus is said to be humble of heart. This is our savior, the One who is the smartest in the room, yet, he asked questions, he sought out people who disagreed with him, he forgave everyone, asked for nothing in return (generous) and he held firmly to the sincere belief in God's kingdom and that it is being made known on earth. He believed Peter, James,

John, Andrew, Mary, all of them, had a role to play in God's kingdom on earth. He also believes you do too. In small, but significant, ways, each of us has a part to play in God's kingdom on earth.

James wraps this section up with this phrase: *Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.*

Submit, like humility, is not being a doormat to the world. Submitting is taking all that you are and handing it, as an offering, to God and for God's purposes on earth. "Resist" is better translated as "stand immovable". Be an oak tree. Let the wind blow but stand immovable. Be the bridge that has tides and the current and wind pushing it; but stand immovable. When we do that, the devil will flee. That's good news. Speaking of good news, "Draw near to God and God will draw near to you." You can't run from God, God will always be with you. But, when we draw closer to God, we will find that God draws closer to us. When we believe that God's kingdom is being made known on earth (despite what you read in the news), we draw near to God and with wisdom and humility, we draw near to the belief that God has a part for us to play. We play that part by loving-peace, being non-combative, generous, and willing to learn and grow.

Before I started on my discernment path to the priesthood, I had run from God's calling to me. I left the sincere belief that I could have something to do with God's kingdom. I was educated, successful, and a little arrogant (I would have told you that I was smart and was doing well). God didn't give up on me. When I found myself in a cold, uncomfortable Russian hotel room, being completely out of my element (it didn't matter what I knew or how well I was doing it, I was a stranger in a strange land dependent on everyone else), I had a dream or a vision, where Jesus watched as all the material things I was working toward started to slip away. When it was all gone it was just him and me. In the same voice he said to me when I was 12 – that he was calling me to serve him in the Order of Presbyterates – he asked if I was ready to join him. He invited me to find out what it is like to bring peace from above, to have the wisdom from above flow through me, to change the hearts and lives of many and to have my life changed forever. "Take my hand and your life will never be the same." Jesus changed my life through the power of the Holy Spirit. I have seen the Spirit change many lives and I sincerely believe the God through Jesus can change yours too.

Our music director, David Stasney and I were talking before the service began. He told me that once he submitted himself to God, his life was never the same – and it is much better. God is still working the Spirit's gifts in David and we are watching it happen. We are seeing him learn, grow, to love peace and we are seeing his sincere belief in God's kingdom on earth through music.

God changed my life. God changed David's life, and James's life and Peter's life, and countless people over the past 19 centuries. Draw near to God and God draws near to you.

The shepherd inside of me who loves and cares for you and for the whole congregation, both in person and online, the shepherd inside of me wants to build a fort around All Angels to keep us inside, and safe, and keep the ever-changing world on the outside. I want to create this shelter where we can keep supporting and connecting with one another. But that's my will, not God's will for us. God's purpose is that we are out in the ever-changing world, with God's wisdom

flowing through us to be pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to learn and to give. That's God's purpose for you and for all of All Angels. When we do this, when we have a sincere belief in God's purpose for us and for our congregation, we don't need a fort, or a wall, or protection from the changing world because we are out in it, doing God's will, and watching thy will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.