



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

October 2, 2016

“Wanting Wisdom” (Real Faith for Real People Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

James 1:5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.

James 1:6 But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind;

James 1:7 [8] for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Last week, we started our sermon series called Real Answers for Real People, a series on the book of James. We hit the deck running, looking at the first four verses of James chapter 1 focusing on verse: “consider it all joy when you encounter various trials.”

This week, in the context of suffering and trials, we ask the question: How do we get wisdom, especially when we face trials? I know this is Ohana Sunday, when more children and teenagers are in the congregation. So for the youth, let me say that this is not the kind of wisdom that tells you how to win at a *Call of Duty* video game or *Settlers of Catan* or playing *Clash with JC and the Boys*. Nor is this the kind of wisdom, for you adults, on how to choose stocks, or whether to order fish, steak, or risotto.

No, this is the kind of wisdom we need from God when we encounter disappointment, pain, rejection, abandonment, or something else that

stops us in our tracks. This is the kind of wisdom we need to survive and move on in life in a healthy way.

Let’s look at the first verse again: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” (James 1:5)

What this says is that there will be times when we lack wisdom, and so we are to ask for help. More importantly, ask God. And when you ask God, two things happen, according to verse 5: God will give wisdom GENEROUSLY, and He will give it UNGRUDGINGLY. This means He wants to give you wisdom without reluctance. It will be given IF YOU ASK.

The question is – do we really want wisdom that can help us, and when we get it, will we follow through and use it? The problem for most of us is that when we get great wisdom – in general – we don’t always want it. Yes, we don’t always want it.

Let me give an example. I was listening to Malcolm Gladwell’s podcast, which is one of my favorite ones, called *Revisionist History*. Gladwell is the best-selling author of some of my favorite books, like *Tipping Point*, *Outlier*, and *David and Goliath*. He is also a Christian, I hear. One of his podcasts captivated me. It was called, “The Big Man Can’t Shoot.” It was about the great basketball player Wilt Chamberlain, who died at the age of 63.

Wilt Chamberlain was seven-foot-one-inch tall, weighing 275 pounds. He was a great basketball player. On March 2, 1962, while playing for the Philadelphia Warriors against the New York Knicks, he scored 100 points! In the 1961–’62 season, he averaged 50 points a game. In that season, he made 87.5% of his free throws, or 28 out of 32 free throws, which was a new record.

But he didn’t always shoot free throws that well. In fact, his average used to be just 40%. When you shoot only 40% you are a liability to a team, because the opponent could always foul you, make you shoot free throws that you would miss so they would get the ball back. But in 1961, he decided to work on his free throws, and what he did was he shot underhanded. That got him higher to more than 60%.

Shooting underhanded was a new technique promoted by a great basketball player named Rick Barry, who, in one season, missed only ten free throws and nine in another. His average was 94.7%. That’s crazy, especially if you compare him with LeBron James, who misses 150 free throws a season!

The magic of shooting underhand is that it is a more natural movement. Our arms hang down. You have a more natural flow when you bend your knees and then swing the ball up. The ball is thrown softer with a higher arc so there is also a greater chance the ball will bounce in than if you hit it harder at a straighter angle.

Who walks with their hands up? Not normal. And in a game when your arms get tired, it's harder to throw and easier to miss, especially if you are using two raised hands. You would think that basketball players, especially those in the NBA who are paid to win, would use a technique where they might only miss 10 free throws a season instead of 150.

Imagine all of the games you would win if every player used the underhand free throw. You could go to the playoffs more often if you could pick up more points per game. The fact of the matter is that even though it is proven wisdom that an underhand would improve your point average and that you would win more games and have a greater chance of getting to the playoff or be the MVP, only two players in the NBA use the underhand free throw today in college basketball, and none in the NBA. One is Chinanu Onuaku of Louisville, who is an American Nigerian, and the other is Canyon Barry, son of Rick Barry, who plays for the College of Charleston. This means you have to be from another continent or be a son of Rick Barry to see the advantage of shooting underhand. So why won't the players use it more?

Shaquille O'Neal, one of the NBA greats, shot 5,935 free throws in his life but missed – 5,317. That's a lot of points left off the scoring sheet. Rick Barry tried to reason with him on shooting underhand, but Shaq said he would rather shoot zero free throws than shoot underhand and make them all. Why?

Wilt Chamberlain stopped using the underhand because of this reason and this may be Shaq's reason and most of the NBA players. Most players call it a "granny shot" or a "sissy shot." They may say they will do anything to win a game, go all out, leave their heart on the court for a championship, but it's not true. If that were true they would all shoot underhanded because you would win so many more games.

Now lest you think I am being sexist here, Gladwell's analysts went to

the women's basketball team of Columbia University and showed them how they could make more free throws underhanded. Guess what, they didn't want to use it because to them it was a "granny shot. Too sissy," so say the women. The belief is that it's better to look good and miss free throws, than look different and help the team win.

So when it comes to wisdom, I say and the book of James say, go ahead, ask God for wisdom because He will give it to you. But don't ask God if you won't act on the wisdom He gives. Don't ask or question Him if you are going to doubt Him for you will be like a wave on the sea tossed to and fro by the wind. You will be double-minded.

When we ask for God's wisdom – often what God tells us to do is to walk to the beat of a different drummer, to live a life for God and not how the world lives. God's wisdom will say love your enemies, forgive them, be honest, don't lie, be generous to God and other's, serve others, think of others highly than you at times. Be loyal in your marriage, keep your promises, stay committed to friends.

You know why Wilt Chamberlain, Shaq O Neill and others wouldn't use the underhand throw? They said it clearly – it looks bad and people will laugh and criticize them. In other words, peer pressure would get to them. Whether a child, youth, or an adult, peer pressure is one of the greatest challenges to us. You might be pressured to drink, or take drugs or do sex or do something unkind. But the wisdom from God asks you to do otherwise, and to live for Him and not how the world tells you to.

Malcolm Gladwell taught me that there is a man named Mark Granovetter, who wrote a book about what he calls the *threshold model of collective behavior*. He wanted to know why nice people suddenly do things they wouldn't normally do, like throw rocks at windows. He discovered that the

struggle is between something internal and something external. For example, our beliefs are INTERNAL. They are the positions we've taken in our head or in our heart. Thresholds are EXTERNAL things, like peer pressure, which can make us do things we wouldn't normally – whether in an office, or in a school, or in a neighborhood with friends.

So if your child drives a 100 miles an hour at midnight with friends, his behavior is guided by his threshold of how he can withstand peer pressure with the friends in the car. Same for getting drunk with friends. Everyone's threshold is different. Some join a lynch mob. Some walk away from it.

We need to have God's wisdom and not "what people say" as our center. Our text today is saying, FIRST, if you want wisdom from God, ask. Second, if you ask, He will give it to you. God is making a promise: If you ask for My presence, I will be there. If you want My help, I will give it to you. If you want strength, I am there. But don't ask for it if you won't accept it and work with it.

God keeps His promises.

Last week I mentioned the verse Matthew 11:28, where Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." If you ask for Jesus' help, then give Him your burdens. Don't go to the throne room, give Him your burdens, and then at the end of the prayer pick them up again. Either give Him your burdens or don't. Give Him your worries, but don't start worrying again if God is to work on your behalf. That will make you like in the waves tossed to and fro – being double minded. Should I do what God said or not? Maybe I should, maybe I shouldn't. Should I worry more? Maybe I shouldn't, or should I?

If you want wisdom from God then ask. Second, if you ask, He will give it to you. Third, if He gives it to you, then act on it and don't turn away from it.

Don't turn away from it like a basketball player would turn away from applying the ultimate secret for scoring more points that would win your team the championship.

Here's a simple truth. When we receive God's wisdom and we don't apply it, when we know His commandments and how He wants us to live but don't do them, I guarantee our life will NOT be better. God's way of living is always better than if we break His rules. That's one of the things we can be certain about.

Break the ten commandments? We are done for. There are no exceptions in history. A few would foolishly say, "Well, I skipped commandments 3, 8, and 10, and I'll have a great life." You are fooling yourself. No exceptions.

But Dan, you ask, how do I get God's wisdom? Do I just pray? Let me share three ways to get God's wisdom. The first two won't surprise you, and for the last one I will go into more detail.

1) Pray.

Basically prayer is talking to God. Talk to Him as much as you can. Constantly chatter with Him. In your car, in your office, on the way to your office, when you are walking, before a hard phone call, during and after, when you recreate, and just before you eat, sleep, and wake up. Remember the prayer acronym I taught you: ACTSL—like the axel of a car that keeps the wheels of your faith going.

- A – Adoration
- C- Confession
- T – Thanksgiving
- S – Supplication
- L- Listen

Adoration – tell God you love Him and praise Him for who He is. Any parent would love to hear that from a child and we are the children of the heavenly father.

Confession – tell Him the things you did wrong today and what you need to do better.

Thanksgiving – self-explanatory – thank God for a lot. Give thanks for ALL Things.

Supplication – present to Him your prayer requests.

Listening – sometimes we ask God for answers but we are not quiet enough to just sit in the quiet and listen to what he might be saying to us.

Do that and you have a healthy ongoing prayer life.

2. Read the Bible.

Hard to be a good American if you don't know the constitution. Hard to know how to run your car if you never read the car manual. You would put in the wrong oil, the wrong gas, and not know what the warning lights mean. Hard to operate a new phone (especially if you're switching from Android to an iPhone or vice versa), if you don't read the instructions.

In faith, can't be more practical to say that if you want God's wisdom, then read God's word. Read the Bible (which can be an acronym for Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth). By reading the Bible you will know God better. You will know His character, His guidelines, His commandments for better living. Use the app I suggested earlier called BIOY, which stands for Bible in One Year. You can read the Bible all year with little stories about it by Nicky and Pippa Gumbel the leaders of Alpha. Or use Scripture Union booklets. Just get the narrative of the Bible in our heads and then in our hearts. There are CD's and MP3's of listening to the Bible, like Word of Promise or The Bible Experience – complete with professional actors and music. You can get them for less than \$30 at times.

3. Examine your life daily.

St. Ignatius of Loyola came up with the Daily Examen. It is a key way to attain the wisdom of God. Basically it leads us to a lifestyle where we are always seeking and looking for the presence of God in our lives.

The fact is, God is always present, but we just don't see Him or hear Him or feel Him. The discipline of the Daily Examen is easy in structure. You might consider making this part of you dinner ritual. Some families light a candle at dinner each night, and before they eat, they basically ask three questions that everyone must answer. It is great for a single person to do too. Here are the questions:

- a. When and where today did you experience the presence of God? (This is the overarching question and the next two help you with the first.)
- b. What is the one thing today you were most grateful for?
- c. What is the one thing today you were least grateful for?

Let's tackle the second one. Ending the day with thinking of at least one thing you were grateful for helps us see the presence of God. I believe the more grateful we are, the more optimistic and the less depressed we will be.

Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, who lost her husband to a heart attack, has found that in her present life without him, it is helpful to end each night writing down three things she is thankful for. She is not a Christian, but I am saying that having a discipline or examen is helpful for everyone.

But here the Daily Examen is asking for you to think of at least just one thing every day that you are thankful for. Can there not be something you would be grateful and might see God in it? Be aware of your emotions as you think back over the day. How did you feel? Why did you feel that? Boredom? Resentment? Anger?

Disappointment? Fear? Depression? What is God saying through these feelings? Are you concerned about someone? Did you let someone down?

This could actually revolutionize dinnertime, even if you have kids around the table, or maybe especially if you have kids around the table because it will get them focused and thinking every day of how God was present.

If taken seriously, this discipline will allow God's presence and His wisdom to start permeating our lives. The waves of His love and wisdom will wash over us as all day we are looking for God's presence and something we can be thankful for.

Recently I had a dinner with friends, and even though we were at a restaurant, I asked our guests if they would do the Daily Examen with Pam and me. Our friend shared how when she got lost while walking to find a new restaurant, a nun came forward out of nowhere (and though she could not speak a word of English) and literally led my friend with her hand to the restaurant. Angels unaware!

For some of you it might be a sunset, a missed car accident, an unexpected call from a friend, a song, a great meal, a smile, or a passage from a book or the Bible that suddenly jumped out at you.

The third point in the Daily Examen is to think of something that day you were the LEAST grateful for. Now that seems like a downer, but somehow thinking of something you didn't like during the day, may help you see God's presence in it. Again examine your feeling and thoughts about that idea. Could God have been in even the greatest fear or the biggest challenge that day?

This one is the essence of my philosophy of "Jerry Coffee," where something bad that has happened turns out to be a blessing. For Jerry Coffee, the bad thing was having to wait longer than

expected for a plane flight and then having a heart attack at the airport. But then he realized later that if his flight were on time, he would have had the heart attack on the flight and it probably would have been fatal. The King has one more move even when we are delayed or frustrated with life.

I read in a book called "Sleeping with Bread," which is a great short book that talked about two American women visiting another country doing the the Daily Examen over dinner. One friend shared that the thing she was most grateful for that day was finding a great item while shopping, and how she bargained down a peasant to get a good deal.

Then her friend, in her turn, shared how that same incident was what she was considered to be the thing she's LEAST thankful for because she didn't like how her friend bargained so hard that the poor peasant who needed the money made so little.

But by talking about it, the one who bargained realized that what she did was not a good thing, and so the next day she was more fair in her shopping.

Seriously, if you really want God's wisdom it will need some discipline in our lives. We are saturated every day with commercials of buying this or buying that or you can be this person or that person. And so the peer pressure begins. So we need a Daily Examen to fight the daily bombardment of the worlds' values, which often are not God's. By seeking the presence of God, we have a chance to remember what God did for us.

Before we start communion, May I suggest that perhaps tonight you can start the Daily Examen, whether you light a candle or not, and ask yourself or your friends or family members the questions:

- a. When and where today did you experience the presence of God?

- b. What is the one thing today you were most grateful for?
- c. What is the one thing today you were least grateful for?

One of the ways we regularly remember Jesus is through the sacrament of Communion, which is open to all those who follow Jesus. It is in communion we revisit the story of what Jesus did for us to show how much He loves us. We are reminded that He came to give us His life, His love, His wisdom.

The title of the book *Sleeping with Bread* comes from the fact that in World War II, young children would sleep with bread to reassure them that they would have bread in the morning. And so the authors used that metaphor to show that if we do the Daily Examen, we will be like children reassured that we would have God's presence or daily bread with us every day. There will be, as with the Israelites, enough manna for a day.

(Communion was served following the message.)