



*Simple Math*

*James 3:13-4:3, 7-8*

*4th in the sermon series on James*

*Sunday, September 23rd, 2018*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

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Text:

*Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. (v. 13)*

I drove back from Chicago last night after making a hospital visit at the University of Illinois Hospital, Chicago in the morning and being my wife's "arm candy" at an evening wedding. While finding my way from the Homewood-Flossmoor area of Chicagoland to my home I followed my Waze GPS. In the dark hours before driving home and finally free of the Chicago area traffic I began to wonder about the "little man" who resides in my GPS and does such a good job guiding me home. Of course, there is no little man but an algorithm doing all the work. Algorithms, as you may know are a finite number of steps with frequent repetition of steps to solve a problem. They are used nearly everywhere--from GPS to web searches and all things in between.

We've been looking at the letter of James. Some people say that the epistle is a counterbalance to Paul's emphasis on Faith. But that was not James' intent. Although he would not have known the word, James gives us a faith algorithm. To James, Faith and Works go hand in hand. "Show me your works," he said earlier in this epistle, "and I will show you your Faith." James algorithm is Faith + Works = Wisdom. Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.

Jesus said something very similar. He told his disciples to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves." By that he meant that we must know the way that the world works without adopting the ways of the world.

The ways of the world and the ways of the Kingdom I believe can be best illustrated by looking at two real life examples. Simon Sinek is a business consultant, author and lecturer. He recently noted that today's standardized business models are left overs from the 1980s and '90s. Those were largely boom years in the United States. The Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union broke apart. One author said that we were at the end of history as he did not foresee anything that could threaten Western liberal democracy. Of course, this was naive, as recent events illustrate.

In the 1980s and '90s the standardized business model became "shareholder supremacy". The needs of the shareholders took precedence over the needs of workers and the society in general. As a consequence many businesses maintained shareholder dividends by laying off workers to cut costs. Their "worldview" went from long range to quarterly. Sinek said that this is like a coach trying to build up a strong team by prioritizing the needs of the fans over the needs of the players. This unbalanced corporate culture led to the primary means of incentivizing people through bonuses which led investment banks to literally create environments where all employees became addicted to numbers. This led to cutting ethical and legal corners to get a bonus and feel valued.

This is not the way that capitalism is designed to work. The basic structure of capitalism is that if you take care of people the people will take care of the business. But when numbers become more important than the people and people become expendable the result is that trust is eroded and employees no longer look out for the company but for themselves. Years of goodwill and trust can be destroyed almost overnight and it takes 20-30 years to reestablish that goodwill and trust, with proxy wars, globalization and the internet. What worked then does not work now.

Contrast this business model with a different one. In the recession of 2008 Barry-Wehmler was a US company with about three billion dollars in revenue and 8000 employees. When the recession hit, almost overnight, they lost thirty percent of their orders. The company's board of directors want to have mass layoffs but CEO Bob Chapman was committed to "his people". He resisted the knee-jerk reaction and took a different approach. He implemented a furlough program whereby every employee had to take four weeks of unpaid vacation. They could do this whenever they wanted to do it and they did not have to take the weeks consecutively. When he announced the program to the employees he said that it was better that everyone suffer a little rather than have a few suffer a lot. As Sinek tells the story, morale shot up as did production. The employees felt safe as opposed to disposable and company loyalty is second to none. There is nothing that the employees wouldn't do for the company because they feel valued.

Wisdom is when Faith and Works go together like a hand in a glove. Wisdom doesn't see "either/or", "black or white". Wisdom looks for a third way, a better way, the Kingdom way -- all for the glory of God. Amen.