

“I Wish I Knew Then, What I Know Now”

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What can be done when we do not know what to do? People of every age face new and or nuanced situations. We often find ourselves not knowing the best path. It is only after an experience that we realize the wisest course. But then, it's too late. We are left thinking, “I wish I knew then, what I know now.”

Wisdom is being able to rightly discern the potential consequences of a decision. Such calculations are based on learned experiences. When we face a new situation, we often find ourselves in a wisdom deficit. For example, we went through a pandemic for the first time in one-hundred years. There was limited experience upon which to use as a model for decision-making.

What can be done to shrink our wisdom deficit? How can we make better decisions when we lack experience? How do we chart a course in life despite having never dealt with a particular situation? Thankfully, the Bible gives us answers.

The Wise...

1. Develop reverence for God. In one of his books of wisdom, Solomon wrote, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Prov. 1:7). Reverence for God is to be the foundation for our knowledge and learning. This becomes the context through which we analyze life and make decisions.

Solomon was writing to young people. Young people lack life-experience to make wise decisions. This is not sinful. This is simply reality. Solomon teaches what can be done to shrink the wisdom deficit of youth. However, his teaching has a broader application.

Regardless of age, we all must seek to grow in our reverence for God. There is any number of situations we may be forced to confront for which we have no experience. Yet, we can cope with situations in the fear of God. We can proceed by seeking to make decisions that would honor God.

2. Are humble. Pride hinders us from acknowledging our wisdom deficit. Without any life experience, young people often think they know everything. With some life experience, middle-aged people often think they know everything. With much of life experience, older people often think they know everything. See a pattern? Solomon warned, “Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil” (Prov. 3:7).

In addition to Solomon, James wrote about the subject of wisdom. James asked, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” (Jas. 3:13). How do we appraise wisdom in people? There are different metrics we often use to discern people we consider wise. We often consider wealthy and successful people to be wise. If a person is skilled in one area of life, we assume he or she must be skilled in all areas of life. This kind of thinking was common in James' time.

Instead of using worldly metrics to appraise wisdom in people, James wrote, "...By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom...wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere." (Jas. 3:13, 17). Humility is the heart of wisdom.

3. Learn from mistakes. There is a common misconception about wisdom: wise people do not make mistakes. This is not true. Everyone makes mistakes. What separates the wise from the foolish is that the wise learn from their mistakes.

Learning from our mistakes requires a great deal of humility. If we do not acknowledge our mistakes and implement lessons learned, we will continue to repeat our mistakes in the future. There is an old proverb that says, "There is no fool like an old fool." This describes someone who, despite age and experience, never learns from his or her mistakes. The Bible says, "Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray" (Prov. 10:17). The wise listen to and implement corrective action.

4. Gain influence. When a person humbly accepts instruction and implements new insights, he or she will gain influence among their peers. A wise person does not have to campaign for a following. A wise person will naturally attract others.

James wrote to Christians who were confused about the nature of wisdom. Some wanted to be teachers/leaders in the church for all the wrong reasons. They wanted to power for self-serving reasons. This is how worldly minded people seek to influence. They politically wrangle and manipulate others to their advantage. James sharply rebuked this nonsense:

"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (Jas. 3:13-18).

Conclusion

We all experience a deficit of wisdom. We frequently encounter new, unfamiliar situations in life. This does not mean that we cannot wisely move forward. Developing reverence for God will enable us to humbly and thoughtfully seek His counsel. Afterward, we can make a decision. Next, we can analyze the results of our decision. Then, we can use the lessons learned in future decisions.

This godly pursuit of wisdom will bless our lives. This is what Solomon stated throughout the book of Proverbs. Also, becoming wise can bless the lives of others. The world and the Church alike need wise leaders in the model of James' teaching of wisdom.

The key to wisdom is faith. We must have faith in God to provide wise guidance to us. We must have faith to follow the wisdom He provides.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind”

James 1:5-6