

**“Rocket Science Not Needed”**  
**James 3:13-4:3**  
**Mark 9:30-37**

Who is wise and understanding among us? Where do conflicts and disputes among us come from? Surely we don't need a rocket scientist to come up with answers, do we? Rocket science was needed this past week to make sure that the shuttle could return safely to earth, but not to answer questions such as these!

Are not the answers as plain as the proverbial nose on our face? They are in the letter of James. Listen again, this time in *The Message*:

**Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom—it's animal cunning, devilish conniving. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats.**

**Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.**

Such wisdom is “from above.” We are so obtuse, however, so enamored with human definitions of wisdom that what we really need is for God to hit us over the head with a two-by-four! “A wise and religious man sat under a mango tree in his garden in the noonday heat, and he looked at his pumpkin vines growing nearby. He said to himself, ‘How foolish God is. Here he puts a big heavy pumpkin onto a weak vine, which can't do anything but just lie on the ground. And then he hangs those small mangoes onto a tree which can hold the weight of a man. If I were God, I think I could do better than that.’ Just then a breeze came up and knocked a loose mango off the tree. It fell right on the man's head. Now he had a bump on his head which made him a sadder, but wiser man. ‘Suppose,’ he thought now, ‘that there had been a pumpkin up there, instead of a mango .... Never again will I try to plan the world for God, but I shall thank God that he has done so well.’”

You don't have to know chapter and verse in the Bible to realize that our thoughts are not God's thoughts, nor are our ways God's ways.<sup>1</sup> We can intuit such truth. Yet boasting that we are always right has become a life-style. No wonder God issued this warning through the prophet: **“Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.”**<sup>2</sup>

Wisdom that comes from God just doesn't square with human wisdom. Human wisdom strives to

be the top dog. Leonard Bernstein was asked one time what was the most difficult instrument to play. His answer: 2<sup>nd</sup> fiddle! So here's another question that does not need rocket science for an answer: **“Where do you think all these appalling wars and quarrels come from? Do you think they just happen? Think again. They come about because you want your own way, and fight for it deep inside yourselves. You lust for what you don't have and are willing to kill to get it. You want what isn't yours and will risk violence to get your hands on it.”**<sup>3</sup>

Human wisdom wants its own way. It wants first chair! That, in turn, precipitates wars and quarrels. Last week I showed the children some books from my personal library. Included among them was one by Dr. Seuss, *The Butter Battle Book*. It could well be a commentary on these few verses from James:

On the last day of summer,  
ten hours before fall...  
...my grandfather took me  
out to the Wall.  
For a while he stood silent.  
Then finally he said,  
with a very sad shake  
of his very old head,  
“As you know, on this side of the Wall  
we are Yooks.  
On the far other side of this Wall  
live the Zooks.”  
Then my grandfather said,  
“It's high time that you knew  
of the terribly horrible thing that Zooks do.  
In every Zook house and in every Zook town  
*every Zook eats his bread  
with the butter side down!*  
“But we Yooks, as you know,  
when we breakfast or sup,  
spread our bread,” Grandpa said,  
“with the butter side *up*.  
That's the right, honest way!”  
Grandpa gritted his teeth.  
“So you can't trust a Zook who spreads bread underneath!  
Every Zook must be watched!  
He has kinks in his soul!  
That's why, as a youth, I made watching my goal,  
Watching Zooks for the Zook-Watching Border Patrol!

As the story continues, the conflict escalates over the correct side on which to butter one's bread. All sorts of defensive and offensive weapons are tried, until finally both the Yooks and the Zooks acquire the BIG-BOY BOOMEROO! As the boy watches his grandpa climb the Wall to do-in those Zooks once and for all, there's no resolution to the conflict, only an open ended-ness that seems to call out some savior to show a better way.

Grandpa leapt up that Wall with a lopulous leap  
and he cleared his hoarse throat  
with a bopulous beep.  
He screamed, "here's the end of that terrible town  
full of Zooks who eat bread with the butter side down!"  
And at that very instant we heard a klupp-klupp  
of feet on the Wall and old VanItch klupped up!  
*The Boys in HIS Back Room had made him one too!*  
*In his fist was another Big-Boy Boomeroo!*  
"I'll blow you," he yelled, "into pork and wee beans!  
I'll butter-side-up you to small smithereens!"  
"Granpa!" I shouted. "Be careful! Oh, gee!  
Who's going to drop it?  
Will *you*...? Or will *he*...?"  
"Be patient," said Grandpa. "We'll see.  
We will see..."<sup>4</sup>

I know, that's silly, silly like the foolishness of God<sup>5</sup> – that God should stoop so low as to live among us and love us and bear the cross – the consequence of "human wisdom."

One day a dispute broke out among the disciples about who was the greatest. This happened immediately after Jesus had finished telling them for the second time that he would be betrayed and killed. Mark seems rather easy on them when he writes, "**they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.**" The more likely scenario was that they were too preoccupied competing with each other to ask or even to care what Jesus meant by dying and rising.

Maybe they could be excused if that only happened once, but their pursuit of their own sense of greatness was a life-style. There was the time when James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came and asked for positions of privilege in God's kingdom. When the other ten disciples heard this, they were angry. Can't you just hear them? Can't you just hear us? "*Who do they think they are?*" How blind we often are to the speck in someone else's eye because of the log in our own.<sup>6</sup>

Still another such occasion happened at the last supper of all places. "**This is my body,**" Jesus said.<sup>7</sup> Then Luke tells us, "**A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest.**"<sup>8</sup>

How slow Jesus' disciples were to get the point. How slow we are to get the point! Could Jesus make it any more clear when he says, "**So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be servant of all.**" But just in case someone fails to get the point, he embraced a little child in his arms. "**Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me.**"

This time Jesus wasn't talking about the innocence and trust of a little child which he holds up as the way to enter the kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup> This time Jesus is emphasizing the lowly status, or virtually no status, of children in the society of Jesus' day. They did not occupy the center of attention that we like to think they do today.

I had this thought as I was comparing different translations of the text. The Greek text doesn't tell

us the gender of the child Jesus embraced. English translations typically use the masculine pronoun. "And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms said..."<sup>10</sup> The New Revised Standard Version which you have before you, seeks more gender inclusive language. It reads, "**Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said...**"

If children were not valued in that society, female children were valued even less. If a man's wife bore him a daughter, he would openly wail in grief. I wonder, therefore, if a more accurate translation would be, "Then he took a little child and put *her* among them; and taking *her* in his arms, he said..."

Preachers often use object lessons to teach a timeless truth to children. In this instance, Jesus uses a child to teach a timeless truth to adults – the best way for his disciples to get over arguing and fighting among themselves is to focus their attention on serving those in need. Would that the nations of the world do the same!

"Do you really want to be great," Jesus asked his disciples? "**Then he took a little child and put *her* among them; and taking *her* in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'**"

1. Isaiah 55:8
2. Jeremiah 9:23-24
3. James 4:1-2, *The Message*
4. "*The Butter Battle Book*, by Dr. Seuss, (New York: Random House, 1984)
5. See 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
6. Matthew 7:1-5
7. Luke 22:19
8. Luke 22:24
9. Mark 10:15
10. For example: *King James Version, Revised Standard Version, New International Version*