What is the most consequential act in human history? An event or a series of events that has literally shaped humanity? If you were to take the crucifixion of Jesus off the table, and dwell only in the human realm, what would you say was the most consequential act? Some might say the acts of Adolf Hitler and the Second World War. Others might argue the acts of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement. Some might reach back and consider the acts of Martin Luther and the Reformation. Others might look at Neil Armstrong’s “one giant leap” . . . I mean it was for “mankind”, right?

What I think we must consider in each of these cases, including the acts of Jesus, is what went into the acts and what came out of it. I believe this is what James is trying to illustrate to his audience . . .

“Who is wise and has understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom’s gentleness.”

He begins with a rhetorical question, a question no one should boldly claim to embody. The tone is similar to the preceding paragraphs of the letter. James is daring the audience to look introspectively at their faith claims, to look at the internal and external evidence of their faith, and to renew their commitment to the faith of their fathers and the faith of the author’s brother, Jesus of Nazareth. James wants to know who would dare to claim to be wise and understanding.

He gives his audience a clear means by which they can prove their claim, inviting them to show their works . . . the natural outflow of their faith. The interesting thing James does, however, is he creates a flowchart. Now, it may take a profoundly left-brained person to see it, but it is there in the text.

There are things, attributes, emotions, and attitudes that lead us into an action. Hitler did not kill millions of Jews on a whim. Martin Luther did not come up with his plan to overturn centuries of religious tradition over breakfast. Martin Luther King did not initiate a civil rights movement by accident. And you must treasure the romance of a God who did not accidentally fall out of Heaven onto a cross. In each of these cases, there was premeditation. Something influenced the actors. Some base desire stirred up their souls to act. And the rest, as they say, is history.

James told his audience that the actions of the “wise and understanding” should be influenced “with wisdom’s gentleness”. If you study the Greek text, you will see that James uses the word “en” (often translated as “in”) to show its influence. So what goes into our works? As for James and his rhetorical question, he declares that the works of the wise and the understanding will be initiated by the gentleness that is imbedded in wisdom. That is the starting point. That is the influential foundation.

So what does that look like?

To get what James is saying, we need to get our head around the word “gentleness”. It is the Greek word “prautes” and is a word I like to translate as “power under control”. The translation as “gentleness” (or as “meekness” in other texts) seems too mild-mannered for me. It is a term that conveys the image of a person who tempers the exertion of his power, not a person who is powerless to exert his power. And is that not what wisdom does to a person of power? Wisdom restrains. Wisdom considers the full range of outcomes. Wisdom controls power.

So back to our flowchart . . .

If wisdom’s gentleness guides a person into an action, what is the outcome? Reverting back to the Greek text, we find the word “ek” (translated as “out”) followed by the phrase “kalos anastrophes” (translated as “excellent turning”). In our vernacular, we might say that a series of actions was a “beautiful turn of events”.

Does this sound like the flow of a person who is wise and understanding? Is their wisdom flowing into their actions and elegance flowing out of them? Are these people who are lauded for their preparation? Are they praised for the beauty that seems to follow their steps?

Do you see the beauty, the “kalos anastrophes” of Calvary in this flow?

But James needs to illustrate the people they are not . . . watch your toes!

“But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don’t brag and deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where envy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every kind of evil.”

Do you see the “in”? A life marked by “bitter envy and selfish ambition” is a life focused on one person—myself. I envy because I do not have what another person has, whether that be talents, relationships, or goods. Selfish ambition is a life consumed with “what’s in it for me”. The actual Greek term is used to describe a mercenary. Anyone want to try to get wisdom and understanding from a person who is influenced by envy and ambition? This is why James warns them to turn away from their pious boasting and their blindness . . . envy and ambition are rotting their works, and it is obvious to everyone but them.

James uses uniquely Jewish verbiage to describe this “wisdom” as “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” as opposed to “from above”. In the Jewish mind, God is the One who gives true wisdom, while the wisdom of earthly being is fatally flawed, incapable of producing any good.

So what is the “turn of events” that flows from “envy and ambition”? What could possibly come from those poisonous influences? James tells his audience that “disorder” and “every kind of evil” will come out of these actions. This is how wars are started, not just between nations, but also between siblings and friends. Confusion reigns. Disturbances follow. Tumults linger. This is the idea of “disorder” . . . but that is just the half of the outcome. The Greek word for “evil” is the word “phaulos” from which we get our word “foul”. In baseball, that is bad, but in the kitchen it is awful! It is putrid. It is something from which you must turn away. It is the outcome of envy and ambition . . .

Anyone ever lived through that “turn of events”? Maybe you are in it right now . . .

So what are the ingredients of “wisdom from above” . . .

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without favoritism and hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.”

I find it interesting that James does not simply compile a list, but he dictates an order to the first few. Similar to a recipe that demands certain ingredients be added in an order and prepared as per instructions, James declares that “wisdom from above” must begin with purity. It is the Greek word “hagnos” and we get our word “holy” from its base. I would argue that what James is saying is that true wisdom has no trace of humanity. It is wholly other. It is not a blend of opinion and doctrine. It is not a product of life coaching. It is breathed into a person by the spiritual manifestation of God—the Holy Spirit. And it produces the most beautiful outcomes . . . outcomes no man can claim as his own.

James then adds three items that all begin with an “e” in the Greek: “eirenes, epeiekes, eupeithos” . . . “peace-loving, gentle, compliant”.

The first is a simple translation and a simple application. Peace begets peace. When I encounter a person in a peaceful manner, I generally get peace. And the opposite is easily seen.

The second is a unique word, found only in this text. The Greek word “epeiekes” is difficult to translate, but the best phrase I discovered was “beyond justice”. When I bring an attitude of looking beyond the justice required by the written rules, and incorporate a human perspective that considers the spirit of the law, I am coming close to this word. The opposite of this word may be “harshness”.

The third word literally translates into “good obedient”. When I come to my world with a desire to be obedient to my God, especially regarding the command to love one another, my outcomes will be aligned with His will for my life and for others. Beauty will simply take its course, and every turn of events will be a proclamation of the goodness of God’s character.

Next, we need to bring mercy and “good fruits” to the table, but not just some . . . James calls for all. James is not looking for traces of mercy, nor is he hoping that we will bring a little “love, joy, peace, etc.”. James is looking for a person who is saturated with mercy and good fruits. Envy and ambition cannot exist in a life saturated with good fruit. Revenge and grudges cannot coexist in a person whose saturation with mercy compels them to forgive. There simply is no room . . .

Finally, James demands that we keep out any form of favoritism and hypocrisy. He has spoken about the evils of favoritism earlier in the letter, but this term is broader than a simple reaction to wealth and poverty. Here James expands the prohibition to any form of distinction, judgment, or doubt. It is a profound sense of acceptance of one creature for another, not according to deeds, but according to our status as fellow creatures. And that it be carried out without hypocrisy or in utter sincerity.

So what happens when we bring all these things to the table?

Peace happens.

Beauty happens.

Orphans get provisions . . . Widows get care . . . Poor men get chairs.

It is an elegant turn of events.

Is this what it is like to be you? Is your life one beautiful turn of events to another? Are you brining all these beautiful, holy ingredients into your home, your office, and your relationships?

Before you get your will power out and try to make all this work, let me encourage you to simply spend some time staring at the Cross. Give yourself over to a contemplation of the Gospels. Consider what it took to bring about this turn of events. Aspire to see others as Christ saw you. Then go do something amazing. And tomorrow, get up and do it again . . .

And before you know it, you will have lived a life of “kalos anastrophes” . . .