

# Wisdom Displayed

## When Wisdom Goes Wrong

### “A Journey Through James” Sermon 14

#### Texts:

**James 3:13–18** *Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. <sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. <sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. <sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. <sup>17</sup> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

**Numbers 14:1–24** *Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. <sup>2</sup> And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! <sup>3</sup> Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. **Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?**” <sup>4</sup> And they said to one another, “**Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.**”*

<sup>5</sup> Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. <sup>6</sup> And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes <sup>7</sup> and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, “**The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land.** <sup>8</sup> If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. <sup>9</sup> **Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.**”

<sup>10</sup> **Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones.** But the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel. <sup>11</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” <sup>12</sup> I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.” <sup>13</sup> But Moses said to the LORD, “Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for you brought up this people in your might from among them, <sup>14</sup> and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people. For you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. <sup>15</sup> Now if you kill this people as one man, then the nations who have heard your fame will say, <sup>16</sup> ‘It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness.’ <sup>17</sup> **And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying,** <sup>18</sup> ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.’ <sup>19</sup> Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now.”

<sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said, “**I have pardoned, according to your word.** <sup>21</sup> But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD, <sup>22</sup> **none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice,**

<sup>23</sup> shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it. <sup>24</sup> **But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land** into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it.

**Acts 4:36–5:11** Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, <sup>37</sup> sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>1</sup> But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, <sup>2</sup> and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet. <sup>3</sup> But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?" <sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God." <sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. **And great fear came upon all who heard of it.** <sup>6</sup> The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. <sup>7</sup> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." <sup>9</sup> But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." <sup>10</sup> Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> **And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.**

**Psalm 1:1–4** Blessed is the man who walks not in **the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;** <sup>2</sup> but **his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.** <sup>3</sup> He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. <sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

## **Introduction:**

Every summer for many years Beth and I had the opportunity to lead a leadership development program for High School juniors and seniors that worked to help them develop strong personal character, spiritual fervency, and identify their life mission for Christ.

The vast majority of these young people were raised in Christian homes, were active in their youth groups, and worshipped in churches whose theology would be very similar to ours. Most of them were educated in a thoroughly Christian context (either home schooled or at a Christian school). However, with relatively few exceptions, many of these young people came with significant gaps between what they claimed to believe about God and how those beliefs actually shaped their personal choices and conduct. Even more alarming was that many of them appeared to be comfortable with the obvious inconsistencies between their stated beliefs and their personal values, choices, and conduct. Put differently, many of these young people claimed theological beliefs aligned with Scripture but actually operated their daily lives from a very different set of beliefs influenced by or derived from the secular world around them. *And I don't think this problem is unique to teens –it exists in the lives of many professing believers in churches like ours.*

The dichotomy between the Christian beliefs we claim and the secular beliefs we actually embrace does immense damage to the whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith James calls us to embrace and display to those living in the kingdoms of this world.

What does Pastor James have to say to help us recognize whether this problem exists in us? How does he suggest we go about resolving this problem once we admit we have embraced the wrong wisdom? The answer to both these questions is found in these six verses (3:13-18) which comprise the heart of his pastoral counsel to believers struggling to embrace the *Wisdom from Above* while surrounded by and bombarded with the compelling attraction of the *Wisdom from the Below*.

James has already warned us of the danger of being “double-minded” and vacillating between the wisdom in God’s Word and the wisdom of the world. Double Mindedness has such a devastating impact on our faith because the wisdom we embrace is connected to our entire life (what we believe and how we behave). We do what we do, say what we say, and feel what we feel because we think what we think. And we think what we think because we believe what we believe about God, the world, and our life. Because everything about us is shaped and governed by what we believe, where we go for those beliefs is of utmost importance.

Through his pastoral letter, James has been talking to us about two distinct kingdoms, two distinct kinds of faith, two distinct approaches to God (single-hearted vs double minded), and two very different kinds of wisdom by which we arrange every part of our life – wisdom from above and wisdom from below.

Last week we talked about how biblical wisdom works and as we listened to James, he reminded us of five important facts about “Wisdom from Above”:

- Its Source – God
- Its Nature – Spiritual vs Carnal
- Its Location – Scripture
- Its Function – Operating System of our Soul
- Its Operation – Transmission for the vehicle of our life where belief turns to action and what we do reveals whether what we say we believe lines up with what we actually believe about God, the world, and our lives.

But James makes clear that another kind of wisdom exists in the world and that wisdom is the universal operating system that shapes and drives the beliefs, values, and behavior of unbelievers living in the kingdom of darkness. This is not surprising nor is it shocking (although *the results* of living in a world that operates by that wisdom are horrifying).

What is surprising is that James reveals this broken, wisdom from below sometimes shapes and drives the beliefs, values, and behaviors of believers who have been enlightened by God, enlivened by the Word of Truth, and transferred

out of the Kingdom of Darkness into the Kingdom of God's Son by means of the gospel.

Christians who know the truth, have experienced its transforming power, and have that truth implanted in their heart sometimes choose to operate by a worldly wisdom that leads them to embrace and display the same values, beliefs, and behaviors that are common to those in the kingdom of darkness.

They are like the person described in Psalm 1 who disregards God's wisdom and instead listens to the counsel of the ungodly (advice); stands in the way of sinners (behavior); and sits in the seat of the scornful (values). And the Bible is full of examples of the damage that happens to God's people when they ignore the wisdom of God and lean on their own understanding. This is why Solomon exhorts us to *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. <sup>6</sup> In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. <sup>7</sup> Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil."* (**Prov. 3:5-7**)

And to help us follow Solomon's advice, James provides five important ways by which we can recognize and avoid being driven by the wrong kind of wisdom.

## **I. Wisdom is Validated by Our Works:**

*Who is wise and understanding among you? By his **good conduct** let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom (**James 3:13**).*

- The first thing James wants us to realize is that every believer operates his life according to one of the two kinds of wisdom.
- Either we operate according to Wisdom from Above that comes from God's Word, OR we operate according to Wisdom from below that comes from the fallen world system around us.
- James makes the very important point that whatever a believer might claim about being "wise and understanding," there is a sure test that will reveal the kind of wisdom that is really governing his life: the works that wisdom is producing in how he lives.
- Wisdom will manifest itself in two primary areas of life:

## ***A. Our Conduct***

- James points out two very different kinds of conduct in these verses that come from two distinctly different kinds of wisdom.
1. The consistent practice of good and beneficial conduct that comes from the good wisdom God has sent down from above. (3:13)
  2. The consistent display of Unruly and Disobedient behavior that comes from the wisdom from below (3:16)

## ***B. Our Disposition:***

- James also reveals that the two distinct kinds of wisdom develop two very different dispositions in the life of a believer.
1. ***Wisdom from Above*** develops and manifests a consistent, gracious humility that eagerly submits to God's Word (3:13; 1:21).
  2. ***Wisdom from Below*** develops and manifests the same bitter envy and selfish ambition that marks those who do not know God.

So .... Why would a person who has truly embraced the gospel and is a genuine Christian ever choose the world's wisdom as the operating system for their heart? The bible reveals a variety of reasons, but James focuses on one: our strong desires (lusts) for things that God has not yet granted or for things we don't believe He will grant. This is what James described in 1:13-15 and 4:1-3.

## **II. False Wisdom Fuels Sinful Desires:**

*But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. (James 3:14)*

- James calls out two specific passions or strong desires (lusts) in our hearts that fuel the destructive behavior behind almost every relational conflict between people, organizations, or nations.
- These desires are internal (so we don't always see them right away) and they are sinful (James makes this very clear).

- They always do relational damage. But, when they show up in the heart of a Christian, they reveal an even greater problem that is going on internally – spiritual double mindedness.
- James tells us that we can expect nothing from God when we allow a double mindedness to exist in our hearts and if unaddressed, we will be unstable in all our ways (1:7).
- ***So what are the two sinful desires in this text?***

#### ***A. Bitter Envy – a sinful zealotry for my personal agenda***

- The term “zeal/jealousy” can mean an ardent enthusiasm for something – a white hot passion or zealotry for something righteous like God’s zealotry for His people (Zech 1:14), His name (Ezk. 39:25), or the zeal of a righteous leader for the holiness of God (Num. 25:10-11).
- However, James attaches the term “bitter” to this zeal making clear that this is sinful zeal. It is a sinful envy that selfishly seeks what is best for oneself regardless of how it impacts others.
- “Bitter envy” is what we feel when we see someone else get what we wanted for ourselves or feel we deserve.
- This is exactly what was going on in the hearts of the Jewish religious leaders in the book of Acts when God began to bless the preaching and teaching of Christian leaders and the crowds began to follow them and not the Jewish Religious leaders.
- In Acts 5:12-33, Luke records that the High Priest and all who were with him were filled with “jealousy” (5:17) and arrested the apostles and put them in jail. Moreover, after God miraculously delivered them from prison, instead of recognizing the hand of God and rejoicing in God’s evident blessing, they were enraged and wanted to kill them!
- In Acts 13:13-44 Paul and company were sent out on the first missionary journey and came to Antioch in Pisidia. On the Sabbath they went to the synagogue and were invited by the rulers of the synagogue to share any word of encouragement with the people. So Paul shared the wonderful news about Messiah’s arrival in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and how he frees men from sin and from the things the Law of Moses could not free a man from – and when they were done, the people begged them to come back the next Sabbath to tell them more (Acts 13:42). Now listen to what happened next: *The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered*

*to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy (envy) and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him (Acts 13:44).*

- James makes clear that this isn't just a sinful desire that happens in the hearts of pagan people who know nothing of God; it can happen in the hearts of very religious people who possess, know, and even teach the Law of God (the Torah).
- And if it can happen in the heart of people like this, it can happen in our own heart.
- What happens when a spiritual teacher starts to draw more people than me? Or his/her giftedness is recognized by others and people start talking as appreciatively about him/her as they do about me? So, what does bitter envy lead to?

***B. Selfish Ambition – a sinful desire for personal benefit or advancement***

- This term often occurred in political or sectarian settings where someone was trying to advance a particular party, position, or person with the goal of attaching oneself in order to rise with that person, party, or position.
- There is a sinful competitiveness or perhaps a subtle undermining of another to gain a personal advantage.
- This sometimes happens when a person or a group have a particular theological agenda or personal preference they want to advance in the group they are associated with (church or institution) and they resort to partisanship to gain ground for their particular position or for a particular leader to whom they have attached themselves because they receive some personal or material benefit.
- This is often what happens in the pagan world where someone identifies a powerful person and becomes intensely zealous and fiercely loyal to making sure that leader advances or rises because when he advances, so does the individual.
- That is ugly when we see it in pagan society; it is even uglier when it shows up at church or religious organizations that should be marked by a very different spirit and driven by a very different wisdom.
- So, how do I spot False Wisdom in my life?



### III. False Wisdom is Revealed in Outworking of My Life: (3:14-16)

*But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.<sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.<sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. (James 3:14-16)*

- James makes an important point that claiming something does not necessarily mean we possess the thing we claim. For instance, in chapter 2 he talks to the person who claims to have a living faith and states that the presence of living faith in a person is revealed by the kind of faithful works it consistently produces in that person's life.
- James makes the same point here – claiming to be wise and understanding does not necessarily mean I am wise and understanding. What will reveal the kind of wisdom I possess and operate from is what it consistently produces in my life.
- James has made the case that wisdom is the operating system of my heart. Now he makes the case that wisdom functions as the transmission that turns belief into behavior.
- And when the wrong kind of wisdom is driving my life, there are at least four evidences that show up in my conduct.

#### A. *My Disposition – Arrogance*

*do not boast*

- The idea behind the term “boast” is arrogant confidence that boldly asserts one's own wisdom and exalts oneself over others.

#### B. *My Speech – Deceit*

*and be false to the truth*

- When you are marked by bitter envy and selfish ambition and yet you arrogantly claim to be “wise and understanding” you have deceived yourself and others.
- When you claim to be wise, you are actually being false to the truth because when you embrace the wisdom of the world and lean on your own understanding, you are like the fool in Proverbs who trusts in himself (Prov 28:26).

### **C. My Relationships – Unruly Disorder**

*For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder*

- This is the third time James uses this term (“unstable” in 1:18; “uncontrollable” in 3:8; and “unruly” or “out of order” here).
- When a person operates with wrong wisdom, his relationships will be disrupted and broken due to an unwillingness to be ruled or to take one’s proper place.

### **D. My Conduct – Disobedience**

*and every vile practice*

- This unwillingness to be ruled or to submit to God appointed authority leads to relational disruption and to disobedient conduct.
- Something or someone will always rule my life. When I refuse to be ruled by God or to submit to His Word, then I will be ruled by my sinful passions, unspiritual suspicions/fears, or my selfish ambitions.
- And when I am ruled by my sinful passions my life will be marked by what Paul describes in Romans 1:28-32.

*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.<sup>29</sup> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,<sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,<sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.<sup>32</sup> Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*

## **IV. False Wisdom is Characterized as:**

*This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. (3:15)*

### **A. It is Earthly – the world**

- This wisdom is earthbound – it comes totally from the world and not the Word.
- It draws its counsel from people who do not know God; it patterns behavior after those who transgress God’s Laws; and it adopts the values and priorities of those who scorn God or deny His existence.

## ***B. It is Natural – the flesh***

- This wisdom is devoid of any influence or power of the Spirit. Instead, it is driven by my flesh – the part of me that will never be redeemed.
- It leads to living in my own strength for my own goals and objectives according to my own plans.

## ***C. It is Demonic – the Devil***

- It is part of the world system that is under the sway and influence of the god of this world – Satan who orchestrates the course of this world and is at work in the sons of disobedience to live according to the passions of their flesh and carry out the desires of their body and mind (Eph 2:1-3).
- James has already pointed out where this demonic influence has impacted the tongue of his readers (3:6).
- The presence of this demonic wisdom in the lives of his people moved James to urge them to “resist the Devil” (4:7).
- And ultimately, this is why James states that when we operate from this false wisdom, we are not friends of God but rather of the world which actually puts us at enmity with our Savior (4:4).

## **V. False Wisdom Displayed**

### ***A. OT Example – Israel against Moses bitter jealousy***

*Numbers 14:1–24* Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. <sup>2</sup> And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! <sup>3</sup> Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. **Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?**” <sup>4</sup> And they said to one another, “**Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.**”

- Caused them to despise God’s Provision
- Caused them to doubt God’s Promise
- Caused them to disregard God’s Leaders
- Caused them to disobey God’s Command
- Caused them to be disqualified from God’s Blessing

## **B. NT Example – Ananias and Saphira – selfish ambition**

*Acts 4:1-5:11* But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? <sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” <sup>5</sup> When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. **And great fear came upon all who heard of it.** <sup>6</sup> The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. <sup>7</sup> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. <sup>8</sup> And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” <sup>9</sup> But Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” <sup>10</sup> Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> **And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.**

- They were controlled by Satanic wisdom
- They used that wisdom to contrive a plan hidden in their heart
- That wisdom manifested itself in deceptive actions and speech
- That wisdom put the Holy Spirit to the test to see whether or not they would get away with their deception
- That wisdom defiled and destroyed two believers who were doing a religious deed in a Christian context.
- So, if it happened to them it can happen to me. What can I do to protect myself from making these same mistakes?

### **Conclusion:**

Remember our illustration of the person in Psalm 1 who disregarded God’s Wisdom and instead listened to the counsel (the common way of thinking) of lost people; lived according to the lifestyle of those who sinned against God; and embraced the values and priorities of those who scorn/mock God or deny His existence?

What will be the end result of the years such a person spends on earth – the psalmist states that when this man’s life work is evaluated by God on the day of Judgment – it will blow away like worthless chaff.

So how do I stop this from happening? Or how do I change course if it has been happening?

1. By meditating on the Law of the Lord and allowing that Word to determine what I believe, reshape how I behave, reorient my values and priorities, and reshape how I relate to God and to others. (Ps 1:2)
2. By intentionally drawing near to God (James 4:8)
3. By cleansing my hands – repenting of my sinful behavior (James 4:8)
4. By purifying – uniting my double-minded heart (James 4:8)
5. By resisting the Devil by submitting to God’s Word (James 4:7)

And when I draw near to God – He will draw near to me!

That is how I reclaim a chaff-filled life and turn it into a life that will be like the tree planted by rivers of water whose leaf also does not wither and whose fruit is abundant in each season of life – and in the end will prosper in the sight of God.