

Wisdom from Above: James 3:13-18
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We're back to our study of the letter of James this morning, and we'll be looking at chapter 3:13-18 where James contrasts the wisdom from above with earthly wisdom. Our last time in James, which was a few weeks ago now, we were studying the passage about taming the tongue in the earlier part of chapter 3. And in the concluding verses of that section, in verses 9-12, we saw that a double-tongue is evidence of a divided heart. "With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water." The fruit of our lives will demonstrate the condition of our hearts, and our speech is a very telling fruit. It's either bad fruit or good fruit, and it reveals what's going on in our hearts.

Jesus said, "the tree is known by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33), and I think that's the point of James 3:9-12. If it's a good tree—if you have a new heart—then there will be good fruit. Not that we won't still struggle with sinful speech, but our speech will certainly be different. On the other hand, the unsanctified tongue is evidence of a divided heart. It's evidence that there's not a new heart.

And in our passage this morning we're going to see some other fruit (both good and bad). And here the contrast is drawn between wisdom that is from above and wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

James draws some very stark contrasts in this letter. In chapter 1 he exhorts us to be doers of the word and not hearers only, and he expounds on the differences between those who do the word and those who merely hear the word. The doer will be blessed in his doing. The hearer deceives himself, and his religion is worthless. In chapter 2 there's the distinction between active faith and dead faith. And as we learned from that important passage, it's only active faith that is true, saving faith. Faith that is by itself—faith that does not have works—is dead and useless and will not save anyone. In chapter 4, in the strongest rebuke of this letter, James contrasts friendship with the world and friendship with God. "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). We'll come to that in the coming weeks.

In our passage this morning the contrast is between two types of wisdom. And in many ways, it is the same distinction that is made in those other passages. In James 3:13-18 he contrasts the wisdom from above with earthly wisdom. We could say it's wisdom from above versus wisdom from below. It's heavenly, spiritual, godly wisdom versus earthly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom. It's true wisdom versus false wisdom.

What I want to do in this sermon is simply point out the fruit of these two kinds of wisdom. We'll look at the wisdom that comes from above (and its fruit). And we'll look at earthly wisdom (and its fruit). If you noticed the structure of the passage, James begins in verse 13 by referring to wisdom and understanding. He doesn't call it "wisdom from above" here, but that's what he's referring to. And then he contrasts that with earthly wisdom, which he describes in verses 14-16. And finally, in verses 17-18, he returns to speaking of the godly wisdom that he started the passage with, and he describes the wisdom from above. So let's follow the flow of these verses and begin with the characteristics of wisdom that are mentioned in verse 13.

Wisdom from Above and Its Fruit (v. 13)

James starts with this question: Who is wise and understanding among you? I don't think he was looking for a show of hands. Instead, he wants to provoke some introspection. Look into your hearts, all of you. What do you see there? Are you wise and understanding? Do you think you're wise and understanding? Do you claim to be wise? And then he tells us what wisdom is and how it's manifested.

1) Good conduct

He says, first of all, if you think you're wise then by your good conduct show your works. This is the evidence of true wisdom. The wisdom from above will show itself in good conduct. It will show itself in works. Notice what he does not say here. He does not say what we might expect him to say, if we have a skewed perception of what wisdom is. What we might expect him to say is, "By his keen intellect let him demonstrate the depth of his theological understanding." This doesn't minimize the importance of theology, but mere intellectual knowledge is NOT wisdom. Wisdom begins with a fear of the Lord, as Proverbs tells us (9:10). And as James is telling us here, this wisdom will manifest itself in right living.

It's not just knowing *about* the Lord, or knowing *about* the Bible. It's fearing the Lord, loving the Lord, delighting in the Lord, and rejoicing in His Word. And this kind of wisdom and understanding will *show* itself. It will produce good conduct. It will produce good works. "let him *show* his works." This is the

same word that James used in 2:18 when he challenged the person without works, “Show me your faith apart from your works.” True faith will be evident in the way we live our lives. You can’t just say you have faith and think that means something. And in the same way, you can’t raise your hand when asked “Who is wise and understanding among you?” and think there’s any substance to that claim. True wisdom, like true faith, will be shown in good conduct. It will be demonstrated in the works that it produces.

2) Meekness

The second thing that we learn about wisdom is that these works are shown “in the meekness of wisdom.” Other translations say “gentleness” or “humility.” So another characteristic of this wisdom and understanding is that it is meek, gentle, humble. It’s in stark contrast to the earthly wisdom that produces bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. True wisdom is seen in the willingness to think of others first, to give up personal pride, to surrender your personal “rights.” Even when wronged, the one who is truly wise will respond graciously and without a desire for revenge. Jesus Christ, who is the personification of wisdom, demonstrated this in His sacrificial death for us. It says in 1 Peter 2:23 “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” This is the meekness of wisdom. It’s the opposite of pride. It’s the opposite of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

I want us all to see the joy there is in this humility, this meekness of wisdom. There are certainly sacrifices to be made, but the deep and abiding benefits far outweigh those sacrifices. It’s not easy to humble ourselves and give up personal pride, personal ambition, personal comfort. But it’s worth it for the peace and contentment and harmony and joy that will result. Meekness is a key attribute of true wisdom.

Listen to what Matthew Henry wrote about the relationship between meekness and wisdom. “It is a great instance of wisdom prudently to bridle our own anger, and patiently to bear the anger of others. And as wisdom will evidence itself in meekness, so meekness will be a great friend to wisdom . . . When we are mild and calm, we are best able to hear reason, and best able to speak it. Wisdom produces meekness, and meekness increases wisdom” (*Matthew Henry's Commentary*, James 3:13).

So, one evidence of true wisdom is meekness. And meekness is also necessary for increasing in wisdom. Do you want to grow in wisdom? Do you want to be truly wise? Then you must humble yourself, before God, and before others. There’s nothing within us, within our flesh, that will produce godly wisdom. It’s something that we must receive from God. James exhorts us in 1:21, “receive with meekness the implanted word,

which is able to save your souls.” And we also need our brothers and sisters in Christ around us to encourage us and spur us on toward greater wisdom. If we’re too proud to cry out to God, and too proud to accept counsel from godly men and women, then we’re cutting ourselves off from wisdom. Proverbs 11:2 says, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.”

Earthly Wisdom and Its Fruit (vv. 14-16)

Now we turn to earthly wisdom and its fruit. In verses 14-16 James turns his attention to a different kind of wisdom that is the antithesis of godly wisdom. It’s interesting that he even calls it wisdom. But I think he does so because people claim to have wisdom, but it is not the wisdom from above. It is not real wisdom. This is similar to the way he speaks of faith in chapter 2. He refers to a kind of faith that is not real faith. Individuals claim to have faith, but when that faith does not produce works, it must be concluded that their so-called faith is dead. And in the same way, many claim to be wise. But if a person’s so-called wisdom produces bad fruit rather than good fruit, then it must be concluded that it is an earthly, unspiritual, and even demonic wisdom.

Let’s start with verse 14. This is in contrast to verse 13, where he opened the discussion with a question and then exhorted us to demonstrate our wisdom by good conduct in the meekness of wisdom. The point being, if wisdom and understanding are truly present in your life, then this is what the fruit will look like. There will be this good fruit evident in your good conduct and in your meekness, your humility, your gentleness. And now in verse 14 he warns us: if the fruit of your life looks like this—if your heart is filled with bitter jealousy and selfish ambition—then you do not possess wisdom or understanding. We’re being tested here. God’s Word is giving us the criterion by which to evaluate wisdom. This is how we distinguish true wisdom from counterfeit wisdom.

1) Bitter Jealousy

The first thing he mentions is bitter jealousy. The word for jealousy here is the Greek word *zēlos*. And the word can have a positive sense or a negative sense. It can refer, positively, to zeal. Or it can refer, negatively, to sinful jealousy. And it’s clear in the context, with the adjective “bitter” placed in front of it, that this is referring to sinful jealousy. We see a couple of examples of this in the book of Acts where the unbelieving Jews were jealous of the attention that the apostles were drawing. In Acts 13:44-45 it says, “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 and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him.”

2) Selfish Ambition

The second thing James mentions is selfish ambition, and this goes right along with bitter jealousy. Bitter jealousy is the sinful desire to have what someone else has, and this accompanies pride and selfishness. These attitudes are the opposite of the meekness / humility that characterizes true wisdom.

James tells us that if we have in our hearts bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, then we do not possess true wisdom. We can't make any claim to having wisdom. To boast and to claim to have wisdom would be a flat out lie. "Do not boast and be false to the truth."

And then he clarifies that there is a kind of wisdom that people claim to have that is not true wisdom. It is not the wisdom that comes down from above, he writes in verse 15. But, rather, it is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. It is earthly and unspiritual in the sense that it is of the world. It is of the flesh. And it is demonic in origin. Just a few verses earlier James described the tongue as being "set on fire by hell." And what's true of the wicked tongue is also true of this false wisdom. It has its origin in hell. This reminds us Ephesians 2, where it says, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." (Ephesians 2:1-3, ESV)

This was our sinful condition apart from Christ. We followed the course of this world (earthly). We lived in the passions of our flesh (unspiritual). And we followed the prince of the power of the air (demonic). And this is how James describes false wisdom. It's the opposite of true wisdom, which is heavenly, spiritual, and godly.

3) Disorder

Then we see two more products of earthly wisdom. Verse 16, "For where there is jealousy and selfish ambition" (in other words, where there are those who boast in their wisdom but have no true wisdom) there will be disorder and every vile practice. It should be easy to see how disorder will result from jealousy and selfish ambition. Pride and selfishness and jealousy divide. These sinful attitudes separate people and put individuals at odds with one another.

4) Every Vile Practice

And these sinful attitudes also produce many other vile sins. "Every vile practice." The person whose heart is filled with bitter jealousy and selfish ambition will do anything to feed those egocentric desires.

I want to challenge you this morning (and we're going see this more next week in chapter 4) to think about the relationships in your life that are in a state of disorder. Where have there been divisions? Is there anyone you're avoiding, or not speaking to? And our natural tendency is always to blame the other person. But I want to challenge you this morning to think about how your own bitter jealousy and your own selfish ambition is producing disorder. This is not the fruit of wisdom. It's earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. We need to repent of these things and cry out to God for true wisdom, which will produce very different fruit.

Wisdom from Above and Its Fruit (cont.)

This brings us to verse 17 and brings us back to the place where the section began. In verse 13 we saw that true wisdom is manifested in good conduct and the meekness of wisdom. And now, in contrast to false wisdom, James says that the wisdom from above is first pure. Not producing every vile practice, the wisdom from above produces purity. James mentions this first, and he seems to be thinking of this as the general fruit of wisdom. Purity. This is how Paul expressed his desire for the church. He wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:2, "For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ."

The other fruit of wisdom are various aspects of this purity, and they are the genuine fruit that will be evident in the life of every believer. The list is similar to the fruit of the Spirit that are found in Galatians 5:22-23, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." And James gives this list of the fruit of wisdom.

Peacable: the opposite of disorder. Gentle. Open to reason, which is related to humility, the meekness of wisdom, as we looked at. *Full* of mercy and good fruits: the opposite of *every* vile practice. Impartial and sincere: this first of all makes us think of the exhortation in James 2, "show no partiality." But the word for "impartial" could also mean "unwavering." And so James may have in mind the opposite of the doubter who is double-minded, unstable in all his ways. The truly wise person will be unwavering and sincere.

James concludes this section, and leads into his discussion of quarrels and fights, with this proverbial statement in verse 18, "And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." Again, in contrast to the disorder produced by jealousy and selfish ambition, wisdom will produce peace and a harvest of righteousness.

I want to close with a passage that contrasts the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world. It's in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

I just want to mention two things. First of all, God is the One who saves and who grants true wisdom. In our flesh, in our earthly wisdom, the word of the cross is foolishness. That's in verse 18, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing." But by God's sovereign work of regeneration He opens our eyes to see that what we once thought was folly is actually the power of God and the wisdom of God. And the second thing I want us to see is that Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God. Did you see that in verse 24? "but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." And then also in verse 30, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." So if you want to know wisdom, look to Jesus Christ. Look to the perfect God-Man, who lived a sinless life on this earth. He never harbored in His heart bitter jealousy or selfish ambition. But instead He lived a life of purity and righteousness, full of mercy and good fruits. He is the personification of the wisdom from above. And He is much more than an example of wisdom. He is the wisdom of God who became foolish in the eyes of the world by dying on a cross. He died for all those who will repent of their sins and cling to Him as their only hope of salvation.

And this brings us back to the question that James asks of us, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" The answer we could give is: those who are forgiven through the blood of Christ and who are being changed into the likeness of Christ. Those who recognize their need for wisdom, and desperately cry out to God to give it. James 1:5, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." Let us ask God for this wisdom.