

True Wisdom

James 3:13-18

With our lesson today we transition from controlled speech to Godly wisdom. As we saw in our homework this week, the things we say originate in our heart revealing whether we have a heart for the Lord, or a sin sick heart. All manner of evil can be spewed from our lips because the cancer of worldly wisdom and worldly ways have corrupted our heart. Just as we can diagnose a sin-sick heart by the words that are spoken, we can also discover that sin-sick heart through actions. In our scripture passage today James contrasts worldly wisdom with godly wisdom. Before we get started it might help to define the term “worldly”:

Many choose friendship with the world not realizing that it means enmity with God.

Biblical Definition of “the world”: “The world here assumes its semantic function as the forces and elements opposed to God, or more precisely, the whole complex of human institutions, values, and traditions that knowingly or unwittingly are arrayed against God.”¹ Many choose friendship with the world not realizing that it means enmity with God. Likely this is the case with the Jewish Christians James is addressing as he draws the lines between worldly and godly wisdom.

James states his premise that if we claim to be wise and understand the way God operates then our life should be a reflection of that wisdom and understanding. If we make wise choices, our life will show it in our good deeds. But if anyone harbors “bitter envy”, or “selfish ambition” that, too, will reveal itself. Just as a tree can be identified by its fruit, so can the wisdom of man be determined by his actions. Just as we learned that evil words are ignited by the fire of hell (3:6), so can our actions. What drives our actions is wisdom, so the question becomes, is the wisdom that guides you of the heavenly or hellish variety?

James begins with the description of worldly wisdom. If the world is at enmity with God, so then worldly wisdom is in opposition with heavenly wisdom. We are warned to neither harbor “bitter envy” (zealous jealousy)² or selfish ambition (fractious rivalry, divisive competition)³ because these bring dissension and disorder – hallmarks of evil behavior. We are not to boast because boasting exults and glorifies that evil behavior; and denying its existence is lying against the truth. Envy and selfish ambition are symptoms of worldly wisdom. James goes on to tell us that worldly wisdom is earthly – limited to a relatively short and temporal focus. It sees only what is here and now and in the immediate time frame of a physical and material earthly existence. It is unspiritual as it forces us to compare ourselves to others striving in competition against them for personal gain or glory. James tells us this behavior in fact originates with the devil. When one pursues life in the ways of the world, one has set himself against the ways of God, even if one

¹ The NIV Application Commentary, David P. Nystrom

² BKC

³ Ibid.

proclaims faith in God. Because the two paths cannot co-exist, one must supersede the other, the effects are demonic. It is demonic in that the human interests supersede heavenly interests; and thereby, serves satanic interests. There is no middle road. James uses demonic not in the sense that demons are among the congregation or that individuals in the congregation are possessed by demons; but, rather in the broader sense that all human opposition to God is ultimately alignment with Satan. Just as we learned that even the demons recognize who Jesus is (2:19), intellectual faith that recognizes gospel truths is on equally precarious footing with the faith of those demons. It is the same with believers who act in wrath: they are no longer serving God, but find themselves in opposition to God (1:20). And when evil is unleashed by an unbridled tongue, again we see demonic interests at work in place of heavenly interests. So too, when worldly wisdom supersedes godly wisdom, again it is Satan who is being served; and, the believer is in opposition to God.

The sin of the “worldly” believer is much more insidious than the non-believer who makes no pretense of belief in God. The “worldly” believer is self-deceived operating under the influence of worldly wisdom in opposition to wisdom from above. This believer claims to follow Christ, yet favors the world and its evil ways. This is religious evil, a kind of blasphemy. Proverbs tells us that the sins of the ungodly make them into fools for whom there is little hope. But the religious fools who are contrary to the wisdom of God are “wise in their own eyes” and for them, there is no hope.⁴ This proverb calls to mind the Pharisees and religious rulers of Jesus’ time who embrace so fiercely the ways of the world in their pursuit of power, wealth and prestige that they are truly and utterly blind to the coming of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ⁵. Their actions are a reflection not of the God they claim to serve, but of the devil.

The wisdom of the world does not permit us to find true joy or happiness. It is truly false wisdom designed to lead us further and further away from God. It offers false priorities and its rewards do not lead to joy and happiness. The world tells us that happiness comes from success – worldly success which has to do with wealth, recognition, achievements, social position, status symbols, power and prestige. None of these things will garner true joy and happiness, because if our eyes are on the world, there is constant competition to achieve or gain more; and, even when there is an excess of wealth, it certainly does not guarantee happiness. Joy and happiness do not come from worldly pursuits. Worldly wisdom leads us down a path of greed, selfishness, self-centered desires and destructive competition resulting in frustration at never having enough, never being satisfied, desiring what others have and being disappointed in what is lacking. In verse 16 James sums up the wisdom of the world: *“For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice”*. In this way of life there is no room for the Word of Truth to be implanted in the heart, let alone take root and grow. Instead the heart is fertile soil for a harvest of bitter envy and selfish ambition. Envy was the sin that led Adam and Eve to usurp the knowledge of good and evil that alone belonged to God. And it is envy of the rich man’s wealth that is the seed of favoritism. Envy focuses on another’s possessions and relationships creating an unhealthy desire or drive to surpass that person --even if it means stealing or destroying from another within the Church, just as Adam and Eve had done.

⁴ NAC

⁵ John 8:31-47.

The harvest of worldly wisdom is not the good life and good deeds of heavenly wisdom. Envy and selfish ambition lead to a harvest of strife, disorder and every evil practice including blasphemy, denying the sovereignty of God, and serving the interests of Satan. No wonder James aggressively calls attention to the self-deception and prevalent evil within the hearts and minds of believers!

Wisdom from Heaven

The godly wisdom of which James speaks is vastly different than worldly wisdom. It recognizes the necessity of sacrifice in this life for the attainment of what is good. It is the joy of abiding in the deep sense of being in the presence and will of God. To understand James point of view we must dispense with the worldly perception of finding joy and happiness in immediate gratification and satiety. Joy is found not in ourselves or our achievements, but in the knowledge of who we are in Christ. Purchased at a price through abundant love, our gratitude and humility in response to God's love and our desire to help and share God's love will fill us with true joy and happiness. In serving others we put the needs of others ahead of our own. We give our time, our gifts, our wealth to lift up others and in doing so we place our sacrifices upon the altar of the heavenly tabernacle. In return God fills us with joy, contentment in our circumstances, gratitude and happiness. This sacrifice of self flies in the face of worldly wisdom which seeks to gratify the self first and foremost.

Godly Wisdom is Humble

James begins this passage in verse 13 with the rhetorical question, "*Who is wise and understanding among you?*" *Wise*, or in Greek, *sophos* (coming from *sophias*) describes "one with moral insight and skill in the practical issues of life."⁶ Wisdom knows what is good and knows how to go about doing good. While *understanding* is the Greek *epistēmōn* which refers to intellectual perception and scientific acumen.⁷ Understanding has witnessed wisdom in action and discerns why wisdom is good. Understanding has "seen", or experienced, the effect godly wisdom produces for others. James goes on to demand that wisdom be revealed by action. The only way to measure wisdom is by the fruit of its actions and deeds. (In one translation, verse 13 b says, "*Let him show out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.*"⁸ See how closely our speech is associated with our actions and deeds!) It is not the amassing of wisdom by acquiring knowledge, but, the application, or practice, of putting wisdom to work in life that will produce good fruit. A good life is one typified by "deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom"⁹. A good life and good deeds are illustrated in what the NRSV calls "gentleness born of wisdom". The good actions of godly wisdom are performed out of gentleness and mercy. They are "good" for the very reason they are merciful and done out of loving-kindness becoming a way of life

⁶ Bible Knowledge Commentary

⁷ Ibid

⁸ The Complete Word Study Bible (Hebrew and Greek), AMG International, Inc. 1994

⁹ NAC

that grows in understanding of how to put the word of truth¹⁰ into practice. This “gentle wisdom” is translated from “*prautēti sophias*” or “wise meekness”¹¹, it’s wisdom that is humble. A truly wise person is seeks neither glory nor gain, but rather is gracious and giving.

Wisdom Bears Good Fruit

Wisdom from above bears a succession of good fruit. In contrast to the harvest of worldly wisdom, James tells us the harvest of godly wisdom: “*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*” James 3:17 (NIV). The wisdom of God is a fountain of goodness that producing a cascade of virtues, one after another in an outpouring of blessings upon the believer and those who benefit from his actions.

1. Wisdom first and foremost is pure. It is holy. We learned at the beginning of our study that true religion is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, caring for orphans and widows in their distress, and *keeping oneself unstained by the world* (1:27). Jesus tells us “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*” (Matthew 5:8). To be pure believer must separate themselves from the ways of the world. We cannot be separatistic though. We cannot eschew the ways of the world by separating ourselves from the world. We must stand for the ways of God but our actions are called to minister to the world. Our purity shines brightly in a sin-sullied world revealing the goodness of God. Wisdom that is pure does not bring what is base and devaluing of others into relationships and conversations. Compromising purity with the ways of the world would require conceding the goodness and blessedness of God for the sake of convenience. It operates in love showing no partiality.
2. Peace-loving: Purity leads to the next virtue of being peaceable or peace-loving, standing in stark contrast to worldly wisdom that leads to envy. Where envy is brings unhealthy competition, peace brings uplifting unity. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5: 9, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*” Those who seek peace are committed to the unity of believers within the body of Christ and beyond. Paul exhorted: “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone*” (Romans 12:18).
3. Considerate: The virtue of gentleness or being considerate or forbearing is the virtue that follows peace-loving.” Proverbs 15:1 tells us “*A gentle answer turns away wrath*” applies to everyone, for no one who is wrathful can accomplish the will of God. In Titus 3:2, Paul exhorts “*speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone.*”
4. Submissive: Wherever there is gentleness, there is also “a willingness to yield.” Being submissive is not the same as passivity. Submission is an active response of the will. It requires a willing responsive to authority. One who is submissive is open to direction and accepting of guidance from authority. It is willing to yield to rights to another for the sake of peace and unity, although it does not submit to worldly values and systems.

¹⁰ James 1:18,21. The Word that is planted in us that is powerful to save our souls combines with the wisdom from above to make us a new creation that serves with compassion and mercy.

¹¹ BKC

5. Merciful and Fruit bearing: heavenly wisdom results in fruit-bearing faith. The wise produce a harvest of mercy and good fruit. Mercy is compassionate and puts love ahead of all else. It forgives, corrects gently, helps others, is generous and heals wounded hearts. Just as God's mercy and forgiveness covers our sins, James calls believers to pour out mercy and forgiveness not only among the brethren, but on the world.
6. Impartial and sincere: In contrast to double-mindedness, the next characteristic of heavenly wisdom is to be impartial in the ways one relates with others. It is characteristic of a person of integrity whose actions match his or her words. There is no hypocrisy or favoritism in the treatment of others. All are treated equally because they all are of value to God and the one who implements the wisdom of God recognizes the innate value of each individual in the eyes of God.

Wisdom Develops Spiritual Maturity

James concludes in verse 18 by telling us "*a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace*". The truly wise man sows peace in his actions yielding a harvest of righteousness. To achieve righteousness –spiritual maturity and practical holiness – the overarching theme of James epistle, a believer must learn to act and speak with true wisdom from God. Words and actions are governed by wisdom, and one who shows spiritual maturity bridle his tongue and reins his actions with godly wisdom. In chapter 1 James entreats us to stand confidently with God, not being tossed about on a sea of double-mindedness. In Chapter 2 we are enjoined to serve others with compassion, our actions revealing and completing our faith in the goodness and love of God. Now in Chapter 3 we are cautioned to speak and act with care, governing our mind with true wisdom that comes from God.