

Wisdom from Above

James 3:13-18

I am a man with rather deep settled political convictions. I am thankful to live in a country where we are free to elect our own rulers, and so I vote. I vote my conscience. I vote on the basis of issues that matter to me, and ultimately many of those issues have to do with biblical truth. Yet I am also tempted to be rather cynical, particularly about the effectiveness of our government.

The reason for that cynicism is that I believe that there is very little wisdom exercised in the processes of our government, especially our national government in Washington. Though I am registered to vote in one of our two major political parties, my frustration extends to both parties. And in fact, that is my frustration--the preeminence of political parties. The dominating influence of a party spirit.

I suppose that at the beginning of those parties, the issues at hand determined the membership of the parties. The issues drove the parties into existence as a cohesive expression of those issues. But now the parties themselves have become the issue. Whether or not you are Democrat or Republican has become the issue, and in the Presidential elections, the issue is whether you live in a blue state or a red state.

So when our government is actually in session, when our congress is actually convened, it seems that nobody is seeking the wisdom necessary to rightly govern our country. Rather, the democrats are seeking to solidify their own position of power and influence and the republicans are seeking to solidify their own position of power and influence. Therefore national debates on important issues might well be illustrated by a group of children playing a game with water balloons, tossing the balloons back

and forth. The winner of the game is the team with less of a mess--less broken balloons. And that winner will be the team most able to throw the water balloons across the aisle in a way that make them impossible to catch without splashing.

Do you get the picture? To use a more deadly illustration, our national political debate is like two groups of soldiers lobbing hand grenades back and forth to each other from opposite foxholes. Every time that a grenade explodes, some measure of death and damage is caused, and winner in the war is simply that last team standing. But that's not wisdom. Not biblical, godly wisdom.

Last week we studied James' exhortation to teachers, to be especially careful of their teaching for, as he said,

v.1 "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment."

James then broadened that exhortation to apply to all the uses of the tongue, which he called "an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."

The warning is unmistakable,

v.5 "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! 6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell."

In that context, then, he comes back to this thought about teachers, and the wisdom necessary to be a teacher. His point is so appropriate for our own day when the qualifications of teachers, even in the church, are measured by merely academic standards and degrees. Or by mere intellectual capacity. Intelligence. The best teachers, therefore, are the ones with the best degrees or with the most intellectual brilliance. Not hardly.

That's not true in our educational system, from kindergarten to college and graduate level courses, from pre-schools to universities. And it certainly isn't true in the church!

So who are the best teachers? Those with wisdom. What, then, is wisdom? Or, as James puts it,

v.13a “Who is wise and understanding among you?

And the answer? What is...

I. THE DEFINITION OF A WISE MAN.

v.13

There is a very simple point to be made here about wisdom. Wisdom is not measured by the standards of academia. Wisdom is not measured intelligence or any other external credentials you might obtain. Instead, wisdom is measured by the affairs of life.

A. A wise man demonstrates his wisdom with his life.

Specifically, his good conduct. His good works. Consider the qualifications for the office of authority in the church, the office of elder. Paul begins in,

1 Tim. 3:2 “A bishop then must be blameless.”

Or, perhaps, in the more familiar words, he must be above reproach.” Not perfect—no one measures up to that standard, no mere man. But still above reproach, a man whose life is above suspicion, above credible accusation of evil. No man can claim wisdom when there are evident and obvious claims against his integrity.

Paul continues with such things as temperate or self-controlled. He must be, sober-minded, of good behavior. In other words, respectable. He must not be “given to wine, not violent,

not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous.” And all that must be so obvious that Paul concludes, “Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.” Even non-Christians can recognize such a man of wisdom. Because he shows it with his life.

Now, quite frankly, I believe ministers ought to be seminary educated—there is just too much valuable information and training needed for the preaching of the word. The study of Greek and Hebrew needs to be at the core of that study, with good understanding of Scripture and good training for expounding that Scripture. A minister of the word needs to be a man of reading, gaining from the insight of those gone before. But while it may well be a necessary ingredient in the training of a minister, a seminary degree doesn't qualify a man to be a minister. Wisdom does.

Likewise, for a Ruling Elder or a deacon, the qualification for office is not merely passing a theology examination, as necessary as that is for the protection of the teaching and ruling ministry of the church. Yet more than that, the qualification is wisdom. Wisdom demonstrated good conduct, by the good behavior of a man's life.

It just can't be any other way, and that wisdom is connected with understanding in verse 13, a word referring to an expert, a professional, someone skilled in the use of knowledge. The proof is in the pudding, we might say. The presence of wisdom and understanding is made known by the evidence of a good life.

And look in verse 13 at how James further defines that demonstration of good works, “done in the meekness of wisdom.”

B. A wise man exercises his wisdom with meekness.

Meekness is a fascinating word, sometimes translated gentleness. It is the direct opposite of arrogance. It is the humble and gentle attitude of patient submissiveness, free from malice and the desire for revenge. Meekness is the willingness to not always demand your rights or to stand up for yourself. It is the spirit of a man willing to accept all things as coming from God and therefore to accept them as God working all things together for good. It is quite the opposite of the man trained to self-assertive and always in defense of self-interest. Meekness is simply not occupied with self at all.

So if you are assertive and pushy, always seeking your own will and your own way, you are not wise! If you respond to the circumstances of life with a defensiveness and arrogance that is always in the mode of advancement or even self-preservation, you are not wise. If your life cannot be described and defined as one of good conduct, full of good works, you are not wise.

And therefore James identifies some of,

II. THE ENEMIES OF WISDOM.

Those things that are in opposition to the wisdom from above, or heavenly wisdom we ought to seek. And one thing stands out above all the others. One primary, chief enemy is clearly within the crosshairs of James' attack, and that is,

A. Self-seeking ambition.

With that description, I've tried to put together what he says in verses 14 and 16. In verse 14 he uses Greek words which are translated "bitter envy" or "bitter jealousy," and then "self-seeking" or "selfish ambition." Bitter jealousy is just that. Not only a jealous envy of the well-being of others, but one aptly described as bitter. Deeply intense and personal. Whether you translate it

envy or jealousy, it's a horrible thing. It could be translated "contentious," "argumentative," quarrelsome or divisive. It describes a person so self-absorbed as to resent the advancement or well-being of someone else. To the point of bitterness. Caused by the other Greek word translated "self-seeking" or "selfish ambition."

This is a description of a person who creates a party for his own pride and benefit, the outworking of his own ambition and rivalry. This is the man whose goal is his own advancement, and stirs up a partisan spirit just for that cause. Sadly, this is a description, almost of necessity, of those who seem able to rise to power and influence in our American political system. Those who use their political parties for partisan gain. Those who are partisan for partisan's sake! In other words, it's the Republican who is opposed to something because a Democrat suggested it, or a Democrat opposed to something because a Republican proposed it. And I use those political illustrations because they are easy to spot and easy to identify.

But beware, beloved, this partisan spirit in your own heart. Beware those dual inclinations that feed upon the other, to despise the success and well-being of someone else and to zealously seek your own advancement. How deadly and destructive that is to the body of Christ.

That is precisely the issue James is addressing, and that is precisely the thing that will choke out any fruit of wisdom just as quickly and thoroughly as you blow out a candle. Any quest for personal advancement, any zeal for personal gain will bring an end to the pursuit of wisdom. For those things will inevitably bring what is described in verse 16, "confusion and every evil thing." Or as the ESV puts it, "disorder and every vile practice."

Disorder and every evil thing! Can't you see that everywhere there is a partisan spirit that is the very opposite of wisdom? This tendency is endemic in the fallen human nature. The zeal for self-advancement is part and parcel of what is found in the fallen nature of man. And it brings disorder, confusion, or in the political realm, anarchy. Self-advancement ultimately brings anarchy--such trouble and instability as to unsettle all rule and order.

And with anarchy is found every evil practice, every vile practice imaginable can be traced in some way or another to a man's jealous pursuit of his own ambition. And that is the arch enemy of wisdom.

So if you want wisdom, if you sincerely desire to be wise and to act wisely, search deeply into your own heart for this inclination of self-seeking ambition. And by God's grace, put it to death! After you identify those desires, the crucify them! Get rid of them, so that they won't afflict you.

And hate them, with a holy hatred of what is evil, for look how James goes on to describe those self-advancing inclinations.

v.14

Don't boast! The Greek verb is written such that the idea is to stop something that has already begun. The word itself is intensive, a boasting against what James calls "the truth." If you have this jealous zeal for your own ambitions, then James describes you as one boasting arrogantly against the truth. And again, it is not just self-ambition, but such a partisanship that your own self-advancement is necessarily at the expense of someone else. Your success necessarily means someone else's failure. That's the arrogant boasting of the one under James' rebuke.

And his words are as cutting as they can possibly be.

v.15

The pursuit of partisan self-advancement is not only earthly, that is, not from God in heaven. It is also "unspiritual," or natural. Translated in the NKJV "sensual." The idea is that it is something diametrically opposed to the working of the spirit. It is "natural" in that it is controlled not by the spirit of God but by the nature, the fallen nature, of man. It is unspiritual because it is not governed nor originated by the Holy Spirit. And, therefore, says James, it is demonic. It is of the devil!

Thus this partisan spirit that so defines the man without wisdom is simply,

B. Godless arrogance.

James gives us the two extremes. The meekness of wisdom in this corner. And self-seeking godless arrogance in this corner. And painting the picture with those extremes is very helpful for us, for you who would genuinely seek after godly wisdom will also have to admit the temptation and even the occasional presence of this tendency of selfish ambition. Maybe its frequent presence.

And maybe, maybe it is present far more often than you are willing to admit. There is where the call to self-examination comes into focus. Beloved, this demonic, godless boasting which seeks to feed its own desires for success, is an ever-present evil. This partisan spirit that is caused by a divisive man is an enemy against which we must always be on guard.

Such practical advice Paul gives us. One qualification for a man ordained in the church is that he not be quarrelsome, not contentious. He writes explicitly,

2 Tim. 2: 24 "And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, 25 in humility correcting

those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth.”

And in the Proverbs, we see this same warning against a party spirit, in the context of those things God hates.

Prov. 6:16 “These six things the LORD hates, Yes, seven are an abomination to Him: 17 A proud look, A lying tongue, Hands that shed innocent blood, 18 A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that are swift in running to evil, 19 A false witness who speaks lies, And one who sows discord among brethren.”

That is what partisanship does. It sows discord among brothers. That’s what selfish ambition does. That is the disorder of verse 16. That is what is describe as every vile practice. Sowing discord, causing division among God’s people. Beloved, God hates the one who does that. Such a man shows himself to be lacking all wisdom.

But...let’s end with a breath of fresh air. Enough of the enemies of wisdom. Let’s focus upon,

III. THE PRACTICE OF TRUE WISDOM.

What James calls, “the wisdom from above.” The wisdom from God, wisdom from heaven. True wisdom. And actually, I’ll just mention each of these briefly this morning, because I don’t want to rush through them and will, instead, devote a whole sermon next week to verses 17 and 18. So let me introduce what we will focus on next week, regarding this practice of true wisdom. First of all we see,

A. The necessity of purity. v.17

In the Old Covenant, that would mean ceremonial purity.

Ritual purity. Keeping all the regulations of cleansing and food preparation. But in the New Covenant, those external rituals faded into the background and what rises to the surface in a discussion of purity is what one commentator calls “sincere moral and spiritual integrity.”

The next three adjectives James uses you can put together under the heading of,

B. The temperament of peace-loving self-control.

And this stands in direct opposition to that partisan self-seeking I emphasized earlier. Here is the replacement for that contentious party spirit that will always destroy any wisdom.

Wisdom from above is “peaceable, gentle, willing to yield.” The ESV has “open to reason” for that last adjective. It describes someone ready to listen to the opinions of others, willing to accept admonitions and corrections. If you want wisdom, then you have to be willing to admit that you are not always right!

Then there must be,

C. The expression of mercy. v.17 “full of mercy.”

This is a personal term, a merciful and personally compassionate interest in the well-being of others has replaced that poisonous venom that we studied last week from verse 8.

James then describes wisdom from above as “impartial and sincere.” Such wisdom must be characterized by,

D. Sincere consistency.

Sincere means without hypocrisy. Without favoritism. Without

prejudice. Without preconceived answers and solutions.

And undivided. Without partiality, in the NKJV. Unwavering I think is even better. A wholehearted commitment. If you want wisdom, if you want to exercise wisdom, then you must be devoted to the cause—the cause of pure, peace-loving, and merciful interest in the advancement of others, without an interest at all in yourself.

All of that has one final and overarching consequence,
v.18

E. The evidence of righteousness.

This is the evidence that proves the existence of wisdom. The seed is sown, by the peace-loving man of wisdom. Such a man will show forth his wisdom by this fruit of righteousness evident in his life. Thus we come full circle, back to,

v.13 “Who is wise and understanding among you?”

Let him show it “by his good conduct.”

We’ll come back to these last two verses next week, but let me end today with this consistent biblical call for wisdom, wisdom from above. In the pursuit of that wisdom, beware the obstacle that is to be found, to one degree or another, in everyone of us. It is the inclination of our fallen human hearts to be self-seeking, self-advancing, self-promoting, and self-confident in all that we think and do.

v.17 “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.”