

Wisdom from Above (pt.2)

James 3:17-18

The right balance in preaching is always a tricky thing to get right, the balance between exposition of the text and its application to our lives. It is the balance between an explanation of the words that are written and the appropriate exhortation which those words bring to bear in a very personal and practical way. It is the balance between the law and the gospel. And with that balance in mind, I've always appreciated Paul's definition of preaching when he wrote to his younger disciple, Timothy,

2 Tim. 4:1 "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching."

Convince, rebuke and exhort! That's the application, the exhortation! But do that, Paul writes, with long-suffering, great patience, complete patience. But also with teaching, "careful instruction," as the NIV puts it. That's the explanation and exposition part.

There is no formula for that balance. There is no uniform standard to measure it. It depends upon so many factors, including the need of the hearers. And that balance requires a balance with the use of different books of the Bible as well. The emphasis of some books is in one direction or the other in terms of that balance. Even within those books, there is often a balance among the chapters, some with a greater emphasis upon teaching and explanation, others emphasizing practical applications.

As a whole, James is a book with an emphasis upon the latter,

the practical applications of the gospel, and that is obvious throughout the book. Remember,

James 1:22 "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

In that context, James doesn't define true religion in terms of doctrinal exposition. Instead, he writes,

James 1:27 "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

James is also a book about wisdom, which, by definition, is practical. Wisdom is often defined as the application of knowledge. And this book is all about wisdom, including this encouragement in,

James 1:5 "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

Last week we studied verses 13-18 in chapter 3, which is something of a climax with regard to the subject of wisdom, again with that initial definition of the application of knowledge in our lives.

v.13 "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom."

Last week I emphasized the opposite of that godly wisdom, contrasting what James calls "wisdom from above" with what he identifies as that so-called wisdom which is "earthly, sensual, demonic." To review very briefly, look at,

v.14 "But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic."

16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.”

Last week I described the enemies of wisdom identified in those verses, namely self-seeking ambition and godless arrogance. This week I want to give further emphasis upon the positive explanation and description of true wisdom, godly wisdom, wisdom from above. I noted verses 17 and 18 last week, but I want to focus entirely upon those verses this week so that we can know and understand exactly what James has in mind with these practical words of exhortation and application. So what is wisdom from above? What does it look like? More importantly, how can we obtain it and how should we demonstrate it in our own lives? Obviously, in terms of that balance I mentioned at the beginning, we will be on one side of that balance today, the practical application side. Let me begin with that obvious question.

I. WHAT IS WISDOM FROM ABOVE?

I won't get very complicated in my outline this morning. We will just walk through the words of this text with some detail. As is often the case, comparing different English translations is a helpful study tool since we will be looking so carefully at a list of words given to define wisdom. Beginning with this...

A. Wisdom is pure.

Interesting that James begins with a distinctly moral emphasis. So wisdom from above doesn't begin with anything intellectual. It is not something you learn in a book. It is not a formula you memorize. Wisdom isn't defined like chemistry students define the periodic table. You pretty much have to memorize that table if you want to progress very far in the study of chemistry. You have to know the initials for all the elements, their placement in the columns of that table, and what all those numbers mean.

But wisdom isn't like that. It doesn't begin there. It begins with your character. It begins with a word that has reference to the condition of your heart, your soul. It begins with your motives, your desires, and all the actions which proceed from your heart. If you want wisdom, if you desire godly wisdom, wisdom from above, then the first thing to emphasize is not anything you learn with your brain.

v.17 “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure.”

In other words, sincere moral and spiritual integrity. As Jesus puts it,

Mat. 5:8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.”

Ps. 24:3 “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart.”

That requires much humility in us, for we all need to feel the danger expressed by the Psalmist Asaph in,

Ps. 73:1 “Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped.”

Ultimately, of course, only God can give us a pure heart. A pure heart is the work of God in us, as David so earnestly prays as he confesses his sin in,

Ps. 51:10 “Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

So this is where wisdom begins, with the commitment to purity within your heart. Cleanness, so clearly represented by all those Old Testament ceremonial regulations by which the people of God were then distinguished from the world. And certainly we know

that it isn't those external regulations that matter, but what is represented by them, being pure and separate from sin. The idea of the word holiness is very similar that that. So we read in the New Testament,

1 Tim. 5:22 "Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure."

2 Tim. 2:22 "Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."

And going back to,

James 1:27 "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

Keep yourself "unspotted from the world." Unstained from the world. That's purity. Unspotted. Uncontaminated. That's the purity where wisdom begins. Yet not one of us can claim such purity ourselves in its fullness, but rather it is something we look forward to.

1 John 3:2 "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

So you must look at your own life, and reach this inescapable conclusion, that the extent of your wisdom is directly related to your own personal experience of purity. "Purity is not just one quality among others but the key to them all." (Adamson)

Next in the list,

B. Wisdom is peaceable.

It means that you love peace. It means that you pursue peace as a primary goal and objective. It means that you work to bring about peace. Again, a reference to Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount,

Mat. 5:9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God."

Likewise,

Heb. 12:14 "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord."

Sometimes that isn't possible, that is, others will not allow you to live in peace, but the desire for it should remain. So Paul's words to the Romans are both practical and realistic,

Rom. 12:18 "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men."

Again, for the practical emphasis upon the pursuit of wisdom, let these words penetrate deeply into your hearts. The desire for peace, the practical pursuit of peace, is a necessary foundation for your ability to exercise wisdom. That is, of course, contrasted with those who cause division and discord, as we noted last week from,

v.16 "For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there."

The fruit of wisdom, however, is the opposite of that, as we will conclude later looking at,

v.18 "Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

This simple reality must hit home for all of us. If you want to be wise, if you wish to exercise freedom, then you must be a lover

of peace. And, wherever it is possible, work toward that end and with that goal in mind. Thirdly,

C. Wisdom is gentle.

This word refers to that which is appropriate, expressing moderation and patience. It has implications of being fair, equitable, even mild. It refers to a humble patience, even with the willingness to submit to injustice and mistreatment without seeking vengeance. Perhaps best contrasted with the anger of a quick temper or the lack of self-control. It is the opposite of one who is contentious.

So we read,

Phil 4:4 "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!
5 Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand."

Speaking to all Christians, Paul writes,

Titus 3:1 "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men."

This mark of wisdom is also a mark of the necessary maturity for a leader or officer in the church.

1 Tim. 3:2 "[An elder] then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous."

To put it as a challenge, if you are not gentle, you are not wise. If you are not known for your gentleness, if it is not known to those who know you, then you are not wise. If you are not fair and equitable in your dealings with other people, characterized by self-control, then you are not wise. For wisdom from above is gentle! And, directly related to that but with a separate Greek

word used,

D. Wisdom is willing to yield.

Sometimes that is translated reasonable. Wisdom means that you don't always have to be right. Wisdom means that you are willing to yield to others, willing to defer to others, that you are easily persuaded. It means that you are not dominant nor domineering, that you are not ruling over others nor being what is often so accurately labelled a bully. There is no wisdom in a bully. Rather, there is wisdom in one who is reasonable, who listens to others, willing to yield. I just can't get away from that definition. There is wisdom in the one who does not always have to have things his own way, there is wisdom in the one who doesn't always have to have the last word. If you want wisdom, then you have to be willing to admit that you are not always right! You have to be willing to admit that someone else is right. You have to be willing to yield to the reason offered by someone else. So you first have to listen. And listen with the humility that you know you still have something to learn.

This is very much related to that biblical concept of submitting to one another. You see, submission is not only exercised in those relationships where one party has authority and the other party is responsible to honor that authority or leadership. Those relationships do exist, in marriage, in the family, in the church, in the civil government, and in your employment. But more broadly, in a more comprehensive way, Paul says we are to submit to one another. Ephesians 5:21. I believe that is the meaning of this Greek word in James 3 defining wisdom.

Let me say something as an example about those who rule and exercise authority in our church, our elders, of whom I am one. I don't say this to imply that any of us are perfect, I don't imply that we do this with complete consistency, nor do I want to

boast of anyone nor exalt any man other than Christ. But I can tell you why our leadership is able to remain united and at peace with one another, without question. It is because the four of us practice this particular characteristic of wisdom.

Wisdom is willing to yield, willing to defer. And it is not yielding to the same person, to any one person who exercises some sort of dominance. Wisdom from above means that you are open to reason. “Reasonable.” Ready to listen to the opinions of others, willing to accept even admonitions and corrections. That’s hard, at least for some people. Some people are simply convinced that they are always right, so they fail to listen to the reason offered by others. They are not wise! Fifth,

E. Wisdom is full of mercy.

This is a personal term, a merciful and personally compassionate interest in the well-being of others, especially those who suffer. Simply put, wisdom requires that you learn to love people, for wisdom does not exist in a vacuum. Wisdom is not an abstract concept learned in an academic classroom. Wisdom is not something you read in a textbook. Wisdom is not something measured in units of science. Wisdom is a heart-felt interest in people, in their well-being. Wisdom from above is merciful, full of mercy. And in that mercy,

F. Wisdom is full of good fruits.

There is evidence when wisdom is present. Wisdom is demonstrated by its fruit. That’s the meaning of that phrase Jesus used,

Mat. 11:19 “But wisdom is justified by her children.”

Wisdom is justified, vindicated, proven to be true, by its fruit. Going back again to,

James 1:27 “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the

Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”

Then, next,

G. Wisdom is impartial.

Without partiality. Without wavering might even be a better translation. It means undivided. It means wholehearted, with no uncertainty, referring to a wholehearted commitment, the fullness of devotion to a cause. Related to that is the last characteristic mentioned,

H. Wisdom is without hypocrisy.

Often translated “sincere.” It is undisguised, nothing hidden, no ulterior motives or goals. It is what it is. What you see is what you get. There is no pretense. No merely outward show or appearance. The word for hypocrisy has reference to a play actor, an actor on stage performing a part. Without hypocrisy is the exact opposite of that play-acting. So we read elsewhere, Rom. 12:9 “Let love be without hypocrisy.”

1 Tim. 1:5 “Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith.”

Where there is hypocrisy, wisdom is absent. Where there is an outward performance intended to communicate something that is inconsistent with what is on the inside, in the heart, there is no wisdom.

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.”

Second question to answer as we look at these two verses

this morning is obvious, and I have already referred to it.

II. WHAT DOES WISDOM PRODUCE?

Look at,
v.18

The answer is simple and direct. James doesn't beat around the bush.

A. Wisdom produces righteousness.

What James calls the fruit of righteousness. You see, wisdom isn't measured by the standards of this world. It is not measured by education, or intelligence, even external gifts such as eloquence or charisma. Wisdom is measured by its fruit, as we saw just a few minutes ago. Wisdom is full of good fruits. Particularly, the fruit of righteousness. Godliness. Christ-likeness. That is where wisdom is to be found. And so we go back to where we started last week,

v.13 "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom."

In that righteousness, James again emphasizes that,

B. Wisdom produces peace.

v.18 "Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

The image of sowing is from farming, from planting seed early in the year. Wisdom sows peace, the wise man plants peace. And the fruit of his harvest is a righteousness that brings about further peace. And let me remind you of the contrast we focused upon last week,

v.14 "But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your

hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. 16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there."

Let me end with a fatherly encouragement from the book of Proverbs with regard to the sort of wisdom James describes. Let the pursuit of that wisdom from above be your life-long objective. Solomon tells us in,

Prov. 4:5 "Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. 6 Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you; Love her, and she will keep you. 7 Wisdom is the principal thing; Therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding. 8 Exalt her, and she will promote you; She will bring you honor, when you embrace her. 9 She will place on your head an ornament of grace; A crown of glory she will deliver to you." 10 Hear, my son, and receive my sayings, And the years of your life will be many. 11 I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in right paths. 12 When you walk, your steps will not be hindered, And when you run, you will not stumble. 13 Take firm hold of instruction, do not let go; Keep her, for she [wisdom] is your life."