

Sermon Series: Finding Meaning

To be used with: Session 3

Sermon Title Possibilities: Carrying Fire to Your Chest, Two Ways of Wisdom

Scripture: James 3:13-18

**Connection with Unit Theme:** To complement the small group study *The Problem with Wisdom*. It is believed that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes towards the end of his life. Perhaps he had learned the lesson that wisdom by itself isn't enough. It had to be lived out. James models the difference between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom. The hallmark of godly wisdom is that it actually lives out and reflects the truth of God. It's not just head knowledge or even "street smarts" but it's the living out of a life pleasing to God.

**Introduction:** Can one hold fire to their chest without getting burned? That's the question asked by King Solomon as he counsels his son to avoid the adulterous woman. But history (See 1 Kings) tells us that the ending of King Solomon wasn't pleasant. His demise was because he did not heed his own words. Bruce Waltke hits the nail on the head when he says this:

"If one should ask, 'If Solomon is the wise author, how could he have died such a fool?' let it be noted that he constructed his own gibbet on which he impaled himself—that is, he ceased listening to his own instruction. Spiritual success today does not guarantee spiritual success tomorrow".

Solomon was the wisest man in all the world and yet he died a fool. This helps us to see that wisdom by itself isn't enough. There are many "smart" people who die fools. James, the brother of Jesus, outlines for us the difference between a worldly wisdom and a wisdom from above. We must pursue the wisdom from above.

### 1. True wisdom is humble and not proud

One can imagine how King Solomon would have been ripe for a fall. With much wisdom comes much responsibility. And it also comes with a great temptation to believe that you are always the smartest man in the room. I suppose Solomon actually *was* the smartest person in the room. But it seems that Solomon ended up lacking what James called "the humility of wisdom".

"Humility of wisdom" would have been an off-putting expression to those in the first-century. Humility wasn't a virtue. But James here follows the teaching of the Lord Jesus. He understood, as Douglas Moo rightly points out, that humility and meekness is "a healthy understanding of our own unworthiness before God and corresponding humility and lack of pride in our dealings with our fellow-men".

Wisdom that cannot look any further than self isn't true wisdom. And this is James' point in 3:13. The truly wise and understanding look beyond themselves and trust God's understanding above their own. Ligon Duncan summarizes well:

So wisdom is not only the God-given ability to see how in all our ways we may acknowledge God, it is actually acknowledging God in all our ways. You see, the person who is jealous and selfishly ambitious is insecure, envies others, is not thinking of their best interests, is self-focused, is self-preoccupied, and perhaps even teaches for selfish purposes.

## **2. True wisdom is community building and not self-centered**

You can tell true wisdom from the false version by the way it is lived out in a community. There are scores of somewhat humorous internet memes mocking the person who believes it is his job to correct everyone who is wrong on the internet. Such is the heart of one who has a false understanding of wisdom. True wisdom builds up a community instead of angrily tearing it down.

James shows how envy opens the door for all manner of wickedness. As one commentator rightly noted, “James declares that self-seeking will invariably produce chaos and lead people to baser actions rather than to nobler ones<sup>1</sup>”. This is contrasted with the wisdom from above. This is the type of wisdom which lasts. Wisdom worth seeking finds its origin in God. And where this is found you will always find things like purity, peace, gentleness, a willingness to submit, and mercy. Such wisdom will produce good fruit and be marked by impartiality and genuineness. Can you imagine what your local church would look like if everyone pursued such wisdom and exhibited these characteristics? It would certainly be something which would not only be attractive to a broken world but also such a thing would be pleasing to God.

## **3. True wisdom leads to a harvest of righteousness**

Wisdom from above is the wisdom which not only builds community in the present but also builds eternally. The consequence of worldly wisdom is chaos and destruction. But here the harvest of true wisdom is righteousness and peace.

So given the harvest of righteousness versus the harvest of chaos why do our communities so often appear to choose and live according to the wisdom of the world? It is simply because even though worldly wisdom is earthly, natural, and demonic it is also quite savvy and often “feels right”. If it was easy to tell the difference between these two types of wisdom in its seed form I doubt this passage would be constructed as it is—or even necessary. But you seldom can tell the difference until harvest time. But you can certainly tell by its fruits. Therefore, let us pursue wisdom from above and live out that wisdom.

### **Conclusion:**

It is one thing to agree with the Bible and the truth of God. I think Solomon did that. But it's quite another to obey the Bible. Our dedication to the Lord isn't measured by the times where we agree with the Bible and obey. Our dedication to the Lord is measured by those times when the Scriptures rub up against our fallen inclinations and we balk at His Word. In those moments are we going to obey even if we don't yet at that moment agree? Will we have God's Word not only inform us but also crucify us?

Wisdom by itself isn't enough. Wisdom needs the Spirit of God to apply the benefits of the Son of God. Then we will truly walk and live in wisdom.

*Mike Leake is the husband of Nikki and father to Isaiah and Hannah. He is the lead pastor at FBC Marionville, MO. His writing home is <http://mikeleake.net>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Zondervan Exegetical Commentary, *James*, 174