

Living the Good/Godly Life: Wise Up!
Proverbs 1:1-7, James 3:13-4:10

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Proverbs 1:1-7 - New Living Translation (NLT)

¹These are the proverbs of Solomon, David's son, king of Israel.

²Their purpose is to teach people wisdom and discipline, to help them understand the insights of the wise. ³Their purpose is to teach people to live disciplined and successful lives, to help them do what is right, just, and fair. ⁴These proverbs will give insight to the simple, knowledge and discernment to the young.

⁵Let the wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser. Let those with understanding receive guidance ⁶by exploring the meaning in these proverbs and parables, the words of the wise and their riddles.

⁷Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

James 3:13-4:10 - New International Version (NIV)

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

¹⁵Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷But 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.

¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? ²You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. ³And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

⁴You adulterers!^[b] Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God. ⁵Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him.^[c] ⁶And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."^[d]

⁷So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.
⁸Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.
⁹Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

INTRODUCTION

Today we are considering a longer portion of James' letter (the passage we missed due to snow last week and the one planned for today). There are themes that run throughout this letter and we see them surface here. One is the theme of Godly wisdom in contrast to worldly wisdom. Another is the lure and love of the world, which James finds incompatible with loving God.

And as we shall see, following the worldly wisdom and ways is the cause of conflict of all kinds. At the same time, James offers an alternative.

[Pray]

Do you want to be wise? Not a wise guy, as such, but one who is considered wise? Our society has it's take on wisdom and maturity.

Here are a few familiar sayings on the topic:

If you're too open minded, your brains will fall out.

Middle age is when broadness of the mind and narrowness of the waist change places.

"The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom." Isaac Asimov

It is better to remain silent at the risk of being thought a fool, than to talk and remove all doubt of it!

And I can imagine it is with some degree of disappointment that Charlie Brown says: "In the Book of Life, the answers aren't in the back."

Where might we find the answers? What is the source of true wisdom??

Biblical wisdom is found first and foremost in "fear" or a healthy respect for the Lord, and for the Word of the Lord. Several books of the Bible are considered "wisdom literature", among them, the book of Proverbs. It is filled with instruction, short, pithy sayings that are memorable and readily applied to life. They are filled with common sense, but also are applications of God's Word.

Their purpose is to instruct the hearer in how to live "disciplined and successful lives, and to help [us] do what is right, just and fair." (Proverbs 1:3)

Biblical wisdom is not a result of classroom learning or college degrees. Rather this wisdom "from above" is revealed in God's word and applied in our lives. It is evident by how we live our lives, not by how high we might score on an IQ test. In fitting with the earlier themes of James' letter, actions speak louder than words, when it comes even to wisdom.

The Apostle Paul cautions in I Corinthians 3:18-19:

¹⁸Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. ¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

I think Mark Twain was onto something when he wrote this:

"Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening, when you would have rather talked."

The source of wisdom is "from above", in other words, its source is from God, which makes it "pure". Those who exercise this godly wisdom will be those whose lives reflect Christ-like character. They do not express "mixed motives" but are single-minded, focused on right relationships, both with God and with others. (BTY, that is the definition of "righteousness"!)

Furthermore, James said earlier in 1:5,

"If any of you lack wisdom, ...ask of God, who gives to all equally, and it shall be given...."

James attributes seven virtues or characteristics to true biblical wisdom:

- *Peace-loving, in contrast to one who creates conflict and fosters division.
- *Considerate, respectful and wields power judiciously.
- *Willing to submit to others, because s/he truth when s/he hears it, and receives instruction; One who possess a teachable spirit.
- *Full of mercy and bears good fruit—(1:27, 2:15-18), treating everyone with fairness, and impartiality (James 2:14-20, 2-9).

*And the final virtue of the wise one is sincerity—meaning without hypocrisy, not two-faced.

These same themes continue into chapter 4:1-10. James writes about conflict. Conflict? In the church?! Yes, the reality is that there is no perfect church as long as I am or you are in it. We are sinners, forgiven, but sinners none the less.

A man was stranded for several years on deserted Pacific island. At long last, he was able to get the attention of a passing boat. When it landed, the skipper came ashore to greet him.

The skipper asked: “Are you here alone? What are those three huts you’ve built?”

The castaway replied: “Yes, I am alone. That first hut is my house.”

“What’s that one?” the skipper asked, pointing to the second one.

“I built that for my church.”

“Ok. So, what about that third one over there?”

“Oh.” He replied. “*That’s* where I *used* to go to church.”

We laugh, but our laughter betrays the truth that James declares:

Quarrels and conflict come from the desires that battle *within us*! And that is true of each one of us as individuals. Then put two or more people together and the chances of conflict grow exponentially!

James contrasts two kinds of people, two ways of living. One seeks godly wisdom and friendship with God; the other’s focus is the pursuit of pleasure and self-indulgence.

Do you want to live the good life? A godly life patterned after Jesus? I do, don’t you?

But there’s a problem. You know this, without my having to spell it out for you.

What is the problem? In a word, Sin, S-I-N. And what is at the center of sin? “I”.

“I” am at the center of it.

So this scenario can go one of two ways.

In the first scenario, which pursues friendship with the world and its wisdom, I think I know best! This way of wisdom is described as boastful, selfish, ambitious. It’s all about me, myself, and I. My focus is fulfilling my desires, my way. No matter the cost. If someone or something prevents my pleasure seeking,

hedonistic fulfillment, there are consequences: I become envious, bitter, jealous, I may well deny the truth, resulting in chaos and disorder. I am not pleasant to be around because others matter little to me except as those I can use for my own selfish, pleasurable purposes.

Anthony Bourdain, celebrity chef and TV personality, was interviewed by a men's magazine in 2014. He was asked "What are the benefits of hedonism and what are the risks?"

His reply: "Look, I understand that inside me there is a greedy, gluttonous, lazy, hippie—you know? I understand that...there's a guy inside me who wants to lay in bed, and smoke weed all day and watch tv and old movies. I could easily do that. My whole life is a series of strategems [designed] to avoid, and outwit, that guy....I'm aware of my appetites, and I don't let them take charge." Sean Woods, interview in Men's Journal (2014)

Whether the battle is *within* us or *between* us, the outcome is the two-fold:

First, God is grieved. By putting myself in the place of God, at the center of my life, my relationship with God is broken.

Second, none of my human relationships are immune; they too are broken, destroyed by my own pride and selfishness.

James describes a second way to live, which is much different, but it can be hard to realize. Because something must be done with that I in the center of S-I-N.

You and I must make a critical choice:

I choose to change my mind. This is the definition of repentance. To change one's mind. In this case, to change one's mind about yourself and myself: To acknowledge that you/I am not god, and to humble your/myself, and to admit that you/I am a sinner in need of God's grace. This requires humility.

Humility is a concept that is often misunderstood.

It is easier to say what humility is NOT, rather than what it IS. It is **not** weakness, but strength. It is **not** being a doormat and allowing others to walk all over you.

C. S. Lewis describes humility best when he wrote: "**Humility is not thinking less of oneself, it is thinking of oneself less.**" One of my mentors frequently said: "**You've got to get yourself out of the way!**" In other words, "**It's not all about me!**"

In one Peanuts comic strip, Charlie Brown is talking with his friend Sherman. Charlie says: "I don't understand why people don't like me." He goes on, "I just don't understand it.." In the third frame he says, "I've tried and tried, but I just don't understand it.." Finally he asks: "How can you not like somebody who's perfect?"

Well, it's not all about you either, Charlie Brown!

This realization is the beginning of real wisdom! One who is humble does not always have to be the center of attention; can listen and learn from others instead of always being right; one who is able to gracefully both give and receive. The truly humble finds worth and value in what God's opinion, not so much in the opinion of others.

The proof is in the pudding, or rather the proof is in the "fruit"...because the result or outcome of this kind of wisdom is made evident in one who is a peace lover and peace maker, which is quite the opposite of the person previously described who stirs up conflict and quarrels.

So James contrasts two different types of people:

Those who cultivate true wisdom and friendship with God, and those who cultivate friendship with the world, becoming enemies of God.

Honestly, while James has drawn a sharp contrast between these two ways of life—the truth remains that *some of both* of these characteristics *reside within each one of us*. (Sorry!) Like fish in water, we cannot escape the fact that we are sinners who live in a fallen world, even though we are believers! Ultimately, James encourages us to:

1—Wake Up and Wise Up!

2 –With eyes wide open, James encourages us to embrace the truth, and in true repentance, turn to God with sincere sorrow, dethrone ourselves, giving God, ***God's rightful place in the center of our lives.***

And in doing so, God will wash our hands and purify our hearts (Baptism) to the end that we will no longer experience divided loyalty (v8) but be single-minded, and whole-heartedly devoted to God alone.

3 – James mentions at least twice in this passage, evil influences or spirits which would seek to draw us away from God. His advice: Flee from evil! John tell us that when it to spirits, "... the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (I John 4:1-5) So flee from evil and finally...

4—Draw near to God and James assures us that if we do so, God will draw near to us.

Do you want to live the good life?

It's not a mystery. It is revealed right here within the pages of scripture, in the life and example of Jesus. No need to wonder, no guesswork required. The Word of God reveals the truth about who we are, and how to live wisely. The question for us? Will we humble ourselves—get ourselves out of the way enough to let God have our whole-hearted love and devotion? Will you and I draw near to God, so that God may draw near to us?

Let's pray: Lord help us to wake up, and wise up! We are so easily influenced by this world, and its hedonistic, self-serving tendencies. May we have the grace to listen, to learn, to apply your Word to our lives. We are asking for your wisdom. Through the Holy Spirit, please make us more like Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.