

Two Kinds of Wisdom

James 3:13-18

Intro

When you come to a fork in the road, or when you have to make a decision, who or what do you turn to for the answer? Do you base your choices on what feels good? Do you ask your friends or family? Do you use your own logic and reason by following your heart?

The world says, *"Listen to your heart"* but God says, *"The human heart is the most deceitful of all things and desperately wicked"* (Jeremiah 17:9). God doesn't want us to lean on our own understanding. He wants us to lean on His.

Many times in life you may feel lost, frustrated or confused, having no idea which way to go. Instead of waiting for God's answer, you may try and figure it out all by yourself. Perhaps you can relate to how some people try to process their choices: *"Okay self, this way makes more sense. This idea seems more reasonable. I think this, I feel that..."*

But that is not how God wants us to make decisions in life. God wants us first and foremost to go to Him, and then wait for His answer before we make a move. Remember what James said at the beginning of his epistle, *"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you"* (James 1:5).

Many times we go faster when we see a yellow light and we should slow down, stop and wait. God wants us to wait until we get His green light before we move forward. He doesn't want us to stress out and guess what to do. He doesn't want us to go on whims and feelings and rely on our logic. He wants to give you the wisdom that you need in order to make the right decision and to know exactly what to do.

This is what James deals with here in this passage. He talks about two kinds of wisdom. One that is based on earthly human wisdom and the other on heavenly wisdom which comes from God. The word that James uses for wisdom is *sophia*. It is the ability to judge correctly and to follow the best course of action, based on knowledge and understanding. *Sophia*, wisdom is used frequently in the New Testament to describe the ability to discern and conform to God's will. All true wisdom is found only in God, He is the source of true wisdom.

James began Chapter 3 stating that many should not become teachers, because they will incur a stricter judgment. Then he broadened the exhortation to deal with a problem that we all wrestle with, the evil of a destructive tongue. In our text of chapter 3, James may still be focusing, at least in part, on those who would become teachers. Teachers are especially prone to boast in their knowledge and wisdom. They easily may fall into jealousy against those who have a bigger audience than they do. They may give way to wrong motives, serving out of selfish ambition, trying to attract people to themselves rather than to Christ.

Our Actions Reveal the type of Wisdom We Have (James 3:13)

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."

James begins with a question: Who is wise and has understanding among you? Do you have wisdom and understanding? People cannot merely think they have wisdom. Wisdom must be shown in

action. The evidence of humble, meek wisdom is shown in good conduct. To state it more precisely, James is saying: *we prove which wisdom we have by our actions*. He is asking us to evaluate not only what we know is right but also that we practice what is right. Wisdom is revealed by the way one lives his or her life through good conduct.

Not only are we to have good conduct, but we are to practice this good conduct in meekness. "Meekness" in the original Greek means: *"The quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one's self-importance."*

We show our good conduct with the attitude of humility, gentleness, and meekness. The writer of Proverbs states a similar point. *"When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom"* (Proverbs 11:2). Our relationship with God is revealed by the life we live. Just as works showed us what kind of faith we have (in James 2), so also works show what kind of wisdom we have. James is going to deal with this fully in the following verses of this passage.

Earthy Wisdom (James 3:14-16)

James begins by showing us what wrong wisdom looks like. *"But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice."*

If a person has envy, jealousy, and selfishness in the heart, that person is living a lie. In verse 14 he says, *"You are false to the truth."* You are claiming to be wise, but you are living in a way that denies the claim.

Acting with jealousy and envy shows that we do not have godly wisdom. Jealousy and envy goes against meekness? Remember what meekness means? It means *"The quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one's self-importance."*

What does envy, jealousy, and selfish ambition come from? They come from having a sense of one's self-importance. These attitudes come from believing that we must look out for our own interests. These attitudes come from seeing others receive what we think we ought to have. Worldly wisdom says, *"I will take care of myself."* Worldly wisdom says, *"I deserve this"* and *"I demand that."* *"I demand respect."* This is how the world teaches us to think and act. But here the Bible condemns such thinking.

It says that this wisdom is not from above, but it is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. When we act and think like this, we are acting like we are people of this world, and not of Christ. We are no longer thinking godly and we are in a sense giving way to demonic influence. We have limited our vision and thoughts to the things of this world.

This world has been shaped by some supposedly experts and some philosophers who believe that our decisions are mainly based on **Power, Pleasure, & Purpose**.

Tortured genius and philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, believed that human beings are driven by a will to **power**. We are, he said, desperate to have a sense of mastery over the sinister, unseen but real forces that would imprison the human spirit. He says we crave a sense of control over the chaos confusion that threatens us. BUT many have made great errors in following this line of thinking, that power should be the controlling factor in life. We have seen this kind of thinking in world history that has been destructive. This is faulty worldly wisdom.

Sigmund Freud claimed that human beings are pushed and pulled by a will to **pleasure**. To dull the pain and apparent pointlessness of life, we seek release and ecstasy. If pleasure is the driving force in your life you are setting yourself up for failure and ruin. This too is faulty worldly wisdom. This is how the world teaches us to think and act. To seek power and pleasure is unspiritual and a destructive kind of thinking. There's no wisdom there.

Getting closer to what I think is the truth about us, Victor Frankl said that we are motivated by a will for **purpose** and meaning. We are restless to make sense out of life, to know why we are here and to discover the purpose of it all. To a certain extent this is helpful but it is not in us to know what our ultimate purpose in life is and we are often confused and lost to know our purpose. Only the Creator God can give us purpose and meaning. We need God in order to know who we are and to give us wisdom and direction in our lives. Can I tell you, worldly wisdom sucks.

James calls this wisdom "*unspiritual*." We are not acting or thinking spiritually, but according to the sinful nature. Paul used similar language to condemn carnal, worldly thinking. In 1 Corinthians 3:2-3 Paul says, "*I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³ You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?*" You are not looking at life through godly standards, but worldly and unspiritual standards.

This worldly wisdom is called "*demonic*." What a statement! You think that you are of God when you act like this! You are not of God; you are influenced by the demonic. It is not from God. Stop fooling yourself! Stop lying to yourself! This is a very serious warning.

The Result of Earthly Wisdom

In verse 16 James describes the result of this worldly wisdom. "*For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*" As the world rejects the Gospel, there will be an increase of disorder and every evil practice. Why is crime increasing? Crime is increasing because the gospel is being rejected. Rejecting God does not make us more civilized, as these supposedly experts and philosophers want to claim. Rejecting God causes people to be more disorderly and wicked.

When we reject the wisdom that comes from above and accept the self-centered life, our lives will become wicked. Our families will become more disorderly and broken. Relationships will be damaged and ruined. Our society and relationships simply become more destructive as we focus on ourselves and stop focusing on God. We are making a mess of our lives and making a mess of the world around us the longer we remain selfish and reject the wisdom from above.

Heavenly Wisdom (James 3:17-18)

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

James describes for us various characteristics that will test us to see if we have the wisdom that comes from above. The first characteristic above all else is purity. The pure life is clearly a life that is obedient to godly wisdom, God's wisdom.

Nothing shows wisdom from below than a life of impurity. We are lying to ourselves if we think we have wisdom and understanding but are living an impure life. You do not have wisdom. You do not have understanding. Further, why would we listen to the "wisdom" of people who are leading impure lives? How foolish to listen to their instructions! Living a pure life demonstrates godly, spiritual wisdom.

Qualities that Describe a Person's Disposition

This wisdom from above is not only pure but peace-loving, considerate, and submissive. These are characteristics that describe the wise person's disposition. If we truly have wisdom, the wisdom that comes from above, the wisdom that is not destructive and unspiritual, then we will be peaceable, gentle, and open to reason. Those with the wisdom from above listen to others. They are teachable. They are meek. They are gentle, humble, and peaceable.

Qualities that Describe a Person's Actions

The second set of qualities reveals the wise person's actions. James says that those with godly wisdom are full of mercy and good fruits. The first three qualities described the wise person's disposition. These two characteristics describe the wise person's actions. We do not have the wisdom of God and cannot claim to have godly understanding when our lives are not full of mercy and good fruits. Can your life be described as "*full of mercy and full of good fruits?*" Remember how James began this teaching in verse 13. Your good conduct shows the meekness of wisdom in your life. So where is the good conduct? Where are the merciful acts? Where are the good fruits? When we rise tomorrow, Lord willing, we must think about what good works and merciful acts we can do. This will show that God's wisdom is at work in our lives.

Qualities that Describe a Person's Daily Practice

The final 2 words we find at the end of verse 17 describe a person's daily practice which is *impartial and sincere*. The NASB version of the Bible reads, "*unwavering and without hypocrisy.*" The Christian is not fake or wavering in the face of challenges. Christians are sincere and true in their actions.

Peacemakers

James points out here that when we have godly wisdom that is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, good fruits, unwavering, and sincere, then we are producing the righteous life that God demands. But that righteous living only comes to those who make for peace. Careful winsome words and wise loving words are the seeds of peace. And God loves peacemakers (Matt. 5:9).

Conclusion

Which wisdom leads your life? Are you following the wisdom from above or the wisdom from below? It is easy to know which one you are following. Look at your life; your actions and conduct. Look at your character and attitude. If you have jealousy, envy, and selfish ambition, then you are lying to yourself if you think you are following God. You are following the wisdom of the world. Those who follow God show it by their good conduct that is full of purity, peace, gentleness, and mercy. Live the righteous life that God demands from you.