

# Are we wise or not?

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- [ 0 : 0 0 ] In verse 13, who is wise and understanding among you? And as he asks that question, he's not expecting us to put up our hands and say, 'Ooh, me, me, me!' He's asking us the question so that we might reflect on it. He's inviting us to reflect on this question of wisdom and understanding. And even as he asks the question, he is going to walk us through how to answer the question. And in a sense, he's already began to walk us through this question of wisdom, because back in chapter 1, you'll remember that James says, if anyone lacks wisdom, ask God, and he will give generously. So James has already touched on this question of wisdom. And back in chapter 1, you realize that it is possible, even as those who love our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, that we might be lacking in wisdom. He says, if anyone lacks wisdom. And from what he mentions in chapter 1, it's also something that we want. We want this wisdom.
- [ 1 : 2 4 ] We want to ask God for this heavenly wisdom, this wisdom that comes from God. And we realize as well that it is a gift. It is something that God gives to people who ask for it. And so James has touched on this question of wisdom already. He has set it to one side, and then he's coming back to it, much like my friend Javi. So Javi is a great chef. And once he showed Maeve and I how to cook pasta carbonara. And so pasta carbonara, I thought cooking pasta carbonara from scratch meant boiling the pasta and pouring in the jar of dalmillo. But Javi showed me that cooking pasta carbonara meant cutting up the little bits of ham that are going to go in the sauce, and he fried up the ham. And then what he did was he set the bacon or the ham to one side while he worked on making the cream sauce that would go over the pasta. And then he brought the ham back in to the equation, and he started to develop the flavors of the ham with seasoning and heat and deepening those flavors before combining it then with the cream sauce.
- [ 2 : 4 0 ] And in a sense, that's what James is doing, because he has touched on the question of wisdom. He's set it to one side in some ways, and now he's bringing it back before us to develop and to deepen some of the flavors or some of the understanding about what it is to have this wisdom from above that he speaks about. And so he wants us to know how to understand this question, whether we're wise or not. And what he'll do is he'll show us how to know if we're not wise and understanding. So you see that in verse 15. Such wisdom does not come from heaven. So there's one type of so-called wisdom. And then he'll help us to understand if we are wise and understanding.

In verse 17, the wisdom that comes from heaven. So the wisdom that does not come from heaven and the wisdom that comes from heaven. And as he helps us with this, he will ask us to consider our hearts.

He'll ask us to consider what happens in our lives. He'll draw attention to these things. And you can see that in verse 13.

[ 3 : 55 ] He says this word humility. What's going on in our hearts. And he also speaks about us showing wisdom and understanding by their good life or by deeds done.

And so as he asks us to reflect on whether we're wise in understanding or not, he'll ask us to think about our hearts and the way in which we're living.

And so let's think, first of all, about how to know if we're not wise and understanding. How to know if we're not wise and understanding.

And he begins by asking us to have a look at our hearts in verse 14. And it's eye-opening to realize that James doesn't start with our heads as he thinks about wisdom.

So we realize that James is not thinking about intellectual wisdom, getting good marks on the leaving certs. Nor does he start with our decision-making.

[ 5 : 15 ] How do I know what decision to make in different areas of life? Or what to do with my life? But he starts with our hearts.

And when James speaks about our hearts, he's not just thinking about our emotions, but he's thinking about the control center of our lives. It's when we look at our hearts that we realize what's controlling our thoughts and our actions.

The things that we desire, the things that we long for, the things that we want. And James says if we look at our hearts and we see bitter envy and selfish ambition, that that isn't a good thing.

This bitter envy that James speaks about, it could be translated bitter jealousy. And so this word jealousy, even though in English it's kind of a negative word, it doesn't have to be negative.

So you think of Jesus in the temple and how he is jealous for the glory of God. And that moves him to act in the way that he did. But James makes it clear that what he's thinking about here is not good because he puts this word bitter before it, bitter envy.

[ 6 : 23 ] It's like the bitterness of the water that he's spoken about at the end of chapter 2 that is unpleasant to our taste. It's not something you want to drink.

And James says if we have this bitter envy, this concern for ourselves rather than the other person, concern for our dignity and our rights at all costs, then this is an unpleasant thing.

It is not enjoyable. It's not wise. It's not this wisdom from above. Or if we have selfish ambition, if we look at our hearts and we see selfish ambition, James says that's not wise or understanding.

That isn't wisdom. Now ambition, that can be a good thing as well. You think of this famous quote from the missionary William Carey, who says, Expect great things from God.

Attempt great things for God. And in some sense you want to be ambitious if it is for God. But James says if we look at our hearts and see selfish ambition, that isn't wisdom or understanding that comes from above or from God.

[ 7 : 35 ] This desire to promote ourselves at the cost of others. My friend worked with a big solicitor's firm up in Dublin and he told me about the magic roundabout.

So the magic roundabout was that you would go into work as normal at nine o'clock in the morning and you would work throughout the day until five and then you'd have your dinner and then you'd continue to work until midnight or 1 a.m. or 2 a.m.

And then you'd take maybe 20 minutes sleep on the floor of the office and then you'd get up and you'd continue to work and work and work until dawn was starting to break and then you'd get a taxi home, you'd have a quick shower, you'd put on a new suit, you'd go back into work.

That was the magic roundabout, presumably named ironically because it doesn't sound magic at all. But what was driving the magic roundabout in the company he worked for was this sense of ambition.

And perhaps for some, what drove them in that way was a selfless ambition. They wanted to care for their family. They wanted to put bread on the table and so on.

[ 8 : 55 ] But for many, it would have been a selfish ambition. How quickly can I make my first million? How quickly can I retire and enjoy life?

And in fact, if you Google what is a mark of success in one of these big companies, it will tell you promotion through the ranks.

You want to be promoted. And of course, if you want to be promoted, you need to be promoting yourself. Or it will tell you that what is a mark of success in these big companies is building strong relationships.

And you think, oh, that sounds good. But then you finish the sentence and it says, building strong relationships with high value clients. So it's the clients who bring in the money for the company that you want to build strong relationships with.

And that gives a flavor of what selfish ambition and bitter envy can look like. But as we hear what James is saying here, we need to realize that he's not talking first and foremost to people out there.

[ 10 : 07 ] He's talking to dear brothers and sisters who are believers in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ. And what you realize as he says that is that this is a human heart issue.

That sadly, there are times when we look at our hearts as James invites us to. And we can see these things bubbling away. Bitter envy or selfish ambition.

And what James invites us to do is to call it what it is. Now, it's interesting the way James phrases this because he says if we harbor those things.

So it's one thing for a bird to land in your head and you shoo it away. But it's another thing for a bird to land in your head and you build a nest for it and allow it to make its home there.

And James is saying if we harbor, if we give safe house to bitter envy and selfish ambition, if we nurture it and feed it and develop it in our hearts, James says that is not wisdom from above.

[ 11 : 18 ] That is not something to boast about. That is living a lie if we say that we are following Christ and nurturing these things in our hearts. James says that is not from heaven.

In fact, he says in verse 15, such wisdom does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. You know that this is the lie the devil has always been telling to human beings.

Even from the get-go, from the Garden of Eden, what the devil holds out to Adam and Eve is you can be like God. And what is that?

Only appealing to selfish ambition. And he brings division between Adam and Eve, the bitter envy. She made me do it. But we praise the Lord that he did not allow Adam and Eve to become like God and he does not allow us to become like God.

What kind of gods would we be? And so James says if we see this in our hearts, it's not something from heaven. It's not something to harbor or nurture or boast about.

[ 12 : 35 ] And if we're not sure whether it's in our hearts or not, James says, well, you can look at your life. It's confirmed when we look at our lives in verse 16, for where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

If there is selfish ambition in our hearts, of course, by putting ourselves forward, we need to push other people back. And if that's what we want at all costs, then we will do whatever it takes to make sure that we are promoted and others are not.

And so James is an honest guy and we need his honesty. He's not saying every one of us here have this bubbling away in our hearts, but he's saying if we have a look and if we see this and if we see the effects of this in our lives, then it's something we need to repent of because it's not from heaven.

It is earthly and unspiritual and demonic. And so James, that is how we are to know if we are not wise and understanding with this heavenly wisdom.

And then he helps us to think about how to know if we are wise and understanding. How are we to know if we are wise and understanding?

[ 13 : 56 ] And again, he begins with a heart, in a sense. Not so much about what decisions we make, but the sort of people we are. The sort of people we are to be whatever we do, James says.

Isn't it interesting that James dwells in the heart or the character? As much to say that the decisions will follow from the character that he outlines here.

And the character he outlines here is, first of all, pure. He says in verse 17, the wisdom that comes from heaven is, first of all, pure. And he says, first of all, because he wants this to take priority, he wants us to hear this.

Heavenly wisdom is pure, which makes a lot of sense because if you have turned to Jesus in repentance and faith, you know that he has purified you, he has washed you clean of your sin.

And so in one sense, believers in Jesus are pure already. He has made us perfectly pure, as white as snow before the Father.

[ 15 : 03 ] But because we have been made as white as snow before the Father, we want to give ourselves to a pure life. We want to be totally devoted to God.

We want to be totally devoted to him because he has given his life for us. We want to give our lives to him so that there's no mixed motives, that there's not this double-mindedness, half-heartedly following him.

One of our boys yesterday decided to make a drink for himself. And so he poured water into a glass, lovely pure filtered water, and then he poured some orange cordial in on top of that.

And then he poured some purple juice in on top of that. And then he decided to take some concentrated lemon juice and he poured that in on top of that. And he drank it. And I didn't drink it.

I didn't know what it tasted like. But I know this. It wasn't any longer pure once he had finished making the drink for himself. There was lots of different stuff going on in there. But James says wisdom from above is pure, where we are totally committed to God.

[ 16 : 14 ] And it is peace-loving. What has Jesus done for us? Well, Jesus has brought about peace between us and God, and God and us. And so as those who have God's peace, as far as it is possible, we want to live at peace with everyone.

As far as it's possible, as far as it depends on us, as Paul says, we want to live at peace with everyone. Which means we will pursue, brothers and sisters in love, even if it means hard conversations.

Not because we love conflict, but because we love peace. And if a relationship isn't flourishing, we will want it to flourish as those who are flourishing in the peace that God gives.

And James says this is the wisdom that comes from above. And of course, if it's going to be peace-loving, then part of that is by being considerate, as James says in verse 17, or gentle, as it could be translated.

We serve a Savior who is humble and gentle. And so James says to us, if we see gentleness and considerateness in our hearts, then that is wisdom from above.

[ 17 : 39 ] To be considerate of somebody else. To consider them as well as ourselves. Even if we have the right to get our own way or to get our own back, that we consider them and we let go of that for their sake.

James says that wisdom from above is submissive in verse 17. And when he uses that word submissive, what it means really is being open to reason.

Being reasonable. So that if we're having a conversation with somebody, that we're willing at least to say, I might have got this wrong. I might be wrong on this.

That we're willing to hear the other person out, to listen to them. And isn't it an amazing thing when we encounter somebody who's willing to listen to us and who's willing to change their mind based on a reason that we have given.

And James says, we, if we want to be characterized by this wisdom that comes from above, that we are to be open to reason. There's this quote about Abraham Lincoln.

[ 18 : 57 ] Which illustrates this idea of being open to reason. On one occasion, Abraham Lincoln, to please a certain politician, issued a command to transfer certain regiments.

When the Secretary of War, Edward Stanton, received the order, he refused to carry it out, saying the president was a fool. Now imagine how Abraham Lincoln would respond to this, to be called a fool, by his Secretary of War.

When Lincoln was told of this, he replied, if Stanton said I'm a fool, then I must be. For he is nearly always right, I'll see, for myself.

And as the two men talked, the president quickly realized that his decision was a serious mistake. And without hesitation, he withdrew it. A teachable, open spirit is often a major key in defusing a conflict.

And this is wisdom from above. To be submissive in the sense of being open to reason. James says wisdom from above is merciful. It is full of mercy and good fruit.

[ 20 : 00 ] And he's already touched on this. How those who have given themselves to following Jesus are merciful to brothers and sisters around them. They don't just say to them, be well fed, and then they go on their way.

They are kind and merciful, showing in their actions what they know in their heart to be this love for their neighbor. James says the wisdom from above is impartial.

In verse 17. In other words, they're not swayed by people's appearances. They're not swayed by people's status. And we saw that earlier in James as well where he said if a rich person and a poor person come into the gathering on a Sunday morning, you don't treat them differently based on how they look.

You are impartial. You treat them the same in Christ. And James says wisdom from above is sincere. In verse 17.

In other words, not playing a part. In other words, what you see is what you get with this person. You think of the apostle Peter in the letter to the Galatians.

[ 21 : 05 ] And Peter is having a lovely time eating with non-Jewish believers. He's enjoying fellowship with them around the table.

And this is a wonderful thing that this man, Peter, who's Jewish, is willing to sit down with people who aren't Jewish and enjoy this food together in the name of Jesus. And then what Peter does is when people come down from Jerusalem, Peter decides, oh, I can't eat with these people anymore because of how it looks to those who have traveled down from Jerusalem.

And so he stops eating with them. And Paul calls him out on it and essentially says, will the real Peter please stand up? We don't know what we're getting with you, Peter.

This is inconsistent. And in fact, it is not the wisdom from above. And so James invites us to reflect on our hearts, to know if we are wise and understanding.

He doesn't ask us to look at how brainy we are. He doesn't ask us to look at the decisions we're making. He invites us to look at our hearts as the place in which to determine whether we are wise and understanding.

[ 22 : 21 ] And he says, the results will be seen in our relationships. In verse 18, peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

As we sow in peace, there is a harvest of righteousness. And as you try to get your head around this verse, it's a tricky verse to get your head around because there's questions about whether the harvest is righteousness.

There's questions about whether it's a harvest of righteousness. So you're sowing righteousness and the harvest is something else. It's a question about whether it's your own harvest internally or whether it's a harvest in the community around you.

And in a sense, all of those things are true. There's a sense in which those who have this wisdom from above are those who flourish before God in their hearts, in their character, in their decision making.

And not only do they flourish, but they bring flourishing in the communities that they are a part of. James mentioned back in chapter one that human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

[ 23 : 36 ] And he leaves that frying pan over here, just leaves it sit for a while. Human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. And you're wondering, well, what does produce the righteousness that God desires?

And James tells us here what produces the righteousness that God desires. He says, peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. righteousness. How do we know if we're wise and understanding?

Well, we reflect on our hearts and we ask, do we see these things in our hearts? Do we see these things in the outworking of our relationships? And I don't know as you hear this whether you're encouraged or discouraged.

I used to watch daytime TV sometimes when I was in college and one of the sports that they had on was bowling. So it wasn't 10-pin bowling where you knock down the 10 pins with the bowling ball.

It was lawn bowling which was where you had this small white ball and you tried to roll the bowling ball and get it as close as you can to it.

[ 24 : 42 ] Now, the bowling ball had a weight in it so that it didn't roll straight. So you had to roll it at an angle and it would go out like this and then eventually it would just land right beside the little white ball.

And there's times when you're looking at it you're thinking where is this ball going? And it's never going to get there. And perhaps as you listen to James his reflection on what wisdom from above is like and you look at your own heart you're thinking where is my heart at?

It is never going to get to what James describes here. But the way in which James speaks he wants us to realize that this wisdom from above it is a gift.

If we don't have it we ask for it and God gives generously and he is committed to getting us there. This is why Christ has died so that we might grow in this wisdom and so if you are discouraged this morning remind yourself that before ever James had us looking at our hearts he had us looking at Jesus because this is what Jesus is like isn't it?

This wisdom from above is essentially describing what Jesus is like that he is pure that he is peace loving that he is considerate that he is submissive in the sense that he is open to reason isn't it amazing in the Old Testament God says come let us reason together that he is full of mercy that he is full of good fruit that he is impartial he is not swayed by man's appearance that he is sincere what James has done for us with this wisdom from above is sketched a picture of Jesus his half brother and he says that this is what God is going to make you like and where you lack this wisdom ask and it will be given generously to you wisdom which is a wonderful encouragement to us because we can genuinely look at areas of our lives where we see God has given us wisdom over the years we can see how he has grown us in wisdom we can be encouraged by that we can ask others to reflect on that with us and as we despair at times over the lack of wisdom we have in our hearts the lack of peace at times the lack of submissiveness or the lack of consideration for others we can rejoice because he will get us to where he has promised and if you see some of these things in your heart but you don't see

[ 27 : 45 ] Jesus I want to invite you to look at Jesus to realize that you are made in God's image that there is a reason that if you have some of these characteristics in your heart and the reason is that God has made people in his image that we reflect him in many ways even as fallen people but God has made us not just to be like him in these characteristics he's made us to know him and so I want to invite you if you see these things in your heart but don't see Jesus look at Jesus turn to the gospels and read about Jesus who perfectly fulfills these characteristics this wisdom from above it's not a given but it is a gift it is something that God gives to his people when we ask it's something that he grows in us and is committed to growing in us it's never going to be perfect in us and yet for those who know and love the Lord

Jesus it is possible that we will grow closer and closer to Christ likeness even in the here and now I had a teacher in Bible college by the name of Guy Waters and he would be embarrassed probably for me to mention his name he was an incredibly intelligent man he is an incredibly intelligent man if you were thinking about wise and understanding in the sense of intellectual he would be that he had probably written more books than I had read he had the New Testament understood and learned inside out not only in English but in the original language of Greek he was just so bright and brilliant and to be in class with him might have been a daunting prospect it might have been an intimidating prospect to sit with him in class but what really struck me and what struck others was not his academic brilliance even though that was true but it was his heavenly wisdom his pure peace loving considerate submissive full of mercy and good fruit impartial and sincere wisdom and he wasn't perfect in this but it radiated from him on one occasion

I remember in particular a student asked him a question in class and it was one of those questions that if the teacher had been somebody else they could easily have squashed it they could easily have dismissed it they could easily have ridiculed the question and if he had harbored selfish ambition and bitter envy in his heart that would have been the reflex I'm going to make myself look good here and that student look bad but he didn't he looked the student in the eye and he said that is a great question and then he responded to the question and then the student came back with another question pushing back on what he had said and we're all thinking oh this is going to be ugly you'd be thinking he could say don't you know who I am I've written a book on this but he was open to reason and he said to the student I can understand why you asked that question but can I just show you this and that and this and it was beautiful and that was what characterized him time and time again in the classroom whether you met him in the classroom or in the corridor or in the choir he was in a choir what you saw was what you get he was sincere he was peaceable he was open to reason he was merciful he was full of good fruit in a word he was

Christ like and he would want me to say that because he gave all glory to Christ and it is something that gives all glory to Christ when in we who are so fallen and so broken and so fragile that God would work in us in this way bringing about the wisdom from above it's a beautiful thing to see and so we want to ask God that he would give more of what we lack that we might more closely reflect our saviour let's pray and do that right now father we want to thank you for your words to us this morning through James lord we want to thank you for the honesty of your word lord not shying away from showing us the things that can bubble around in our hearts and lord we willingly confess lord the bitter envy and the selfish ambition that we have in our hearts and we don't want to harbour those things lord we don't want to boast about those things we repent of them lord and lord we delight to see the picture of wisdom from above that

James paints for us we delight in it because it paints a picture of our saviour and we want to be more like him we ask you give us what we don't have as individuals as a church family that we might more closely reflect Jesus to one another amen