

Two Types of Wisdom

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- [0 : 0 0] Please turn with me to that passage we just read in James chapter 3 from verse 13 to 18 as we wrap up chapter 3 of James this evening under the heading Two Types of Wisdom.
- Two Types of Wisdom. Wisdom is faith that works. Wisdom is faith that works.
- I'm sure none of us would like to be thought of as being foolish. I'm sure we'd all like it to be said of us that we're wise. The truth is, however, that many as a clever person is very foolish indeed.
- And many as a not so clever person is very wise indeed. In fact, according to James, wisdom doesn't really have an awful lot to do with someone's intelligence.
- Rather, it's got to do with having faith that works. Or to put it another way, expressing your faith in Christ Jesus in good works.
- [1 : 0 8] Those works, of course, including, as we saw the last couple of weeks, the words of our mouths. And so in James chapter 3 in verse 3, he asks a question.
- Who is wise and understanding among you? 313 rather. Who is wise and understanding among you? Now, I'm sure in our heart of hearts, we'd all like to put up our hands and to say, Me?
- I'm wise and I'm understanding. Perhaps we could point to our knowledge of the Bible or our ability to understand and answer the theological questions.
- Or perhaps we could point to our achievements in university or in our careers. But that's not what James is asking in verse 13. Rather, he's asking the question.
- Who among you is expressing their faith in Jesus Christ in good works? Who has genuine faith that works in controlling your tongue and in showing mercy to the poor?
- [2 : 1 0] You see, the wisdom that James is commending isn't that of the professional thinker of his day, who often dressed in Greek robes and contemplated all day the meaning of existence.
- Rather, the wisdom he's commending is that of the ordinary Christian, who, despite the difficult situations that she faces, is expressing her faith in good works.
- Though she's poor, she's very generous to those who are even poorer than she is. And though she is provoked on account of her being a Christian, she responds with love and mercy, not spite and judgment.
- Now, James is writing in a particular context to a particular church. It is thought that because there were so many Jewish Christians in membership there, that he was probably writing this letter to the church in Antioch.
- But whatever it was, it was a church which faced significant challenges, one of which was that of false teachers spreading disunity and factionalism.
- [3 : 2 3] It was a church where two wisdoms were competing with each other. The one, orthodox and heavenly, which taught that genuine faith in Jesus expresses itself in good works.

The other, unorthodox and worldly, which taught that faith in Jesus does not need to express itself in good works at all. And the competition of these two wisdoms was confusing and dividing God's people into two different camps.

The one sowing piece, the one sowing vision. And in these verses, James is describing these two types of wisdom, the wisdom from above and the wisdom from below.

He leaves us in no doubt as to where he stands on the issue. In verse 13, he writes of the Christian man who claims to be wise. By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

He's saying true, genuine, godly wisdom is faith that works, that shows itself by its good conduct. How does this apply to us today?

[4 : 45] When it's harder than at any other time in many years to express our faith in Jesus. We are socially distanced from one another. We are unable to physically meet together.

We are restricted to meeting on computers, if you can call it that. How then can we show our faith by good conduct?

Well, we'll give answers to that question, hopefully, as we go through our study this evening. So let's look at these two types of wisdom, the wisdom from above and the wisdom from below, by answering three questions.

First, where do these two types come from? Second, what do these two types look like? And third, where do these two types lead us?

First question, then. Where do these two types come from? The wisdom from above and the wisdom from below. Where do they come from? Well, the first kind of wisdom, that which is false and which leads to the destruction of Christian fellowship, that type which insists that we do not need to express our faith in Jesus Christ in good works, is that of which we read in verse 15.

[5 : 59] This is not the wisdom that comes from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. We can never accuse James of being mealy-mouthed.

He calls a spade a spade. The wisdom of the false teachers is not an acceptable variety of orthodoxy. It is not okay to believe or hold the things which are being taught by these false teachers, that having placed our trust in Jesus, we don't need to live transformed Christian lives, pursuing holiness, compassion, and the grace of self-control.

For all their supposed wisdom, these false teachers are the biggest fools in all the world. We read that this kind of wisdom is earthly.

It's unspiritual. It's demonic. It smacks of the world and of the flesh and of the devil. These three spheres of power Jesus came to destroy and by his death on the cross was victorious over.

These three enemies of the Christian life. To preach cheap grace. Grace which costs nothing and demands no change for all its supposed appeal is everything against which as Christians we are to fight.

[7 : 27] It is an enemy doctrine. It is a weed planted among roses. The second type of wisdom, that which is genuine, orthodox, and leads to the peace of Christian fellowship, that type which insists that genuine faith in Jesus must be expressed by good works, we read of in verse 17.

It's the wisdom from above. It's the wisdom from above. This isn't the first time James has used this phrase, from above.

So for example, in James 1.17 he says, every good and perfect gift comes from above, coming down from the Father of lights.

For James, the language of from above means in the first instance, being from heaven as opposed to being from earth.

In the second instance, it means being spiritual as opposed to being of the flesh or unspiritual. And in the third instance, it means from God, the Father of lights, as opposed to being demonic.

[8 : 48] You see, the second type of wisdom is heavenly, it is spiritual, and it is from God. It smacks of a different world, and it often goes against the received wisdom among us.

This is a wisdom that speaks of self-sacrifice and of putting the interests of others before our own, values which, on a day-to-day level, this world despises.

This is a wisdom which speaks of meekness and self-control, two more values which, on a day-to-day level, this world despises. But this kind of wisdom, the kind of wisdom we are to pursue as Christians, is the wisdom of the cross.

You see, you could not get two more diametrically opposed sources of wisdom. One from the devil, one from God. One from the world, one from heaven.

One from the carnal flesh, and one from the spirit. One from the world, one from the world. And yet, see, here, they exist in the same church. As these false teachers edge their way into the church in Antioch, they're spreading their lies and their foolishness, and we must beware of the same.

[10 : 14] So let me give you this first application of how, despite lockdown, despite all coronavirus restrictions, we can express our faith in good works, and by so doing, cling to that heavenly, spiritual, and divine wisdom of which James speaks here.

Be intentional. Be intentional. Make sure that you do one thing every day to express your faith in Jesus Christ.

Decide on a phone call or a text. Choose to send a card or check up on an elderly neighbour or another member of the church.

Be intentional. Intend to express your faith in Jesus in at least one new way every day during this lockdown.

And don't forget, in your being intentional, make mention of the gospel. Put your faith to work. These two types, where do they come from?

[11 : 20] One from below, one from above. Second question. What do these two types look like? What do they look like? Well, two things may claim to be the same, but in reality, they are very different.

English words are the prime example of this. Think of how difficult it must be for those who are not native English speakers to learn our language. For instance, we all have hairs on our head, tens of thousands of them, if we're lucky enough.

But we don't mean by saying that we have hairs on our heads that we have thousands of fast rabbits with long ears jumping on our heads. No, hair in English means both strands of keratin and rabbit-like creatures that live on mountains.

Two words which are basically the same, but in reality, they are very different indeed. For those children listening in tonight, see if you can think of any other words which sound the same, but are actually very, very different.

Well, these two types of wisdom, they claim to be the same, but in reality, they're very different. The wisdom that comes from the world is carnal and fleshly and demonic, and it manifests itself, according to verse 14, in bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

[12 : 52] Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. Isn't it terrifying that such actions can occur within the church? Until we realize, if we're being honest, that we don't need to look too far from home before we see them sometimes at work in us.

Bitter jealousy is such an expressive term. It's the same word James uses in verse 11 to refer to salt water.

It's brackish, it's salty, it's dirty, it's disgusting. It's the bitterness of the waters in Exodus 15, 23, which, because they were so bitter, could not quench the thirst of the Israelites as they wandered through the desert.

How bitter, poisonous, brackish, and dirty our jealousy can be. How divisive is the Christian who is jealous of the status or reputation another Christian possesses.

He'll wreak havoc in the church to drag that other Christian down into the pit of his own bitterness. As for selfish ambition, I'm fairly certain we all have a good idea of what that means in real terms.

[14 : 16] In Philippians 2, verse 3, we read the command, do nothing from rivalry. The ESV translating selfish ambition there as rivalry.

To be ambitious for the self leads us to viewing one another, not as brothers, but as rivals. To treating one another as pawns which can be sacrificed in the altar of one's own ambition, rather than as precious brothers and sisters in Christ whose interests we are to put before our own.

Selfish ambition, no less than bitter jealousy, wreaks havoc in the church, drags other Christians down. That's the one kind of wisdom, which in reality is not wisdom at all.

Those who teach that one does not need to express one's faith in Christ in good works are for all they claim to the contrary, foolish.

And those who listen to them are foolish also. But what about the other kind of wisdom? The kind that is heavenly and spiritual and divine.

[15 : 32] The kind preached by the faithful apostles because they heard it first from the Lord Jesus himself. Well, in verse 17, this wisdom is described.

These are the works the wise Christian is to pursue. The wisdom that comes from above, we read, is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, and good fruits, impartial, and sincere.

Paul has his fruit of the Spirit. James has his wisdom from above. If our faith in Christ is genuine, this is how we shall express it.

Just as we spent 10 weeks working our way through the fruit of the Spirit earlier last year, so we could do the same here. We're not going to do that at this stage, although I do want to recommend that after the service, perhaps you invest a little bit of time reading and praying through these virtues, confessing any nonconformity, and praying for God to help you to be wise.

As Christians, as the Lord gives us grace by his Spirit and instruction in his word, we are to strive for excellence in all of them.

[16 : 57] All of them. It's no use that we should be pure in our actions and our words, but be harsh and unkind to others.

Too many Christians are like that, especially from our own tradition. pursuing purity of word and life, but unthinkingly criticizing those Christians who are really struggling of dismissing them, of being harsh and unkind about them and to them.

Or it's no use that we should be full of mercy in our words and actions, but only show mercy to those who are our personal favorites, while at the same time being judgmental toward those Christians who instinctively we don't get along with quite so well.

We are to pursue excellence in them all. The virtues of this wisdom are rather like the three musketeers, one for all, all for one. James' background was Jewish and as such, when he wrote a list, as we saw for the fruit of the spirit, the first and last items in that list were the most important, the brackets that held the list together.

And in this case of wisdom from above, the first item is purity and the last item is sincerity. Paul did the same with his fruit of the spirit where the first item is love and the last is self-control.

[18 : 22] And the point is that as Christians, our peaceability is to be pure and sincere. Our gentleness is to be pure and sincere. Our being open to reason is pure and sincere. Our mercy is to be pure and sincere. Our being full of good fruits is to be pure and sincere. Our being impartial is to be pure and sincere. In other words, our faith breathes in the atmosphere of purity and sincerity.

James is driving home to us the point. These virtues are not to be skin deep among you. You're not to play act at being gentle. Being gentle on the outside but inside ragingly violent.

Don't pretend to be impartial being fair on the outside but inside holding grudges against other Christians and thinking meanly of them. I would propose that James uses purity and sincerity to qualify all the other virtues which make up wisdom from above because he wants us to know these things are not just to be skin deep.

Rather, real transformation, godly transformation, gracious transformation means they must go right down into the heart. You'll notice that they are the diametric opposite of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in every conceivable way.

[19 : 55] Not the least of which is they're all concerned with the good of the other not his damage. Another way in which these are the diametric opposite of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition and we'll come back to this in our last point is how they play out in the life of the church.

The Christian whose heart is filled with bitter jealousy and selfish ambition destroys, divides, and disunites churches.

The Christian whose heart is pure and sincere in all the ways listed by James builds up, nurtures, and unites churches.

But then lastly under this point, these virtues paint a portrait of Jesus Christ. Perhaps James had his brother in mind when he penned these words.

The Jesus who really was so pure and sincere in every conceivable way. The Jesus who was no hypocrite, but whose holiness was heart-filled and expressed both in good words and good works.

[21 : 14] The Jesus who was God's appointed peacemaker, so gentle, so kind to sinners like us. So let me give you a second application of how during these days of pandemic we may express our faith in good works.

If the first application was to be intentional, then the second application is to be inspirational, inspirational. The call to express wisdom from above is the call to be like Jesus in all his purity and in sincerity.

Many of us, most of us, myself included, most definitely, need to have our eyes lifted away from the present situation we faced and focused instead upon the heavenly realities of Jesus and his grace.

The gospel and how the joy of the Lord can be our strength. So in the things we do for one another and in the words we say to one another, yes, even on our prayers on behalf of one another, let's inspire each other with the gospel.

Lift my eyes away from this world, up to heaven, by talking about, by showing me by your example, the purity and sincerity of Christ.

[22 : 44] It's lovely to know that we're thinking about each other. It's even lovelier to know that Christ is both thinking about us and interceding for us at the Father's right hand, the inspirational.

Well, third and last, as we expound this passage, where do the two types of wisdom lead us? We've seen where they come from, we've seen what they're like, where do they lead us?

If they find their sources in contradictory places, one in heaven, one in hell, and if they look altogether different from one another, one bitterly jealous and selfishly ambitious, the other pure and sincere, then they lead us to destinations which are millions of miles apart from one another.

In verse 16, we read of that wisdom which is earthly and spiritual and demonic that it leads to disorder and every vile practice. Disorder and every vile practice.

This word disorder can be variously translated as confusion, riots, or tumults. the church which allows itself to be infected by that kind of false teaching, which insists that genuine faith in Jesus does not need to be expressed by good works for Jesus, will inevitably end up in a total mess, a complete muddle, what we as Scots love to call a complete burach.

[24 : 19] It'll be a church which is totally confused about the gospel and will stumble from one disaster to another disaster. You don't find any calm in that church, just another stormy day on another stormy sea.

The vile practices James is speaking of in verse 16 are the evil expressions of carnal, earthly, demonic wisdom. If faith in Christ does not need to be expressed in good works for Christ and like Christ, then anything goes.

Faithful marriage, who needs that? Costly service, who really does that? Self-denial and faithfulness to the law of God, no way, Jose. It's a church where anything goes and the biblical gospel is the first thing to go, followed soon after by biblical church discipline.

That's where earthly, demonic, and spiritual wisdom leads to disaster. It may appeal to many because it preaches cheap grace, that cheap grace against which the great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued and which ultimately cost him his life at the hands of Nazi captors in 1945 Flossenburg concentration camp.

the masses may crowd in to hear a message of cheap grace, but it will have no impact upon them, not really. Lord, keep us from that here in Glasgow City.

[25 : 58] well, by contrast, the wisdom that comes from above, this wisdom which consists in purity and sincerity and everything in between results in what we read in verse 18.

A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace for the disorder of carnal wisdom, read the peace of heavenly wisdom, for the vile practices of demonic wisdom, read the righteousness of divine wisdom.

James is telling us that the wisdom from above is characterized by and leads to peace. I love the way in which James uses these words, sown in peace.

the genuinely wise Christian who is working out and expressing his faith in purity and sincerity is rather like a farmer sowing his seed.

And that seed is peace. The peace of purity and sincerity, of gentleness and kindness, impartiality and so on. And he's sowing it in the field of Christ's people, the church.

[27 : 19] Every word he speaks and every gentle action he does is another seed of peace being sown. Every pure word and every sincere action, another seed of peace being sown.

It's that kind of seed which is being sown. And there will be a harvest of righteousness. It may be hard to sow, but when the harvest comes in.

And sometimes the farmer is sowing when the rain is sowing when the rain is pouring down on him and the storms are beating against him.

He sows the seed and he sees a flock of seagulls behind him picking up the seed he's just sown, but he does not give up. He perseveres and five months later, the field in which he has sown his seed is ready for the harvest.

The Christian who is sowing in peace. She may be doing so in a church which is torn apart by controversy, by division and by hurt.

[28 : 34] But she keeps on speaking pure words and she keeps on expressing sincere actions. She keeps on going, even though she sees no immediate effect and impact.

over time, many years perhaps, hearts are softened, division is healed, and the righteousness of the people of God restored.

It brings us to our third and final application of how as Christians in days of pandemic we are to express our faith in Christ in practical ways. How to put the wisdom from above into practice in our daily lives.

If the first was to be intentional and the second was to be inspirational, then the third is to be soothing. Soothing. Soothe one another.

Make peace with one another. Do not let the words we speak to one another nor the impression we give one another be misconstrued as criticisms of one another.

[29 : 49] Let every word and every action, every email, every phone call, every text and every conversation we have build one another up and promote unity within the whole family of Glasgow City Free Church.

Let's speak harshly of no one and not so discontent in any way, but rather be like the farmer who sows seeds of peace.

Remember what I said earlier, the wisdom James is commending isn't that of the professional thinker of the day who dressed in his Greek robes, spent all day contemplating the meaning of existence.

Rather, it is that of the ordinary Christian who despite the difficult situations that she faces in her day-to-day life, is expressing her faith in the grace of good works.

In other words, she is doing no more and no less than independence upon the grace of God and the inward strengthening of the Holy Spirit living like Jesus.

[31 : 03] That's what she's doing, living like Jesus. That's true heavenly wisdom, to live like Jesus. So who then among us is up for my challenge of the three applications of this passage?

Be intentional, be inspirational, be soothing. by God's grace, I pray we all are. Thank you.