

The Test of True Wisdom

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[0 : 00] For this morning we are continuing our sermon series in the letter of James. and we come to a section of the letter where James addresses the issue of wisdom.! James addresses the issue of wisdom.

He begins by asking the question, Who is wise and understanding among you? And James doesn't leave us to ourselves after asking that question.

James actually goes on to answer the question. And this morning our attention is going to be directed to the answer that James gives in response to that question.

So if you've not yet done so, please turn in your Bible to James chapter 3. We'll be reading verses 13 through 18. James chapter 3 verses 13 to 18.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

[1 : 15] 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 and spiritual, demonic.

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, and good fruits, impartial, and sincere.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Let's pray together.

Oh, Heavenly Father, we are so grateful to gather this morning, to sing to you, and now to be addressed by you from your word.

Lord, Lord, we trust your providence that we are hearing this word in this season. We pray that you would care for us by speaking to us.

[2 : 43] Cause us, oh Lord, to have attentive and obedient hearts. We ask, oh Lord, that you would use the preaching of your word to conform us more and more into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And may your name and your name alone be glorified. It's in Christ's name we ask. Amen. Well, although this passage before us is one in which James is addressing a new issue, what is clear is that James is taking the same approach that he's been taking up to this point in the letter.

His approach is to question and then to challenge erroneous views and practices among his hearers.

and so far he's done this with true religion. In chapter 1 verses 26 and 27 he challenges the person who claims to have true religion but does not have any supporting practical evidence like a governed tongue, a caring heart, and a holy life.

And then he questioned and challenged those who profess to know Christ but were practicing favoritism in chapter 2 verses 1 through 7. James says to do that is a contradiction.

[4 : 19] And then chapter 2 verses 14 through 26 he challenged people who said they had faith but they had no accompanying work and he said to them faith without works is dead.

And then last week we heard in this sermon James challenged contradictory speech in chapter 3 1 through 12 and reminded his hearers that blessing and cursing should not come out of the same mouth.

and now we come to this passage this morning where James is considering the issue of wisdom and he questions and challenges those who claim to be wise but in truth are not.

And here's the point that James makes in this passage. True wisdom is determined by the lives we live not the claims we make not our boasting true wisdom is determined by the lives we live.

Or to put it another way James is saying to his original audience and to us you can claim to be wise as much as you like but it is in the conduct of your life that is the true measurement of how wise you really are.

[5 : 53] James is really saying to us that if you want to know how wise a person is don't ask them watch them. He's saying that to us as well that we don't need to say how wise we are we just need to evaluate our lives and our lives will say a whole lot about whether we are truly wise.

I imagine if I were to take a poll this morning and were to ask I don't believe we'd have anyone who would say I'm a fool I think we would all claim to one degree or another to be wise some of us more humbly than others some of us more proudly than others but I think all of us to one degree or another would claim to be wise.

But as I've spent time in this passage this week studying it meditating on it preparing to proclaim it I can tell you that wisdom is not just a simple thing where we look into one aspect of our lives we look at our whole life and I believe that if you will hear this word this morning you will conclude like I have concluded that I've not always been wise that I am not always wise in every single area of my life how does James address this issue of wisdom how does he address the issue of who is wise well he does it by first evaluating false wisdom and then he does the same about true wisdom and so following James approach I want us to consider what he has to say first about false wisdom perhaps the greatest hindrance to grasping what James is saying in this passage is to assume that James is talking about wisdom the way we understand wisdom in a general sense and perhaps that's because when we use wisdom we first of all tend to confuse wisdom and knowledge we tend to call a knowledgeable person a wise person or we tend to call educated people wise people but I think we've all lived long enough to know that education does not make us wise and a lack of education does not make anyone foolish there's some educated people who are foolish and there's some uneducated people who are wise sometimes we look at how a person makes decisions and so we might have a businessman who has done very well because he's made some very good decisions and we might say he or she is wise or maybe a politician who has great timing and we may say he's a wise politician and we say these things even though when we evaluate the person's life their life might scream everything else but wisdom the lives could be in great shambles but the understanding of wisdom that James is holding out to us is rooted in scripture it's rooted in scripture that teaches us that wisdom wisdom is knowing and fearing the lord and passages like proverbs 9 10 through 11 bring this out the fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the holy one is insight so wisdom begins wisdom begins with fearing the lord and knowledge of the holy one is insight and scripture doesn't place value on knowledge that remains in our heads scripture places value on knowledge that trickles to our feet and is lived out in our lives and that's why in biblical jewish culture wisdom was considered to be skill in living righteously and therefore the way of wisdom is the way of obedience in his excellent commentary on the book of james j.a.

martia says it this way wisdom is the god-given ability to see how in all our ways that is throughout the whole course and style of life we may acknowledge literally know him it's wisdom the god-given ability to see how in all of our ways through the whole course and style of life we may acknowledge the lord so the wisdom that james is calling us to is biblical wisdom the god-given ability to fear and know the lord and to live lives that demonstrate this biblical wisdom but first james addresses false wisdom and what motivates it look at what he says in verse 14 he highlights two motivations that demonstrate false wisdom jealousy and selfish ambition and certainly there are others other motivations that would point to false wisdom but here james notes these two perhaps because they are sufficiently comprehensive and so what does james mean by jealousy and selfish ambition they are broad terms to refer to the general sinful motivations of our hearts that are rooted in the discontent of our lives who we are and where we are in life in comparison to other people it speaks about begrudging and wanting others wanting what others have and having desires to promote ourselves above others and in the eyes of others and so ultimately jealousy and selfish ambition although directed towards people is ultimately a protest against the sovereign lord the master potter who makes all of us who's made all of us and who determines the boundaries of our lives at any given moment in time but people are the focus about jealousies and selfish ambitions and they produce division dissension disruption disorder and chaos in relationships jealousy refers to hostile motivations against someone else because they possess perhaps a position or some possession some accomplishment that we want and we desire for ourselves and we don't have it selfish ambition on the other hand is a motivation that flows out of a sense of self-importance that seeks to

advance oneself and to gain privilege it's focused on self and ignores others and their needs and so in verse 14

James says if we claim to be wise and we are motivated by jealousy and selfish ambition in our hearts we must not boast and be false to the truth saying that we are wise he says because you're just not wise the lack of wisdom is seen in our refusal to see the Lord's good and sovereign hand in all things and to be content with what we have to be content with who we are and trust his wise providence James says when we don't do that we're not wise and when you look at it when we are actually not content with our providential lot in life that God determines when we're not content and we are comparing ourselves with other people and desiring what God has done in their lives to be in our own lives in a sense what we're really saying is we're saying I'm wiser than you God because I would do it differently than you have done it you've not done the right thing you've not done right by me and James says instead of being wise you are unwise that's false wisdom and in verse 15 he gives us the reason why the person who's motivated by jealousy and selfish ambition shouldn't boast!

[16:00] He says your wisdom is not true wisdom because it's not from above it's not from God and he lays out the characteristics of this false wisdom first he says it is earthly meaning it is of this world as opposed to being heavenly he says it's unspiritual meaning it's natural it is carnal it is of self and then he uses a very strong word he says it is actually demonic it has its motivation in darkness it is influenced by the demonic and no wonder that he goes on to tell us what the result of all this is in verse 16 he tells us the result for where jealousy and selfish ambition exist there will be disorder and every vile practice and remember what James says he says now listen he says don't you deny the truth if you have jealousy and selfish ambition at work don't you deny the truth because we could do that despite what we see despite the fruit we can still deny the reality of that and claim to be wise but James says no

James says here's the proof he says if there is jealousy and selfish ambition there will be disorder and every vile practice and that points to a lack of wisdom so what is James saying to us James is saying that we are able to determine whether we are wise or not by looking at our lives if we see disorder if we see arguments if we see scheming and a lack of cooperation and undermining and power struggles and division and disruption what we can conclude is that jealousy and selfish ambition are behind those actions and no matter who the individuals are and no matter what they claim they're not wise when we act like that brothers and sisters we're not wise when we're jealous for a position when we were jockeying for a position we're not wise because we don't recognize that promotion comes from the Lord ultimately he will have his way and so we can trust him and we can entrust all things to him and so this morning

I think it's fitting for us to do some evaluation do some inventory taking in our span of relationships that we have in our marriage in our parenting relationship with siblings our work relationships our school relationships relationships with neighbors what are the results what are they marked by are they marked by disorder and evil practices are they marked by running our blood hot if they are then jealousy and selfish ambition are present and godly wisdom is not and to whatever extent this morning we see our own jealousy and our own selfish ambition at work in these relationships brothers and sisters we need to repent I understand that these are bridges these are these are two two sides you need two sides of that bridge to come and we have people coming in and different motivations and so the chaos and the results we don't own them all but we own our part and to whatever extent we contribute to this disruption this these evil practices we need to by the grace of God we need to repent but here's the reality the reality is and I'm sure you know this we know right from wrong but oftentimes our hearts are not moved by right and wrong I think we all know what it is to know that we have acted wrong in a situation and don't have godly sorrow don't have conviction to repent and to change and we need to cry to the Lord to say God help me to see my sin as I need to see it help me to see it and enable me to repent break my heart soften my heart that my sin will break me and I will not be hardened by my sin because friends when we are hardened by our sins it doesn't get better it only gets worse well in verse 17 in contrast to false wisdom James goes on to describe true wisdom which is my second and final point look at how he says it in verse 17 but the wisdom from above is first pure then peaceable gentle open to reason full of mercy and good fruits impartial and sincere James tells us that the motivation of true wisdom is purity

I tell you I was deeply affected as I studied this passage and I consider the Lord's kindness to us as a church in his providence as we're going through the beatitudes and we come face to face with the

beatitudes in this passage this morning blessed are the pure in heart they're the ones who are going to see!

God and we know he's not talking about perfection and purity because if that were the standard none of us will see God but if there's any purity in us if there's any purity in our heart to whatever degree we have the promise that we will see God James says the first motivation of true wisdom is purity but you know purity is very much like jealousy and selfish ambition in the sense that they begin as unseen qualities when a person is let me just make it personal when we harbor jealousy and selfish ambition in our hearts it's not immediately evident to others around us not immediately the same is true with purity but just like selfish ambition!

[24 : 06] and jealousy will soon manifest its fruit so will purity and James helps us to see that he says it's first pure but then he brings some fruit from it and he lists seven characteristics that can be seen in verses 16 and 17 about true wisdom he says first true wisdom is peaceable true wisdom is peaceable brothers and sisters when we are peacemakers!

we are showing that we are wise and that's what Jesus says Jesus says blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God isn't it not interesting that of all the beatitudes it is this particular one that marks us as belonging to God blessed are the peacemakers those who pursue peace those who make peace it is this characteristic that marks us as belonging to God and so brothers and sisters when we are troublemakers when we are pursuing strife we put a question mark over our heads as to whether we truly belong to the Lord I don't believe that it is conclusive but it raises the question yes some of God's children behave badly and some of God's children are troublemakers instead of peacemakers and so that in itself does not right somebody off as not being a child of God but what it does is it puts a question mark over us because those who are God's children are peacemakers peacemakers and I think the reason that we can see that is because the one who had the right to annihilate the entire human race made peace through the blood of his son so that rebels who deserve death can find mercy and grace he made peace with sinners James tells the second that true wisdom is gentle and here the idea of gentle is being courteous being considerate being forbearing yielding and being kind James says when we do that we demonstrate that we are possessing true wisdom wisdom that is from above he tells us third that true wisdom is open to reason it's reasonable it will listen in a humble and teachable manner godly wisdom is not stubborn and godly wisdom does not insist on its own way as we learned a few months ago as we studied 1 Corinthians 13 and we learned that love does not insist on its own way and that's because the source of true love and the source of true wisdom are the same they come from God James tells us that true wisdom is full of mercy it's full of mercy again referencing the

Beatitudes Jesus said blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy when we are merciful we give evidence that we have received mercy we give evidence that the wisdom of God is working in our lives to see that we have received mercy we want to give mercy friends you know when we are giving evidence that we are so foolish we are giving evidence that we are so blind and so foolish when those around us need mercy and we who have received mercy refuse to give mercy an evidence of wisdom is when we remember our own need for mercy when we see those around us who need mercy particularly from us and we extend that mercy to them but it also has to do with when we look at other people if we want everybody else to get their just desserts and we forget that we didn't get ours we're not being wise we're not being merciful and this is one of the things [29 : 14] I've come to really see that there are situations where we are in a position to give mercy because it's personal and then there are other situations where we're not involved we can't give mercy but we see it but what is our heart towards that situation is it a heart of mercy if it is then that's a mark of wisdom James tells us number five the true wisdom is full of good fruits we're wise there's going to be good fruit from it all around and here I believe James has in view the fruit of the spirit the true wisdom will produce the goodness of the spirit in our lives that others that we partake that we relate to can partake of that good fruit in our lives and we can partake of it as well number six

James says the true wisdom is impartial and in this characteristic he is echoing back to what he said earlier when he said that when we show preferences when we are showing favoritism choosing one person over another because of external attributes he says we're showing that we're not wise but when we don't do that it's a mark of wisdom it's a mark of wisdom as we are moving towards seeing what God sees and how God sees and treating people the way God does he's no respecter!

of persons and then seventh and finally James says true wisdom is sincere true wisdom is sincere true wisdom is consistent in and out true wisdom doesn't show one face and have a different heart true wisdom is without pretense what you see is what you get it's not hypocritical it doesn't say yes when it means no or one thing when it means another James says sincerity is a characteristic of true wisdom this is a word I believe that is so timely for us today because we live in a time when there is so much insincerity where people are saying things they do not believe because of a cancel culture because of bullying publicly there's so much insincerity where people are saying all manner of things that they do not believe!

it is sown in peace by those who make peace those who are peacemakers! it is righteous actions sown in wise peaceful living that yields a righteous harvest godly holy and upright brothers and sisters James was challenging his heroes because they were calling themselves wise when they were failing the test of true wisdom and he calls them to evaluate themselves and he said you are to evaluate yourselves based on the motivations of your hearts and the results in your lives and he calls us to do the same he calls us to do the same

I think if there's ever a text this morning in the letter of James that we don't want to do what James said that we look in the mirror and walk away and forget what we saw it is this text because the fallout is far too great the disruption in relationships the harm that comes the irreparable damage sometimes that results should motivate us to really take inventory in these relationships that we have and evaluate the motivations of our hearts are we content with the sovereign hand of God marking out the boundaries of our lives and if we aren't we need to say God help me to see your wisdom and to trust that your ways about my life are perfect and

[34 : 50] I can rest in them I don't need to be jealous I don't need to have false ambition to desire more for myself than you have allotted for me in this season helping to rest and helping to be content and when we do that we're showing ourselves to be wise friends we need to humble ourselves and really say you know what it really doesn't matter what I think about how wise I am I'm going to pay attention to what my life is saying if my life is exhibiting the fruit of false wisdom God by your grace I'm going to repent and change!

I think for us perhaps the better question is for us to think about to what degree we may be responsible for any degree of chaos and disorder and strife and disruption evil practices in relationships that we might have because it doesn't necessarily mean that because it's present that we are culpable at all or even to the same degree as others who may be contributing to that Romans 12 18 says this if possible as far as it depends on you live peaceably with all as we're called to and so when we lay down at night or when we reflect on these things by the grace of God to be able to say Lord I have done as much as I know to do to be at peace in these relationships there may be every evil practice all around us in these relationships but we with a clear conscience can say Lord I'm not contributing!

to that live at peace with everyone as much as it is within you I think one of the things that we need to hear this morning what James is saying and this is why I appreciate the letter of James James is hard hitting he's hard hitting but he doesn't cross certain lines James notice James is not questioning our salvation this morning he's questioning our wisdom he's not questioning the salvation of his hearers and see this is really why grace is so amazing because sinners like us can be aware that we fall short in so many ways that we in our lives whether presently or at other times we demonstrate a lack of wisdom and we are contributing to strife and disorder we're motivated by selfish ambition and jealousy and yet there is a merciful

God who holds on to us and our salvation is eternally secure in him and that's because it was never about our performance it didn't start being about our performance and it would never become about our performance it started on the merits of Christ and it will end on the merits of Christ and because of that we remain justified even in our wrong motivations and our sinful hearts that's the first thing we should be encouraged by he's not questioning our salvation the second thing we should be encouraged by is being unwise is not a permanent condition to whatever degree we may see a lack of wisdom in relationships right now it's not permanent by the grace of God we can change we can look afresh to the Lord Jesus Christ we can trust him not just for justifying grace but also sanctifying grace to purify our motivations and our thoughts that instead of being jealous we rejoice with others instead of having selfish ambition we will prefer others above ourselves trusting and knowing that it's all in

[39 : 39] God's hands and he works out his purposes in all of our lives and for those of us this morning who as you evaluate your life you're not aware of any strife and disorder and evil practices and your sphere of relationships be sobered by this that even that is not permanent and subject to change and that calls us to continue to abide in Christ that calls us to take seriously our union with Christ and seek each day to be rightly motivated and to demonstrate true wisdom in a consistent and in an ongoing way and if you're here this morning or whether you're listening by live stream and you don't know the

Lord Jesus Christ perhaps in a very practical way you've thought about your own life and probably thought about where there is strife and relationships have been ruptured but I say to you this morning that a lack of wisdom is really not your greatest concern being unwise is really not your greatest concern your greatest concern is being unsaved your greatest concern ought to be being away from the mercy and grace of God through Jesus Christ being an object of the wrath of God being without hope and being lost in this world that should preoccupy your heart in this moment and really that's putting the first button in the first button hole that's getting the priorities right and so I say to you this morning if you're here and you know that you stand outside of

Jesus Christ you know you've not trusted Christ as Savior Lord I say to you come to Jesus come to him he says in his word come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light and you come to Jesus you will find that he is far more eager to forgive you than you even desire forgiveness and that is the way you will become wise brothers and sisters those of us who truly are wise and understand will be clothed in the meekness of wisdom and in truth growing in wisdom is growing in sanctification and for that we need the spirit's help let's pray

Lord we thank you this morning for your word and I pray by the power of your spirit you would open our eyes help us to see where we are not wise and help us by the grace of God to repent and to pursue godly wisdom by trusting you in all of life in its ebbs and flows and its ups and downs knowing that you're the one who orders our steps and our days therefore we need not be motivated by jealousy or selfish ambition we're able to trust you we pray and ask in Jesus name amen