

Faith in the Marketplace: What Wisdom Is

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[0 : 00] Having carefully reversed Chuck on the fact that the 13th verse and following were from chapter 3, when I listened to them I realized they weren't. They're from chapter 1, but they're supposed to be from chapter 3, and I'm talking on them as if they were from chapter 3, but that passage that was read is going to be part of next week, and it isn't chapter 3, I'm afraid, which I hoped it was.

But I'm working on chapter 3, whether it's there or not. The passage then has essentially to do with wisdom and the fact that James says to us, if you lack wisdom. Now I would like to remind you that the fundamental function of James' epistle is to try and put things together, because the effect of evil is to drive things apart, like war drives things apart and peace brings things together. There's always a going apart and a coming together again. You get faith over against reason, you get Protestants over against Catholics, you get faith over against works. Always there's a breaking down into two different camps, and this process is going on. And so what I was telling you last week that Humpty Dumpty, who sat on the wall and had a great fall, and all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again, that there is a falling apart of things in our lives and in our society in which we can't put it back together again. All our human resources are unable to put it back together again. So what James is trying to do is to tell you how it comes back together again. And we notice in our own lives the breakdown between what we know and what we do, who we are publicly and who we are privately. Our personal lives and our public lives are always in contradiction to one another. H.L. Mencken, who was a cynical fellow, talked about people who had the morals of a Baptist minister and the intelligence of a P, that somehow that the morality and intelligence didn't go together. He picked on Baptist P, but I know that that isn't true for just them. He also talked about people who had the intelligence of a genius and the morals of a rat.

So, you know, that always you have this terrible kind of contradiction. A friend of mine who took a gold medal in classics at the university while fighting with an obsession to shoplift at the same time.

This kind of contradiction which hits us and how do you put it together? Well, the fact of the matter is that I think you have this kind of situation in our world.

You have the person here and they're looking at their world here. But then as we, as knowledge increases, this gets bigger and this gets bigger and this gets bigger, but this doesn't get any bigger at all.

[3 : 25] In fact, this tends to diminish in relationship to the whole so that in our modern world, he diminishes or she diminishes to the point of total insignificance. The individual doesn't count because knowledge has increased so much. And you get that sense of lostness because of the separation that exists between a man and the world in which he lives. Now, there is a brilliant writer from the South who's a devout Roman Catholic, as you will discover. I mean, you may not discover it, but I'm telling you that because it'll explain something you're about to hear. He's written a book called *Lost in the Cosmos*, you know, the sense of the meaninglessness of this person.

And his name is Walker Percy, and he projects this question in the front of his book on *Lost in the Cosmos*.

He says, how was it possible for the man who designed Voyager 19, which arrived at Titania, a satellite of Uranus, three seconds off schedule and a hundred yards off course, after a flight of six years to be one of the most screwed up creatures in California or in the whole of the cosmos.

That terrible contradiction that breaks people down and they can't seem to put it together again. He calls his book a book on how you can survive in the cosmos, about which you know more and more, while knowing less and less about yourself.

This despite 10,000 self-help books, 100,000 psychotherapists, and 100 million fundamentalist Christians.

[5 : 27] That's where I thought the dig would come in, you know, that he's... We seem to know more and more and more, and yet the significance of the individual shrinks and shrinks and shrinks and becomes less and less.

So that he's following out a theme which Nietzsche, I think, said, that each of us is the farthest away from himself, you know.

That the more we know about this, the less we know about this. And so in our world, we pride ourselves on the amount that we know about our world, and yet at the same time, the significance of who we are as individuals diminishes and diminishes and diminishes.

Even my friend George Grant, when I think I quoted this to you before, but I do it again, he said that technology has not removed human drudgery, it has only removed human purpose.

And that is that this person gets lost and lost because of the vastness of the world in which we live. Now, when you come then to wisdom, what I think it means is that it means that there are lots of people in our world, and they go on like this.

[7 : 00] And what happens is that wisdom comes in to help you to know how to know who you are in relationship to other people and other things. Wisdom is not knowledge from which you are divorced.

Wisdom is knowledge in which you are involved. And you know how we like to think of our human superiority in terms of the fact that we can remove ourselves from the problem that we're studying.

But we're part of the problem that we're studying. I remember a lovely illustration that Bill Nellums gave me once of a woman who was going in for a cancer operation, and her doctor, before the operation, stripped off his shirt to show her that he had been through the same operation.

You know, that he was part of what he was doing. And that what wisdom does for us is to bring us to the place where we're not objectifying what we're doing out there and living apart from it.

But what we're doing is that we are becoming involved in what our world is all about. We are becoming involved in what we are doing.

[8 : 17] Knowledge involves us. You know that we made a great scientific discovery, which I think is called Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty, in which they discovered that by looking at an atom, you are affecting the atom.

So you can't look at it without in some way affecting how it's behaving. And science tended to think that it could remove itself from the thing it was studying and be able to look at it independently.

But Heisenberg says you can't do that. And the fact is we can't know without at the same time being involved in what we know.

And so what we need is what James tells us is available to us here. What we need in our kind of world is we need this wisdom.

That is, to know, but at the same time to be involved in what we're knowing. Even the study of the New Testament has now become very much a study which is carried on by classical scholarship, and many of the leading scholars in the New Testament have no belief in the content of the New Testament.

[9 : 29] It's an objective kind of scholarship that they carry on without themselves being involved in the drama of redemption, which it is portraying. And so when James says that what we need is wisdom, that's what he's describing.

We need to be involved in what we know. And in order to do that, he says, if any of you lack wisdom, and all of us do, let him ask God who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given to him.

Now, there are many different kinds of wisdom. There's a wisdom which belongs to a successful stockbroker or a successful lawyer or a successful doctor or developer or engineer.

There's a wisdom which helps you to maneuver in the downtown of Vancouver successfully and to go in among the offices and various things like that. You have a wisdom. And you acquire that wisdom, perhaps by dint of your background and knowledge and a lot of the gifts that you had in the beginning.

But this wisdom is peculiar in that it is a gift of God. This wisdom which helps you to find yourself in relationship to the whole, which you can't get outside and examine, this wisdom is something which is a gift of God.

[10 : 59] Now, the difficulty with gifts is that they're very hard to receive. Most of us, you know, spend most of our life getting to the place where nobody can give us anything because we've got it all for ourselves.

And though we try to keep the exercise open, the fact is we get to the place where nobody can give us anything. I know a very brilliant professional friend of mine who finally got to the point of desperation in his life where he said, Though I am a very ardent believer, and though I have been brought up in the faith, and though I know my theology backwards, I get nothing whatever out of it.

It's cold, dead, and meaningless as far as I'm concerned. And the wise priest said to him, And you're probably not able to receive love, are you?

Because what we need is gifted to us. It's not something we achieve. It's not something we master. It's something that's given to us.

And so James says that this wisdom that we're looking for is given to us as we ask God for it.

[12 : 25] And he gives it without reproaching. And he gives it to us generously. So that this is available to us, but it's available in terms of a gift that we have to receive from God.

And I think this is the part that makes it supremely difficult for us, is that we do have to receive it from God.

And that's hard to come by. Not only is that the condition, that we have to receive it as a gift, but James goes on to say, let him ask in faith with no doubting.

For he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord.

And of course, that's the picture of who we are, you know, that what we desperately want today is of no significance to us tomorrow and what we want to choose between this, this, and this.

[13 : 47] We can't make up our mind and sometimes we think that and sometimes we think that. And to come to the place where you are no longer looking in both directions and asking from all directions, you know what it is that you want.

You know supremely what it is that you want and you go to the one who can provide it, who is God. And so you got to, James says, you got to make up your mind.

If you want this thing, it's available to you, but it can't be one of a kaleidoscope of different possibilities that you've considered. It's got to be something that you really want.

And if you haven't made up your mind about it, don't waste anybody's time by asking for it. What is it that you want? Well, you know that down through history, that was the great question put to Solomon.

When Solomon was said that you can have anything that you want, Solomon said, what I want is wisdom. I want to know where I am and who I am and what time it is and where I'm going and how I stand in relationship to other people.

[14 : 59] I want that kind of wisdom. I want to know, to know God. And that's where the wisdom comes from.

So, if you go on from there to chapter 3, verse 13, and since you won't have heard that, let me read it to you because it goes on to describe what wisdom is.

James chapter 3, verse 13, asks the question, who is wise and understanding among you? He says, by his good life, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

In other words, that the wise man will get to the place where he will demonstrate by the kind of life he is living that he has this gift of wisdom.

And James goes on to describe how that will be apparent in him. If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

[16 : 14] You will know that you haven't got it together. The quality of jealousy and selfish ambition are not the qualities of person and character that wisdom brings.

wisdom allows you to operate independently of that. The thing that it allows you to operate independently of, in addition to being without bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, is that you don't have to be false to the truth.

And again, you see, James is trying to put us together with the thing which we know in our hearts to be true and which we don't have to deny by our behavior or by our tongue.

We can, we live consistently with the truth. Where James says that you don't boast and be false to the truth that is in your own heart because wisdom allows you not to do that.

And if you're pretending to be a wise man of this world and yet these inconsistencies are glaringly apparent in your life, whatever that wisdom is, it's not the wisdom from God.

[17 : 35] And that's why I think you need to, when you talk about wisdom, recognize that there are different sources of wisdom and different kinds of wisdom and the wisdom which is, which is the practical wisdom which James is talking about is the wisdom which helps you in your relationship to other people and to the circumstances around you and in your relationship to the God in whom you believe.

He says of that kind of wisdom which produces selfish ambition and denying the truth that is in your heart and which creates bitter jealousy.

Now, you know what, and I feel I've told you this, said this to you a hundred times, but bitter jealousy and driving ambition and falseness to what's in our hearts is common day experience.

I mean, we run into it every day. It's not something that's unusual to us at all. But we perhaps don't identify it. And wisdom allows you to identify this kind of reality, that what's happening here is happening as a result of driving uncontrolled ambition.

What's happening here is happening because of bitter jealousy. What's happening here is because people have entered into a covenant to do what they know in their hearts to be false.

[19 : 08] Now, that's the kind of thing that's happening. And James says, that kind of wisdom, and this is in verse 15 of chapter 3, is not such as comes down from above, is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish.

In other words, its origin is from Satan himself. So, James goes on to describe further what happens when you distinguish between that and the wisdom which does come from God.

That wisdom, which is earthly, unspiritual, and satanic in origin, he says, that the results of it are this jealousy and self-ambition.

And they produce disorder and every vile practice. In other words, this kind of wisdom creates the climate or the atmosphere or the garden, I suppose, in which this kind of thing grows.

Every vile practice and disorder, it creates a jungle, it creates chaos, it creates misunderstanding. The relationship and harmony that should exist between people does not exist because of this kind of earthly, unspiritual, and satanic wisdom that moves in.

[20 : 50] Now, you're all in business and wouldn't know about this, but sometimes that happens in church meetings, you know, where some kind of satanic wisdom moves in with a powerful and eloquent argument and, in a sense, undermines the whole reality of what you're trying to do as a church.

And that kind of wisdom, James says, can be identified. It can be identified in terms of its results and it can be identified in terms of its origin.

And so, James goes on to say, but the wisdom of which I am talking, the wisdom which is the gift of God, the wisdom which is from above, is first, and then he gives a long list of things about it.

It's pure, that is, it's unalloyed, it doesn't mix with anything else. It's peaceable, it's gentle or considerate, it is open to reason, it is full of mercy, it bears good fruits, that is, in the kindly deeds that come out of that kind of wisdom, it's straightforward and it's sincere.

well, that's, that's the kind of wise person you like to encounter, isn't it? That, that you move into somebody who can deal with any question, any situation, any personality conflict, can look at it and bring to bear on that situation this kind of wisdom, a wisdom which is characterized by being pure in that it's, there is no deviousness in it, it's peaceable and peace loving, in other words, it doesn't set people at odds with one another, it doesn't create conflict because it's God's wisdom imparted through people.

[22 : 48] It's gentle, it's considerate, it's open to reason. And you know how valuable and how important it is to have someone whom you can talk to from time to time, whom God has given this kind of wisdom to, that is full of mercy and that is, it's, it's forgiving.

You see, mercy is that quality of God whereby he having committed himself to you as God, then lives according to the commitment that he's made even though you don't.

He is merciful to you, not because you don't, you deserve it, but because he has made that covenant with you. And that's why this wisdom is full of mercy and it results in things happening.

Thoughtful, kind, considerate, things happening which you recognize don't come from any human scheming or human ingratiating activities, but it comes from this wisdom.

It's without uncertainty or insincerity. It's straightforward. Well, then you get into the summary of this when it says that of it that in the last verse in which James talks about wisdom, he says, the wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity, and the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

[24 : 38] In other words, it produces a harvest of bringing people together rather than driving people apart. It doesn't produce the harvest of vile practice and every disorder, but it produces a harvest of people drawing together within themselves, people drawing together in relationship to one another.

it's this thing which James emphasizes throughout is that the grace of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ has the impact on us of drawing us together.

Jim Packer in his book on the living God says about wisdom.

He gives this statement about what wisdom is. He says it's the best means, wisdom gives you the best means to the best end. And so that when Paul is writing in Corinthians and I, you know, he says that, you know, that Christ is made unto us our wisdom.

You know, what the New Testament does is doesn't leave you with an abstract moral or ethical or philosophical concept that you wrestle with and try to implement in the circumstances of your life.

[26 : 17] The New Testament constantly sort of incarnates wisdom and the incarnation of wisdom, Paul says, is the person of Jesus Christ.

And this is the means to the best end. That in the wisdom of God, Christ is crucified in order to open up the reality of the eternal kingdom of God.

And so that wisdom will compel you to come to terms with this man in this place. Because if wisdom is the best means to the best end, this is the man who says, I am the way.

And this is the man who says, I am the life. And if you go back to Walker Percy and his lost in the cosmos, and describing modern man and his technological quandary where he knows more and more and yet himself becomes less and less meaningless, you understand the tremendous import of the gospel which says that for the man lost in the cosmos, there is a means and there is an end.

And that's been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. So that's what wisdom is. That's the gift that God has given us of wisdom.

[27 : 47] And he's given it to us, not in the abstract terms of ethical patterns of behavior, but ultimately in terms of Christ himself. Let me pray.

Father, thank you so much for your word, and thank you that your word unerringly teaches us to, or unerringly confronts us with the person of Jesus Christ.

And so as we desperately need wisdom in the chaos and confusion and lostness of our world, the wisdom which is the best means to the best end for the people of this world, we thank you for Jesus Christ.

And ask that by your Holy Spirit, you will grant to us and the circumstances of our life such wisdom. Amen.