

Two Kinds of Wisdom

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, church. It's good to have you joining us this morning, whether you're at home or you're here in the sanctuary. Our sermon passage today is James chapter 3, verses 13 through 18.

James chapter 3, verses 13 through 18. We've been walking through the book of James this summer, and we're going to continue doing that today. Let me pray, and then I'll read this passage for us.

Let's pray together. Our Father, we confess that in our own human reason and understanding, God, the things of you remain dark and cloudy.

But we thank you that by the gift of your Spirit, you come and you give light to our minds, and more importantly, you bring light to our hearts and to our wills, that we might embrace all that you are. And to do just what we've sung, to worship your holy name. Your name, who you've revealed yourself to be. And all of your grace and majesty and justice.

[1 : 13] Oh, Lord, would you come through this passage that we're about to read and meditate on this morning. Would you come and do just that? Empower our hearts to worship your holy name and to live lives as a result that are honoring to your name.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. All right. James 3, verses 13 through 18. Let me read this for us. Who is wise and understanding among you?

By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, 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.

[2 : 28] And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. So what does real wisdom look like?

That's what James wants us to consider in the text before us. Picture in your mind maybe someone who embodies wisdom. What do they look like to you? Are they an old scholar, a wise sage with a big gray beard?

But keep in mind, in the Bible, wisdom means something more than just intelligence or learning. Wisdom actually means something more like skill.

The skill of living life as it was meant to be lived. Now that includes knowledge, but it means a lot more. It's like a sailor who knows how to read the winds and the waves, and she can position her sails and her rudder just right to bring the ship safely home through the storm.

That's biblical wisdom. Or the weaver who can bring all the threads together to make a beautiful whole. That's the sense of wisdom. Not just knowledge, but living skillfully in God's world.

[3 : 44] And for James here in chapter 3, this is a very practical question. It's a very practical question for us as a church. Because as the context of chapter 3 and 4 show us, in the communities to whom James was writing, conflict and dissension were on the rise.

As external pressures mounted around them, perhaps trial, hardship, economic oppression, as those things happened around these young churches, internally conflict started to rise up.

In verses 1 through 12 of chapter 3, what we looked at last week, James has been talking about the power and the danger of the uncontrolled tongue. And from chapter 3, verse 1, it seems that the problem even involved their teachers, their leaders, some of whom were perhaps claiming to be wise.

But what really is wisdom? And as we seek to be the church today, what should it look like for us to be wise? Now remember, for James, in this book of James, his vision of the church is that it's meant to be the first fruit of God's new creation.

Remember that from chapter 1, verse 18? We've been brought forth by the word of truth, the gospel, into new life. We've been brought forth by the word of truth in order to live out what James calls the law of liberty, the law of love.

[5 : 18] But as we follow that call, a question comes. What sort of wisdom are we going to employ?

What sort of wisdom are we going to use as we seek to live out the church calling that we have?

Because you see in our text, James describes not just one, but two kinds of wisdom.

There's one from below and there's one from above. He makes a contrast. He makes a distinction between two kinds of wisdoms. Why? Because here's James' big idea in our text.

He's essentially saying we cannot be a heavenly people and live according to earthly wisdom. The church cannot be a heavenly people, the people it's meant to be, the new creation, and live according to earthly wisdom.

The way we do life, our skill in living, in leading, our practical approach to everyday matters and to being together in community, it has to be different, James says.

[6 : 32] So let's take a look at these two kinds of wisdom. James says there's a wisdom from below and there's a wisdom from above and for each one he's actually going to show us three things about these two kinds of wisdom.

For each one he's going to show us first its nature, what it's like, and then second he's going to show us its source, where it's from, and then third he's going to show us the results, what it brings.

So first, let's look at the wisdom from below. James starts off this text by saying, who is wise and understanding among you? Then he says something that just sounds so James, doesn't it?

Let them prove it, not by their intellect, not by their credentials, but by their life. Not just their work too, not just their conduct, but also their character.

He says, real wisdom is seen in good conduct, brought forth in humility. But James is kind of jumping ahead there. First, he wants us to see what this false wisdom, this wisdom from below looks like.

[7 : 36] So in verse 14, he begins with his three points. He says, okay, here's what it's like, here's its character, here's its traits, he says, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. Now bitter jealousy, that's the sort of thing that says, I want what you have. And selfish ambition says, I'm willing to divide and conquer in order to get it.

In fact, that phrase, selfish ambition, means something like using divisive means to promote your own interests.

You exploit rivalry or develop a kind of party spirit in order to get ahead. Now, I'm imagining that very few of us walk around explicitly saying, I want what you have and I'm willing to divide and conquer to get it.

I've never had that kind of conversation with someone. But notice, James says, in your hearts. What's underneath your words and your actions?

[8 : 53] Take, for example, maybe a Christian leader. On the surface, they might be teaching true things. Even putting forward what seems like a great concern for God's kingdom.

But underneath, they can be driven by jealousy. A desire to want to be the biggest and the best. To get the praise that other ministries or ministers receive.

And along with that, they can be driven by selfish ambition. They could cast dispersion on whole groups. They could create an us-versus-them mentality in order to get ahead.

And now, here's the danger. On the surface, that sort of approach can produce what looks like, at first, good results.

The word is preached. The church grows. People's lives are impacted for the good. But James says, don't boast and be false to the truth.

[9 : 57] And by truth here, he probably means the same thing that he meant back in chapter 1, verse 18, when he talks about the word of truth, which is the gospel. In other words, if underneath what drives you or characterizes you is jealousy and selfish ambition, then you're actually betraying the truth of the gospel itself.

But this isn't just a problem for Christian leaders. It's a problem for all of us. And James is talking to all of us. From the classroom to the workplace to our neighborhoods, in any sphere, jealousy and selfish ambition can be what drives us.

I want what you have and I'll do what it takes to get it. And again, in the beginning, it can look like it's working.

We move to the top of the class, we get the promotion at work, we get elected for an office, but deep down, we're being false to the truth.

Because as James shows us in the next verse, verse 15, we need to realize the source of this so-called wisdom. He's just shown us what it's like in verse 14.

[11:17] Now, in verse 15, he shows us where it's from. Verse 15, this is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

Whoa. James does not pull any punches in this book, does he? Each of these three words, earthly, unspiritual, demonic, they each describe different aspects of the created order without any reference to God.

Take earthly, or what James and other New Testament writers elsewhere call the world. Now, that is our corporate or our social or our structural life together without reference to God.

Take the word unspiritual, that's our personal life without reference to God. Then, demonic, of course, that's the spiritual world without reference to God.

How tragic that people claiming to be the church, claiming to be God's new creation in their practical everyday lives can be living according to the wisdom of the very opposite. Now, you might be thinking, demonic?

[12:31] That's a little harsh, isn't it? But do you remember in the Gospels when Jesus turns to his disciples and he says, who do people say that I am?

And the disciples say, well, some people are saying this and some people are saying that. And then Jesus says, well, who do you say that I am? And then Peter, speaking for all the rest, says, Jesus, you're the Christ, you're the Messiah, you're the Son of the living God.

And at that moment, what does Jesus teach them about next? Now that they're professing him to be the Son of God, what does he go on to tell them and to teach them? At that moment, he starts teaching them about the cross, that he must be delivered over to the authorities and crucified.

And then what does Peter say? He rebukes Jesus, right? He says, Jesus, no way, this is not a winning strategy. Messiahs don't get crucified.

This is not the plan. And then Jesus says, get behind me, Satan. You see, Peter wanted the Messiah to come and divide and conquer.

[13:48] Jesus had come, however, to make peace by the blood of his cross. Peter's wisdom in that moment was from below, earthly, unspiritual, and according to Jesus himself, demonic.

Of course, Jesus' wisdom looked like foolishness in the eyes of the world. And in that moment, it looked like foolishness in the eyes of the disciples, too. But what they would soon find out is that the cross is actually the wisdom of God and the very power of God.

God's wisdom is the truth. But what does this wisdom from below result in? We've seen what it's like.

We've seen where it's from. What's the outcome? Now, we've already said that in the short term, this wisdom from below can produce what looks like success. But what about in the long run?

Verse 16. James says, for where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

[14:57] Disorder. Chaos. Churches will splinter and split. People will be torn apart. Communities will be torn apart. Communities will turn against one another and implode.

Disorder. And then he says every vile or every evil practice. What will be on the rise? Selfishness. Malice. Gossip.

Greed. Discrimination. Apathy. That's what the real end result is. You see, sometimes we foolishly think that the ends justify the means.

But what James is telling us here is that the ends will never escape the means. The means that we use will be the ends in the long run that we produce.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way, paraphrasing verse 16. He says, whenever you're trying to look better than others, that is jealousy, or get the better of others, selfish ambition, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the other's throats.

[16:13] Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the other's throats. So that's the wisdom from below.

But thankfully, James doesn't stop there. We don't have to stay in the wisdom that's characterized by trying to look better than others and get the better of others.

You see, the good news is there's another kind of wisdom. There's a wisdom from above. A wisdom whose source is God himself.

As James says in chapter 1, verse 17, James says, every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights. That's the source. That's where this wisdom is from.

But what does this wisdom look like? And what does it result in? Let's look first at what it looks like. Verse 17, but the wisdom from above, James says, is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

[17:28] Now, James is sort of like a word artist at this moment. He's sort of painting a picture with these words. In the Greek text, there's lots of alliteration, there's lots of assonance among these words.

They sort of sound like they're strung together. And that would have made this list of virtues very memorable and very powerful to the original listeners. So what James is trying to do here is he's trying to paint a picture of the heart of true wisdom, of God's wisdom.

And we won't be able to unpack every stroke of that painting that he's doing here, but let's just focus on the first two words. First pure, then peaceable.

Now, when something is pure, it's clean, right? There's honesty, there's integrity to it. There's nothing that's sort of diminishing it or weakening it.

Think of metal ore that's been dug out of the earth. And then it gets put into a fire and the dross, the impurities, are kind of burned away.

[18:36] And the pure metal that comes out is not just more brilliant, but it's also more resilient. It's stronger. So this wisdom from above is first of all pure.

It has no mixed motives. It has no conflicting agendas. In other words, it's not riddled with the bitter jealousies of the old wisdom from below.

Beneath that old wisdom, that old wisdom from below, was the fear and pride of how I looked before others, comparing myself to others, wanting to be better than others, wanting to be praised by others. But the wisdom from above is free of all that.

It's pure. more. The other word that James gives for this kind of purity is found back in verse 13 where he calls it the meekness of wisdom.

In the Old Testament, this word meekness does not mean cowardice or passivity. It means being set free from our anxious self-promotion. It means genuine humility.

[19:51] It means being free from our obsession with the self. Can you imagine living a life without the constant undercurrent of wanting to promote yourself?

Without that constant anxiety of self-assessment and self-comparison and self-regard? Can you imagine a life lived rather, in the purity of genuine humility?

Wouldn't that be wisdom indeed? To not be enslaved to your desire to be seen, to be praised, to be acknowledged, but release from all that to live a life of love toward others?

Socrates apparently called jealousy an ulcer of the soul. Imagine the deep burning pain of self-interest at last being healed.

What would that be like? Well, James says it's first pure, then it's peaceable. That's what it starts to look like. Freed from jealousy, we become peaceable.

[21:09] if the wisdom from below is characterized by selfish ambition of dividing and conquering, of trying to get the better of others, the wisdom from above is characterized by peace.

But peace here doesn't mean merely the absence of fear or worry or conflict. Peace in the Bible means wholeness. It's the fabric of creation in all its right relationships flourishing together.

To say then that wisdom is peaceable means that it is driven to make things whole again, to make things right again, to give birth to what the Hebrew Bible calls shalom.

To mend this torn fabric of relationships, of communities, of creation. First pure, then peaceable. That's what true wisdom looked like.

But you know in the short term, it often doesn't seem like it works, does it? A wisdom that is pure then peaceable doesn't often make a snappy headline.

[22 : 27] The work of peace doesn't often garner promotions, or win elections in the same way that jealousy and selfish ambition can. In fact, like Peter, we can sometimes look at the wisdom from above that's first pure then peaceable and say, that's not going to work, Jesus.

This is the real world down here. But look at what James says in verse 18. verse 18.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. A harvest of righteousness. righteousness.

Have you ever been in a field or in an orchard maybe that's ready to harvest? My family likes to pick fruit at Bishop's Orchard up the shoreline. But here's the thing.

If you look at an apple orchard out of season before the harvest, you might be a little underwhelmed. I remember the first time I went to an orchard and I expected that these massive apples would come from massive trees, right?

[23 : 43] And I showed up and the only thing that was planted were these like stubby pruned back kind of things. And I thought, what's going to come out of that?

They're so much shorter, they're so much smaller than I expected. I had crabapple trees at home that are bigger than that. What's going to come of that little tree?

But then the harvest comes and those seemingly little trees are covered in fruit. You see, friends, the wisdom from above is like that.

The wisdom that's first pure, then peaceable, it doesn't seem like much at first. It might even seem like a losing cause. But a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. It may take time. It may seem like there are setbacks, but the harvest will come. I think it's worth asking then, what kind of church do we want to be?

[24 : 52] What kind of church do we want to see? What kind of families and communities do we want to see? What kind of city do we want to see? Do we want to see increasing righteousness and justice?

It doesn't come through worldly wisdom. It will come as we sow peace and make peace. But keep in mind, being a peacemaker is different than being a peacekeeper.

Have you heard that distinction before? Some of you have. There's a difference between peacemaking and peacekeeping. Keeping the peace often means avoiding conflict, appeasing people, supporting the status quo, not rocking the boat.

That's not what James means. That's not what Jesus means when he says blessed are the peacemakers. Peacemaking means striving for real wholeness, real shalom.

Peacemaking means confrontation at times. Peacemaking may mean, as one writer put it, temporarily disrupting a community in order to deal with root problems so that genuine peace may ensue.

[26 : 18] Sometimes a friendship, sometimes a marriage, sometimes a church, sometimes a community needs to be disrupted in order to deal with root problems so that genuine peace can come.

peace can come from the people. But remember, even the sometimes confrontational and disruptive work of peacemaking is still done in humility, in purity, and in love.

So these are the two kinds of wisdom then. Wisdom from below and wisdom from above. And James has shown us the nature and the source and the results of each.

But you know, before we leave this passage, I think we've got to ask, how do we get that second kind of wisdom? How do we get this wisdom from above?

Because oftentimes my natural default is the wisdom from below. Well, first we need to ask for it. If any of you lacks wisdom, James writes in chapter 1, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given to him.

[27 : 28] We need to ask for it. Of course this makes total sense, right? If the wisdom from above is God's wisdom, then we have to go to God to get it. We have to be humble enough to ask for it and realize that we can't produce it on our own.

But, you know, we can also be bold and confident when we ask for it because God promises to give generously to all without reproach. So we need to ask for it.

We need to ask for this wisdom in prayer. And second, we need to start practicing it. Remember, wisdom isn't just knowledge, right?

It's living. I don't know if you've ever driven a car without power steering, or when the power steering goes out. My grandfather had a very old Buick when I was growing up and sometimes the

power steering wouldn't always work so well in the Buick.

When the power steering goes out in your car, it is almost impossible to turn the wheel when the car isn't moving. But once the car starts moving, it gets a whole lot easier.

[28 : 37] You see, wisdom's kind of like that. Once the car starts moving, once we start practicing what we know, then in the living, we grow more and more wise.

Now that can be hard for some of us. Some of us like to have all the things figured out ahead of time. We want to know exactly how and if it will work. But in order to grow in wisdom, we need to begin.

We need to begin making peace. peace. And little by little, you'll become more and more of a peacemaker. Because here's what's going to happen once you start living into it.

For Christians, the Holy Spirit is going to start showing you when you need to be gentle, when you need to be open to reason, when you need to be full of mercy and good fruits, when you need to be impartial, when you need to be particularly sincere.

And the Holy Spirit is also going to start showing you as you put it into practice, where you failed, and where you need to seek forgiveness and try again. You know, a good practice is to end every day, or to end most days, with a few minutes of prayer.

[29 : 49] End every day with a few minutes of prayer, asking the Spirit to guide your thoughts over the previous day. Invite the Holy Spirit to come and just think with you, to lead your thoughts over the previous day.

you've just lived. And then ask Him to show you where you've been responding to His leading. And to give thanks for that. To give thanks for when the Spirit gave you some of these gifts of peacemaking and gentleness and openness to reason, etc.

And then ask the Holy Spirit to show you where you didn't respond so well. And confess that. And then pray for His leading and His power for the coming day to help you keep in step with Him, to keep in step with the Spirit.

You know, if we're practicing that kind of prayer, that's going to help us grow in the practice of peacemaking. So we need to ask for it.

And we need to begin practicing it. But the last thing, we need to receive it. Here's what I mean.

[31 : 00] You see, the wisdom from above is first of all pure, James says. And there's only one way for foolish and flawed people like us to be pure.

there's only one way to be liberated from the jealousy that wants to look better than others. There's only one way to be set free from the selfish ambition that wants to get the better of others.

The only way to be set free from all of that is through what God has done in Jesus. You see, Jesus was the one who was truly wise.

in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, Paul writes in Colossians. You know, read the Gospels for yourself and you will find that James' kind of impressionistic portrait here in verse 17, pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, sincere. It's really the portrait of Christ. And only when we see what Jesus did for us will we be set free from jealousy and ambition. Only when you see how much he loved you, dying on the cross, the wise one dying for the foolish, when you see that, that he did that for you and that he loves you, then you won't need so much to look better before others anymore.

[32 : 28] And when you see him rising again in victory over sin and death for you, well, suddenly that releases you from the need to get the better of others.

Because in him, through his death and resurrection, no matter how sinful or broken you might be, in him, you're pure. In him, you are victorious. In him, you're seated with him in the right hand, at the right hand of the Father.

And when you start living like all of that is true, when you start living united to Christ through faith, knowing that his death has cleansed you and his resurrection has rescued you, then we'll start to be truly wise with the wisdom from above.

Proverbs 13, 20 says, whoever walks with the wise becomes wise. Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise. So, friends, if Jesus is the ultimately wise one, the one in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found, then only by trusting and walking with him and receiving it from him will we become truly wise.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, what a convicting passage this is for us. Lord, too often our wisdom is characterized by selfish ambition and jealousy.

[33 : 57] Would you forgive us for that this morning? would you expose in our hearts where that is true and we don't see it? And, Jesus, would you forgive our pride that wants to try to do it on our own?

And would you humble us by your spirit and teach us to ask and to act and to receive? Lord, would you make us a people that are wise with the wisdom from above?

Make us pure and peaceable. Lord, we long to see a harvest of righteousness. Rebuke us when our means are from below. Help us to be peacemakers with the wisdom from above, we pray.
Amen.