

Wisdom or Wisdumb?



James 3:13–18

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If you don't mind, for us to get ready for this message, I would like you to use your sanctified imagination with me. Imagine you are the leader of what you believe, personally, is the greatest country on the face of the Earth. Now all of a sudden, you realize that as the leader every decision you make affects people. It doesn't just affect you; it affects the country you lead. Imagine you believe you are a believer, and you also believe that the country you are leading believes that as a country they have been ordained by God, and that the country was founded on godly principles. Now imagine it is time for you to go to worship God, but for the first time you are worshipping God differently. You are the leader of the country and everyone who knows you now knows your responsibilities are different. You literally have the weight of the country on your shoulders — but not just your country — because the country you lead is the greatest country on the planet, your decisions also affect people in other countries, especially those countries that are nearby you and border you. Now, while we are worshipping God we get a special revelation from Him, and He just says... *You can have from me, your God, anything you want.* What would you ask for? What do you believe the people in the country that you are leading would want you to ask for if you were to be asked this question by

God? Would any of you have asked for wisdom? How many of you would want the leader to ask God for wisdom to lead the people? Because with that wisdom, he would understand that every decision he makes not only affects him, but it affects everyone in that country.

Well, praise the Lord that is exactly what Solomon did. Solomon became the leader of the greatest country on the planet at that time, Israel. It was a country that was founded on the Word of God, the laws of God, and Solomon was following in the footsteps of his father, David. When he goes to the place of worship God, God revealed Himself to him and asked him what he wanted from Him. He said I want wisdom. Can you imagine being Solomon — following in the footsteps of your dad who everybody believed was a man after God's own heart, and now the weight of government is on your shoulders? Solomon was building a house for God but it wasn't finished, so he went to the high place to worship, and as he was making his sacrifice, God appears to him. Solomon said... *You blessed my dad. He tried to walk in your commandments and now Dad is gone. That role is now mine, and I am nothing more than a kid. I don't know if I have the knowledge when to go out and when to come in, and now I am going to be making all of these weighty decisions that will affect so many. Would you give me the ability of discernment in understanding and wisdom?* And God did. Solomon's wisdom affected so many around him.

That is what we are talking about this morning — wisdom. I think each one of us, many times, pray for wisdom for others, especially those who are in places of leadership that affect so many. But, what if you were not the leader of the greatest country on the planet? If you could ask God for one thing as a Christian, how many of us would ask Him for wisdom because we realize whether we are a dad, husband, wife, mother, grandmother, son, daughter, student, teacher, business man, or employee, every decision we make affects somebody? Does that ever weigh on you? Every decision you make affects somebody. James is going to give us a whole paragraph about wisdom because he wants the church to be wise.

Scripture

"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, don't 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. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

James has taught us that God is going to take trials and bring them into our lives to test our faith. Any time we face a trial, we are to have the attitude of joy, understanding that the trial has the ability to take us to the altitude of it producing full Christian maturity in our life. James understands if we are going to walk in this life God is going to test us from time to time with a trial and it is important to have a certain level of wisdom. It is important that we realize, in failing some test, that if we don't have wisdom we can actually ask God, who gives generously to all who ask, to give us wisdom and He will give us wisdom. But when we ask for this wisdom, we have to ask in faith, not doubting. Then, James is going to talk about how with this wisdom, as we navigate life with trials, God actually birthed us so that we would be a first fruit of a new kind of creation, a new creature. Others are going to look at us and see what can possibly happen in them when they come to know Christ by looking at us and seeing what happened to us when we came to know Christ. He is going to talk about how important it is to not just say we have faith, but to actually show we have faith. If we have a real faith, it doesn't just *say* what we believe, it actually *reveals* what we believe because true saving faith always has works - a changed life - that accompanies that saving faith. As God tests our faith as believers, it is not just important that we have saving faith, but James wants us to understand that one of the most distinguishing marks of being a mature believer in Christ is that we control our tongue. The reason many of us don't have an influence, the reason why many of us cannot be

teaching, is because of the words that come out of our mouth. Those words that come out of our mouth, according to James, actually reveal our heart.

Now, James is going to talk about wisdom. I know that James was influenced by the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, no doubt, but I personally don't believe this is another isolated section. I believe James is building on what he just said because James knows that saving faith should give us the ability to control our tongue. But there is something else he wants us to have along with saving faith, and that is wisdom. He is going to ask this question to the congregation...who is wise and understanding among you? If you and I were personally getting this letter and we were a part of the congregation that James is speaking to, how many of us right now in our heart would say yes I am wise, yes I have understanding? That wisdom would be relative to our age, spiritually. So if we were young in Christ, we would believe we are wise as a young person walking with Christ. If we were more mature in our walk with Christ, we would believe that we have a wisdom that is more mature. How many of you in your heart would say yes, I am wise, yes I have understanding? Now, James is going to answer that question. Basically, he says don't tell somebody how wise you are, don't tell someone how much knowledge you have about life — show it. Just as he said show your faith, he is going to remind us that each and every day in relationships with other people we show our wisdom. You know this, but many times our English translators try to smooth the Greek sentences out so that we can better comprehend it, and sometimes in doing that they change the word order. Our ESV is basically saying if you believe you are wise and understanding, by your good conduct show your works in the meekness of wisdom. So James is saying, who among you is wise and understanding? *Show it*. That is what he says. Show it. Show has the priority of order in the sentence. Show by your good life, your works in the meekness of wisdom.

Now, James doesn't give us a definition of wisdom. I think it is because he knew his audience. He knew his audience was steeped in the wisdom literature of their Bible. To a Jewish person, you didn't believe a man was

wise by how much factual knowledge he knew about a subject or about life. A person was wise if they knew how to apply the knowledge they had about life in every situation they faced. So to a Jewish person, wisdom was right application of knowledge not the attainment of knowledge, not the reservoir of knowledge, but knowing how to apply what you know to every situation. To be wise was to be skilled in life, to be skilled in living. Do you know how we look at somebody and we talk about them being a skilled carpenter or a skilled mechanic or a skilled physician? That is wisdom...to be skilled in living.

James says in the *meekness* of wisdom. This word, meekness, was the picture in Greek society of a horse harnessed with a rider and all of that power of the horse harnessed by the rider. So, please don't think meekness is weakness. Meekness is strength under control. To be a wise person is to be a strong person, but to have all of that strength harnessed not unharnessed, so you don't have an uncontrolled reaction to someone, but a controlled reaction.

"Show by your good conduct..." This word, conduct, in the ESV is literally translated as life, show by your good life. This word, good, is an adjective, *kalós*, which literally means lovely, beautiful, or attractive. It is the picture of when someone looks at the totality of your life their comment is, "Wow, they are beautiful!" It is not talking about outward beauty, it is not talking about the arrangement of their clothes on their body; it is talking about their person, their life, their living. It is lovely, attractive, beautiful. You have seen these people, right? You have been around folks and when you see their life, you are thinking wow, that life is attractive to me. They are really lovely. They are really beautiful and you are attracted to that. Then, you have seen those lives that are...whoa...you want to get as far away as you can from them because the life that they are living, even though they say they are a believer, even though they say they have faith, there is nothing in their life that attracts you to them. Everything in their life causes you to be repelled from them. So, James is saying don't *say* you are wise, just *show* how wise you are. Let every action, every reaction we have display the life that is attractive because the attractive life we are living is

being governed by wisdom, wisdom that is harnessed, wisdom that is under control. How are you doing? Honestly, how are you doing?

How many of you have seen the work of a skilled carpenter? It is easy to see! Would someone look at you and say you are skilled in living? James is going to show us two different types of wisdom — one that is from above and one that is from below, one that is heavenly and one that is earthly, one that is ungodly and one that is godly. So, I want to ask you two questions and I want these two questions to set the stage for the rest of the message. Do you have wisdom? Or, do you have (as I call it) wisdom? If you don't have the first one, wisdom, I want you to know that according to James, at any time all you have to do is ask God, by faith, and He will give generously to you what you lack and what you need. Amen?

James is going to deal with what I call wisdom first. Remember, he is not writing about the Roman government, he is not writing about politicians, he is not writing about Wall Street or businesses, he is writing to Christians. He says, verses 14–16, "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth." Why? "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." Do any of you struggle with jealousy? Bible scholars believe this word probably should be also translated as envy. Do you ever struggle with envy in your heart? Do you ever look around at somebody else and see what they have and wish you had what they have? Then you realize you don't have what they have, so you are bitter and try to tear them down. Every time you have an opportunity, you have to say why you believe they have what they have. You don't even say it to their face; most likely, you say it to somebody else because in your heart there is this bitter envy, bitter jealousy. You just don't like who you really are so you always find something negative to say about somebody else. A lot of times, selfish ambition is the root of bitter jealousy and bitter envy. You struggle with this. And can I say this? It is really easy to have this struggle if you are an American who is a Christian because it is all about the right of the individual. It is about personal

freedom. It is about ME. The Constitution guarantees it is about me, therefore, my ambitions are about me; they are self-centered.

Do you know what I find interesting in studying this? The Greeks actually translated these words, selfish ambition, as the word, partisan, and that means to be of a party. There is not a day that goes by when I listen to any kind of news that I don't say to myself, why can we not have some bipartisanship in this country? Why is this party about themselves, and why is this party about themselves? That partisanship is dividing the country. But James is not talking about the Roman government...and we aren't going to apply this to the government of the United States of America. We are going to apply it to ourselves because Christians can have this same heart where you can be about the party of one, and that is you, or, the party of four or five; that is your family. What James knew was that even in the church there was partisanship. There was a little faction, a little party of the church who believed they had the truth, but they had such disregard for the others that it caused disorder and chaos. Once you have disorder and chaos, it can lead to all kinds of vile practices. James is not defining wisdom; he is describing wisdom. But he is not describing wisdom that comes from God, that comes from above, he is describing the wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

I know you know this, but we could get folks together that don't know Christ and there would be a certain amount of wisdom they would have, but the wisdom they have is outside of Christ, not based on biblical revelation. It would be totally earthly, totally unspiritual. It would just come from the psyche of man, his will, his emotions, and his intellect, but with no spiritual influence at all. It would actually be demonic. Whoa! For the writers of the Bible, there was just two sides — God's side and Satan's side. Jesus even told a group of religious people that they were of their father, the devil. So, James is talking about a kind of wisdom that the church has that is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

See, to the Jewish person, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One leads to insightfulness. Here, James is

talking to the church — but not the pagan gentiles who just came out of paganism to Christ, but to Jewish people, who have a morality based on the Old Testament, have the wisdom leadership of God, have the special revelation from God of His Word, and yet in their heart is bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. James says whatever you do, don't brag or boast, because if you do you are false to the truth. Every time we boast about our wisdom, if our wisdom is not from God, we are actually presenting a false belief, a false life to someone else. James says don't do it, because if we have this in our heart it leads to disorder and chaos. I find this amazing...the very word that is translated, disorder, here is translated in chapter 1 verse 8 by the word, unstable. It is translated in James 3:8 by the word, restless. James is saying this wisdom that we have, if it is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic, it actually causes instability, it actually causes restlessness, and it actually causes disorder and chaos; so don't brag about it. Can I paraphrase this for us? Don't you dare tweet it. Don't you dare text it. Don't you dare post it. Because when you post it, when you say it, when you live it out in action, you reveal your wisdom — no skill in living. We have a lot of information, we have a lot of Bible stories, but we cannot take that Bible story and respond correctly in the trial or circumstance we are in. And because of it, we are bringing a lot of pain, we are bringing a lot of hurt, we are bringing a lot of shame to a lot of people.

If there is one thing I wish we would grasp as a Christian, it would be that as much as we want to hold others to a standard for them to realize how their actions affect us, we need to ask ourselves when will we come to understand our actions also affect someone? To them, my actions carry as much weight as Solomon's carried to the nation of Israel. That is how much weight my actions carry to them. So, I don't want to be unskilled in living. I know we face things we have never faced before — I get it! That is why, before we reveal our heart, we ask God for the ability to be skilled in handling whatever we are handling and with whoever we are handling it with...because the moment you handle this, they are going to see your wisdom or your wisdom. Your life will either be attractive and lovely to them, or they will not want anything to do with you; not based on the truth

of what is right or wrong, but based on how you handled that situation of truth in the meekness of wisdom. All of us have this potential, even as a believer.

Praise God for what James says in verse 17 and 18, "But the wisdom from above (heavenly wisdom, spiritual wisdom, *godly* wisdom) 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." Wisdom from above is first pure...please let that sink in...PURE. How many of you believe it would be an advantage to you if you had some 100% pure gold right now? How about 100% silver? Do you know what we really need? We need 100% wisdom because there is not a relationship we are in that is not important; not just to us but to them. And 100% wisdom allows us to understand that, whether we are a parent, spouse, grandparent, child, teacher, student, employer, employee, neighbor, church member, or an American citizen. As Christians, just know that the wisdom that God gives us is pure.

Then, wisdom is "peaceable." It doesn't cause chaos, it doesn't cause restlessness, it doesn't cause instability, but it causes peace! It is "gentle." It is not harsh, it is not brash; it is gentle. Why? It is because we are always in control of our emotions because we are meek, if we are wise. Wisdom is "open to reason..." It is not so insecure that I can't sit down and talk with someone who believes completely different from me, but I can be open to a reasonable conversation because I have wisdom. I don't fear you; you are not a danger to me. In meekness, I understand that I may not be right about everything. How am I going to know that unless we have a good exchange of ideas, not based on partisanship or emotion, but based on knowledge, truth, fact?

Wisdom is "full of mercy." See, if I have godly wisdom in my heart, heavenly wisdom, wisdom from above, I am never going to want you to get what you deserve, even if I totally disagree with you. Even when you totally ruin my day, even when you totally ruin my moment, I don't want you to get what you deserve because I am full of this ability to hold back

wanting you to have to pay. Why? It is because God didn't make me pay; He was full of mercy to me. And this wisdom is "full of good fruits," not corrupt fruit, sour fruit, or immature fruit, but GOOD fruit, fruit that is useful to people. This wisdom is going to cause me to be "impartial." You might be my son, my daughter, my neighbor, my best friend, or my spouse, but when I deal with you, I am not going to let that cause me to deal with you in a different way than someone else concerning the same matter.

And then, I am going to be "sincere." This word, sincere, literally means without hypocrisy. Some translations translate it that way. Hypocrisy, in the biblical world, comes from the root word meaning, to play act. It means to be two-faced. In Greek drama, one character would play four or five people. There would not be a costume change, just a face change. They would come out with a stick that had a face on it and they would play that part. Godly wisdom NEVER puts one face to you and then another face to someone else. I have the same face over here that I have over there. I have the same face on Sunday morning in worship that I have Monday through Saturday at home, because this godly wisdom, this wisdom from above that is heavenly, causes me to be one-faced.

Then, James switches to farming imagery. I love harvest. When I plant corn, I expect to harvest corn. Did you know that spiritually you are a farmer? Godly wisdom leads you to be a peacemaker, and as a peacemaker, you sow the seed of "peace" and the harvest you get back is righteousness. Once you get that "harvest of righteousness" back, you now have more seed to sow, and as you sow the seed of peace, you just keep harvesting righteousness. This doesn't mean that every relationship you have is going to be right because there are some people we just cannot have a right relationship with, but it is because of them not us. Now, I can still be right in the relationship toward them, even when they are not right with me. Therefore, I can display the harvest of righteousness at all times because of wisdom from above that is governing my heart, which is governing my tongue, which is governing every action that I have as a believer.

Do you have wisdom? Do you have the wisdom that is pure, peaceful, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, full of good fruit, impartial, and sincere? Are you sowing the seed of peace? If the answer is no, would you just go back and read chapter 1, ask God and He will give you skill in living, skill in acting, skill in responding to every situation that we face, because ultimately, every situation we face is a test of our saving faith and God wants to bring us to full Christian maturity.