

True Wisdom

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July 23, 2017

James 3:13-18

We are continuing this morning in our study of the book of James called “Unwavering: Living out a single minded faith.” Today James is going to talk to us about the topic of true wisdom. How do you know when someone is wise? What do you look at to tell? Do you look at their IQ? At their titles? Their confidence? Their wealth? What do you look at to see if someone is wise?

Today I thought I’d start our sermon with a little quiz, not to see if you are wise but to see if you can recognize wisdom. So I’ve got some quotes, and what I’m going to do is read the quote and then you tell me whether or not this sounds like a wise person to you:

* “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you see every problem as a nail.” Wise or not wise?

Abraham Maslow

* “Smoking kills. If you’re killed, you’ve lost a very important part of your life.” That was the model Brooke Shields during an interview to become the spokesperson for an anti-smoking campaign.

* “Idleness and pride tax with a heavier hand than kings and parliaments.” - Benjamin Franklin

* “Baseball is 90% mental. The other half is physical” - Yogi Berra

* “I asked myself which is better, the sun or the moon. And I realized the moon is better, because it shines in the dark, whereas the sun shines in the day, when we don’t really need it.” I don’t know who said that it was on the internet.

* Last one: And this is from a billboard we saw in Zimbabwe: “We are a substitute for excellence.” I don’t know what that means, but it didn’t seem very wise! That’s like there was a pre-school called “There’s no place like home” pre-school.” What are they saying?

Now we could do this all day, but you get the point: how do we recognize true wisdom? How do we know when someone has real insight on life rather than something that just seems like real insight? How do we recognize God’s wisdom?

We need to know, because we need God’s wisdom in every area of our lives.

* We need God’s wisdom in our families. We believe that God designed families, that he made them to operate a certain way, and that we’re not on our own trying to figure that out. So we need God’s wisdom in our families.

* We need God’s wisdom in our careers and lives. We don’t want to get to the end and look back and see that we made a bad investment of our lives, so we need God’s wisdom.

* We need God’s wisdom in our church. We want this church to be founded on and to operate on God’s wisdom, and not on man’s. So we want to recognize God’s wisdom and lean into it when we see it.

When we don’t see it, we want to have the sense that something’s not right. We want God’s wisdom in every area of our lives. So how do we recognize God’s wisdom?

Today James is going to address that very subject. Today we are going to look at a passage where James talks about wisdom. Today James is not so much going to tell us the content of true

wisdom. There are other books in the Bible like Proverbs that address that. Rather, James is going to give us a contrast between true wisdom, God's wisdom, and false wisdom. He's going to tell us how to recognize true wisdom when we see it and how to recognize it when we don't!

Turn in your Bibles to James 3:13-18. Today we are going to see three things in this passage:

1. James is going to show us generally, big-picture, what the test of wisdom is.
2. Zoom in on worldly wisdom or what I would call false wisdom.
3. Zoom in and look at God's true wisdom.

It's my prayer that as we look at this today we will recognize and model more of God's wisdom in our lives, in our families, and in this church. Let's read James 3:13-18:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

- James 3:13-18

We want to start today by seeing what the general test of wisdom is, and it's this:

1. True Wisdom is found not in having all the answers, but in a humble, godly lifestyle

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

- James 3:13

James starts this passage on wisdom with a question: "Who is wise and understanding among you?" We are familiar with the word "wise" and the word "understanding." There relates to someone that was an expert at something, a skilled person. So in essence, James is saying "If you consider yourself wise, if you feel like you could give a Ted Talk on how to live wisely take two giant steps forward, so that we can examine you."

But James surprises us with the examination. It's not what we would expect. If you thought you were going to be examined to see if you were wise, what kind of things would you expect people to look at? You might expect them to look at your education or credentials. Or maybe the truth and depth of your words. Or your sense of confidence. Maybe you would expect them to see whether you have answers to the questions you were asked. When we think of someone who is wise, we think of someone who has studied, someone who speaks truth, someone who has all the answers.

But look at what James says. He doesn't mention any of that. Let him show it by his good life (conduct), by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. In other words, wisdom isn't shown in the way we think it is. We tend to think wisdom is shown by our words. James says it is shown by our lifestyle. We tend to think wisdom is shown by knowing all the answers. James says it's the opposite. It's in humility. This word is sometimes translated "meekness" or gentleness. It's shown by having the humility to be teachable, the humility to listen to people challenge our view and learn from them, the humility to admit when we don't have the answers. James says that's where wisdom is shown, not in having all the answers but in good conduct and in being teachable.

In saying this, James is solidly in line with the rest of the Bible:

- * He's in line with Peter, who says "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."
- * He's in line with Jesus, who blesses humility and teachability in the Sermon on the Mount.
- * He's in line with the book of Proverbs, a whole book about God's wisdom with hundreds of verses that describe the wise man for us. I've read that book several, maybe 20 or 30 times. I love it!

But do you know what the main characteristic of a wise man is in Proverbs? It's not that he has all the answers. It's that he is humble enough to learn! The wise man learns from everything - from the events that happen to him, from the rebuke of his friends, even from his enemies. Proverbs tells us "one word of rebuke has more effect on a wise man than 100 lashes does on a fool." So Scripture has always connected wisdom with humility and teachability.

I just say this because it's so important that we are humble. We live in a world that says "put yourself out there. Demand what's yours. Blow your own horn! Tell everybody how great you are

and exaggerate a little bit if you need to.” You guys that live in the business world know what I’m talking about. It can really be like “if you’re not over-selling yourself, you’re not trying hard enough.” But James says that’s not true wisdom. True wisdom is shown in a humble, godly lifestyle.

What’s true out there is doubly true in the church. True Wisdom is not shown in having all the answers or even in having perfect theology. It’s found in a humble, godly lifestyle. I’m not saying that Bible knowledge is opposed to true wisdom. Scripture never portrays ignorance as desirable. What I’m saying is that we need an attitude of godly humility of teachability, where we don’t have to criticize or divide to show our wisdom, where we don’t have to have all the answers.

I remember the Principal of our College in Zimbabwe, Onesimus Ngundu. He had a double doctorate - one from Dallas Seminary and one from Cambridge. He was a very smart guy. But I remember when a Missionary friend took one of Dr. Ngundu’s classes. He said “half the value of that class is being able to sit there and listen to Dr. Ngundu simply say ‘I don’t know. I don’t know.’” He knew a lot, but he was very honest about what he didn’t know. I saw in him a real genuine humility, and I said “I want to be like that.” That’s the kind of wisdom James is talking about.

True wisdom is not shown in having all the answers. It’s shown in a humble godly lifestyle. That’s the basic test of wisdom. But now James moves on to zoom in. He’s going to look at two different kinds of wisdom up close, and the first is this:

False wisdom pursues rivalry and leads to disorder

In verses 14-16, James is going to talk about worldly wisdom, or what I would call false wisdom - wisdom that seems to be wise, but really isn't. He's going to tell us three things about this kind of wisdom:

1. What it's like. Its nature.
2. Where it comes from. Its origin.
3. Where it will take us. Its result.

James starts in verse 14 by telling us about the nature of false wisdom

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

- James 3:14

Don't boast of what? Boast that you are wise. How would you deny the truth? By claiming to be wise when you're not. In other words, James is saying if you have these two things - bitter envy and selfish ambition - do not claim to be wise by God's standards. It's false wisdom.

Now when we first hear that we may be like "whew!" Bitter envy and selfish ambition - that's not me. Luckily, I'm not that bad! If you're like me, here are my weaknesses: (1) I care too much (2) I'm overly loyal, and (3) I work too hard. Just kidding. If you were here for the phone story last week, you know I have other weaknesses. But seriously most of us probably hear "bitter envy" and "selfish ambition" and go that's not me!

We need to take a closer look at these words, because if we look closely at what James is saying here I think we'll see that this false wisdom may show up more in the church and in our lives than we think.

So there are these two words that describe false wisdom:

- * "Zelos" translated "bitter envy"
- * "Eritheia" translated "selfish ambition".

Zelos is a fascinating word. We get two different English words from zelos. First, we get the word "zeal" which is sort of a neutral or positive word that relates to a sort of enthusiasm for a cause. It's usually a legitimate desire to protect and promote something usually outside ourselves, so "zeal." But we also get another word from zelos. Can you figure out what it is? "Jealous." "Jealousy" or "envy," which is more negative in connotation. Jealousy is usually more self-oriented. It is more of an illegitimate desire to protect and promote something. It is strongly related to rivalry and the concept of being threatened. So, zeal which is kind of good and jealousy which is kind of bad. But in the Greek, there's just one word - zelos. It expresses both the legitimate and the illegitimate desire to protect something. Both meanings are found in the New Testament. The word is used 16 times.

* Half the time, people are being congratulated for zelos. Paul congratulates the Corinthians for their zeal for him. Jesus says "zeal for God's house will consume him."

* The other half people are being warned about it. The Saducees are filled with jealousy (zelos), because the apostles are healing. In Galatians 5, Paul lists the characteristics of people that will not enter into the kingdom of God, and one of those characteristics is zelos. So there are these two concepts that are sort of opposite all rolled together into this one word.

OK, so what is the point? The point is that what one minute is godly zeal can easily turn into an ungodly jealousy. A legitimate zeal can actually roll over into an illegitimate zealotry. There is the possibility that what starts as a good and noble effort to promote or defend God's truth or God's people can turn into something so bitter and violent that it summarizes the life of people who don't enter into God's kingdom. That's zelos.

Now eritheia is much simpler. Eritheia is translated here as "selfish ambition." It is only used in one other place in all of Greek literature, and it relates to strife or fighting for a cause.

Now all of this is important, because when we see those words "bitter jealousy" and "selfish ambition" we can think that James is only talking about self-advancement. We can excuse ourselves. We think that this passage doesn't apply to us, unless we are out for personal gain. If we think that way, we'll miss the bigger part of what James is saying. Because when we look at these two words, we can see that James is not just talking about people being selfish, he's talking about people engaging in rivalry over different causes

* Where what is a legitimate godly zeal turns to an illegitimate, ungodly jealousy.

* Where we spend all our energy defending our piece of turf

It seems like wisdom because it started out good, but somehow it becomes all about rivalry.

This can happen in a hundred different ways in our life. It can happen in the church so easily: Maybe there's a doctrine that's precious to us, or a musical style that has really ministered to us, or a particular ministry that we really love. It starts out as something good that God has used to minister to us, and we want to promote it in a healthy way. But sometimes things can gradually take an unhealthy turn and we get possessive. What started out as good becomes a piece of turf that we fight over.

I remember one full time ministry Director that was under my supervision. We'll call him Bill. As Bill was in ministry longer and longer, he became more and more possessive about his area of ministry. He had conflict with other staff members. He had inappropriate conversations with people from the church, and he drove some families away from the church. Because he had tunnel vision, the only thing he could see was his one area and whether or not people were blocking his goals. I remember we had a conversation where I asked him "Bill, what do you think it means to be a good Director of your ministry area?" He said "It means to care enough to fight for my area." I said "that is absolutely wrong. The enemy is out there. Not in here." Eventually, I had to fire him because of that attitude of rivalry and jealousy. This can happen in the church over anything - any doctrine, any ministry, any personality, any preference.

It can also happen as we live in our society. Maybe as Christians, we want to do something good, defend the powerless or incorporate biblical values. Our heart is good initially, but then it turns

into a piece of turf that we want to fight over. We're no longer acting out of love, and it makes our Christianity really ugly. Many of us know the fellow-Christian at the office who loves to argue with people about his faith, and we're going "Please don't!" So it can happen in our society. It can happen in our families. We decide something is an issue of right and wrong and maybe it is, but we get to the point where love left the building a long time ago and, to be honest, we really just want to win.

What started as a good thing - a godly zeal - becomes bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. James says that's the nature of false wisdom. He goes on to explain the origin of this wisdom. It has its origin in things that are opposed to God:

Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.

- James 3:15

James says that if we are engaging in this no matter how legitimate it seems at first we are not acting out of God's wisdom. This is not the wisdom from heaven. Then he tells us where this wisdom does come from: three sources for this kind of wisdom, and they go from bad to worse:

1. He says it's earthly. That means it's earth-bound. It only thinks of things in the sense of the here and now.
2. He says it's unspiritual. There are many translations of this word: "sensual" and "selfish." It's almost always used in contrast to what the Spirit wants. So it's un-spiritual "fleshly."
3. He says it's of the devil. Literally, James says it's "demonic." In other words, it's the kind of reasoning that the Devil uses.

If you know your Bible super-well, you may have noticed that James has identified the three enemies of the believer: The world, the flesh, and the devil.

Now what is James' point here? Is it that we are demon possessed when we have rivalry in the church? No, that's not his point. Rather, I think the point is this: James always wants us to recognize what we are acting out of. Remember a couple of weeks ago? We said our behavior betrays our belief. James is making the same point again: behavior betrays belief. No matter how legitimate the original issue was when we get to the point where our behavior is promoting rivalry we must not tell ourselves that we are acting from divine wisdom - even if the issue is theological, and you are theologically correct. If you are engaging in rivalry, you are acting in line with: you are operating on the principles of the world, the flesh, and the devil. That's the source:

James goes on to prove that by talking about the results of this wisdom:

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

- James 3:15

James here is proving what he said about the source of rivalry. How do we know that this wisdom is from the world, the flesh, and the devil? Look at the results look at the fruit of this kind of wisdom. The fruit of rivalry is disorder and, ultimately, every vile thing. Disorder is not from God. So we can see that the source of rivalry is not God, but is the world, the flesh and the devil.

I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but rivalry really does result in disorder and every vile thing. It's only logical that it results in disorder. When all my attention is on guarding my chunk of turf, then none of my attention is on what the church as a whole should accomplish. So we get the "dream team syndrome" where everyone is so worried about their own glory that we lose the mission of the whole, and we have disorder. So rivalry results in disorder.

James goes on to say that ultimately this can result in every vile thing. In other words, there's no limit to the evil that can result from rivalry. We see quarrels. We see churches and families destroyed. We see Christianity become really ugly. We see people walk away from the faith. There is no limit to the damage that can be done by worldly wisdom.

So just to re-cap: worldly wisdom's nature is rivalry bitter envy and selfish ambition. Its source is the world, the flesh and the devil. It's result is disorder and, ultimately, all kinds of evil.

Kelley and I have seen just how far this can go in Zimbabwe. We saw a society that had fallen into total disorder. We saw real evil: literally punishing the good and rewarding the evil. But the thing that made this so tragic was that, at least from what I could see, it wasn't about greed, or violence or even racism. I think it was about rivalry. I believe that the man who has now become the country's dictator started out with a legitimate zeal for something good. He was an activist for democracy. He served time in prison for his cause. He just wanted to see the freedom of his people. But at some point, that legitimate zeal turned into jealousy and rivalry and a quest to hold on to power, and there was no limit to the harm that was done.

James says this same spirit rears its head when we act out of rivalry in our lives, in our families and in the church. True wisdom is generally shown in a humble godly lifestyle. Worldly wisdom pursues rivalry and leads to disorder and sin. Final point:

True wisdom pursues peace and leads to righteousness

James describes God's wisdom by giving us a list of seven virtues:

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

- James 3:17

When we look at that list, we can see that the items all revolve around two principles. The first principle is that it's peace loving. Godly wisdom promotes peace in all circumstances. James says godly wisdom "loves peace generally. It is considerate when it is provoked. It is submissive when it is corrected." It loves peace no matter what kind of treatment it receives. That doesn't mean it never stands up. That doesn't mean it loses sight of right and wrong, but it always works for - always hopes for - peace.

The second principle is that it is single-minded in its pursuit of that peace. There is no duplicity, no hiddenness. It's pure. It is impartial. Literally, James says it is "not double minded." It is sincere. It is transparent. James tells us that the wisdom from above seeks peace and is single-minded about that.

James goes on to tell us something very important about the results of God's wisdom. Just as worldly wisdom had results, God's wisdom has results. James says this:

Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

- James 3:17

James closes not really with an appeal or a summary but with a proverb. It's kind of disjointed - kind of takes a minute to figure out what he's getting at - but he says this: Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. What is the point? The point is this: if you want to grow the crop of righteousness, you have to plant in the soil of peace. This is so important for two reasons:

1. Because it's the opposite of the way we normally think. We normally think that righteousness is best grown in the soil of justice. When we're in conflict, we think that justice is what we really need. That's what will straighten the whole thing out - put everyone in their place. That's what will enable me to heal. Then everyone will know what is right and fair, and righteousness will grow out of that. Honestly, isn't that the way we often think? I know I sometimes think that way. But James says that's not the way it works! In James 1:20, he said "man's vengeance, his anger, does not bring about God's righteousness" Here he explains that righteousness grows out of peace. Do you want to grow righteousness in your family? Do you want a marriage - a family - where godliness grows powerfully? Do you want to promote righteousness at your job? Do you want to grow righteousness in this neighborhood? James says you grow that by planting in the soil of peace. None of us is going to get where God wants us to go if we're after justice. Righteousness is a crop that is grown in peace by peace makers. That's important, firstly, because it's contrary to the way we normally think.

2. Because this is the gospel. God grows righteousness in our lives. Nobody loves righteousness more than God. Thank God, he does not grow righteousness by demanding justice. When God wanted to grow righteousness in my life and we were at odds because I had wronged him, he didn't demand that we do that in an atmosphere of justice. He didn't tell me to square myself up, and then we could work on righteousness. He made the first move. He sent his Son to die on my behalf, pursued me, shared the good news of my forgiveness, gave me his Spirit, and then he grew righteousness. God is asking us through this passage to do to one another what he has done for us: to seek peace so that we might build righteousness. This is the gospel. It is the chief wisdom of God, displayed in the death of his Son. It is the model for our lives.

We need this kind of wisdom true wisdom. We need it in our society, in a nation that is racked by division and strife. We need it in our homes as we navigate the complexities of being imperfect people that are married to imperfect people. As we navigate the complexities of raising imperfect kids, we need this wisdom. We need this wisdom - this gospel wisdom - as we work together to build the Church at Perry Creek. There's a lot of work to be done here. We're just getting started. If we pursue the work in God's wisdom and if we plant in the peace of the gospel, we will raise a harvest of righteousness right here at Perry Creek.

True wisdom is shown in a humble, godly lifestyle. Worldly wisdom pursues rivalry and leads to disorder. God's wisdom pursues peace and leads to righteousness.