

Sermon outline and notes:

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James 3:13-18 “Are You Truly Wise?”

Intro. James begins this text by saying, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” There are always those in a church or school who consider themselves wise. Such people may love to give advice. But how can we know if they really *are* wise? How can we know if we should follow their advice and counsel? James is going to answer that question.

We need to know who can give wise counsel. We need to know who the wise teachers are among us. That’s because we all need to gain wisdom. Without wisdom you will make foolish mistakes morally, financially, and in other ways. Without wisdom your life will not be blessed. You will not live your life successfully.

What is wisdom? Wisdom is not just the accumulation of knowledge. Wisdom is the God-given ability to apply the right kind of knowledge to each situation. Knowledge comes from books. Wisdom comes from *the* Book. Knowledge comes from below. Wisdom comes from above.

There is certainly a great deal of knowledge in this world, and we all benefit from it. In fact, we are living in the midst of a knowledge and information explosion. But knowledge alone is not enough. Knowledge and education have not proven to be the answers to the fundamental problems of humanity. For example, we have the knowledge & technology for one farmer to produce 100 times more food than in the 19th century, but yet, we still have hunger. We have a more advanced educational system than ever before, but we also have more immorality, suicide, drug use, and violence than just a generation ago. Today, public schools teach knowledge, but not wisdom. In spite of years of secular education, our young people are graduating without being prepared for life. In our own day many people have enough knowledge to run a computer, but it seems that fewer people know how to run their lives. What we are lacking is true wisdom from God.

If you want to live life successfully in every realm of life, you need the wisdom of God. Solomon said, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom” (Prov. 4:7). If you have wisdom, everything else will fall into place. Look over at Prov. 3:13-17, and let’s see what Solomon says about wisdom, “Happy is the man who finds wisdom, And the man who gains understanding; for her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her. Length of days is in her right hand, in her left hand riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.”

Now in v.15 we see that there are two kinds of wisdom. First of all, there is wisdom from above, a wisdom that comes from God. But James also recognizes that there is a wisdom that is worldly, natural, and even demonic. In 1 Corinthians 1 the apostle Paul wrote of the “wisdom of this world” (vv.20-21). Today, most of our politicians are offering humanistic, government solutions to the problems we face. Yet these worldly solutions create more problems than they solve. While man searches for wisdom apart from God, we need to realize that there is no true wisdom apart from God. So you need to make sure you get the right kind of wisdom.

So let’s look into our text and learn about true wisdom together. First of all, you need to know:

I. HOW TO TEST TRUE WISDOM

Many people claim to be wise. You may be among them. How can you know if you or someone else is truly wise? What is the real test? Is it by how many degrees they have by their name? Do you go by how smart they sound? James gives the real test in v.13, “Who is wise and understanding¹ among you? Let him show² by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.” The test of true wisdom is to look at a person’s life. While the Greeks defined wisdom in terms of speculative knowledge and philosophy, the Hebrews defined wisdom as skillfully applying knowledge to practical living. So what James says here is certainly more in line with the Hebrew concept of wisdom. James indicates that real wisdom is not found in a man’s books. It is found in a man’s life. The true test of wisdom is works, not words. James says if you want to see how wise a person really is, don’t ask him how much he knows. Just observe him and see how he *lives*. You do not measure wisdom by IQ but by CQ. It’s not by the intelligence quotient but by the character quotient. Knowledge is of no benefit until it affects behavior in the right way. In fact, he says that wisdom will be manifest in a man’s “good conduct.” The word translated “good” (*kalos*) means “beautiful” or “noble.” It the kind of life that even a non-Christian will recognize as good and commendable.

When we select pastors, deacons, and teachers, we should not decide based on their talk, but based on their walk. We look at how they are living their lives. That’s the real test. And young ladies, when you decide who to marry, don’t decide based on what they say. Look at their character. Look at the kind of life they are living. That is the real rest of wisdom.

Next, you need to know:

II. HOW TO IDENTITY FALSE WISDOM

Just a godly wisdom is manifested in a person’s life, even so worldly wisdom is manifested in a person’s life. So we are going to see how to know if a person is spouting off false wisdom. The contrast between false wisdom and true wisdom is crystal clear, and can be quickly recognized. First of all:

A. Look for the Manifestations of False Wisdom – James says in v.14, “But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.” Wrong thinking produces wrong living. So here in v.14 James gives 2 manifestations of false wisdom:

1. Bitter Envy - What is envy (*zelos*)? It is our discontent at the good fortune or success of others. Envy happens when we notice that someone gets a better job, or better grades, or if they are better looking, or drive a better car. People with bitter envy & jealousy live in a world that focuses on themselves.

Illustration: There are many examples of envy in the Bible. Cain was envious of his brother Abel, because God was more pleased with Abel’s sacrifice. It was because of envy that Joseph was sold by his brothers to be a slave in Egypt. It was envy that gripped King Saul’s heart as he heard the fair maidens singing the praises of David.

¹ The Greek word translated "understanding" (*epistemon*) is used only here in the New Testament. It refers to a specialist or a professional highly skilled in applying his knowledge to practical situations.

² This is an aorist imperative, a command in the 3rd person.

Notice that envy is usually associated with bitterness. Prov. 14:30 compares envy to “the rottenness of the bones.” Envy eats at the mind like a moth eats at a garment.

Now notice another manifestation of worldly wisdom:

2. Self-seeking – This Greek word (*eritheia*) also refers to selfish ambition that tends to create rivalry & conflict. It was used of people who entered politics for selfish motives. Worldly wisdom says it only makes sense to put yourself first. Isn't that the pathway to personal happiness? That's what the world says, but that's not what godly wisdom says. Worldly wisdom crowns self. Yet heavenly wisdom crucifies self. Worldly wisdom says the way to get to the top is to step on everybody else. Heavenly wisdom says the way to get to the top is to deny self & help others.

James is calling for us to take an inventory of our hearts. Take a look at yourself. What motivates you? If you realize that you have a self-centered kind of wisdom, you need to give heed to the last of v.14, “do not boast and lie against the truth.” In other words, stop boasting about your so-called wisdom. To say you are wise is to “lie against the truth.” That's because your life is contradicting your claim.

You not only need to recognize the manifestations of false wisdom, but you also need to:

B. Recognize the Destructive Consequences of False Wisdom – James says in v.16, “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.” Why should you reject worldly wisdom? One reason is because it will lead to the following negative consequences:

1. Confusion - This word (*akatastasia*) refers to “instability, a state of disorder, or even chaos.” Jealousy & selfish ambition will lead to disorder & disturbances of peaceful relationships. They result in strife & bitter rivalries. Today we see turmoil in the home, discord in the office, fights in school, and even disturbances in the Church. There have been some movements in the church over the past 100 years that have created more confusion than anything else. Now can that be of God? No! Wherever there is disorder, you can mark it down, God's wisdom is absent in one or both parties. The Bible says that God is a God of order and not confusion (1 Cor. 14:33, 40).

False wisdom will also produce:

2. Every Evil Thing - The word translated “evil” is *phaulos*, the word from which we get our word “foul.” It refers to worthless, ethically bad conduct. The Greek word translated “thing” is *pragma*. False wisdom produces nothing of any pragmatic value.

So if a church is following the world's wisdom, rather than God's wisdom, there will be confusion and instability. Nothing worthwhile will be accomplished. The many battles among Christians and the church splits, all suggest that something is wrong. Perhaps that “something” is the absence of the wisdom of God. So let us identify & reject the wisdom of this world, and seek the wisdom of God.

Now let's see last of all:

III. HOW TO IDENTIFY TRUE WISDOM

As we have already discussed, true wisdom is demonstrated in the way we live our lives. And so James identifies the life characteristics of true, godly wisdom. Put yourself to the test. First of all, it is:

A. Pure – James says in v.17, “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure...” Notice that James makes special note of the fact that purity, or holiness, is first in importance. Though the natural mind sees sin as the pathway to happiness, wisdom understands that sin is stupid. It understands that if you sow sin today, you will reap sorrow tomorrow. Wisdom understands that the best way to live is to live a clean, pure life. James had already said back in 1:27 that real religion is “to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” Wisdom never says go ahead and sow your wild oats. Wisdom never says if it feels good do it. Wisdom never says everybody else is doing it. Heavenly wisdom rejects immorality, drunkenness, lying, and cheating. First & foremost, godly wisdom will cause you to live a pure life.

Are you wise enough to live a pure life, or are you walking the pathway of sin? If you are living in sin you are *not* wise. You are setting yourself up for a life of sorrow & turmoil.

Another characteristic of wisdom is this. It will cause you to have:

B. Peaceable Relationships - We live every day in relationships with other people. We need wisdom to help in our personal relationships. Families need wisdom in how to get along with each other. You need wisdom to get along with people at work, at school, and certainly at church. And God’s wisdom will help you in this area.

You see, God’s wisdom leads to peace. In v.17 James says that “the wisdom that is from above is ... peaceable,” or “peace loving.” A wise man follows Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” Heavenly wisdom is the answer to earth’s conflicts.

Furthermore, the close connection between purity & peace is also affirmed in v.18, “Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” “The fruit of righteousness” probably refers to the fruit produced by righteousness.³ If we live in God’s wisdom, we sow righteousness and, we reap peace and God’s blessing. If we live in man’s worldly wisdom, we will sow sin and selfishness, and reap “confusion and every evil work.”

Then, James gives a total of three character qualities that promote peaceful relationships.

1. True Wisdom Will Make You Gentle - This word (*epieikes*) refers to a sweet reasonableness & being fair minded. You will not be hard, stubborn, obstinate and difficult to get along with. Along the same line:

2. True Wisdom Will Make You Willing To Yield - This word (*eupeithes*) means being open to reason and persuasion, and having a teachable spirit. Such a person is willing to hear all sides of a question, & admit when they are wrong.

This word also refers to a person who has a compliant disposition, who submits to discipline & authority. Such a person is easy to live with and work with. Proverbs 17:10 says, “Rebuke is more effective for a wise man than a hundred blows on a fool.”

3. True Wisdom Will Make You Meek – Back in v.13 James talk about “the meekness of wisdom.” Meekness (*prautes*) primarily refers to gentleness and submissiveness. In reference to animals, it refers to those who have been tamed. True wisdom will cause you to have a submissive & obedient spirit to God, & to others. The wisdom of the world says you get ahead through arrogance and self-assertiveness. But godly wisdom will cause you to be meek. You see, when Jesus gives you wisdom, He doesn’t make you a wise-guy; He makes you a wise man. And wisdom never flaunts itself.

³ At first glance it seems strange that James would say the “fruit of righteousness is sown” because usually seed is sown. But harvested fruit also becomes seed for the next crop. The fruit of righteousness is sown again in peace by those who make peace [MacArthur].

So do you have peaceful relationships, or are you often involved in turmoil? Only those who are peaceable, gentle, meek, & willing to yield are truly wise. Though worldly wisdom says that you get ahead & get what you want through selfish ambition, assertiveness, and fighting your way to the top, you only end up with conflict & turmoil. But the meek are truly wise, for Jesus said in Mt. 5:5, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” He also said in Mt. 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Wise people seek the blessing of God.

There’s another primary way that godly wisdom manifests itself. It will cause you to have:

C. Practical Concern for Others – Toward the end of v.17 James says that true wisdom will cause you to be “full of mercy and good fruits.” Earlier it was taught that true faith clothes the naked and feeds the hungry (2:14ff). Here our writer teaches that true wisdom also concerns itself with practical things. It changes the life and produces good works to the glory of God. For example, wisdom will cause you to be:

1. Merciful - You see, real wisdom never thinks of itself. It is always thinking of others. When you see someone who is suffering & in need, wisdom will cause you to have compassion on them, & help them. But what does the wisdom of the world say? It says that you have to look out for #1, put yourself first, etc. Why give of your time & money to help someone else?

2. Good Fruits - “Good (*agathos*) fruits” probably speaks of kind actions, helpful deeds, prompted by compassion and mercy. Such wisdom leads us to do helpful deeds.

Our Lord’s parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates the meaning of good deeds prompted by mercy (Lk. 10:25-37 - briefly tell story).

So how wise are you? Can you point to good works in your life? You are wise to extend mercy, for Jesus said in Mt. 5:7, “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” A self-centered life is a foolish life. A life that gives is a life that is blessed. Jesus said in Luke 6:38, “Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom....”

D. Without Partiality⁴ (v.17b) - True wisdom is impartial and without prejudice. This would follow what James said in the first part of chapter 2, where the verb form of this word is used in v.4. Man’s wisdom teaches you to be partial toward influential people. But the one with godly wisdom sees no one as rich or poor, black or white, but all people are the same at the foot of the cross.

Finally, godly wisdom will cause you to live:

E. Without Hypocrisy⁵ - Godly wisdom is sincere, genuine, and unpretentious. There is no sham in the life of a wise man. There is not an ounce of insincerity in his body. The world says you have to put on a mask, and hide who you really are if you are going to get ahead. Fool

⁴ The Greek word *adiakritos* can mean “without dubiousness, ambiguity or uncertainty.” It can be translated “unwavering” (compare the verb form of this word in 1:6). In such a case it would refer to decisiveness. When you have God’s wisdom, you need not waver; you can be decisive. A wise man has convictions. He is not like a reed driven by the wind. While wisdom leads us to yield when we are wrong, it also causes us to be decisive about what is right.

⁵ There is a play on words in Greek. James says that true wisdom is *adiakritos* and *anupokritos*.

your boss. Fool your girlfriend if you're going to get what you want. But true wisdom will cause you to be authentic.

Conclusion: So how do you measure up to the life of wisdom found in v.17? Can you tell from that Scripture passage that you still need true wisdom from God? If so, how do you get such godly wisdom? First of all:

1. Enter into a Right Relationship with God - Prov. 9:10 says "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Since God is the source of true wisdom, you must look to Him for wisdom. Romans 11:33 says, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" In 1 Cor. 1:24 Paul called Jesus "the wisdom of God." In Col. 2:3 Paul said that in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." So knowing Jesus, & having Him in your heart is the first step toward having God's wisdom. When you receive Jesus Christ, you receive the Holy Spirit, who is called "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" (Eph. 1:17). He is our teacher (John 14:26; 1 John 2:27).

2. Pray for Wisdom - James 1:5 tells us how to get wisdom, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him." God will keep His promise to give you wisdom if you look to Him & pray.

3. Study Scripture - Man's wisdom comes from reason & experience, while God's wisdom comes from revelation. In Luke 11:49 Jesus called God's Word the "wisdom of God." The book of Proverbs is full of wisdom. The Scriptures are able to make us "wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15), and wise in many other ways.

4. Learn from Godly Believers - Prov. 1:5 says, "A wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel...."

So don't look to the world for wisdom. Look to God. Pray. Study the Scriptures. You can reject the pathway of fools, and be blessed as you gain wisdom from God!

Sources: John MacArthur, Jr., *Wisdom in Action: Study Notes on Ephesians 5:15-17; James 3:13-18* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1988); James Merritt, notes from his sermon, "Living in the Light of Wisdom"; Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); George Sweeting, *How to Solve Conflicts: A Practical Study of the Book of James* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Mature: James* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1978); Curtis Vaughan, *James: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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