

Text – James 3:13-18

Also read Prov 3

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Pray

Main Point

What if your wisdom was foolishness?

Introduction (300)

Hook

How do you act when you know you are right?

When you are positive you have the right view.

Whatever it may be: parenting, time management, finances or politics? What is the manner in which you communicate that?

Each of you has some measure of wisdom, but how do you exercise it?

When asked for advice do you take it as an opportunity to display your knowledge, or a genuine desire to benefit someone?

When voicing your opinion about social matter is it to promote yourself or is it to promote God?

When you voice your “wisdom” is it Godly wisdom or Earthly wisdom.

The content of what you share is vital, but we will see in this passage that manner with which you communicate is just a vital.

In fact the manner of your communication **decides** whether you have godly wisdom or earthly wisdom. The difference between working for God or working for the Devil.

Outline

This passages forces us to ask the question: **What if your wisdom was foolishness?** What if the thing you thought was godly wisdom was in fact a mere façade of wisdom?

To work through this passage, we will break it up into three parts:

First we ask the questions

1. Do you have wisdom? (v13)
2. Is your wisdom Earthly? (14-16)
3. Is your wisdom Heavenly? (17-18)

Part 1 – Do you have wisdom?

Explanation - Context

So let us begin with our first point: Do you have wisdom?

You will remember James is helping us understand what is true religion. What is truly required of people who seek to follow God.

There are those who thought that if they had all their doctrine right, they could do what every they wanted. Somehow they thought their “right knowledge” gave them freedom to discriminate the poor brother, to use their tongues in evil ways, that is to sin.

James is talking to people who think themselves religious, but their actions show they are no followers of Jesus. He is talking to people who have wilfully deceived themselves. They think they are saved but they are not. Their actions prove that their faith is dead.

James want’s these religious hypocrites to snap out of it and realise their danger.

He addressed their false faith in chapter 2.

In these few verses he addresses their false wisdom.

Explanation - Wise

And he begins with a question. Notice the start of verse 13.

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you?

Who has insight?

Who has understanding?

Who is able to understand the world?

To understand life, and the ways of God?

And who is able to apply their knowledge in specific times with a God honouring outcome?

Who is wise among you?

Application - Who here considers themselves wise?

How do you answer this question from James?

You may consider yourself wise in a host of areas.

You may consider you have a pretty good handle on how to use your time. That you have worked out how to exploit every spare moment in your week. People with time management questions should come to you.

Or maybe you consider yourself astute with your money. You understand how to invest, save, spend and give, in a way that is generous, but also able to fulfil your responsibilities. People with money questions should come to you.

Or maybe you feel you are an expert in parenting. You know how to achieve a perfect balance of firmness and grace, of instruction and discipline, of work and play. People with parenting questions should come to you.

Or maybe you consider yourself knowledgeable about politics and social issues? You have the answers to the issues our society faces. You feel you can speak to the moment of our day. People with political questions should come to you.

Who considers themselves wise?

Wisdom seen by works

And you can imagine, as this letter is read out, those who consider themselves religious standing a bit taller and putting their hands up, at least in their minds, when James asks this.

But James is seeking to lure them out into the light to expose their lack of wisdom. Wisdom we will see is more than correctly applying knowledge.

Just like faith, wisdom needs to be shown by works. Special understanding alone is not wisdom. Special insight is not wisdom.

True wisdom is humbly applying knowledge to consistently do good works.

The key there is humility.

Wisdom stems from humility

Look at the end of verse 13.

*By his good conduct let him show his works **in the meekness of wisdom.***

Wisdom is shown by works and the source, the rootstock of true wisdom is Meekness, or humility.

This is key in navigating all areas of life in a God honouring way. Key to being able to live wisely and give wise counsel.

The source of that wisdom is humility.

Where there is pride as the source there will come disgrace. But with the humble there will be wisdom.

Prov 11:2 makes that explicit:

*When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with the humble is wisdom.*

Humility to follow God

In the OT, a wise person is one who follows God. This is reiterated in the OT again and again specifically in Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. A wise person humbles themselves before God and seeks to follow him.

In Prov 3: 5-7 we read:

⁵ *Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your **own understanding**.*

⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*

⁷ *Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.*

Being wise starts by humbling yourself before God, admitting you have nothing to offer, mourning over your wicked deeds.

Being wise starts with repentance.

Pathway of Jesus

Turn with me to Matthew 5:3-5

Here we have the pathway Jesus outlines for those who wish to be his disciples, for those who wish to follow God. It is the path of repentance, and notice how it is marked by humility.

Matt 5:3-5

³ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit (Those who consider themselves spiritually bankrupt, nothing to offer) ,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *“Blessed are those who mourn* (Mourning over their sin. Recognising that even their most noble of deeds are an insult and rebellion to God, they mourn because they have offended the King and there is nothing they can do about it), *for they shall be comforted.*

⁵ *“Blessed are the meek* (The humble, the one who bows the knee to Jesus), *for they shall inherit the earth.*

This is the path of repentance. The path of humility. The path of wisdom.

Application - Gospel plea

Friends, who consider themselves wise here tonight?

Have you humbled yourself before the King of the universe in repentance? Have you mourned over your sin, have you realised that you have nothing to offer God to repair your relationship with him?

That my friends, is the ultimate display of wisdom.

To refuse to turn to God in repentance is the ultimate act of foolishness.

Jesus Christ offers you the gift of eternal life. He died on the cross to save sinners from the penalty they deserved. To accept that gift is the wisest act you can ever do. To accept that gift starts with you humbling yourself before God.

Will you be wise or will you be a fool?

Link

Godly wisdom flows from humility. A humility that begins when you repent. When you confess your sin, when you cling to Christ's sacrifice and when you ask for his grace to change your sinful ways.

Earthly wisdom, on the other hand, flows from pride. Which brings us to our second point: Is your wisdom earthly?

Part 2 – Is your wisdom Earthly (14-16)

Exposition

Bitter Jealousy and Selfish Ambition

James now describes where earthly wisdom comes from and what it produces.

Look at verse 14 and 15

¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

Again, the actions prove the wisdom. The fruit will prove the root. You may say you are wise, but are there bitter jealousy and selfish ambitions in your hearts? Are you boasting or taking pride in your “wisdom”?

James makes it clear that where there is jealousy and selfish ambition there is no godly wisdom.

Selfish ambition, by its very nature is the very opposite of living a life that pleases God. The opposite of a repentant heart.

Selfish ambition is the desire to achieve one’s goals at the expense of others.

And others include God.

Achieving your own desires at the expense of obeying God, and ultimately taking the place of God. Selfish-ambition is the worship of self.

Jealousy is rampant because our self hates to share the attention. Our self hates to share the glory with others. And it certainly has no intention to give any glory to God.

World, flesh and the devil

We can understand why James says this kind of wisdom *is earthly, unspiritual, demonic*.

Earthly in the sense that it fails to consider God. It runs calculations without considering him in the equation. Neither his realm nor his will. It is the wisdom of the world.

It is unspiritual in the sense that it is driven by indwelling sin. Driven by our self-centeredness. Driven by our flesh. “Good” is defined by what makes me most comfortable.

And Demonic. Earthly wisdom is the same wisdom the Demons share. The same wisdom Satan shares. The wisdom that advances self. The wisdom of pride. Satan and the demons don’t lack craftiness and are the epitome of this wisdom.

So, James tells us this earthly “wisdom”, this fake wisdom is characterised by the world the flesh and the devil. The three sworn enemies of a Christian.

This is no simple intellectual disagreement. There is a fundamental difference between Godly wisdom and earthly wisdom.

Application – Why do you give wisdom?

Think of it this way. Why do you share the insight you have collected over the years?

Your knowledge about time, money, parenting or politics?

What motivates you to share these things? Be it online or in person.

Do you share that information so people will know how smart you are? Or to help them be better worshipers of God?

To get some glory or to give God the glory?

You will know that if you are willing to stay silent while another is teaching them the same thing. What is your motivation for sharing insight?

Application – How do you give wisdom?

And also **how** do you share this knowledge?

How do you share the things you are passionate about and are enthusiastic about? Do you share it with a heart of humility or a heart of pride?

Is it as a beggar showing another beggar where to find bread? Or is it as one of the elites patronising a plebian?

The knowledge may be the same, but pride or humility will dictate if it is godly or earthly. Does it serve to glorify God or glorify you?

If there is jealousy or selfish ambition, there is no godly wisdom.

Disorder and vile practices

And pride is subtle, so how will you know if you have jealousy and selfish ambitions in your heart? Verse 16 tells us.

¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

The word disorder here has the same idea as “double-minded” or “double-tongued” previously used in the letter. It talks of being swayed to and fro. Of being restless and unsettled.

This characterises someone who is living to please themselves instead of pleasing God. Swayed by their feelings. Swayed by their desires. Instead of being anchored in God’s principles.

The religious hypocrite is the best example of that. One moment imitating Christ because it is beneficial for Self, since they are in a Christian environment.

But in a different context obeying Christ is not so beneficial for Self, and so Christ’s principles and His command go out the window.

The only consistency is selfish ambition. They are double-minded. Their life is in disorder.

Selfish ambition is characterised by disorder, and of course by every vile practice. Every kind of moral degeneration. Our self wants to please, pleasure, and glorify itself.

Every kind of vile practice will flow from selfish ambition.

Where does selfish ambition come from? Selfish ambition flows from pride.

And Pride at it's core is a worship disorder. It is the worship of Self instead of the worship of God.

Application – What does your life look like?

Do you find yourself constantly swayed to and fro?
Constantly practising all sorts of vile activities?

In hindsight, you question how you could do such a thing, but in the moment, you always give in?

Self- control or more knowledge of how to live wisely is not going to help.

The core of the problem is self-worship. You need to kill Self and put God on the throne of your heart.

Until you let your life be driven by a desire to love God and love his people, you will always be tossed to and fro.

When your life is driven by selfish ambition, you will always have wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual and demonic, regardless of how correct your words may be.

Are you prepared to live a life that pleases God instead of pleasing yourself? Do you want a life characterised by Godly wisdom?

It begins by killing selfish ambitions and choosing to follow God's principles no matter what.

It begins by killing pride and being humble.

Link

From that place of humility flows godly wisdom. Which brings us to our third and final point: Is your wisdom Godly?

Part 3 – Is your wisdom Godly?

Exposition

Description of a wise person

There is a godly wisdom. A wisdom that comes from above, as verse 17 tells us. A wisdom that is a gift from God. A wisdom that every Christian ought to pursue. To pray for, and exercise. A wisdom that God is pleased to give to those who ask Him. A wisdom that is beneficial to encourage and exhort the saints.

This wisdom is rooted in a heart of humility. This wisdom is displayed in humility. Look at verse 17 with me and notice humility oozing from the description of godly wisdom.

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

Characteristics of wisdom

The overarching theme of the description is Pure. [it] *is first pure*. All the other traits qualify this. Wisdom from above characterises a different people, a distinct people, a pure people. It characterises the church.

As we grow and share wisdom, it is to the purpose of presenting ourselves to Christ like a pure bride.

Remember 2 Cor 11: 2

² For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

And how is that purity expressed and developed? Godly wisdom is *Peaceable, Gentle and Open to reason*.

This is to consider others better than oneself. Being gentle and considerate. Being willing to yield your opinions. Being willing to let go of your rights. Being slow to speak and quick to listen. Having no issues if your opinion is not listened to.

And godly wisdom is also active. It is Full of mercy and Full of good fruits. It is not just a right attitude but also right actions. They go hand in hand. Mercy and good works flow from a heart of humility. A heart that seeks to elevate God, not promote self. A heart that seeks to love people because of the Love of God.

Where disorder characterised a person with earthly wisdom, Godly wisdom is impartial and sincere. Impartial in the sense that there is no distinction as to the circumstance or the group you are in.

A wise person will always choose to follow God. They are not tossed and driven by their feelings.

And further they are sincere. They do not wear a mask one day and another mask then next where no one really knows who they really are. They are sincere.

Harvest of Righteousness

James finishes his description of Godly wisdom by quoting what seems to be common saying in the early church. In verse 18 we read:

¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Godly wisdom produces peace. And as we live out godly wisdom and produce peace, righteous actions

naturally flow out. The harvest of righteousness can be seen to contrast “every vile practice” of verse 16.

Righteousness, or a conduct that pleases God, is the outcome of living in peace and making peace. Right actions can only grow in an atmosphere of peace.

James has already talked about this. In James 1:19-20 we read

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; [humility!!!!] ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Application - How do you respond to events?

Friends, we are in a time in history where we can be very quick to speak. Social media gives us numerous ways to be quick to speak. And online there is no external accountability to how we speak. No healthy peer pressure. But God knows how we speak.

Social media also gives us numerous temptations to be slow to listen, to misunderstand, to accept a misrepresentation of a person as fact. Social media gives us many reasons to be angry.

But this does not bring about the righteousness of God.

When you respond, do you show godly wisdom or earthly wisdom? What you say may be true, but is it said in humility? Is the way your are saying things producing peace?

Friends it is better to remain silent than to be working in line with things which are earthly, unspiritual and demonic.

But if you are compelled to speak, speak in godly wisdom.

Speak in the wisdom that is from above.

Speak in a way that is pure peaceable, gentle and open to reason.

Speak with mercy.

Sharing godly wisdom

This is true when you hope to share your any experiences and life lessons.

What a gift to have the older teach the younger. Those with experience teach the less experienced.

Whatever the area: be it in time management, money matters, parenting, politics, or whatever. Seek out times to share your knowledge.

But be sure to do it with a heart of humility.

To do it with meekness and peace. To do it with gentleness and a heart that is open to reason. And in doing that you can know you are sharing wisdom that is from above.

And you can know you are sowing a harvest of righteousness.

Application - Are you living for self or the glory of God?

Let your actions and your words be fuelled by humility before God and before men. A humility that recognises he is on the throne of the universe and that he is on the throne of your heart. That he is the only one who is worthy of honour and glory.

Let your actions and words be an act of worship to God, never an act of worship to self.

Conclusion

Friends, as we have worked through this passage, I hope you can see how godly wisdom is completely different from earthly wisdom. The difference is much more than between being right and wrong.

The difference is between Humility and Pride. That is the difference.

One leading to disorder the other to peace.

One characteristic of the bride of Christ, the other characterises demons.

One leads to every vile action, the other leads to a harvest of righteousness.

Friends let us be active to pray and pursue wisdom that if from above.

Let us be quick to notice and eradicate selfish ambitions. Let us question our motives.

Let us remove any remnant of self from the throne of our lives. Let us be active to kill pride and to cultivate humility.

Let us live, speak and act in humility, in all spheres of life.

Let us do everything knowing God is on the throne of our lives.

Let us humble ourselves before our holy God because he is worthy.

Let us pray.