

James: The Practical Christian

The Wise and the Otherwise (Part 1)

James 3:13-16

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Scripture

Warren Buffett is one of the greatest investors in our day. He is also the second richest man in the world, with an estimated worth of \$44 billion. Buffett is so famous that a special edition of the *Monopoly* board game features him and his companies. A couple of months ago, in June 2005, Buffett decided to help raise money for his charitable foundation by offering an online auction on eBay for someone to have lunch with him. The winning bid was \$351,100—the price of access to the world’s second richest man.¹

Do we recognize the value of the wisdom of God’s word, and our access to the eternal God in prayer and worship?

In our text today, James helps us to understand the value of the wisdom. So, with that in mind, let’s read James 3:13-16:

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (James 3:13-16)

Introduction

Carl Sandburg, the American poet, wrote a massive volume on President Abraham Lincoln and the war years. The 68th chapter has an interesting title borrowed from a woodsman’s proverb. Its title is, “A Tree is Best Measured when It’s Down.”² You see, you

¹ “eBay Bidder to Pay \$351,100 for Buffett Lunch,” www.msnbc.com, accessed 7-02-05.

² Carl Sandberg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years* (New York, NY: Harcourt, 1954), 728.

cannot accurately measure the height of a tree until it is cut down. The point Sandburg was making was that only after the death of Lincoln could people truly assess the value and impact of his life.

But Lincoln's many achievements were not as impressive as those of another man I want you to think about today. During this man's life he was an author, diplomat, poet, writer of songs, a king, a theologian, a philosopher, a philanthropist, a financier, an architect, an engineer, a man of royal blood, a man with intense creative ability, and the builder of one of the seven wonders of the world. He reached the pinnacle of incredible achievements. The zenith of his life is almost without parallel. Who was this man?

His name was Solomon!

The question I want to put to you is this: *why was Solomon able to do so much in his life?*

The answer is given to us by God in 2 Chronicles 1. There we are told that one night, just after Solomon began his reign as king, God appeared to him and said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (2 Chronicles 1:7).

Try to imagine that! If God said that you could have anything in the world, what would be your request? Remember, God is the one asking, so there are no limitations. You ask for it—and it is yours. No restrictions. What would it be? Financial independence, so you could be free from worry about bills? Perfect health, so you could have a long life? A position of great honor and prominence? A new car?

Let's listen in on Solomon's response: "You have shown great kindness to David my father and have made me king in his place. Now, Lord God, let your promise to my father David be confirmed, for you have made me king over a people who are as numerous as the dust of the earth. Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people. . ." (2 Chronicles 1:8-10).

Solomon could have asked for anything! But what did he ask for? Solomon asked for *wisdom and knowledge*.

What was God's response? Let's hear God's response.

God said to Solomon, “Since this is your heart’s desire and you have not asked for wealth, riches or honor, nor for the death of your enemies, and since you have not asked for a long life but for wisdom and knowledge to govern my people over whom I have made you king, therefore wisdom and knowledge will be given you” (2 Chronicles 1:11-12).

It seemed like from that point on in his life almost everything Solomon touched relationally turned to gold. He was able to accomplish amazing feats like no other man because of his unique ability to relate to people with true wisdom and knowledge.

Lesson

Truly wise people are a scarce commodity these days. They are hard to find in any generation. And so in verse 13 James asks the pointed question, “**Who is wise and understanding among you?**” This is a rhetorical question that is meant to be seen as a call for you to stop and examine your life and ask if your life is reflecting true wisdom.

In order to know if you are truly wise or otherwise you must first understand what true wisdom really is. In today’s lesson, James wants you to understand two important truths about what true wisdom really is. He teaches that:

1. True wisdom is more than mere intellectual understanding, and
2. True wisdom is never self-centered.

I. True Wisdom Is More than Mere Intellectual Understanding (3:13)

First, true wisdom is more than mere intellectual understanding.

In verse 13 James writes, “**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 is saying that true wisdom is not to be identified with scholarly ability but rather by a good life and deeds done in humility. Wisdom is not just the intellectual ability to understand and articulate certain facts but it is the moral discernment and insight to know how to make that knowledge functional in day-to-day living.

Wisdom, in a biblical sense, has much more to do with the *relational* than the *technical*. It has very little to do with your IQ, or your academic achievements or how articulate you might be. It is an issue of how much your life patterns the truth—especially in your many relationships. There are many men and women who are highly intellectual but who cannot get along with other people.

One can have extraordinary gifts, but not have true wisdom.

In January 1970 a brilliant scientist named Max Born died. Max Born was a very close friend of Albert Einstein. He was one of the great minds of the 20th century. And yet in an interview on German television shortly before his death he said: “I’d be happier if we had scientists with less brains and more wisdom.” Prior to his death, Born came to realize that there is a big difference between mere knowledge and true wisdom.

Wisdom goes beyond mere knowledge to the proper use and application of that knowledge in real-life situations. When it comes to the biblical concept of wisdom, the focus is more on the practical than the intellectual. Someone who is truly wise is someone who has the ability to put knowledge to practical use.

British author G. K. Chesterton and several other literary figures were asked one evening what book they would prefer to have with them if they were stranded on a deserted island.

One writer said without any hesitation, “The complete works of Shakespeare.”

Another said, “I’d choose the Bible.”

Then they turned to Chesterton and asked, “How about you?”

Chesterton replied, “I would choose Thomas’s *Guide to Practical Ship Building*”!

If you want to determine if someone is wise, don’t ask for his resume or the number of her degrees or Grade Point Average.

James says, “Look at his life. A man’s works—and not his words—will tell you if he has true wisdom.”

Notice in verse 13 the spirit in which the wise person manifests wisdom. It is in genuine **humility**. The wise person doesn’t approach life selfishly but with others in mind. He doesn’t focus on himself. It’s been said that “he who calls attention to his own wisdom manifests that he has none.”

Do you know what **humility** is? Many people think that **humility** is that you think less of yourself. They think that a humble person has a low view of himself: “I am nothing really. I am less than nothing. In fact, I am just a worm!” Well, that is not humility; it is really false humility. Tim Keller says that true humility is not that you think less of yourself but rather that you think of yourself less. In other words, true humility is not focused on self—which is really the essence of pride, the opposite of humility—but true humility is focused on others.

Jesus was humble in heart (Matthew 11:29), and the essence of his humility was his passionate commitment to others. That is why the apostle Paul talks about Jesus as one who “humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:8).

Humility is thinking of yourself less because you are focusing on others. And James says that wisdom produces good deeds done with humility.

There were false teachers in the early church who were claiming to be men of great wisdom. They were far more eloquent than the apostle Paul. And they claimed to be much wiser. They presented themselves as having a far superior knowledge to Paul. But the apostle tells us they had a worldly wisdom, a false wisdom for they were driven by their own self-centered desires. True wisdom always manifests itself in humility!

James faced the same problem Paul did. He knew of self-centered people claiming to be people of great wisdom. They would openly boast of how wise they were. But when you pulled back the pompous veil and looked beneath the surface you found

nothing more than the evil root of self-centeredness underlying all they did and said. And that exposed their wisdom as a counterfeit.

No matter how good it may look on the surface, it's not the genuine article. It's false wisdom.

You need to know the difference between true and false wisdom. So in verses 14-16 James shows you another characteristic that is true of the person with true wisdom.

II. True Wisdom Is Never Self-Centered (3:14-16)

Second, true wisdom is never self-centered.

James writes, **“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”** (3:14-16).

James tells us that in the heart of an unwise person you will always find the root problem of **“envy and selfish ambition.”**

Sheridan, in his play *The Critic*, said, “There is not a passion so strongly rooted in the human heart as (envy).” Envy is a painful and resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another person accompanied by a strong desire to possess that advantage.

There is an ancient tale about two people, one of whom was envious of the other. The envious person was once given an opportunity to ask a favor from the king, with the proviso that his rival would get twice as much of whatever he requested. This put the envious person in a difficult position. After much consideration, he asked that one of his eyes be plucked out.³

Several years ago, Millard Fuller of Habitat for Humanity addressed the National Press Club on public radio, and he recalled a workshop at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary with 200 pastors in attendance. The assembled pastors quickly pointed toward greed and selfishness as the reason the church never had enough money to assist others creatively.

³ Adin Steinsaltz, *Simple Words: Thinking About What Really Matters in Life* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 126.

Millard then asked this seemingly innocent question: “Is it possible for a person to build a house so large that it’s sinful in the eyes of God? Raise your hand if you think so.””

All 200 pastors raised their hands.

“Okay,” said Millard, “then can you tell me at exactly what size, the precise square footage, a certain house becomes sinful to occupy?”

There was silence from the pastors. You could have heard a pin drop.

Finally, a small, quiet voice spoke up from the back of the room and said: “When it is bigger than mine.”⁴

Envy is a problem in every profession. Doctors envy other doctors. Secretaries envy other secretaries. Homemakers envy other homemakers. Professors envy other professors. Pastors envy other pastors. Students compare grades, clothes, appearance and athletic ability. We compare husbands and wives, sons and daughters.

I came across these few lines that sum up what I am saying:

I hate the guys who minimize
and criticize the other guys
whose enterprise has made them rise
above the guys who criticize.

The fact is that envy and selfish ambition are almost everywhere! And the point James is making is that it is one of the primary reasons why true wisdom is found almost nowhere.

The principle here is that true wisdom and self-centeredness are antithetical. They are contradictory. They cannot co-exist. You cannot be truly wise and still remain self-centered.

James makes this point in verse 16 by saying, “**For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.**” The problem with envy is that it always leads to other sins. Envy leads not only to the sin of resenting

⁴ Frank G. Honeycutt, *Preaching to Skeptics and Seekers* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001).

God's goodness in others' lives, but also to the sin of ignoring God's goodness in your own life.

What are some of the **“evil practices”** James tells us are brought on by **envy and selfish ambition**? There is a long list. Envy can cause you to lie to others. Envy can spread gossip and slander. Envy causes anger and stealing and cheating.

Envy can also lead to adultery. Envy causes people to steal husbands and wives. Envy can even lead to murder.

The Bible indicates that Cain killed Abel because he envied God's approval of Abel.

Joseph's brothers threw him in a pit and sold him into slavery because they envied the fact that he was their father's favorite son.

The religious leaders of the first century crucified Jesus Christ because they envied his popularity with the people.

Envy is destructive and worse than cancer. Proverbs 14:30 says: “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.”

If I told you that you had a malignant tumor, you would have it removed as soon as possible. And yet envy is just as destructive as cancer. If you are ever going to be truly wise, you must first cut envy out of your life so that it doesn't destroy you. But how can you break the grip of envy on your life? There is only one way. And that is by seeking the wisdom that only God can give.

Solomon tells us in the Proverbs that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The apostle Paul tells us in Colossians 2 that in Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is the wisdom and the power of God we all desperately need. Jesus Christ is the ultimate source of true wisdom.

But Paul says that the so-called wise of this age will scoff at such an idea as finding true wisdom in a person and in the death of some lowly Jew who was crucified as a criminal.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy

the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. . . . For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

Why is the message of the cross the source of true wisdom? Because it was at the cross that Jesus solved our sin problem. It was at the cross that he took upon himself the punishment we deserve for all our bitter envy and selfish ambition. And because of his death and resurrection for us we can now have not only deliverance from sin's penalty but also deliverance from sin's crippling power. Because of the cross you can now be set free from your bondage to envy and self-centeredness so that you can enter into a new kind of life, the fullness of a life of true wisdom. That is a life marked by love for God and selfless love for others.

True wisdom is only to be found in a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. If you haven't come to the point where you are trusting in Christ alone for forgiveness of sins and eternal life, you need to do that today. You need to admit to God that you have fallen short of his standard of perfection and that you have been trusting in your own efforts to measure up. You need to turn from your old ways and turn to Christ as Savior and Lord.

But that is only the beginning of a life of wisdom. You then begin the exciting adventure of learning how to experience God's transforming power in your life. You learn more and more what it means in Colossians 3:2 to "set your mind on things above, not on earthly things." You start learning to look at life from God's perspective. And when you do that, you discover the life-changing principle taught by Jesus that it is only when you die to your own self-interests and begin to love God and others that you will find true fulfillment in life. Jesus taught that unless the grain of wheat first drops into the ground and dies, it will never bring forth fruit.

The world's wisdom will tell you that the only way to find yourself is always to focus on yourself. But God's wisdom tells you just the opposite. Jesus taught that the only way to find yourself is to first lose yourself in genuine love toward God and others.

Conclusion

That is wisdom! And how can you spot such a person? Let me take you back to verse 13. James tells us you can spot the wise person **“by his good life, by deeds done in humility.”**

When you want to have a baby but can't get pregnant, and when your best friend has her third child, you are still able to celebrate with her.

When somebody else gets married and you are still single and you don't want to be, you can still rejoice.

When someone else gets promoted or buys a new house or gets some nice clothes, you celebrate.

And when those whom you are prone to envy lose out in life, you do not rejoice but you hurt with them and come to their aid.

How can you live like that? Because the driving force of envy and selfish ambition in your life has been broken by Jesus Christ, and by God's grace you have now entered into a life of love in dependence on his power.

Do you still struggle with envy? Of course you do. But you are no longer a slave to it.

Instead of always rejoicing when people fail and weeping when others succeed, you are learning more and more what it means to “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.”

You have become numbered among the few in every generation who have true wisdom. God is looking for a few more. May you be such a person. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Let's bow for prayer.

I know that many of you listening today long to be people of true wisdom. I want to encourage you in that direction by simply praying to God right now saying, "Lord, you know that I truly want to be wise. I join with Solomon today and I don't ask for intelligence or riches or prestige or revenge or long life. I simply ask you for wisdom in knowing how to live in the office, in the classroom, at home with my children, with my parents, with my friends and with those who are my enemies."

Lord, I pray for those listening who have seen themselves today as numbered among the unwise. I pray especially for those who have never personally received Christ and are without the pardon from sin and the power for living you mean for us to have. I ask you to remind them of your gracious love and forgiveness in Christ. I ask you to relieve the guilt and the deep sorrow of their past failures through the quiet confessions now of their failures. Deliver all of us, O God, from selfish ambition and jealousy. Show us how to rejoice when someone else is promoted. Deliver us from a jaundice eye, the cancer of envy that creates a tumor of selfishness and pride and ugly remarks. Make us a people marked by your wisdom. We ask this in the name of the one whose cross is our power and wisdom. Amen.

CHARGE:

Theologian and author J. I. Packer once said, "The kind of wisdom that God waits to give to those who ask him is a wisdom that will bind us to himself." My challenge to you today is to ask God for that kind of wisdom. Wisdom that will bind you in love closer to him and to others. As you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.