

A WORD TO THE WISE ABOUT BEING WISE

*“Wisdom is at the Heart of the Matter
because it is a Matter of the Heart”*

“A Journey Through James”
Sermon 12

Texts:

James 3:13–18 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.**

Prov 9:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

Job 28:28 And he said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.’

Psalms 111:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs 4:7 The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight.

Proverbs 2:6–8 For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; ⁷ he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, ⁸ guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints.

Deuteronomy 4:5–10 See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶ **Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘**Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.**’** ⁷ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? ⁹ “Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, **lest you forget** the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. **Make them known to your children and your children’s children—** ¹⁰ how on the day that you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, ‘Gather the people to me, **that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.**’

Introduction:

Nothing is more disconcerting and embarrassing than believing and saying you are completely right about something only to discover you are completely wrong about the very thing you were so confident about. This has happened to me as I am sure it has happened to you.

One of the most embarrassing of those times happened many years ago during a time when my ministry necessitated a good amount of travel. I lived in Wisconsin and almost weekly, I found myself at the small regional airport at Green Bay to catch a flight to wherever I was preaching that weekend. I had to drive an hour and a half to the airport and so there were more times than I care to recount where I found myself barely making a flight. Because the airport was small and I flew so often, I got to know the folks who ran the counter of the airline I always used, and they got to know me. One day, I was running behind and found myself running to the boarding gate to catch my flight to Detroit. This was before 9/11 occurred so security was in place but not to the degree it is today. As I ran for the gate, one of the ladies called my name and said, "Hurry, I will hold the door open for you and you can just make this flight" and ushered me right through the door and into the plane (this would never happen today). The flight was not very full and after putting my bag in the overhead compartment, I took my seat next to a gentleman in my row. As I buckled in, the flight attendant began her pre-flight announcements and welcomed us on board to the flight for Minneapolis. I chuckled and mentioned to my seat mate, "Well, sometimes they get things wrong!" He responded, "We are all going to Minneapolis. Where do you think you are going?" Needless to say, I was not only embarrassed, I had to make a very undignified exit to get to the correct gate for the flight to Detroit.

How did this happen? And more importantly, how could it have been avoided? It happened because two people made some big assumptions based on familiarity and regularity. Because she knew me and because I usually flew out of that gate, neither of us checked the documents we possessed and as a result, I almost ended up at the wrong destination.

It is uncomfortable, inconvenient, and embarrassing when that happens at an airport. It is devastating when we make wrong assumptions about things in our lives that have larger and more significant consequences for our eternal destiny,

for the good of God’s people, and for the advancement of the gospel – like the assumption and confident claim James addresses in the paragraph before us this morning.

Some of James’ readers have made two major claims thus far in the book:

1. A confident claim that they possess living faith – James 2:14-26
2. A confident claim to be spiritually mature (wise) – James 3:13-18.

These are the very claims that I hope most of us would make this morning because of the devastating consequences upon our life both in this life and the next should those claims not be true. James' response to both claims reveals how God wants us to evaluate these claims in our lives and in the lives of our Christian brothers and sisters.

Before we proceed, it is important that we realize in the overall picture of his letter, James assumes that his readers (and us) truly do have a living faith that is growing and maturing them. James consistently addresses his readers as his beloved brothers and sisters in Christ (1:5,9,16,19; 2:1,5,14; 3:1,12; 5:7,12; 19). He also assumes they are growing and maturing spiritually (1:2-4,12, 19-21, 22-25; 5:7-11, 13-16, 19-20). So, he is writing to people who, like us, are not perfect but who have a genuine faith and desire to grow and mature in that faith!

But how do I recognize if my claim to possess a living faith is actually true? And how can I know if my faith is actually growing and developing me into a wise and maturing Christian?

James has a very direct and helpful answer (if we will accept it) to both questions: “If you claim to possess a living faith (and you should) then there will be compelling evidence to validate that claim. And if you are indeed growing and maturing in Christian wisdom (as you should be), there will also be compelling evidence to validate that claim.”

James addresses the first question in chapter two by reminding us that the evidence of our living faith is the faithful works it produces out of our life as it did in Abraham and Rahab.

He now turns to address the second question in the paragraph that is before us this morning – how do I know if my living faith is actually growing and maturing me as a believer? And the way James presents this important issue is by calling for “wise and understanding” believers to identify themselves (3:13a). Just like the evidence of genuine, living faith is the works it produces, the evidence of spiritual maturity is whether a certain kind of wisdom is shaping our heart and controlling our conduct (3:13b).

At the heart of this paragraph is perhaps the key discussion in James about spiritual maturity in the book. Earlier, James reveals how spiritual maturity happens in our lives (1:2-4). In this paragraph James reveals the heart of spiritual maturity is “wisdom” that governs our heart and displays its presence through our character and conduct. But what does it actually look like in real life? James’ main point can be summed up in this statement:

Spiritually maturing people embrace a specific kind of wisdom which cultivates in them uniquely Christian virtues displayed through the consistent practice of distinctly Christian behavior that displays humility, promotes peace, and grows righteousness for the Glory of God, the Advancement of His Kingdom, and the doing of His Royal Will.

So, if spiritual maturity is produced, shaped, and governed by wisdom, we need to make sure we understand what James means when he talks about “wisdom” in this book (which we will address this week) and what it should produce in our character and conduct (next week).

I. The Nature of True Wisdom (3:13a)

Who among you is wise and understanding?

- James is often described as the “Proverbs” of the New Testament.
- Wisdom is a central theme in James. He mentions the concept of Wisdom directly in two places (1:5-8 and 3:13-18). However, there are more than 40 allusions in the book to “wisdom statements” or “proverbs” that allude directly or obliquely to OT wisdom literature.
- What exactly does James want his readers to understand about the nature of wisdom as they represent the values and advance the agenda of Jesus’ big Kingdom in all the little kingdoms of the world where He has placed them?

A. *Wisdom is Spiritual and not Worldly (Dt. 4:5-6):*

*See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶ Keep them and do them, for **that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples**, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘**Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.**’*

- Just as there are two kinds of faith in James 2:14 (living vs dead); there are two kinds of wisdom in James 3:13-18 (wisdom that is spiritual and wisdom that is earthly and natural).
- Wisdom in James is aligned with the OT concept of the body of Wisdom God gave His people as opposed to the concept of Wisdom common to the surrounding nations or the world system in which believers live (Dt. 4:5-6).
- There was a unique wisdom God gave His people that was distinct from the wisdom of all the surrounding nations. This wisdom distinguished them from all the surrounding nations. It was to be their means of success before God as well as in the eyes of the nations who, based on the effects produced by this wisdom, would conclude they were a great nation of wise and understanding people!
- In using the terms “wise and understanding” James is wanting His readers to connect the wisdom he is talking about with the wisdom Moses was describing.

B. Wisdom is inherently relational – fear of YHWH (Prov 9:10):

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

- Solomon stated the “fear of the Lord” is the “source” or “foundation” of wisdom.
- He defines “fear of the Lord” as “knowledge of the Holy One.”
- In other words, the kind of wisdom James has in mind is only available to people who truly know God and are in the right relationship with Him – that is what it means to “Fear the Lord.”
- “Fearing the Lord” in the OT is the equivalent in James of someone who is genuinely born again by the Word of truth (James 1:18) and therefore possesses a living, saving faith that faithfully works like the faith of Abraham and Rahab produced works that were faithful to God (2:21-26).
- In other words, only people who are genuinely born again and who truly know God have access to this wisdom because a relationship with God is the access point, the foundation, and the fountainhead of this kind of wisdom.
- Which means that true believers live their lives according to a very different wisdom than everyone else around them.
- So what is the difference between these contrasting wisdoms?

C. Wisdom is primarily moral and ethical (Job 28:28; Prov 2:6-8):

Job 28:28 And he said to man, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.’

*Proverbs 2:6–8 For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; ⁷ he stores up sound wisdom for the **upright**; he is a shield to those who walk in **integrity**. ⁸ guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints.*

- Wisdom is the cultivation of a certain kind of moral character (Job 28:28) lived out in ethical behavior before God and others (Prov 2:6-8).
- Illustration: Biblical Wisdom is the operating system of our heart which drives our moral character and results in ethical conduct.

D. Wisdom was experiential rather than intellectual (Psalm 111:10):

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; **all those who practice it** have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!*

- The wisdom James has in mind is more than possessing information or knowledge; it involves understanding and practicing that wisdom in daily life.
- Illustration: It is the transmission in the vehicle of our life that transforms belief into behavior.

When James calls for those who are wise and understanding, he is actually thinking of someone who knows God and is living in ways that please Him and advance His purposes.

This is very different from the concept of wisdom in the world of James' day. When the world called for a wise and understanding person, they were looking for someone who had deep understanding of the gods, who understood the laws and values of the Roman Empire, who knew and understood the Greek poets and philosophers, and who was initiated into the mysteries of the pagan religions that proliferated the empire.

Or they would have looked for someone who had accumulated wealth, owned large properties, had achieved high status in the world, or who occupied important positions in society or in the government of the city

BUT NO ONE would have been looking for someone who intimately knew the true God of Heaven and Earth or who was radically committed to pleasing Him and living for His purposes regardless of the personal cost to themselves or their family.

This is what James means when he exhorts believers to be doers of the word and not hearers only (1:22)!

This kind of wisdom was radically different and distinctly different from all the wisdoms of the world. So where does this kind of wisdom come from? And how does one obtain it?

II. The Source and Location of True Wisdom (James 3:17)

Wisdom from above is first pure . . .

A. Sourced in God:

- The wisdom James has in mind has God as its source which is why James describes it as “from above.”
- This wisdom comes from God, belongs exclusively to Him, and is available only to those who ask Him for it with an undivided heart.

James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

B. Located in Scripture (Torah):

- The articulation of this wisdom is in the Word of God that James describes as “the Word of truth” (1:18), the “perfect law of liberty” (1:25), the “royal law” (2:8) which is the Scripture (2:8)

C. Implanted by God in our Heart (James 1:21)

Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

- Which means this wisdom is accessible to every single believer who is willing to receive it with meekness (1:21).

III. The Expression and Evidence of True Wisdom (3:18)

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

James makes the point that true wisdom from above is verified in the life of a person by what it produces. So, what are the marks and evidence of true wisdom in a person’s life?

A. In Disposition – humility

- James makes the point that this kind of wisdom produces a particular disposition in the life of the one who possesses it – humility.
- This kind of wisdom is only available to those who have humbled themselves before God.
- When it is truly received and embraced, it continues to produce and display gracious submissiveness in our lives.
- The opposite of this is an arrogant, caustic, self-serving or self-advancing spirit that resists God, rejects His Word, and desires to rule over others.

B. In Character – pure/whole (James 3:17a)

But the wisdom from above is first pure,

- This wisdom has as its chief and foremost characteristic a purity or a wholeness or soundness of character.
- James talked earlier about how trials mature and complete the character of a Christian who endures so that they are mature and lacking nothing in their character before God (1:2-4).
- That is the idea here – a person whose life is controlled by this wisdom from above has an undivided heart and a character that has been growing and maturing into Christlikeness – thinking like Christ thinks, valuing what He values, and responding like He responds to people and circumstances.
- And out of the character produced and shaped by this wisdom comes a certain kind of conduct.

C. In Conduct – good (3:13b)

By his good conduct let him show his works

- The term “conduct” has reference to a consistent way of life as opposed to a particular deed or occasional act.
- The term “good” has the idea of beauty or beneficial. It points us back to what God’s works were like in Genesis 1 when He looked at all He made and saw it was “good.”

- And the goodness of our conduct/life is to be validated in the display of particular works done in faith generated obedience to God’s Word -- the same works that James referred to in chapter 2:21-25.
- James describes these “works” as being *peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere* (3:17).

IV. The Orientation and Goal of True Wisdom (3:18a)

And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.
(NASB)

A. Its Orientation – sowing seed

Pleasing God by:

- Doing His will
- Embracing His Values
- Advancing His Kingdom

B. Its Goal – reaping righteousness in our lives as well as others

- The righteousness that James has in mind is not the same righteousness Paul has in mind when he talks about justification.
- Rather, James is talking about righteous conduct. Being right with God and with others.
- Clearly this is a huge problem for James’ readers as we will see in chapter 4. And the reason there is so little righteous conduct in the lives of his readers (and perhaps in ours) is they were operating from the wrong wisdom—“wisdom from below.”
- They were striving to get everyone else to do their will. They were living for the wrong values—obtaining their own desires. They were living for and building the wrong kingdom. And as a result, their lives and relationships were marked by the same brokenness/disorder and wickedness/vileness (3:16) that marked the lives of those living in the kingdoms of darkness.

V. The Result of True Wisdom (3:18b)

And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.
(NASB)

- The life of a person who operates from God's Wisdom will be flavored by internal peace of mind and heart and relational peace with others.
- Peace is the full orbbed shalom the Bible describes as a life lived as God intends and for the goals and objectives that God desires His people to live for and strive after.
- It means we are not living for this world and the false, temporary peace it offers. Rather, we are living in this world for the World that is coming when Jesus returns to establish His kingdom.
- People who live this way have joined Abraham in looking for the coming of a city whose builder and maker is God (Heb 11:8-10).
- Like the Thessalonian Christians, they have turned away from the idols of this world to serve the true and living God and to wait for the coming of His Son from Heaven (1 Thessalonians 1:10).
- And while they wait, they are working to exalt His name, extend the gracious offer of His kingdom, and display the beauty of His will by doing that will on earth as it is being done in heaven.
- And what drives these Christians to delay the gratification of their desires, to mortify their flesh, and to sacrifice their rights and even their own lives is the unshakable faith they have in the God who has made promises to them that He will fulfill when His kingdom comes.
- And the spiritual transmission that drives this behavior in the kingdoms of darkness is the wisdom James is talking about!
- People with this wisdom understand that their entire life may be lived as one small moment in God's extended timetable. This is why James describes our life as a vapor – a breath that appears and soon is gone (5:14).
- In other words, we may live our entire life waiting and enduring without seeing the arrival of God's promised Kingdom.
- That is precisely what happened in Isaiah 9 when God assured His people who were living in darkness and gloom that He would bring light to those who lived in darkness (Is 9:1-5). But that light would not dawn and the promised Son (Is 9:6-7) would not appear for 700 more years – and then the Jesus

appeared on the scene and began to shine the light in Galilee of the Gentile to fulfill a 700-year-old promise prophesied by Isaiah (Matthew 4:15-2-17).

- And it means that our entire moment may be just one of many such moments before God chooses to bring the final form of His kingdom.

Conclusion: The requirement for true Wisdom

So, what is required of those who desire this wisdom for themselves?

James tells us – we must ask God. We won't get this wisdom on our own. We won't even get it by reading our Bibles. God will have to open our eyes and reveal this wisdom to us from His Word.

And He will only reveal that wisdom to people who have a living faith that believes Him and is committed to doing whatever He reveals through His Word.

And what this produces in our lives is a whole-hearted, single focused, fully trusting devotion to God that grows out of faith in Him and in His Word!

We can sum it up this way:

- We must know God truly – we must possess a living faith
- We must love God wholly with an undivided loyalty
- We must live for God and for His Kingdom unreservedly
- We must follow God unwaveringly for all of our days in all of our ways

And for that to happen, we must draw near to God, purify our hearts, cleanse our hands, and embrace His Wisdom submissively.