

## **Introduction**

Like many boys, I grew up loving football and dreaming of playing it in college and later in the pros and then coaching it. Although my brother is 5 and half years younger than me, we would go out in our front yard dressed in our football garb and with helmets to punt, pass, kick, run, and tackle. When I outgrew my garb, I transitioned into the role of coach. Now instead of playing against each other, I was drilling and instructing him as to how to play the game. And one of my hallmarks in playing the role was to act angry and scream to the top of my lungs. As a young person I equated coaching with anger and arrogance. It appeared to have been the way things got done. And it is true that a boisterous demeanor does have an impact, but in light of what James teaches us in our text this morning, it is not the kind of impact that accompanies the wisdom from above.

[Read Text and Pray]

It is a human tendency to think better of ourselves than we are. We tend to think ourselves stronger than we are. We tend to overestimate our abilities. It sure has been true of me. When I was seeking entry to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary about 25 years ago I petitioned to enter directly into the Ph.D. program. The professor who would be my supervisor, however, only gave me the option of entering the Master of Theology program first. That would mean about two years of work and completion of that degree first. He explained that the Ph.D. is like a moving freight train, and he wanted me to get a running start. I was disappointed and felt he was underestimating me. However, that first week of class told me that he knew me better than I knew myself.

James appears to have a good knowledge of the Christians to whom he is writing, and it is clear he believes that some of them think highly of themselves when they ought not to. We have seen him challenge his audience to examine themselves in terms of doing the word and not just being a hearer. He also challenged them to take a careful look at their profession to be religious. Then he urged them to examine their faith for the works that will arise out of a faith that is truly alive. James does not want people to be deceived. He does not want them to think more highly of themselves than is warranted. So again this morning we come to a section of this letter where James is calling his readers to take a careful look at themselves—this time in terms of wisdom.

Wisdom is really important as a biblical concern. An entire book of the OT, namely Proverbs, is concerned with this matter. James is well tuned-in to the significance of wisdom. Back in the first chapter, he advised that we ask God for it. So we need wisdom and we need to pursue it through God's provision.

But as surely as the Bible points to the importance of wisdom, it also underscores that wisdom has a counterpart. There is a pseudo-wisdom. It goes under the name of wisdom but wisdom it is not. Proverbs calls it folly. When you turn to Proverbs 9, you see images of two different women. Both have prepared a banquet and they call out for whoever is simple to come in to them and to dine of their delights. The first of these women is called wisdom and the second one is folly. The first declares that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." The second woman entices to sin; her message is that "stolen water is sweet and bread eaten in secret is pleasant."

James also sets before us the two counterparts for wisdom. There is wisdom which truly is wisdom. It comes down from above. It comes from heaven. It is the wisdom God gives. Then there is a wisdom that is not from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, and indeed demonic. It originates from hell. James does not use the word folly, but it seems he has folly in mind when he calls for those who think themselves wise and understanding to step forward. He would have them submit their claims to scrutiny so as to determine if they are legitimate. If their claims are illegitimate, they should not be false to the truth. What they have is not true wisdom.

James' desire for us in these verses is that we seek the wisdom of God and not be deluded by that which falsely goes under the name of wisdom. He desires that there be a harvest of righteousness among us and knows that will never happen if we are captivated by folly. To that end we will consider what James says about true wisdom as distinguished from pseudo-wisdom. We see it in three aspects—wisdom in the heart, wisdom in action, and wisdom in production.

### **I. Wisdom in the Heart.**

A. When the heart of a human being is filled with true wisdom, there is a corresponding disposition which accompanies that wisdom. It is the disposition or attitude of meekness. James refers to the meekness of wisdom as set in contrast to bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in the heart.

The world tends to glory in its talents, achievements, and abilities. Wisdom itself has been a reason for personal pride. But God's word says "let not the wise man boast of his wisdom." In fact the substance of true wisdom promotes NOT pride but humility. Here is how it is. God's word tells us that wisdom begins with fear. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge. Fear refers to a reverential awe of God. It is coupled with the awareness that we are mere creatures but even more than that sinful creatures—creatures who have disobeyed our Sovereign and Creator and who have incurred his just wrath. When sinners fear God in this way, they are poor in spirit; they mourn over their sin. Like Isaiah that we mentioned last week before the holiness of God, they feel woe unto themselves. Yet sinners who have responded to the gospel in faith, have had their shame and guilt removed and atoned for. This provision does not make them proud but humbles them even more. They are astonished at God's amazing grace. Their knowledge of God; their fear of God; their consciousness of forgiveness by God's grace through the cross of Jesus is the foundation of their wisdom, and they are meek from the heart.

The Christian's meekness also follows in the footsteps of Jesus, our Savior and Lord. He described himself as "gentle and lowly in heart." He did not come with a vengeance. He did not come to be served. He came to serve and give his life a ransom although he deserved to be served. He was gentle and compassionate, not arrogant and pompous. He took on the form of a servant though he is King of kings. He took on the form of a law-breaker even though he was the perfect law-keeper. Peter says of him, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree." If you come to Jesus with your sins, he is not standing there with a baseball bat looking to smack you. No, he is urging sinners to come to him with the comfort that he is gentle and humble of heart. He calls them to come to him to find refuge, comfort, and rest! This is the heart of true wisdom.

The person of Jesus displays what meekness is. He humbled himself by becoming a man and as such to be a servant. And that is what a meek heart does. We subdue self for the purpose of a servant attitude first toward God for his glory and then toward others for their welfare.

How opposite is the heart of earthly wisdom! James says, "if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth." In other words, do not suppose yourself to be wise and understanding if these attitudes reside in your heart. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition stand completely opposed to meekness. Fueled by worldly desire for approval and reward and recognition, these heart attitudes are proud, vengeful, harsh, judgmental, angry, malicious, and self-serving. They operate with force by manipulation and control rather than by appeal and invitation and patient exhortation.

Wisdom in the heart translates into meekness. And this is where it starts. James is just kind of amazing when you look at his connections. Just before launching into the subject of wisdom, he had been talking about our speech and where it comes from. He had posed the rhetorical question, "Can a fig tree . . . bear olives or a grapevine produce figs?" Obviously, no. A tree can only produce its own kind of fruit. A vine can only produce its own kind of grape. Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. In other words you can't get fresh water from a salt-water pond. Here are vivid illustrations of the point he now makes about the heart. Meekness starts in the heart. You will never have true wisdom in action if that wisdom has not first got a grasp upon the heart.

The point here is that we are not to try to manufacture the acts of wisdom without first having a heart of meekness. You can attempt to produce meek behavior and you might even can wing it in an instance or two, but it is like sticking fruit on a tree and pretending it grew there. Rather, go to your heart. Take a look there. See if there is bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. Eradicate that first. This is the root of what you do.

Maybe you have slipped back into a selfish mindset. Maybe you have given way to the impulses of the flesh. You need to go to God for forgiveness and cleansing for what is in your heart. You need to cultivate a fresh fear of God, a fresh consciousness of redemption and what that involves. Or perhaps you have never been converted, you need to humble yourself before God. Right now turn to trust in Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection; receive his amazingly gracious gift of salvation. It only comes to a heart of meekness. Drink in the amazing and glorious truth of what it means to be a forgiven sinner! Look out then and see the world of people in a whole different light. See the world as a host of sinners each of whom need the same mercy that you have received. And take up living not for yourself but for the glory and greatness of our great and glorious God.

Next, James directs our attention to . . .

## **II. Wisdom in Action.**

Wisdom from above starts with meekness in the heart, but where there is meekness in the heart, there will be actions which reveal that it is there.

James writes, "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." In verse 17, he goes on to show us what that conduct and what those works look like. He says, "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere." So because of the reception and embrace of true wisdom, there will be meekness in the heart. And from that meek heart will arise good conduct that involves works which are characterized by these eight descriptions.

The first descriptive term is pure. James places this term above the others. The conduct of the truly wise is firstly pure. It refers to being morally blameless. It is behavior that is set apart from the ways of the world. Proverbs 3:7 says, "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil." Just prior to that, verses 5-6 tells us, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not

lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." A meek heart listens to the wisdom of God and behaves accordingly. Purity is turning away from evil in all its forms and embracing the ways of God. We acknowledge God when we listen to him and live accordingly. Wisdom from above is therefore, first, pure. Christ himself is pure. John tells us that "everyone who hopes in Christ purifies himself as Christ is pure." We are talking about holiness in behavior, putting off ungodliness and putting on Christlikeness. That is purity in general.

But there are certain other action characteristics that are attached to wisdom from above. That wisdom is peaceable. It corresponds to a meek heart. It is not combative or quarrelsome. Sometimes, perhaps many times, professing Christians display something significantly wrong when they stand for truth but with a hostile and degrading demeanor. It does not adorn the truth to speak it with an air of angry judgment, and it does not exhibit a meek heart informed by the wisdom of God.

The idea of being gentle is closely associated with being peaceable. Gentleness is how you handle fine china. We have a few dishes in our house. And we have a couple built-in cabinets in the dining room. I know better than to go grabbing dishes out of there like I gather my dirty clothes off the floor. You ever go into an antique shop with fine items, and the sign says, "You break, you buy!" You see the price tag hanging down, and gasp and think to yourself I am not touching anything! But then there is that John Wayne bobblehead you know Pastor Groves would love to add to his collection. You decide you have to check it out but with ever-so-great care because you can't afford to drop it and break something. Gentleness is the care you give to people because they are delicate and precious to God.

Next, James says wisdom from above is open to reason. This means a person has a teachable spirit. It doesn't mean they will fall for anything, but they are willing to think through what another is saying. Instead of rejecting them out of hand, they listen and ask questions before jumping to conclusions. They also are willing to hold their preferences lightly. Rather than being determined to get their way, they are open to the preferences of others.

Wisdom from above is also full of mercy. This quality reflects the realization that we have received more mercy from God than we can ever dish out to others. It recognizes the hypocrisy of accepting mercy without granting it. It sees sinners as needy and helpless as we were apart from Christ and does unto others as we would have them do to us.

Full of good fruits refers to works that are morally good and benefit others. Wisdom from God brims with good works, alleviating suffering, doing acts of kindness.

The ESV word impartial actually points to one who does not waver back and forth. It may indicate that kindness shown does not differ between persons based on worldly matters that are irrelevant to God—things like wealth, health, color of the skin, and such.

Sincere implies it is not a show but an authentic demonstration of meekness and care. The work is not manipulative; it is not designed to curry favor with people but to glorify God.

James sets these acts of true wisdom in contrast to the acts of folly. Actually if we look down into James 4, he points out what arises from bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. He says in verse 2, "You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel." Whereas true wisdom operates with care and sensitivity and gentleness toward others,

pseudo-wisdom kills others with murderous thoughts, words, and actions. Pseudo-wisdom provokes and competes against others. Rather than, in meekness, being for others, it is against them because it is for itself. It is not hard to spot pseudo-wisdom; it is everywhere. It is the way of the world. This way should not be in the church. It should not be among God's people. It should not be in the midst of Christian couples and Christian families.

James calls us to step forward and submit to examination in the light of the acts of true wisdom so that we will not boast and be false to the truth. This is serious! Faith without works is dead. Religion that does not bridle the tongue and care for others and keep unstained from the world is worthless. And wisdom that behaves with self interest and bitter jealousy does not begin with the fear of God. It is no wisdom at all. It is not from heaven. It is unspiritual. It is demonic! Do not kid yourself. Do not be deceived. And on the other hand, be motivated and instructed to add to a heart that is meek actions of meekness. Endeavor to let meekness produce its proper fruit as you relate with others. Be pure. Seek peace. Be gentle and reasonable, full of mercy and good works. Don't waver, and be REAL.

### **III. Wisdom in Production.**

The wisdom of the world that is self-seeking and jealous produces harm and chaos. It divides and embitters. It causes fights and quarrels. It multiplies sin. James declares, "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice." Jealousy and selfish ambition will take you anywhere but closer to God, anywhere but in the direction of godliness. Remember what James said earlier, back in chapter 1? "The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." Your anger and your selfishness and your agenda do not work to encourage holiness. No, they drive people in the other direction. Do not think you are doing people good by trying to manipulate their good behavior. Do not think that your manner with them will be helpful even if you can say you want what is best for them but your real motive is selfish. If you truly care for others and you truly want what is good for them, you will embrace the wisdom from above. And James tells us here how to do it.

He says, "A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." God has a word here for all of us. You do not produce good results by being unpeaceable and offensive! Sledge hammers have their place. They work really good for hammering a wedge into wood to split it. But sledge hammers in the faces of people do the same thing. They splinter relationships apart. What James is saying here is that we should not think to do good in people's lives by bringing out a sledge hammer to try to manhandle them into compliance. That's like taking out a gun and telling someone to believe or else. Badgering people does not produce righteousness. It is not the way of wisdom. Wisdom knows that what needs to happen in the lives of others requires the grace and power of God. Wisdom knows that outward pressure and fighting and quarreling can influence a person to change their behavior for a while but it cannot change their hearts. A man-centered, man-produced outcome is always deficient. What is needed around us is a change of heart. And that comes about by the power of God. We can sow seeds and we can water, but God is the one who produces true growth. True wisdom knows this.

True wisdom then sows the seed in meekness. It desires not what man can do but what God alone can do. A harvest of righteousness is the work of God. The human role in such a harvest is sowing the seed and doing so peaceably. We are not talking about a compromise of truth for the sake of peace. No; the seed that must be sown is the truth. Many will be offended by the truth. James knows this; his concern here is that folks are not kept from the truth because we are prideful and arrogant and make ourselves an offense. God's people, those who are really wise and

understanding, are peacemakers at heart. They are genuine and gentle, patient and passionate, reasonable and full of mercy. They trust in God to do what they cannot. So they are not judgmental and condemning. They go about with an attitude of instruction and peace, and leave the heart-results to God.

Is this your approach in evangelism? Is this your approach when confronting those who oppose your witness? With those who vocally stand for vile ideas and practices? I know it is hard. When folks are inconsistent, and belligerent, when they are behaving with the wisdom of the world, it is tempting to get down and grovel with them and return tit for tat. But it is unwise and ungodly. We must remember that the ultimate reason we differ is not our superiority but God's grace. We are not called to exact vengeance but to offer peace. And you do not offer peace with a sword. True wisdom offers peace in a peaceable manner. It is willing to sacrifice self. It goes that way in marriages, in families, at work, within the church body, in the neighborhood, and with the lost.

A model of this approach is expressed by Paul as he wrote to Timothy about how to conduct himself in the pastoral role. It is in 2 Timothy 2:24. "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness." Paul himself set this example. When he was in Corinth, he did not resort to human methods to try to produce converts. He did not try to show himself impressive. He simply preached Christ crucified. His goal was that their faith would not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. That same determination and hope are what accompanies a true harvest of righteousness. It is sown peacefully by those whose intent is to make peace.

### **Conclusion**

Among the most notorious coaches in the field of sports, some names stand out in a particular category—Bobby Knight, Bobby Cox, Lou Piniella, Bill Belichick, and Nick Saban. These coaches have enjoyed a degree of success in the field of coaching, but they are not known for their meek spirit.

In the arena that really matters, we stand before God. The product we are looking for is not wins in sports but is a harvest of righteousness. That harvest does not come through anger or human manipulation. It is rather produced in true wisdom—a wisdom that begets meekness in the heart, gentleness in action, and righteousness as the final result, to the glory of God. I urge you lovingly and peaceably to pursue such wisdom.

### **Benediction**

Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord. May he by His Spirit bring us to true wisdom and produce in us the glorious fruit of that wisdom—a harvest of righteousness.