

Wisdom, Peace, and Influence

James 3:13-18

This morning we are returning to the book of James. Today's passage is James 3:13-18 in which James asks a very simple question, "Who among you is wise and understanding?" And so I'm posing the same question to all of us today: Who among **us** is wise and understanding?

This is an important question for at least three different reasons. First, I dare say that every one of us wants to be considered wise. Nobody wants the reputation of being foolish/unwise. We all want to be known as the type of person who demonstrates and imparts wisdom. Therefore, in order to avoid self-deception (a major theme in the book of James), we need to be clear about what wisdom actually is.

Second, this topic is important because there are times when each of us needs to seek out wisdom from others. If you seek counsel from a foolish person you are inviting disaster. Therefore, we need to know how to identify those who are wise and understanding among us.

Third, as today's passage will make clear, when wisdom is absent (in a church or a family or a workplace or wherever), there will be all sorts of relational chaos. Genuine wisdom is essential for healthy relationships.

Therefore, for these reasons, we should be passionate about understanding and cultivating wisdom. This is what today's passage addresses.

The structure of James 3:13–18 is rather simple: James first tells how you can identify the person who is wise/understanding; he then gives a rather sobering description of false wisdom (earthly wisdom); finally James describes true wisdom (wisdom from God Himself).

Wisdom is demonstrated by our behavior. (James 3:13)

James begins by asking and quickly answering a question:

13 Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

In the Western world we tend to equate wisdom with knowledge; we tend to think a person is wise if s/he has a wealth of knowledge and can talk about it. But biblical wisdom involves skillful living as much as it does knowledge. Wisdom is certainly founded upon knowledge; but knowledge alone is not enough. "It's possible to make all A's and still flunk out of life." Biblically, a wise person is one who lives well.

Therefore, it's not surprising how James answers his *question: Who among you is wise and understanding?* **Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.** Wisdom is demonstrated by good (or praiseworthy), gentle

behavior. Whether you are young or old and whether you have a little or a lot of formal education, wisdom is demonstrated by your behavior. This is consistent with the way wisdom is described in the Old Testament, especially in the “wisdom literature” of Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord and culminates in skillful living. If you’re wise, you fear the Lord (the last thing you want to do is get on God’s bad side); and if you’re wise, you live skillfully (in a way that’s consistent with God’s design and purposes).

In chapter 2 James said that genuine faith is demonstrated by good works; in a similar way, wisdom is also demonstrated by good behavior. It’s no coincidence that the first twelve verses of James 3 talk about the power of the tongue. The strong emphasis is upon the destructive power of the tongue. If you want to identify who is wise and understanding, notice those whose words bless instead of curse others. Notice those who “make knowledge acceptable” (Proverbs 15:2). Notice what others say and do.

Notice that James speaks of *the gentleness of wisdom*. Gentleness is listed as one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23. In the rest of this passage James will contrast the gentleness of true wisdom with the harshness of the earthly/worldly wisdom. As we’ll see, wisdom bring peace and flourishing to other people; foolishness brings the opposite.

Wisdom is demonstrated by our behavior.

In verses 14-18 James describes false wisdom and true wisdom. Like his half-brother Jesus, James understood that “a tree is known by its fruit” (Luke 6:44). James won’t mention I.Q. or education when he describes true and false wisdom; he will point to the fruit of a person’s life. This is a sobering reality for us to accept: our behavior (and to a slightly lesser extent, the effect of our behavior on others) is an accurate reflection of whether or not we are wise and understanding.

Earthly wisdom demonstrated. (James 3:14-16)

Not surprisingly, he describes a type of behavior that is not good (praiseworthy) and gentle; it is bad (not praiseworthy) and arrogant. He speaks directly to his readers (including us):

14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

If you recognize bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart (that’s where it resides), you lack genuine wisdom. If you have “jealousy,” you cannot take pleasure in the good fortunes of others; when you notice others’ good fortune, instead of “rejoicing with those who rejoice,” you are envious. “Bitter” jealousy implies a more intense self-centeredness. In the workplace bitter jealousy could be centered on another person’s promotion or success; in the church it could be centered on another person’s spiritual maturity or position or influence. The “elder brother” in Jesus’ parable about the prodigal son is a profound example of this.

“Selfish ambition” refers to a type of competitiveness in which you want to get ahead of others at all costs. This is the polar opposite of humility which looks out for the interests of others. It’s possible James still has in mind those he mentioned in 3:1 who “want to become teachers” out of a desire to feel important and influential instead of a humble desire to serve Christ.

If you have bitter jealousy or selfish ambition in your heart, James says, “Do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.” The truth is probably a reference to the gospel which declares that **as an infinite expression of humility** Jesus laid aside His heavenly prerogatives, emptied Himself by becoming one of us, humbled Himself to the point of death (even death on a cross), and afterwards He was raised bodily from the dead and enthroned at the right hand of God above every evil power. The gospel declares that those who believe in Him experience the complete forgiveness of sin and are made eternally alive to God. That is the gospel truth.

I hope you don’t get tired of hearing me say this: **as believers, we are called to embody the gospel**; we are to treat others the way Jesus has treated us. We no longer live for ourselves, but for Him who died and rose again on our behalf. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are incompatible with that gospel. So much so that James says if we have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in our hearts, 1) we are arrogant (we exalt ourselves and look down on others), and therefore, 2) we are lying against the truth of the gospel (instead of embodying the true gospel, our lives are preaching a different gospel).

In verse 15 James draws an obvious conclusion:

15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.

In James 1:5, James established that wisdom is a gift of God. He wrote that if any of you lacks wisdom, ask of God who **gives** generously and without reproach. Expanding on that idea, he said in 1:17 that “every good thing given and every perfect gift **is from above.**” Here in 3:15 when James says that “this wisdom is NOT that which comes down from above,” he’s saying that it’s **not from God.**

Actually, James says, this kind of wisdom is **earthly** (as opposed to heavenly), **natural** (as opposed to supernatural), and **demonic** (as opposed to godly). In mentioning “demonic” James is probably saying that jealousy and ambition characterize the kind of wisdom that demons have. Demons are intelligent spiritual beings. In chapter 2 James said that the demons “believe” that “God is one” yet don’t have genuine faith; here he said that demons have a kind of wisdom that isn’t genuine wisdom.

If I asked you, “Do you have any bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, and arrogance in your heart?” I would guess that almost all of us would say, “Of course not!” But we (myself included) are often blind to our own sins. And we so easily justify sins that other people

can spot a mile away. I have to believe that James is flagging a real issue for followers of Christ, not a hypothetical issue that is irrelevant to us today.

Fortunately James helps us out in verse 16. He tells us how we can know whether we have the intangible sins of jealousy, selfish ambition, and arrogance.

16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

Wherever you have jealousy and selfish ambition - whether in the church or in the workplace or in an organization or in a family - there you will find disorder/instability/chaos. Paul uses this word in 1 Corinthians 14:33 where he wrote that “God is not a God of confusion, but of peace” [in the context of an orderly use of spiritual gifts]. We’ll see in a few minutes that genuine wisdom produces peace. But instead of unity and peace, jealousy and selfish ambition produce disorder.

You will also find “every evil [or worthless] thing.” The sins of jealousy and selfish ambition breed other sins (in that person as well as others affected); I have in mind sins such as slander, division, strife, and anger.

Here’s the point: If you really want to know (and not everyone does) whether you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, evaluate the core relationships in your life and see if there is disorder and evil. Evaluate your relationships in your family, in the church, in the workplace, etc. Not all conflict is the result of our own arrogance, but **many times it is**. Many times when you notice chaos and evil in relationships, you can trace it back to bitter jealousy and selfish ambition and arrogance.

Remember the context: James is helping us identify those among us who are wise and understanding. If you want to be wise, if you want to help others live with wisdom, and if you want peace in relationships, you have to face this directly. We simply repent, turning from our arrogance, ambition, and jealousy and adopting the humility of Christ.

G.K. Chesterton told a parable about a young boy who was given a choice: “he could be gigantic, or he could be miniscule.” The boy made the choice that almost any little boy would make. He chose to be gigantic – really gigantic. He’s a retelling of Chesterton’s parable by Mark Buchanan:

His head brushed the clouds. He waded the Atlantic like a pond, scooped gray whales into his hand and swished them like tadpoles in the bowl of his palm. He strode in a few bounds from one edge of the continent to the other. He kicked over a range of mountains like an anthill, just because he could and he didn’t feel like stepping over it. He plucked a California redwood and whittled its tip for a toothpick. When he got tired, he stretched out across Nebraska and Ohio, flopped one arm into the Dakotas and the other into Canada, and slept in the grass.

It was magnificent. It was spellbinding. It was exhilarating.

For about a day.

And then it was boring. And the gigantic boy, in his boredom, daydreamed about having made the other choice, to be miniscule. His backyard would have become an Amazonian rain forest. His gerbil would hulk larger than a woolly mammoth, and he could ride the back of a butterfly or go spelunking down wormholes. A tub of ice cream would be a winter playground of magic proportions.

Life would have been so much more interesting had he chosen smallness.

(Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God*, p. 99)

Turning from arrogance and cultivating the humility of Christ will make your life more interesting and fulfilling. Embodying the gospel isn't easy, but it's satisfying, it's fascinating, it's fruitful.

Verses 17 and 18 reinforce this reality. James says that those with ***genuine*** wisdom experience peace and promote peace (instead of chaos).

Wisdom from above demonstrated. (James 3:17-18)

Here James answers more fully the question he posed in verse 13, "Who among you is wise and understanding?"

17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.

The wisdom God gives - the wisdom from above - is first and foremost pure - uncontaminated or compromised by evil. This suggests that we deceive ourselves if we think that God has led us to act in ways that compromise His character; the wisdom He gives us is pure.

He goes on to mention qualities that are the opposite of the so-called wisdom he described in verse 15. We won't define each of these terms in detail, but as I read each of them again, notice the contrast with the earthly, natural, demonic wisdom that flows from bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, and arrogance. Instead of producing chaos and evil, the wisdom from above is "first pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy." These virtues are very similar to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.

Verse 18 should give us a vision for the fruit our lives can produce if we have wisdom from above. We experience peace and we promote peace:

18 And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

If you are wise and understanding, you are a peacemaker (not a troublemaker). Being a peacemaker doesn't merely mean you get along with other people. The OT word behind

the NT term peace is *shalom* (wholeness). If you “make peace” you help other people experience wholeness personally and in relationships; your words and actions are so substantive, winsome, and inviting that you influence others to get right with God and with other people.

Like a farmer sows seed in the ground, you sow seeds of peace/*shalom*/wholeness wherever you go. The crop or harvest is righteousness (i.e. right living). The ESV reads:

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

Connect the dots with me. Wise people are peacemakers. Peacemakers say and do things that promote righteousness. Another way to say it is, Wise people make disciples. Wise people follow Christ and teach others to follow Christ. From the vantage point of eternity, that’s what really matters.

Mr. Holland’s Opus is a story about a high school music teacher. Mr. Holland didn’t really want to be a high school music teacher; he wanted to be a great composer. His plan (at age 30) was to teach high school music for a few years just to pay the bills, but on the side he would work on his opus (his masterpiece). He fully expected that his fame and lasting legacy would be this opus.

But things didn’t turn out as Mr. Holland had planned. Due to a variety of factors, he found himself trapped in his position as a high school music teacher. He invested deeply in the lives of his students, all the while, Mr. Holland kept working on his opus.

At the age of 60, after teaching for 30 years, it became obvious that Mr. Holland would never finish his masterpiece, much less experience the satisfaction of having it performed. Adding insult to injury, Mr. Holland was forced into early retirement. On his last day at the school, his wife and his grown son help him pack up his office. As they walk down the halls on their way to the parking lot, they hear music coming from the auditorium. There he finds an auditorium full of people and on the stage an orchestra comprised of former students. They had been practicing the opus that Mr. Holland had been composing for over three decades (but never finished).

Before Mr. Holland was invited to conduct the assembled orchestra, it was pointed out that his “opus” – his masterpiece – wasn’t the music. His opus was that body of students he had influenced along the way – all young men and women whose lives were enriched by their relationship with him.

Something similar will probably be true in your life and mine. Your legacy and the thing for which you’ll be remembered probably isn’t going to be some amazing accomplishment in your career or some history-changing invention. Your masterpiece will probably be the people whom you’ve influenced. As we’ve seen this morning, our influence is a function of wisdom - genuine wisdom from above.