

Faith that Works: Heaven or Earth's wisdom?

James 3:13-18

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~If you say you are wise but live foolishly, you aren't wise and you aren't following Christ~

One of the best pieces of advice I ever received came to me while I was sitting in detention in grade 11.

Mr. Wiens, the principle at Cedars Christian School, was overseeing a group of us who must have done something diabolical though I can't remember the details. But whatever it was that earned me the honour of spending lunch with the principal, it turned out to be one of the best bad things I ever did.

What began with me feeling sorry for myself as I looked out the window at all my friends playing football turned into a profitable conversation. I don't remember how it started, but the punch line was this: "Dan, if you want to be wise then you should read a chapter of Proverbs every day. There are 31 chapters in Proverbs, and so you will read the whole book every month. Do it, it will change your life."

I was intrigued. I wanted to be wise, or perhaps I wanted people to think I was wise, and so I took him up on the challenge. And I read a chapter of Proverbs every day for years.

Now we aren't primarily looking at the book of Proverbs today, but we are going to come back to it in a minute. If you have your Bibles please open them up to James chapter 3. If you didn't bring your own, and don't have one on your phone, then you can use the pew Bible in front of you. You will find James 3 right near the end, on page 855. Please follow along.

[Pray]

If you are joining us today we are in the middle of a series through the letter that James wrote to a church that had been scattered across Asia by persecution. And the theme that runs through his letter is that in order for our faith in God to work, our actions have to line up with what we believe.

Now this doesn't mean that we need to earn God's acceptance in order to be saved. James knows this isn't how salvation works. But he is writing to people who have heard the Gospel and professed faith in Christ, but who he is concerned are deceived into thinking that a profession of faith is all that matters.

And so the central verse in the whole letter comes at the very end of chapter 2 where James writes:

As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.
(James 2:26)

His point is that once a person has encountered the grace of Jesus, the life they live out on the horizontal realm, among neighbours, co-workers and whoever will be transformed. And the result is that while no person earns their salvation – grace always comes down free and is received by faith – but the evidence that our faith is real is seen in the way we live our daily lives. This is faith that works.

Now today James wants to flesh this out in the realm of wisdom. And wisdom is a strange word – it isn't something we talk a lot these days. We live in the information age. So today farmers can grow a 100 times what they could in the 19th century, and yet there are still hunger problems around the globe. Our education system is more advanced than it has ever been, and yet there is just as much or more immorality and suicide and violence than there has ever been. The youngest people in our culture have no problem getting around the internet and working a computer, and yet it seems fewer and fewer people know how to run their lives. There is lots of knowledge, but not much wisdom.

And so if I could put chapter 3:13-18 in a sentence it would be this: **If you say you are wise but live foolishly, you aren't wise and you aren't following Christ.** Let's pick the text up in verse 13:

[Read James 3:13]

"Church," James says, "let's not just talk about stuff, let's live it." And in the verses that follow James lays out that there are two kinds of wisdom that lead to two kinds of life. One of these kinds of wisdom is true wisdom, and the person who lives this out lives well. The other kind of wisdom isn't wisdom at all, and when people live this out it might sound good up front but ultimately it's stupid.

And basically everyone agrees with this. It's pretty hard to find someone who says "I don't think there is a dumb way to live. Whatever you want to do is good for you, and there's no way to mess your life up."

That kind of reasoning might exist in a textbook somewhere, but as soon as you see a person living it out we all agree "hey that's not just personal preference – that's dumb." I'm not going to give you any examples – James doesn't give any. He takes it for granted that we know what foolish looks like. Instead he differentiates the root of the wise life from the root of the foolish life.

Now today's talk is going to be a little different than most. Usually I dig into a specific text – and we will do a little of that near the end today, but in order to really get at the heart of what James is talking about I want to establish two

theological points about the nature of God.¹ And we are going to spend most of our time here today. These are points I have made before so if you have been at Fort George for a bit they should be familiar, but if you haven't then perhaps these ideas may be new.

I want to do this because the more you embrace these two ideas the more full of joy and life you will be. But the further you move away from these two ideas the more miserable you will be. Now that's quite a bold statement so I'm just going to lay these two ideas out and then we will get into them.

The first statement is this: **God is God's first love.** Or you could say "God is for God." And the second statement is this: **God has wired the world such that we find our greatest joy when we join Him in loving God first.**

And today in order to understand the wisdom James presents in our text I want to unpack these two ideas.

So first: **God is God's first love.**

Now if you haven't heard this before it might sound really strange. Like how could God possibly love Himself most of all? Didn't He die for us? And wouldn't God loving God first mean He was kind of like a monstrously huge 2-year old just selfishly demanding His own way or else He will throw an infinite tantrum?

These are fair questions, but I want to show you first that this is what the Bible teaches, and second it is a really good thing that God is God's first love.

So fundamentally when we say God is God's first love we are saying the world isn't about us – it isn't about me. I'm not what God revolves around. Now this is a tough sell in our culture because we want to be the point.

Let me give you an example. When I get home from work, I want to be the point. I want Nikki to drop what she's doing and run to the door and hug me and say "wow, it looks like you put in a hard day, let me rub your feet." And I want her to say "I've got ribs and chicken ready for you, and we will eat when you want. And the kids are gone. I mean they still exist, but they aren't here right now. They are all over with the grandparents, and we can have them back when you want them, but for now tonight is all about you. I just want to make you happy."

Sounds good right? I want that! Or when I'm driving my minivan I want people to get out of the way. It's my road, stop driving slow in the fast lane. Get out of my way. I want to get where I want to go, and I want to get there now!

¹ Outline and content for the following "two theological points" is adapted from Pastor Matt Chandler's sermon "False wisdom, True wisdom" <http://www.thevillagechurch.net/resources/sermons/detail/false-wisdom--true-wisdom/> (Accessed February 25, 2016)

I want life to be about me. Actually we all do. And our culture feeds on this. It says, you deserve a new truck. A man like you shouldn't drive a mini-van! And you should drink this kind of beer because when you do the girl will notice you, and somehow you will have a sweet house and a hot-tub and life will be great and all about you. Have you seen that commercial? It's all the commercials!

And then as Christians we put God in the same mix. So Jesus died on the cross for me. I am so important that He put His desires aside and put me first. He just wants to make me happy, like a gene in a bottle. I just rub a little and poof, He pops out and makes things good.

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Now I've said this in a way that hopefully you see some problems here, but the fact is most Canadians think this way. But this isn't what the Bible says. Now, yes God loves us and wants good things for us. But we are not His primary love. And if we were the universe would spin to pieces because God would be an idolater, we would be God's god.

Now idolatry, for anyone who doesn't know, just means elevating anything that isn't God up to the God spot. The most important thing to you is your god.

And if God isn't the most important thing in our lives then our foundation is broken; we are basing our lives on something that isn't infinite. This is idolatry. And it's the same for God. Only God can be the most important thing in His life in order for Him not to be idolatrous. And so God worships God.

Now this still might just sound crazy, but let me back it up with a couple of texts. So Psalm 23 is one everyone knows. It starts off.

The LORD *is* my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness... (Psalm 23:1-3a
NKJV)

It really sounds like God is into me. He's my shepherd; He gives me what I need. He takes care of me. I must be awesome! But there is more. The second part of verse 3 tells us why He does this. It says:

For His name's sake. (Psalm 23:3b)

So the reason God takes care of me is so that His name will be lifted up. It is so He will be recognized for being awesome. Or Ephesians 1 tells us why God saved us. Paul writes:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual

blessing in Christ. For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, **in accordance with His pleasure and will— to the praise of His glorious grace...** (Ephesians 1:3-6)

God saved us, but our salvation is about His pleasure and will so that His glorious grace will be praised. It's about Him. He's awesome, not us. And the Bible is just full of this idea. I've put a couple other texts in the footnotes – really this idea is all over the place.²

...

Now we get to the real kicker; it's good that God is God's first love. When God is God's first love then He can invite us to make Him our first love too. If we were the most important thing to God then only we would be worth our primary affection. But we all know that when we make our lives about us everyone hurts.

So let me bring you back to that example about me walking into my home and it being all about me. The problem with this seemingly amazing idea is that I am unable to give anything back.

If it's all about me everything has to be just like I like it so I am not free to serve my wife. I'm not free to love my kids. I can't be a good friend. I can't let someone else have what they want. All I can do is get frustrated when things don't go my way. And that's exhausting!

And so here is what we see, people who want the world to revolve around them are always angry, they have high blood pressure. They die early. Basically the more your life is about you, the more miserable you are. So if you want a miserable marriage, be all about yourself. If you want to have no relationship with your kids, just focus on yourself. If you want to be despised at your job, just make sure you are the point of everything. It will work.

...

On top of being miserable if you're the god of your home then you are going to let everyone down. So when my wife centres her life on me then I have to be enough for her. I have to be big enough that her needs get met. And news flash – I'm not that good. I let her down. I let my kids down. I'm constantly having to apologize for missing the mark as a husband and a father and a friend. I'm not worth centering anyone's life around, and neither are you.

² Texts about God doing things for His own glory: Isaiah 48:9-11; 43:6-7; 43:25; 49:3; Jeremiah 13:11; Psalm 106:7-8; Exodus 14:4,17-18; Ezekiel 20:14; 36:22-23, 32 1 Samuel 12:20-22; 2 Samuel 7:23; 2 Kings 19:34; 20:6; Eph 1:12-14; Romans 9:17; 3:25-26; John 5:44; 7:18; 12:27-28; 13:31-32; 14:13; 17:1; Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:12. For a whole bunch more go to: <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/biblical-texts-to-show-gods-zeal-for-his-own-glory>

But it's different with God. God is the only being worthy enough to centre His life around. Everyone else falls short. But He can handle being God. And very unlike a tantruming 2-year old, God is so confident in His position and so infinite in His merits that when we centre around Him we find ourselves basing our lives on the most important and valuable thing in the universe. And as a result our lives are solid, they are full of meaning and joy.

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So the more you are the centre of the universe, the more miserable you will be. But the less the world revolves around you, and the more your world revolves around the only being worth revolving around the more free you are to really live. And this brings us to the second theological point I want to hit today.

So first **God is God's first love**, and second, **God has wired the world such that we find our greatest joy when we join Him in loving God first.**

...

Now most of our culture and even a lot of people in church view God and the Bible as being all about the rules. God is up there saying "all the things you want to do are 'no-no's', just go do something you hate. It builds character." But spoiler alert – this is not what the Bible says. In fact, God wants us to be fulfilled and live the best lives we can, and He establishes the rules of scripture in order to point us in this direction.

So God isn't interested in forcing us to live our lives His way, actually He wants us to want Him. And the way He accomplishes this is by showing us He really is the most desirable thing ever.

It's like if you asked someone with a bad marriage whether or not you should get married. Imagine the scenario, what are they going to say? "Man, marriage is a ball and chain, it's all about getting stuck with someone you never see eye to eye with. I'm going to stay married because the Bible says I have to, but I'm miserable." With that kind of description who is going to say "sign me up for that!" Nobody! But the problem isn't marriage, it's that guy! And if you are pitching Jesus this way the problem is you.

Instead imagine you were around a couple who had been married for 30 or 40 years and weren't enduring each other, they were loving being married. They are still sneaking kisses on the patio. And the guy says "I love this woman. She's amazing, she supports me and helps me and works with me – I just love having her around." And the woman says "I feel safe when I'm with him, he loves me so much. I'm so glad I've got to spend my entire life with him." And then you probably say "yeah, I'd like a bit of that!"

And that's the way it is with God. He says "Live your life My way." But He doesn't want your begrudging obedience because He says so, He wants you to delight in Him. He wants you to make Him your God because this is the best

thing for you. And the word the Bible uses to describe people who figure this out is “wise.” They live their lives the way the Designer says life works best.

Now here is where we come back to Proverbs, because in this book Solomon lays out why following God’s way is wise. So in chapter 9 he says:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10)

Wisdom starts when we fear God, which means when we make Him the most important thing in our life. It is when we put God in the right place that we start to understand everything else.

And then Solomon pictures wisdom as a woman and she speaks saying:

“Now then, my children, listen to me;
blessed are those who keep my ways.
Listen to my instruction and be wise;
do not disregard it.
Blessed are those who listen to me,
watching daily at my doors,
waiting at my doorway.
For those who find me find life
and receive favor from the LORD.
But those who fail to find me harm themselves;
all who hate me love death.” (Proverbs 8:32-36)

So wisdom says “if you do it my way then it’s going to go good for you – this is the way God designed it, and this is really what you want.

...

Alright, that’s the foundation. God is God’s first love, and God has wired the world such that we find our greatest joy when we join Him in loving God first. Now look back at James 3 and His contrast between Heaven and Earth’s wisdom. Let’s pick it up in verse 13 again.

[Read James 3:13-18]

So there are two kinds of wisdom that people live their lives by, in verses 14-16 there is Earth’s wisdom, and in verses 17 and 18 we get Heaven’s wisdom. Let’s lay them out.

Earth’s wisdom is against everything we have spent the whole first part of this sermon talking about. It’s marked by bitter envy and selfish ambition. It’s all about being at the center of your own life and making sure the world revolves around you. If people are living in this kind of wisdom and consider themselves Christians then they think God is all about them too – He centers His life around them. But ultimately God isn’t that important because, after all if He is centering His life around mine then I’m the most important thing in the universe.

And people like this are pretty touchy. They say “Hey don’t tell me how to live, don’t judge me, I’m living the life that is good for me.” They boast about this. But they boast in spite of the fact that their world is falling down around them. And it has to be. We’ve already said that when we find ourselves at the center of all our relationships the result is absolute misery. And so they find themselves boasting any lying! Have you met people who are doing it their way, and say they are having fun even though it’s obvious their life is a mess?

James says this kind of wisdom doesn’t come from heaven so check yourself to see if this is you. And he gives three tests:

First, James says this wisdom is earthly so it isn’t interested in what is eternal, it’s just focused on the now. So look at the decisions you are making, think specifically about your relationships, your finances and your time. Are your relationships and the things you spend your time and money on going to last, or are they all about now? 100 years from now we are all going to be dead. Will what you have lived your life for still matter? If not then you are living by wisdom that hasn’t come from heaven.

Then James says this kind of wisdom is unspiritual so it only cares about what it can see and touch. This person might talk about God, but they don’t make decisions with Him in mind. So when you make your plans or your church’s plans is your first thought “this is what I want, and what I can afford,” or do you say, “I’m going to do what God wants because I trust this is going to be good for me. I’m betting all my chips on God and the miraculous.”

And finally James says this kind of wisdom is demonic. When we make God a side-thought – when He is just part of our lives instead of at the centre – this isn’t just some smart human idea, this is Satan’s idea. Satan is all for having God in the picture if He is only part of the picture. He loves that deception because the truth is God will either be our God, or He will have nothing to do with us at all. God isn’t an idolater, and He isn’t going to share His role as God with anything. He won’t stand by and say “no, no that’s fine, you sit on the throne of your life, I’m just happy that you are paying a bit of attention to me one day a week.”

No, God is holy; He’s not desperate for our affection. He wants us to love Him, because He knows that is good for us, but if we aren’t interested in that He won’t force Himself on us. He will let us go.

So that’s the warning. Don’t live your life by false wisdom because it is going to go badly for you here on earth, and then it is going to go badly for eternity.

...

And then James points us to heaven’s wisdom. And he says this wisdom is pure – it’s a life that’s 100% about God, not 99% percent about God and 1% about me or anything else. It’s all in. It loves peace. It is able to be considerate and put others first. It doesn’t have to have its own way, it can submit.

And this kind of life is beautiful. It can sincerely give mercy and impartial justice away. This is what a life full of heaven's wisdom looks like. And people who live this way leave a trail of life and joy behind them. This is faith that works.

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So let me conclude with three brief points for how we can get heaven's wisdom.

First, we need to ask for it. In James 1 he said:

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. (James 1:5)

This is what Solomon asked for when God said He could have anything. And it pleased God that he asked for this.³ So pray. If you want God's favor; if you want to get what the good God has for you then don't trust yourself, ask for heaven's wisdom.

Second, get to know God. Plug into your Bible. Set aside time in your day to read it and pray, and then do what it says. Proverbs says:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Proverbs 1:7)

Don't hate what is good for you - love it. Love God; put Him first. Make Him God in your life. If you do you will be centering your life around the only thing in the universe worthy of your centre. And when you make the First Thing first you will find the joy God wants for you – trust Him.

And third, get into community. Proverbs says:

Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory (Proverbs 11:14 NASB)

So surround yourself with wise people who have great relationships with God - people who have faith that works – because it's going to be contagious, and you are going to find yourself picking it up. On the other hand if you surround yourself with fools you are inviting a beating.⁴ So go to your care group, get to know godly people. And let their faith rub off on you.

Brothers and sisters, James says don't just talk about being wise and then live foolishly, put God and His desires for you first. Do what He says, this is faith that works.

³ 1 Kings 3:7-9

⁴ Proverbs 13:20