

Wise Faith

James 3:13-18

Introduction

Our scripture passage is about two types of wisdom, so I thought it would be fun to share with you some advice I found on the internet that I will get you into trouble if you do follow it:

“Carry a fork with you. If someone tries to rob you, pull it out of your pocket and say, ‘thank you Lord for this meal I’m about to have’ and charge at them with the fork.”

“Always say what you're thinking out loud.”

"Don't breathe, 100% of people who breathe die at some point."

"Don't go to the doctor's office if you only have one problem. Wait until you have four or five; that's how you get the most bang for your buck."

“If life gives you lemons, squeeze the juice into a water gun and shoot other people in the eyes.”

"When confronted by a bear, give it a hug and tell him it'll be alright."

We laugh at these bits of “wisdom” I found on the internet because they are so foolish they are comical. In James 3:13-18, we are reminded of two sources of wisdom, and of the two, we as a species gravitate to one over the other.

Wisdom is the application of knowledge. According to James 3:13-18, not all wisdom is good.

The Source of Worldly Wisdom

What is worldly wisdom? James says that it is, “**earthly, natural, and demonic**” (v. 15). Well that sounds a bit harsh does it not? Let’s dive a bit deeper into what James means here before we judge whether or not he said too much. The kind of wisdom that is earthly, natural, and demonic is the kind that is motivated and driven by, “**bitter jealousy and selfish ambition**” (v. 14).

So what is “bitter jealousy” and what does it look like? The Greek word for “jealousy” is... are you ready for it? The Greek word is “*zēlos*.” Do you think there may a better way to translate this word? Of course you do, a better translation for this word is our English word “zeal”! Zeal can be positive or negative. The prophet Elijah was zealous for God is a good way, and that zeal was demonstrated on multiple occasions by standing against evil and speaking on behalf of God, even when it was not safe for him to do so; when his life was threatened by Queen Jezebel, Elijah prayed: “**I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of armies; for the sons of Israel have abandoned Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. And I alone am left; and they have sought to take my life**” (1 Kin. 19:10).

Zeal can also become a bad thing. Zeal can turn into bitterness, rivalry, and even pride. In the case of James 3:14, it is a “harsh zeal” that places the individual at the center of his universe at whatever cost may come to those around him. The kind of “bitter Jealousy” (harsh zeal) James is talking about is self-centered. The person with this kind of mindset is one whose glory and mission in this world is his own.

The other source for worldly wisdom is “selfish ambition.” There is not much I need to say to make sure you understand what “selfish ambition” is. It is the kind of thing we see every four years in America: How do I make sure I get what I want.” There is only one Greek word that is used here for “selfish ambition,” and it is “*eritheia*.” In ancient Greek it means strife, contentiousness, and selfishness. It is a word that was also used by the Greek Philosopher Aristotle to describe a “self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means.”¹ It is used in the New Testament to describe the jealous or angry leader who, “forms a group which emotionally or physically withdraws from the rest of the church.”² These are the kinds of people Paul described in Philippians 1:15-17, **“Some... proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking that they are causing me distress in my imprisonment.”**

There are varying degrees that “bitter jealousy” and “selfish ambition” can come into the life of a person, but none of it is from God. Even the best of us can cave to the kinds of vices that lead to worldly wisdom. Consider some of the people from the Bible such as Abraham, David, and Solomon.

God told Abraham that he would father a child with Sarah, but because pregnancy seemed impossible to the couple, Sarah came up with another plan that was culturally acceptable. Sarah said to her husband: **“See now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please have relations with my slave woman; perhaps I will obtain children through her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai**” (Gen. 16:2). So, the slave woman got pregnant and had a son and what Abraham got in return was one big giant mess that we are still dealing with today.

David wrote much of the Psalms that are in our Bible, and he knew his Bible pretty well! He understood what God’s word said of Israel’s kings in Deuteronomy and most likely had memorized it. He knew that as king, he was not to acquire the kinds of properties the kings of the other nations collected to measure their glory and strength such as many horses or many wives, nor was he to hoard silver and gold (see Deut. 17:16-20). We know David knew this because he even wrote a song about it that included the verse: **“Some praise their chariots and some their horses, but we will praise the name of the LORD, our God”** (Ps. 20:7). Yet at the height of his reign as king, he conducted a census to measure the strength of his nation instead of trusting the God who told Him that his power did not come from numbers but from God alone.

Can you see what Abraham and David’s stories all have in common? They followed after the wisdom of the world instead of trusting the word of God as their source of wisdom. Abraham wanted a son so badly and for his legacy to go on, so he took matters into his own hands and got his female slave pregnant. David conducted a census just like the other kings did because he

¹ Peter H. Davids, [*The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 151.

² *Ibid.*

needed to know how he and his nation compared to other nations. If you listen closely to the pages of scripture you can hear the serpent's question with these men: **"Has God really said...?"**

The wisdom of the world would lead you to an easier and wider road rather than a narrow and more difficult one. The wisdom of the world would have you erect a house on sand instead of spending the time necessary to lay a good foundation.

Heavenly Wisdom

Unlike worldly wisdom, the kind of wisdom that leads to the thriving life God created us to know and enjoy does not come from within, or from this world, or beneath; it comes from above where God is seated. The wisdom from above is **"pure, peace-loving, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy, impartial, free of hypocrisy, and full of good fruits"** (v. 17).

From where does "heavenly wisdom" come from? It comes from God! Where can I gain this kind of wisdom? From the counsel God has already given, which is His word. We already saw in the first chapter that those of us who lack wisdom, are to ask God for it without doubting (1:5-6); the source of the kind of wisdom we need comes from the word of God. We gain wisdom from above when we first listen to what God has said through His word and then become a doer of it by putting what we read into practice (see 1:21-25).

But here is the thing... there is no wisdom from above if you do not have the kind of faith that moves you to really trust the truth of God's word. It is one thing to say you believe the Bible to be true and another to act upon that belief. Think for a moment about what we say we believe at Meadowbrooke; this is what we state on our webpage about the Bible:

We believe the Bible, including the Old and New Testaments, is the divine revelation, the original autographs of which were verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit, thus rendering them trustworthy and solely authoritative in faith and practice (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet. 1:20-21). The Scriptures reveal the mind of God concerning the need and the method of human redemption, the character and destiny of mankind, and are "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (Jn. 5:39, 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The more important question is not if we are okay with that statement, but do we really believe it? The Bible testifies of itself: **"All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man or woman of God may be fully capable, equipped for every good work"** (2 Tim. 3:16-17). In the book of Hebrews, we are told, **"For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, even penetrating as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart"** (4:12). But do you really believe it to be what it claims?

If you believe the Bible to be the word of God and that it is beneficial for teaching, for correcting, and training in righteousness, then how is it shaping your choices in life, what kind of influence is it having on your relationships, how does it affect how you behave and function at work? Do you believe the Bible to be the word of God even if what it tells you to do with your life makes no sense to those around you and the rest of the world?

Think about some of the things that God told His people to do. God told Abraham to leave his home in Ur and promised him a child, even though he and his wife Sarah were quickly advancing in age to the point that fathering a child would be highly improbable. The conventional wisdom of Abraham's day suggested that he father a child through one of his servants, but that was not the promise God made to Abraham. God promised a son that would be both his and Sarah's, and in their old age God provided an heir.

God used men who acted upon the word of God when others thought they were nuts. Men like Moses who God commissioned to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. Men like Joshua who God told to march around Jericho a bunch of times while blowing seven trumpets and then on the seventh day after the seventh time around the city to shout to bring down the walls of the city. Men like Gideon who God ordered to cut his army of 32,000 soldiers down to 300 to face an army of at least 135,000; each of Gideon's soldiers were to carrying a torch, a clay pot, and a trumpet that they would blow after breaking the clay pot at night while surround the 135,000 Midianite army and then shout: **"A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"** and this would be the way they would defeat an army that outnumbered them by 440 to 1 (see Judges 7:1-8:10).

God raised a shepherd boy whose own father and brothers did not think much of to be a king over Israel, and it would be through his descendants a savior would be born who would rule the nations. God spoke through unlikely prophets of old, and choose an unassuming and impoverished virgin girl and her fiancé to raise up the promised Messiah that she alone would be the biological parent of, and the child would grow up and live the life we could never live in a little country about the size of New Jersey for the purpose of suffering on a cross and dying under the wrath of God a death we all deserved. This is why the apostle Paul wrote, **"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"** (1 Cor. 1:18).

God's wisdom is different! Not only is the wisdom of God different, but it is in a whole different category than the wisdom of the world. In what way is it different? We are told in verse 17, **"But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, free of hypocrisy."** God's words and His ways rub against the grain of the world's conventional wisdom and is the reason the prophet Isaiah wrote of God, **"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, declares the LORD"** (55:8). The question for you, dear brothers and sisters, is what are you doing with it, or maybe a better question for some of you is, "What will you do with His word?"

Conclusion

What wisdom is guiding you? What wisdom is shaping your decisions? What wisdom are you applying to your marriage, your children, and your friendships? James is not offering us an option here, for what the Holy Spirit is showing us in James is that if you belong to Jesus, then you have no business with the kind of wisdom that is earthly, natural, and demonic. Why, because we are kingdom people!

I told you that I believe what James is doing is simply applying Jesus' sermon on the mount to everyday life. I have shared with you repeatedly that the way you come to Jesus is as one who is poor in spirit, one who mourns over sin, and one who is meek enough to lay you pride before the

cross of Christ. These are the first three of Jesus' beatitudes and are what theologians call, the beatitudes of need. The fourth beatitude is the fruit of the first three: **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied"** (Matt. 5:6).

How can I be satisfied? By finding my satisfaction in the One who is infinitely righteous and from whom true wisdom is found. What does a hunger and thirst for righteousness produce when that hunger and thirst is satisfied in Jesus? It produces what theologians call the beatitudes of action. I will pick up on this next Sunday, but for now I think it is enough for you to see what James is doing with wisdom and our Lord's beatitudes. What kind of fruit does wisdom from above produce? It is pure, peace-loving, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy, impartial, free of hypocrisy.

- **Pure:** *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will receive mercy"* (Matt. 5:8).
- **Peace-loving:** *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God"* (Matt. 5:9).
- **Gentle (meek):** *"Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth"* (Matt. 5:5).
- **Reasonable (compliant):** *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt. 5:3).
- **Full of mercy:** *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy"* (Matt. 5:7).
- **Impartial / free of hypocrisy:** *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted"* (Matt. 4).
- **Full of good fruit:** *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied"* (Matt. 5:6).

My question for you is what are you doing with the wisdom that comes from above? It is the wisdom from above that calls those who follow Jesus through the narrow gate instead of the broad gate (Matt. 7:13-14). The wisdom from above calls the Christian to build upon the rock instead of sand (Matt. 7:24-29). The wisdom from above calls us to action in such a way that we do not only call Jesus Lord but live in subjection to His lordship (Matt. 7:22-21).

The wisdom that is earthly, natural, and demonic will lead to death. The wisdom from above will lead to the kind of living where you can truly thrive as a child of God. Some of you may need to turn from whatever wisdom that has been guiding you, by humbling yourself before God Almighty. I will leave you with James 4:3-4 and you can do with it what seems best in light of what we have considered today: **You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend what you request on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."**