

We are looking at James 3:13-18, and the topic is wisdom. James sets before us two kinds of wisdom: false wisdom and true wisdom. James tells us there are really two ways to live. You can live according to false wisdom, which the Bible often calls foolishness. Or you can live according to true wisdom.

Nowhere is the difference between false and true wisdom more apparent than in the Christmas story. I mean, God has always had a plan to establish his kingdom on earth. That, of course, required invading this planet and defeating and abolishing evil. That's a monumental task. How would God pull it off?

It's a bit like the invasion of Normandy on D-Day in 1944. A lot was at stake. The Germans, under Hitler, wanted to take over all of Europe. They were in the process of killing six million Jews. So what did we do? We sent more than 150,000 troops to the initial invasion, with 6,900 vessels, 4,100 landing craft, and 12,000 airplanes. Two weeks later, we put another 315,000 soldiers ashore. Ten thousand tons of bombs were dropped on German defenses.

With an even more monumental task than the Allied forces had to defeat Germany, you'd think God would use the same tactics. I mean, this is the ultimate cosmic struggle between good and evil, and it's not Germany's rule but Satan's rule over the earth. But how did God invade this dark planet? He did not use massive logistical support and vast armies, but rather, he invaded in a way that confounded and perplexed the wisdom of this world. He sent a baby, born to a poor couple from a backwater town called Nazareth. It was a quiet invasion. The Jews in Palestine were expecting a Messianic invasion like D-day — conquerors in armor, bringing a sword to set the people free from oppression. But instead, they got a child who grew up in obscurity, worked as a carpenter, and eventually, after just three short years of public ministry, was falsely accused and nailed to a Roman cross where he died.

There are two kinds of wisdom: the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God - false wisdom and true wisdom. And, make no mistake; the wisdom of God appears as foolishness to this world. That's why the apostle Paul wrote,

“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate’” (1 Cor. 1:18-19).

In the same vein, James contrasts these two kinds of wisdom. And he does this because he wants us to be able to see through the wisdom of this world and live according to true wisdom. This was a big issue for the churches he wrote to. We've already learned some people claimed to have faith, to be wise, but there were no good works to back it up. We also learned some of them were teachers, who used their platform to talk about God but to curse others in the same breath. James says, “This should not be” (James 3:10).

And so, following that, he says, “Listen, true wisdom doesn't act like that. Let me show you what true wisdom looks like in contrast to what's false. And let me show you where it comes from and the harvest it produces.” James wrote,

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.
James 3:13-18

There are four things James wants to communicate about wisdom, and each of these is crucial for us to get if we're going to live wisely.

Wisdom isn't about what you know but how you live

The first thing James wants to communicate is that wisdom isn't about how much you know but how you live. That's the point made in verse 13. He starts with a question: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” The word he uses for wise is the Greek word *sophia*. We get our word sophisticated from this. It means “right living.”

It's also interesting the word he uses for understanding is only found here in the entire New Testament. It was used in Greek writings outside the New Testament to describe someone with know-how, someone who knows what they're doing, someone skilled. Here James is talking about being skilled at living. Isn't

that what we all want? We want to know how to live well. Instinctively, we know you can be a person with a very high IQ and with degrees from the best universities and still not be skilled at doing life. You can be incredibly talented in some areas. You can be able to throw a football 60 yards on a dime, or sing like Aretha Franklin but still not be skilled at doing life. And that's what James is talking about — skilled living.

And that's the point he makes when he says, *"Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."* You see, it's not about what you know or how good you are at doing something, it's about living a good life. The word James uses for good isn't the normal word for good. The common word for good meant morally good. But this word means good in the sense of being beautiful. Jesus used this word when a woman poured expensive perfume on his head. The disciples thought it was a waste of money, but Jesus said, *"Leave her alone... She has done a good/beautiful thing to me"* (Mark 14:6). It wasn't an efficient thing; it wasn't even a prudent thing, but it was a beautiful gesture of love. Who is wise and understanding? The one who lives a beautiful life.

But what does that look like? James says this beauty is seen in "deeds done in the humility of wisdom." Again, it's not about what you know but how you live, and that means doing deeds in humility. That word humility is better translated meekness. Remember, Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek" (Mt. 5:5). He even said of himself, "I'm meek and humble at heart" (Mt. 11:29). Meekness wasn't a well-respected trait in Greek thought. One Greek writer listed meekness as the first among moral faults. One modern dictionary defines meekness as "deficient in courage." Another says, "Overly submissive; spiritless." When we think of meekness, we think of a cross between a wimp and a wallflower. Charlie Brown might have been meek, but he didn't win many baseball games.

But that's not what Jesus or James meant by meekness. Meekness isn't weakness. Meekness is strength under control, power that's tamed and submissive to someone greater than ourselves. Take Moses, for example. Here's a guy who stood before Pharaoh and started a revolution; who led 2.5 million rebellious Jews through the wilderness; who got so mad, he smashed a rock that God told him just to touch. Yet, in Numbers 12:3, he's described as "very meek, more than any man on the face of the earth." Moses was meek because, at his best, his strength was under control and in submission to God.

Wisdom is relational

So that's the first thing about wisdom: it's not about how much you know but how you live. The second thing to know about wisdom is it's relational. You see, wisdom is the ability to build healthy relationships. We see this first in how he describes false wisdom in verse 14. The bogus wisdom of the pseudo-wise

harbors "bitter envy and selfish ambition." He points to the same two things in verse 16. If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition, you won't build healthy relationships.

First, there's "bitter envy." We can be so wrapped up in ourselves; we see everyone as a rival. When someone else prospers or does something impressive, we become jealous. Oh, we may smile and congratulate them, but deep down, we're seething. "That should have been me. Why do they get all the breaks?"

The terrible twin of bitter envy is "selfish ambition." Not all ambition is bad. There's a place for wanting to grow and advance and take on more responsibility. But this can easily become selfish. How easily can it become all about me? How easily can we slip into doing whatever we think is necessary to advance our standing and agenda? How easily can we manipulate situations to put ourselves in a better light, all the while coming off as very humble and self-effacing? Believe it or not, this self-promoting disease spreads, particularly in churches and Christian ministries, and it destroys relationships. Hudson T. Armoring wrote,

"I'm persuaded that much of the confusion and conflict which besets the Christian church today is not due to great issues of theology. Instead, it is because brilliant leaders have not been willing to act with meekness. Instead, they have gained a following and then, to maintain this following, have felt obliged to discredit those who would oppose them."

James calls this what it is: bitter envy and selfish ambition — false wisdom. On the other hand, true wisdom builds healthy relationships. Look again at what he says in verse 17,

"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

Those are all qualities that foster a healthy community. We don't have time to look at this entire list one by one but notice a couple of things about it. Notice true wisdom is "first of all pure." This quality is positioned first because it's the overarching attribute of all the rest. To be pure means to be single-minded and unmixed in your devotion to God. This is important because we shouldn't think we have to compromise what's right in God's eyes to get along with others. You can be both pure and peaceful.

And that leads to another thing I want you to notice about this list. All of the other qualities he talks about have one thing in common — they're all qualities that express in different ways the skill of bringing peace into relationships. That's why after pure, he says peace-loving. If you're going to be peace-loving in a combative situation, if you're going to be what he describes as considerate, you'll be a person, who though wronged, will forgo your right to get even. You'll be the kind of person who believes the best about others and gives them the benefit of the doubt.

He even says you'll even be submissive. Who wants to be submissive? Who wants to give in? Then he says, "Full of mercy and good fruit." Who wants that? I want justice, not mercy. I want people to pay.

You see, all these things require one thing of me — to recognize life is not all about me. I'm not at the center of the solar system; God is. The more your life is all about you, the more relational conflict you'll have. You'll not build healthy relationships, but toxic ones.

Over Thanksgiving, we were in Utah with our kids and grandkids. Now I love my grandchildren, and they wanted to see *Frozen 2*. So, Lynn and I took our nine-year-old granddaughter and five-year-old grandson to see it. I like movies, and I love my grandkids, but this was a commitment. I'm watching *Frozen 2* with 300 screaming little girls. I've got the tub of popcorn that costs as much as dinner out at a fine restaurant. And of course, each kid needed something to drink. And then halfway through the movie, one of my grandkids had to go to the bathroom, and I was chosen to go with. I didn't want to do it because I was actually starting to like the movie! And of course, that meant climbing through a whole row of screaming children, who were now screaming at me because I was blocking their view.

Now, if my life is all about me, not only am I going to have a miserable time, but I'll make everyone around me miserable as well. If it's not about me, I can be considerate, submissive, peaceful, and full of mercy.

Or think about marriage. I mean, I come home from work, and I want it to be all about me. I want to have dinner all made. I want to watch my favorite TV shows. I want everything on my terms. But Lynn says, "Hey, we need to get the Christmas lights up." Or "Hey, I need you to get that stuff down from the attic." Or, "I invited so-and-so over for dinner. They really need our help." Or, "We're watching the grandkids tonight." And, I'm like, "That's not in my plan. My plan is what matters here." Why? Because life is about me. Well, that kind of thinking doesn't work.

Let me share a secret with you. Are you ready? Not only is life not all about you, but God is NOT all about you. He loves you, and he cares about you, but he's not all about you. The fact is God is all about God. In human terms, that sounds selfish, but not with God. You see, he created us in such a way that we only become truly happy, content, and peace-loving when we get that. So wisdom is relational. But this is hard. This is hard because none of this stuff comes naturally to any of us. So where can we get acquire this kind of wisdom?

Wisdom has a source

This brings me to the third thing about wisdom: wisdom has a source. In verse 15, he says false wisdom is earthly, spiritual, and

demonic. How's that for a bloodline? Earthly means there's no consideration for what God might want or even what God says is true. It's a worldly mindset.

Unspiritual means natural. Paul used this word when he says, "*A natural (unspiritual) man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them...*" (1 Cor. 2:14). A natural man depends not on God but on his flesh. Finally, James ruthlessly unmasks this false wisdom and says it's demonic. It's demon inspired.

So false wisdom, that which often looks so good to us, comes from the world, the flesh, and the devil. All this stuff we hear about every day, such as, how it's all about me, and how I ought to do whatever I need to do to find happiness on my terms is a lie from the pit of hell.

On the other hand, he says true wisdom "comes from heaven" (verse 17). That means it comes from God. So the only way I can embrace this true wisdom that builds relationships is by receiving it from God. The only way I can become pure, peaceable, considerate, submissive, full of mercy, good fruit, impartial, and sincere is by receiving these qualities from God. It starts vertically, not horizontally. How can I be a peace-loving person unless I first know I have peace with God? How can I be full of mercy towards others unless I know how God has been so full of mercy towards me? How can I submit myself to others if I haven't first submitted myself to my God? How can I be generous with you if I haven't first understood how generous God has been with me?

On one occasion, Abraham Lincoln wanted to appease a certain politician, so he issued a command to transfer certain regiments during the Civil War. When his Secretary of War, Edward Stanton, received the order, he refused to carry it out and called Lincoln a fool. When Lincoln heard this, he replied, "If Stanton said I'm a fool, then I must be, for he is nearly always right. I'll see for myself." Lincoln soon saw Stanton was right, and he then changed his original order. That's wisdom. But where did he get this wisdom? Listen to what Lincoln himself once said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for the day."

If you want true wisdom, start with God. That's what Proverbs tells us. It says, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding*" (Proverbs 9:10). The fear of the Lord isn't about being scared of God. It's reverence for God. And our reverence for him grows even more when we realize how gracious he is. Psalm 130:4 says, "*But you offer forgiveness, that we might learn to fear you.*" I don't fear God because I'm scared of him. I fear God because he's been so merciful to me; I revere him even more and want to please him. Again, I see that he's at the center of life, not me. Wisdom has a source; it comes from God.

Wisdom is recognized by the harvest it produces

Here's the last thing: Wisdom is recognized by the harvest it produces. Look again at verse 16,

“For where you have bitter envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” The harvest or fruit of false wisdom, of bitter envy and selfish ambition, is “disorder and every evil practice.”

I get this because I'm a fixer. Fixers try to fix problems, and when we do that in the flesh when we do that without prayer, and without wisdom, we make things worse. We produce disorder and chaos and every evil thing. When you see those qualities, you know something is off. Think of all the anger we see around us today. Where does this come from? What is it telling us? There's road rage, airplane rage, grocery store rage, and violence at youth sports events.

On the other hand, true wisdom produces a different harvest. Look again at verse 18, *“Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”* How do you tell the difference between true and false wisdom? You tell the difference by what they produce - by their fruit. Those who are wise will sow peace and see a harvest of righteousness and goodness.

I heard a story about two people fighting rush-hour traffic in Washington, D.C. One morning, a young lady darted her compact car from a side street into the stream of traffic immediately in front of a driver, forcing him to brake sharply. He avoided hitting her by inches and was furious. Within seconds, traffic stopped at a red light, and he pulled up behind her, got out from his car, and strode angrily toward hers. Clearly, he intended to give her a royal bawling out. Seeing him come, this attractive young lady jumped from her car and ran to meet him with a big smile on her face! Before he could say one word, she threw her arms around him, hugged him tightly, and planted a big kiss right on his lips! Then she went back in her car and drove away, leaving the guy standing in the middle of the street speechless and a bit embarrassed, but no longer angry!

“Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” Are you sowing in peace in your marriage, hard relationships at work, with that neighbor whose dog won't stop barking and waking you up in the middle of the night? It may take a while, but if you sow peace, you'll reap a harvest of righteousness.

Four things: Wisdom isn't about how much you know but how you live. Wisdom is relational. Wisdom has a source. Wisdom is recognized by the harvest it produces.

The December 2013 issue of GQ magazine had two quotes that present two starkly different kinds of wisdom. In the first quote, the actor Matthew McConaughey, named GQ's Man of the Year, argues, “I'm a fan of the word selfish... Selfish has gotten a bad rap. You should do for you.”

A few pages later, GQ quotes an award-winner fiction writer named George Saunders, who was named Life Coach of the Year. Saunders says, “The big kahuna of all moral questions, as far as I'm concerned, is ego. How do you correct the fundamental misperception that we are all born with, i.e...., I am central? All of the nasty stuff in this life comes out of that misunderstanding.”

False wisdom: Life is all about you. You should do for you. True wisdom: Get over yourself. Life is all about God and the wisdom of God. The wisdom that's best seen on a cross is foolishness to man. What kind of wisdom will you choose?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1441-8FC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, December 8, 2019 at Central Peninsula Church.

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