

Two VERY Different Kinds of Wisdom

Imagine that I held up two chocolate bars in front of you and explained that, even though both of these bars look the same, one of them is actually laced with poison and will make you very sick. Then, imagine that I offered them to you. Would you then take both chocolate bars and eat them one at a time to discover which one had the poison, OR would you instead ask me to give you only the pure one and enjoy it without getting sick? That's a strange scenario, but it's similar to the situation that James puts us in today.

James 3:13-18

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

In this passage, James informs us that there are two different types of wisdom. These two types of wisdom may sometimes present themselves as being very similar, but when you consider their origins and their results, you'll see that they are complete opposites.

They are the wisdom that comes from above and the wisdom that does not come from above, but rather comes from below, if you will. Let's look at these two types of wisdom and then what we are supposed to do in light of this.

First of all, what is wisdom? That is not as easy of a question to answer as you might think, but looking at this passage, James seems to have in mind a general understanding of the things of life; knowing how life works. "Who is wise and understanding among you?" Who gets it? Who is able to teach and explain spiritual things and advise others on the proper way to live and to understand or relate to God and others? It's a rather general sense of wisdom, but one that includes spiritual understanding for sure.

So, he poses the question of "who is wise among you?" and immediately challenges those who would say that they are to prove it with their actions: **¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.**

Just like James did with the topic of faith, he now wants to subject the so-called wise to a test of validity. If you say that you are wise and have understanding, let's put that to the test and see whether or not it is true. And so, the first thing you see on the MAP is that: **Wisdom should be tested by examining its fruit.** The test is whether or not your wisdom produces the proper fruit, which James defines as "good conduct done in the meekness [or humility] that

true wisdom brings.” We’ll come back to that because he now turns to a description of the other kind of wisdom.

¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

There is a type of wisdom that can be rightly labeled as “hellish wisdom”. I say this because in verse 15, James tells us that this wisdom is not the wisdom that comes down from above (which we’ll call “heavenly wisdom”), but rather is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. Those three words point us to what Christians recognize as our triune enemy: the world, the flesh, and the Devil. As followers of Christ, we are, at every turn, engaged in an ongoing battle with that three-fold enemy. The world is the order and way of doing things in our society that is, at its roots, opposed to God and His way of doing things. The world is a sworn enemy of our Heavenly Father. That does not mean that everything in the world is evil or wrong or that the world never does anything right, but at the root level, the world is opposed to God and everything else is, at the very least, tainted by that opposition.

Take Iran, for example. Iran is a sworn enemy of the United States. Their leaders say as much. They lead rallies against the U.S. and chant “death to the U.S.” and all kinds of fun stuff like that. Nonetheless, not everything they do and say is a complete act of defiance against the U.S. In fact, we have many things in common. Many of the things we call good, they would call good as well. But at the root level, the nation of Iran is a sworn enemy of the U.S., and so it is with our world and the Kingdom of our God.

This wisdom is not only earthly, it is unspiritual. In Scripture, we are reminded of the constant battle between the flesh, which represents the sinful desires of our human nature, and the spirit, which is the life of Christ in us that is waging war against our fleshly desires. The type of wisdom James is describing here comes not from the spirit, but from the flesh: it is unspiritual.

And finally, it is demonic. Our third enemy in the Christian life, and ultimately the source and influencer of the other two, is the Devil himself and his demonic forces.

The wisdom you attain will either lead you towards Christ or away from Him.

And so, even if it sounds extreme, what James is pointing us to is the simple reality that, if you’re willing to go here with me, everything in life, including wisdom, comes from one of two sources: heaven or hell; and ultimately points us in one of two directions: toward Christ or away from Him. God’s agenda (His will) is that we come toward HIM. Satan’s agenda is to pull us away from God. And so James has a test that he likes to subject things to, and he challenges us to take the wisdom that is being spread amongst us and

see where it’s coming from. What are the results of this wisdom?

¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

If the wisdom being spread by the wise among you is leading you to jealousy and selfish ambition, then this is not heavenly wisdom; it is hellish wisdom. For it is not accomplishing our Father's agenda of bringing people closer to Him, but rather is, in fact, accomplishing the demonic agenda of pulling people away from the Lord.

Then he goes onto say, "¹⁶ **For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.**"

This may sound extreme, but it's absolutely true. Ask any pastor or church leader you know if they've ever seen someone's study of theology make them a worse Christian. We can all give you a list of names (not that we would), but we could give you a list of people whose "wisdom" made them increasingly difficult to be around.

James has seen this too, and he is writing to warn against it. Such wisdom is deceiving, harmful, and not from Heaven, but from Hell. There may be few things the devil rejoices in more than Christians who think they are mature because of knowledge, when really they are full of selfish ambition and are doing much more to accomplish the devil's will than the will of our Heavenly Father.

So, what are we supposed to do, reject the pursuit of wisdom and understanding??? Do these things only lead to sin? Of course not!!! There is a wisdom that comes from above and has a very different result than the hellish wisdom that James has warned us about.

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

This wisdom is, first of all, PURE. This is its most important quality. Hellish wisdom may look very much like heavenly wisdom at times, but like a candy bar that has been laced with poison, it is impure. No matter how good and enticing it may look, if you eat it, you will get sick. But heavenly wisdom is PURE. It will not make you sick, but instead will bring you pure delight as you consume it! It has no harmful ingredients, and can lead you in the way of truth and life!

Remember in Chapter 1, James told us that, "¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights,". Well, this is one of those good and perfect gifts that He gives. Wisdom from above is pure and gives life to those who receive it. That's why James also told us to "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" in 1:21.

Wisdom from above always produces godly fruit.

It is pure, James says. He also says it is peaceable, gentle, and open to reason. These are extremely important traits of true wisdom. People full of fraudulent wisdom want to fight and die on every hill. True wisdom prefers peace on matters that are not essential for salvation. People who have received true wisdom are easy to converse with. People full of fraudulent wisdom don't converse, they fight. They think everyone a heretic who doesn't believe as they believe. They find themselves with a very small circle of people whom they can associate with. They are divisive, harsh, and unreasonable.

Another thought that comes to mind when I read "open to reason" is our practice here at Harvest to not bow down to "thus sayeth the Lord" statements. What I mean by that is some people want to claim the authority of God Himself for everything they say, suggest, or believe. Certainly, there's a time for such confidence, but not when we're discussing what color carpet to get, or which chairs to put in the sanctuary, or quite frankly, even on much bigger topics, like adding another service or launching a new campus. If you go to an elders meeting at Harvest where such things are being discussed you won't hear, "Well, God told me" or "I think the Holy Spirit is saying..." You won't hear those things because they shut down reasonable discussion. No one wants to argue with God.

I saw a video from a pastor online this week, in which he claimed he was reading his Bible and the Holy Spirit told him to stop what he was reading and to read Revelations instead. He read a couple of chapters, and then something came up and he stopped. A couple of weeks later, he was reading somewhere else in the Bible and again, the Holy Spirit told him to read Revelations. And he did and BAM!, a passage of Scripture leaped off the page, and he now had a message from God. Now, I know I'm nitpicking and I don't want to stay on this very long, but when I hear that kind of talk, flags go up all over the place for me. For starters, Revelations is not even a book in the Bible. Revelation is a book, but not RevelationS. Just like Matthews is not a book, neither is Marks and neither is Act. Some books of the Bible have an s at the end and some don't and I'm pretty sure the Holy Spirit knows which ones are which. So, that's a red flag to begin with. The Holy Spirit mispronouncing books of the Bible makes me think that it wasn't the Holy Spirit.

Additionally, the whole Bible is the living, active, and inspired word of God, and so to find great value in a particular passage of Scripture doesn't convince me that God told you to go there. But it sounds so much better when you are preaching to say that God told you something, doesn't it? But when I hear that kind of talk, that person's credibility actually begins to slip in my mind. Now, in his defense, what he said after that was very meaningful and I actually think he's a decent teacher of the Word. I just have a lot of concerns about a church culture where everything carries the weight of being a "thus sayeth the Lord".

Here, we rely on what we refer to as sanctified wisdom, or a rational, conversational approach to discerning God's will by relying on the Holy Spirit to guides us through the reason and rationality that He gives to His people. We don't stick our heads down and wait for

someone to be struck by lightning. We do what seems reasonable to the group of godly leaders involved in the decision.

There was a discussion among the early church leaders in Jerusalem regarding what Gentile believers needed to do in order to be accepted into the church. The conclusion they came to was to not force them to be circumcised, nor to keep the Mosaic Laws. In fact, it says in Acts 15: 22-29:

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

Now, this is not all to say that God never reveals His will in dramatic ways, just that the wisdom that comes from above is peaceable, gentle, and open to reason. It’s not one person forcing an agenda by claiming special access to God’s will.

Furthermore, this wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits.

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

Wisdom from above produces good fruits. That’s the main point here, right? You will know which of these two wisdoms a person possesses by the fruit of their life.

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

Heavenly wisdom should produce humility and meekness, not arrogance and self-righteousness. Heavenly wisdom makes you grateful for the mercy God has shown you, and therefore, makes you eager to show that same mercy to others.

Also, wisdom from above is impartial and sincere.

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

James has already shown us that partiality is out of place in the Christian life and that true faith must be sincere. So, it's no surprise to see those characteristics appear again here in relation to wisdom from above.

And finally, James says ¹⁸ **And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.**

This is a somewhat awkward sentence, and is translated a couple of different ways in the different English translations, but I think it basically means that these peaceful people, who have received wisdom from above, reap a harvest of righteousness. This is a strong contrast to the "disorder and every vile practice" that results from the jealousy and selfish ambition of the ones whose wisdom comes not from above.

And so James has painted a picture of strong contrast between fraudulent and true wisdom. One advances the agenda of Hell; the other advances the agenda of Heaven. One results in all kinds of sin; the other results in a harvest of righteousness.

Now, the question remains, "What are we to do?" How do we obtain the wisdom from above? Fortunately, James has already answered this question. In 1:5, he says, ⁵ **If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.**

To answer the question of how to we gain this wisdom from above, James reminds us that we simply ask our Father, who gives generously, to give it to us.

Wisdom from above is gift that God generously gives to his children who ask for it with a pure heart.

This does not necessarily negate the need to seek wisdom through study and learning, but rather emphasizes that our pursuit of wisdom through those means must be enveloped in prayer that the wisdom we attain would be from God, and that it would bear the proper fruit. Proverbs 2:6 reminds us that it is the Lord who gives wisdom. It's not merely the result of intellectual effort and human study, it is a GIFT from God.

So, today, having considered the two opposing types of wisdom we may gain, which do you desire? Do you simply want to be wise with worldly wisdom, or do you desire the wisdom that leads to righteousness, peace, and humility?

If you long for wisdom from above, ask your Heavenly Father to give it to you.