

Wisdom.

Text: James 3:13-18

Suggested Hymns:

122, 381, 303, 163, 619

1) Wisdom Demonstrates Itself in Actions

2) False Wisdom

3) True Wisdom

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is James 3:13–18, ¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.* ¹⁴ *But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.* ¹⁵ *This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic.* ¹⁶ *For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.*

¹⁷ *But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.* ¹⁸ *Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

We live in an age and in a society which places a high premium on education and the accumulation of knowledge. Applicants for almost any type of job are asked to indicate the amount of education they have received, and the more years of formal education they have had, the more university degrees they can list behind their name, the better chance they have of getting a good position with higher pay and more opportunity for advancement than the person who has had only a minimum amount of formal education.

As a result of this, most parents feel obligated to provide a university education for their children to try to guarantee their chances for success in life.

There is certainly nothing wrong with trying to accumulate as much knowledge as possible, but it is important to remember that having a great deal of knowledge does not automatically make one wise.

The poet William Cowper once said it so well:

Knowledge and wisdom, far from being one,
Have often no connection.

Most of us have known or read about people who had very little formal education in their life, but who demonstrated a great deal of wisdom, and we have also known or read about people who despite a high education seemed to possess no wisdom at all.

Indeed, we read in Proverbs 9:10 that ¹⁰ *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

So today let us consider *wisdom*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Wisdom Demonstrates Itself in Actions

It is wisdom that James is writing about in the words of our text. He points out that not everyone has wisdom, and even those who do have it need to look at the fruit it produces in their lives to determine if their wisdom is from above and is therefore true and godly wisdom, or whether it is from below and is therefore false and demonic.

This was a piece of necessary advice for the Jewish Christians to whom James was writing because many of them wanted to be teachers of the others assuming that they had the understanding and wisdom that qualified them for this position.

James begins this third chapter of his epistle by describing the great responsibility that a teacher assumes when he attempts to shape and influence the thoughts and lives of others through his teaching.

He proceeds from this to a discussion of the tongue which the teacher uses in his teaching and what great things for good or evil the tongue can set in motion.

From there James moves to the subject of wisdom, indicating that only those who have true wisdom should be teachers of others, and the way to find out whether or not a person has true or false wisdom is to look at the fruit it produces in his life. We read in Matthew 7:16, ¹⁶ *You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?*

2. False Wisdom

Let us now consider what constitutes false wisdom.

False Wisdom Is Arrogant and Selfish

The nature of false wisdom is to be arrogant and selfish. The person who is filled with false wisdom has only one aim in life and that is the advancement of self. Personal victory is more important to him than the triumph of truth.

Such a person delights in controversy and argument, not because he wants to discover the truth, but because he is convinced that he already possesses the truth and is determined to demonstrate to others that anyone who disagrees with him is an ignorant fool.

There may well be times when it is necessary to engage in debate and to speak out very forcefully in defence of the truth of the Gospel. But anyone who lives to foster doctrinal wranglings or who arrogantly assumes that there is absolutely nothing he can learn from anyone else is a living lie to the truth of the Gospel itself, which produces in people the fruits of the Holy Spirit such as *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control.*¹

False Wisdom Is Demonic

James says that people who have the nature of being arrogant, bitter, selfish, and the like may well have wisdom, but it is not the wisdom that comes down from heaven. Instead it is *earthly, sensual, demonic*. Such wisdom is typical of the wisdom of this world which always seeks its own advantage.

It is unspiritual, it is not prompted by the spirit of God but by the passions of the flesh. Its root and source is Satan himself.

In the Garden of Eden it was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that God told Adam and Eve not to eat. After Eve listened to the voice of Satan questioning her whether or not God had really said that they should not eat of that tree, she looked at the tree again and saw that it was a tree *“desirable to make one wise,”*² so she took of the fruit and did eat and also gave some to Adam to eat with her.

Eve thought that eating of that tree would give them the wisdom to distinguish good from evil so that they would no longer need to depend on God to make that distinction for them.

It is this false wisdom that has been at the heart of man's problem of sin ever since. He thinks he knows what is right and what is wrong — what is good and what is evil — and is determined to convince everyone else that his way of thinking is the only right way.

False Wisdom Is Full of Evil

We all know what happens when two people decide to undertake some task or solve some problem and each one is convinced that his way of doing it is the only right way and it's either going to be done his way or not at all.

There is disorder — people pulling in opposite directions and before long they lose sight of the original task or problem and begin to attack each other and try to rally others to their side. The end result is *“every kind of evil”* — unkind words, hatred, bitterness, envy, strife, conflict, alienation, and the list of evil goes on and on.

It would be somewhat comforting if we could point to illustrations of this sort of thing happening only among those outside of the church, but we know that we don't have to go outside of the church at all. There are plenty of examples within.

How many Christian congregations and even church bodies have been torn apart by that same spirit of “bitter jealousy and selfishness” — where people started out trying to solve a common problem and eventually became convinced that they had the only solution, that there was nothing they could learn from anyone else, and so the battle lines were drawn, and there could be no solution until one was totally defeated and the other was totally victorious.

2. True Wisdom

Let us now consider the characteristics of true wisdom.

True Wisdom Is Meek

Fortunately for us and for the church there is another kind of wisdom at work in the world, and this is that true wisdom which comes down from above and has at its very heart the spirit of humility and meekness.

When we hear the words “humble” and “meek” today, we often associate them with weakness, cowardice, or softness. But that is not the true meaning of the words at the time of James, nor is it the true meaning today.

To be meek and humble means to be patient and unassuming, and we have no better example of this than our Lord Himself who *“when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously”*.³

Or as the apostle Paul describes Jesus in his letter to the Philippians, written in Philippians 2:6–8, *“⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.* Does that sound like weakness, cowardice, or softness — to willingly walk the path of servanthood and obedience that leads to death on the cross?

Only the sons and daughters of God are able to be meek. They do not have to struggle to get honour and glory for themselves because they already have all the honour and glory anyone could ever hope to have in being chosen by God to be His very own.

They alone are able to be patient because they know that their heavenly Father is in ultimate control of all things and will eventually cause all things to work together for their good and for His glory. And so James says that if there is one characteristic that will be evident in the lives of those that have true wisdom it will be this characteristic of meekness.

True Wisdom Is Pure

While meekness is the chief characteristic of true wisdom, it is not the only one. James proceeds in the 17th verse of our text to list seven other qualities or virtues of true wisdom.

First of all, he says, it is “pure.” In the opening chapter of this epistle James reminds these Jewish Christians that *“¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights.”*⁴ When he says here that true wisdom is first “pure,” he is referring to its source — God Himself. True wisdom is one of those good and perfect gifts God gives to men out of the rich storehouse of His grace.

True Wisdom Is Peaceful

The next three qualities which James lists as characteristics of true wisdom belong together because they are all concerned with the idea of making peace with others. He says that true wisdom is *peaceable, gentle, willing to yield*. In other words peaceful, gentle, and friendly.

The person who possesses true wisdom does not delight in starting quarrels nor does he insist on doing everything his own way. Instead, he is “gentle and friendly.” He respects other people and their point of view. He listens very carefully to the opinions and feelings of others, aware of the fact that only God possesses all truth and all wisdom and that He continues to speak to people through His Word.

True Wisdom Is Merciful

James goes on to say that true wisdom is *full of mercy and good fruits*. In other words full of compassion and produces a harvest of good deeds.

The truly wise person does not wait for those in need to prove themselves worthy of his attention and affection. He models himself after our Lord who stretched out His loving and helping hands not only to His friends when they were in need, but also to strangers and to those who were his avowed enemies.

True Wisdom Is Honest

Finally, James says, true wisdom is *without partiality and without hypocrisy*. It is free from prejudice and hypocrisy. True wisdom wears no masks. It has no need to hide. It is not ashamed to be recognised for what it is. True wisdom does not say one thing today and just the opposite thing tomorrow, nor does it say one thing when it really means something else. It is honest and straightforward. It cannot be otherwise because it is true.

True Wisdom Harvests Righteousness

In the closing verse of our text James speaks about the harvest that is produced by this true wisdom which plants the seeds of peace, and he says that this harvest is “righteousness.”

We can consider ourselves to be righteous today as a result of God’s wisdom which planted the seeds of peace within us. Think once again about those seven qualities of true wisdom which James lists for us, and see how they describe God’s way of dealing with us.

He is pure and holy and therefore cannot tolerate sin. He had every reason to destroy us, but instead He dealt gently with us. He sent His own Son to live among us as one of us, to be tempted like we are, to endure human pain and suffering and finally to die for us that we might better understand Him and His love for us, experience the joy of salvation, and feel comfortable in drawing closer to Him.

His attitude toward us can only be described as being full of mercy and good works. He did not wait for us to prove our worthiness of His love but *“while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*⁵

He is always true and honest in His words and promises. He never failed to keep everyone of His promises throughout the days of the Old Testament. He kept His promise to rise again on the third day. He has kept His promise to be with us and to sustain us in all our ways.

And because He has kept every promise He has made to us in the past, we have every reason to believe that He will keep His promise to one day take us home to live with Himself in heaven.

Scripture says in Romans 11:33, ³³ *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!*

But while we are still here in this world, we give evidence of the true wisdom abiding in us as we plant these same seeds of peace in the hearts of others.

And this we do by adopting a life-style that is full of meekness, dealing gently with others, helping them through our speaking and our listening to find peace with themselves, with one another, and above all else — peace with God through faith in Christ.

Such a life-style delights in deeds of mercy, words of honesty so that, as we share with others the words and promises of God, the seed of faith might be planted and grow, and they will join us in reaping the harvest of righteousness and life everlasting.

May God help us all to be such truly wise people — people filled with that wisdom which comes down from above. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Galatians 5:22–23

² Genesis 3:6

³ 1 Peter 2:23

⁴ James 1:17

⁵ Rom. 5:8