

James: Wise Faith

James 3:13-18 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.

ILLUS – A Boston man was entertaining a famous Chinese scholar. Barely giving his friend time to breathe, he rushed him to the subway saying, “If we can just catch this next train, we’ll save ourselves three minutes.” The scholar looked at him and asked, “And what significant thing will we do with the three minutes we are saving?”

I wonder if we ever stop and think about the things that we do, if there’s any real reason for doing them.

Or if we just live life on automatic pilot.

Prov 4:7 says, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding.”

This passage in James agrees with Proverbs, and focuses on the need for wisdom.

Let’s take a look at what it tells us.

1. Wisdom is important

James tells us to do our works in the “meekness of wisdom.”

In James 1:5, he tells us how to get wisdom: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all liberally and without reproach and it will be given to him.”

God wants us to have wisdom.

But here’s an important question: If you ask for wisdom, how do you know that what you get is from God?

Do you just accept the first thing that pops into your head?

Or is there something more?

You see, the devil is always willing to give his opinion; he’s always ready and available to influence us in our decisions so that we end up doing what he wants instead of what God wants.

How do you tell the difference?

James tells us that it’s important to understand that there are two kinds of wisdom.

There is godly wisdom, and there is demonic wisdom.

And God wants us to discern between the two.

ILLUS – Let me give you an example. You’re having an argument with someone, and even though you’re a fine man or woman of God, you’re getting just a little heated. Have you ever noticed how clear your thinking is when you’re angry? You’re all fired up, and you deliver the Word of the Lord. Then later on, you start to calm down. And suddenly, the things that you said and seemed so right when you said them, now are so wrong.

What happened? You were influenced by your emotions.

So let's first understand that, even though something can seem right at the time, that doesn't mean that it is.

There are two kinds of wisdom.

Here's the first one:

2. Earthly, sensual, demonic wisdom

Wow! That doesn't sound good, does it?

Earthly, sensual, demonic wisdom – what exactly does that mean?

To understand this better, let's first realise that we are tripartite beings.

That means that we are made up of three distinct parts: Spirit, soul and body.

1 Thessalonians 5:23 Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Spirit, soul, and body – three parts.

And the wisdom that is not from above has a three-fold description: Earthly, sensual, demonic.

They correspond to our three parts, because the devil has a wisdom that is designed to appeal to every part of your being.

Earthly for the body, sensual (which means unspiritual) for the soul, and demonic for the spirit.

That's good to know, but what are the characteristics of this bad kind of wisdom?

Here are some of the things that this passage of Scripture uses to describe it.

It talks about bitter envy.

In the Greek, the word means “jealousy” and is different from envy.

Envy says, “I should have had that instead of you.”

Jealousy says, “I should have had that too.”

Demonic wisdom is motivated by jealousy.

It's the kind of attitude that says, “I want what he's got.”

And this brings us to the next characteristic: Self-seeking.

This word means “selfish ambition”; it means to be motivated by self-interest.

It was a word used to describe a politician who was canvassing for votes.

Vote for me; think about me; it's all about me; what's in it for me?

This is the exact opposite of what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 6:33: “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness...”

We're supposed to be looking out for God's interests and the interests of His Kingdom.

Phil 2:3-4 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. (4) Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

We're supposed to be looking out for the interests of others.

ILLUS – Maybe you remember an incident from the life of Jesus where He was predicting His death and how He would have to suffer at the hands of the chief priests and elders. And Peter had an idea. And it seemed like the right thing to do at the time. So he took Jesus aside and started to tell Him off because there was no way something that bad would happen to Jesus.

Do you know what Jesus did? He rebuked Peter.

He said, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” (Mat 16:23)

Ever wonder why Jesus was so tough on Peter?

Because Peter was motivated by self-interest.

He didn't want anything to happen to Jesus; he was rather enjoying having Him around.

But he didn't have the interests of the Kingdom at heart.

The next few characteristics of bad wisdom are boasting, lying, and confusion.

These are all indicators that the wisdom is not from above.

So what's the wisdom from above like, the heavenly wisdom?

3. Heavenly wisdom

Just like the demonic wisdom, the good wisdom has certain characteristics too, so that we can be clear that it's coming from God.

The first thing it talks about is in verse 13: Good conduct.

This isn't the kind of wisdom where you just sit under a fig tree and spout off clever sayings and quotable quotes.

This kind of wisdom is very practical and translates into good behaviour.

James has already made it clear in chapter 2 that he is concerned that we understand that real faith results in good works.

But so does godly wisdom; if it doesn't impact our behaviour, it's not the real deal.

Another attribute is meekness; it talks about the “meekness of wisdom.”

This is one of those badly misunderstood words, so let me make this clear: Meekness is not weakness.

Men, you especially have to understand this.

Because so often today people think that a meek person is a person who's scared of his own shadow.

All you've got to do is say, “Boo!”, and they jump out of their skin.

That's not meekness.

Meekness is power under control.

Let me give you two different examples of meekness.

ILLUS – The first one is David – giant-slayer, mighty warrior. He's being persecuted by King Saul who has brought his army out to capture David. Then there's a stroke of luck. While David and his men are holed up in a cave, Saul comes in to relieve himself. What an opportunity. And David's men are saying, “Do it, do it. Kill him now.”

What does David do? He spares Saul's life.

Why? Because he's weak?

Far from it. David was one of the toughest men in his nation's history.

But he was meek; he had his power under control.

ILLUS – Then there's Jesus. He's the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords, Almighty God in the flesh. And now He's being arrested by mere mortals. And He says in Mat 26:53, “Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?” Twelve legions of angels?

That's a lot of angels. Way more than enough to sort out every person on this planet. But Jesus didn't call for help. Why? Because He was weak? No, but because He was meek. He was tough enough and strong enough to resist the temptation to lash out in anger and revenge.

That's meekness.

Men, listen to this: Real men are meek.

They may be tough, they may be strong, but they have their strength under control.

Godly wisdom is also pure.

In fact, James says that it's *first* pure *then* peaceable.

This means that we don't sacrifice our values for the sake of keeping the peace.

That's what some people do.

They sacrifice what's right for what's easy; it's peace at any price.

This is what we have to be careful of in our presentation of the gospel.

We have to take up the challenge to present the timeless, unchanging message of the gospel in a way that is relevant to our time and our culture, but without compromising its truth.

This is also relevant to our lifestyle.

We can't afford to simply go along with the crowd just because we want to be Mr or Mrs Popularity.

Purity is important to God.

Next is the characteristic of being peaceable.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

Paul said, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men." (Rom 12:18)

It doesn't always depend on us, but sometimes we are our own worst enemies.

And if we are miserable, unkind, obnoxious people who can't get along with others, and then we try to pretend that it's because we are standing for the truth, that's not good enough.

God says that we are to make every effort to be at peace with others.

This brings us to the next attribute of godly wisdom – willing to yield.

It means that we are to be reasonable, the kind of people who are willing to listen fairly to opposing points of view, and to yield when necessary.

It's not possible to be a peacemaker without this quality of being willing to yield.

Don't be the kind of person whose attitude is: My mind is made up; don't confuse me with the facts.

Next, we are to be "full of mercy and good fruits."

The word "mercy" is a word that has the same root as another Greek word that means "to give alms."

This emphasises again the practical nature of godly wisdom; the truly wise person helps others.

The next word is "impartial."

We've already spent some time looking at this in our message "Impartial Faith."

Here we just need to note that a wise person is impartial.

The final quality that we'll look at in this passage is "without hypocrisy."

In Greek, the word "hypocrisy" comes from a word which means to impersonate like an actor, to act a part, to pretend to be something you're not.

But the wise person doesn't need to put on an act.

They live according to the WYSIWYG principle.

Have you heard of the WYSIWYG principle?

ILLUS – WYSIWYG is an old computer term. Back in the early days of computing, what you had on your computer screen often was completely different when it was printed out. But then computers got better and software got better, and people started talking about WYSIWYG. It's an acronym that stands for What You See Is What You Get. What you saw on your computer screen is what it looked like when printed.

Here's my question for you: Are you living a WYSIWYG life?

I know that at home we're all a bit different from what we are in public.

But each of us should be striving to live lives in private that match up to what we present in public.

That's the WYSIWYG principle.

What You See Is What You Get.

Be real.

Walk the walk, don't just talk the talk.