

Do You Have Wisdom

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. (James 3:13-18 (ESV))

The title of our message today is “Do You Have Wisdom”, because that is the question that God is calling you and me to consider here in these words. We are being asked “Do you, do I, have wisdom”. And then on beyond that question, “if we do have wisdom, what kind of wisdom do we have?” And then one more question beyond that, “what kind of wisdom do we show to others by our behavior”?

But first, may we ask, “what is wisdom?” Because here again, wisdom is another one of those words that people often struggle to define accurately. Much as with the word “truth” that we considered in the message last week, most every person has their own version of meaning and definition for it. And that may be because “wisdom” has its very secular usage and meaning, as well as the biblical meaning given to us here.

The dictionary does as dictionaries do, and gives us the established and accepted meaning of the word. There we are told that wisdom is, “A body of knowledge and principles that develops within a specified society. And for an individual, wisdom is the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment. Synonyms that are given for wisdom are “intelligence, common sense, and good judgment.”

Within that definition, probably the best clue to our beginning to know the real meaning of the word “wisdom” is found in the words, “developed” and “experience”, because, as we know, “wisdom” is not a quality of thinking and knowledge that a person is born with. It is acquired, later on, and most always from sources that are outside of a person’s own abilities.

And from this passage, we are also given the understanding that “wisdom” is not always trustworthy. Depending upon where it is acquired, wisdom can be good for us or it can be evil, here being separated out by the two most common sources of wisdom, “wisdom

from the world”, in other scriptures called the “wisdom of the wise”, and “wisdom from above”, “Wisdom from God”.

And it is no accident that these words about “wisdom” follow along immediately after the stern warnings that God gives us about our tongues, our inability to get control of and keep control of the words that so often come flowing out from our mouths. There is a strong connection between these two, our wisdom, and our tongue. Listen again to the warning given in verse 6,

6 . . . the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. (James 3:6 (NASB))

Why does God put these two matters together in one chapter, “the corrupt habits of our tongues” and “wisdom”? It is because, depending upon the “wisdom” you have acquired, “worldly wisdom”, or “wisdom from God”, that will be the “wisdom” that your tongue employs and your behavior demonstrates. May we read these words again!

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. (James 3:13-18 (ESV))

Again, these words give us two distinct kinds of wisdom, “wisdom of the world”, which is earthly, sensual and demonic, belonging to those people who are not of God, who do not have Christ as Savior and Lord. And then there is “wisdom from God”, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, compliant, merciful, good, impartial and sincere wisdom. This wisdom comes down from heaven and belongs to those who do know God and have Christ as their Savior and Lord.

As we consider this word “wisdom”, may we keep in mind that the general tenor of this whole Book of James is instruction concerning the “testing of our faith”. From chapter 1, verse 2, we read,

2 Count it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4 And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4 (NASB))

And keep in mind also that one of the most important reasons for “testing”, of any kind, is to reveal what we know and think and feel. And as to the “testing of our faith”, it is designed to reveal the true nature that abides within our souls. And as our faith is tested daily in the crucible of ordinary circumstances, the “wisdom” that is within us, whatever its source, will be clearly revealed. Will our behavior reveal the kind of wisdom that God desires us to have, or will it reveal wisdom of another kind?

We see here in verses 14 to 18 a contrast of these two kinds of wisdom. “False wisdom”, the “wisdom of the world” in verses 14 to 16, and “true wisdom”, “the wisdom of God” in verses 17 and 18. And when we look at our daily life and compare our lifestyle, our daily behavior, with this passage, the “test results” should be able to confirm our true nature, whether we have the wisdom of God, or we have false wisdom. By looking closely at our own behavior, we should be able to know whether we are truly redeemed, truly saved and truly know God, or whether we are just thinking something that isn’t true.

But with that being said, unfortunately, sometimes the “test results” may reveal that, though we be truly saved, we might still be dabbling, sometimes completely immersed in behaviors that we should flee away from.

Looking at these words . . . let’s first consider “worldly wisdom”, because “worldly wisdom” truly is the most prevalent kind of wisdom. “Worldly wisdom” is the kind of wisdom that flows across our tongues in common conversation, across the coffee table at work, across the truck bed between good friends, in phone calls between good friends, across the Board Tables in big corporations, across the telephone lines as business transactions take place, and on and on. And much too often, it is the wisdom that husbands and wives and moms and dads spout out to one another in the busy exchanges of family life. And unfortunately, too often, it is as these words of verse 15 tell us,

15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. (James 3:15)

A question . . . Is all “worldly wisdom” wrong and bad. Unfortunately, though it may not seem so at the moment, for the most part, yes, it has wrongness all interlaced within it. But its wrongness is not always easily discernable. I say that because much within the wisdom of the world comes from their copying and mimicking many of the elements of the “wisdom of God”. We can see that especially throughout ordinary daily commerce,

businesses providing food and services to people, people getting fed and clothed, but at the same time, those businesses making profits, often exorbitant profits.

We can also see a mixture of elements of worldly wisdom and Godly wisdom being applied in our governmental transactions and in our military and in police departments, practical wisdom being carried out and ordinary people benefiting from it.

The question that has occurred to me as I have considered this phenomenon, good things coming from something that is basically evil, I came to realize that it is because of God's hand that is always at work in providing "Common Grace" to ordinary people, even in amongst the wrongness of daily behavior. Much like the "rain falling on the just and the unjust", benefiting everyone whether they are believers or not. So also then, God provides benefits within "worldly wisdom" that will bless believers and unbelievers alike.

The warning for us as believers is that we can easily get caught up in choosing the wrong kind of wisdom. In a message that I heard recently from Bible Teacher, John MacArthur, he commented on how Solomon, though being the wisest man who would ever live, seemed too often to apply very worldly wisdom to the matters of his daily life. And while, for the most part Solomon blessed his nation Israel, He himself seemed often in an agony of distress, crying out in the Book of Ecclesiastes that even with all of his wisdom, his life seemed to be a perpetual existence of meaninglessness. Turn there with me and listen to some of Solomon's agonizing words.

12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. 14 I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. 15 What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted. 16 I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge." 17 And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. 18 For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18 (ESV))

And in Ecclesiastes 2

1 I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. 2 I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" 3 I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine—my heart still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might

see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life. 4 I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself. 5 I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. 6 I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. 8 I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. 9 So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also, my wisdom remained with me. 10 And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. 11 Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 (ESV))

Remember now . . . This is the record of a very special man, one dearly loved by God, a man who had been given all the gifts that a man could ever hope for. He was given the greatest of wisdom, both of the spiritual kind and of the practical kind. Wisdom to truly know God and to teach God's principles throughout not only his kingdom then, but also for us today as we read these Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs.

And his great wisdom extended into all the matters of leadership and commerce and governmental affairs. He amassed great wealth, both for himself and for the nation of Israel. He literally lacked nothing. Everything was at his fingertips.

And as we have been saying, the "testing of a person's faith" reveals much about them. With Solomon, the "testing" revealed that even though he was greatly loved and blessed in every way by God, and he, no doubt, loved God and wanted to obey God's will, when those moments of temptation came his way, even with all of his wisdom, he still gave in to temptation's lure. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines. And he experienced every form of lurid and corrupt behavior. And at the time he penned these words of Ecclesiastes he was completely awash with guilt for his evil behavior.

Thankfully, as we see from some of his final words in that Book, Solomon did repent. Those words from the 12th chapter,

13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole [duty] of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (NIV))

Folks, if this can take place with Solomon, this can also take place in the life of even the most devout of believers today, even your life and my life. Godly wisdom should and usually does protect a person from making wrong choices. But sometimes not, especially when a person keeps intentionally making “wrong choices”.

So then, this “test of our faith” that is given to us in this contrast between “worldly wisdom” and “Godly wisdom”, and the revelation that even though we are fully born again in our soul, we can still be much like Solomon, blessed beyond measure but still continuing to make wrong choices, we must not let these words get passed us today.

There are questions to be asked and answered concerning our own souls. And they are this, what kind of wisdom characterizes you? Is your wisdom earthly, unspiritual, demonic, having jealousy and selfish ambition, disorder and every vile practice? Or is your wisdom pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy? and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

As I consider myself, in light of Solomon’s “unwise” choices, I know, more than ever, that I want desperately to make “Godly wise choices”, especially as I head towards this last chapter of my life. I want to run and to finish this race well! Because it is as these words of Ecclesiastes tell us,

14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:14 (NIV))

As for each of you . . . “What will you do? What will you do?”

14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:14 (NIV))