

True Wisdom

James

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Bible Text: James 3:13-18

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Our gracious God and heavenly Father, you have sent your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Word and from his lips you have instructed us in the written Word and we pray that again today our Lord Jesus in the power of his Spirit will teach us his Word. We ask that you would open our ears that we may detect his accent. We pray that you would soften our hearts that we may be eager and responsive to listen to what he has to say. And we pray that you would bend our stubborn and often proud wills before the grandeur of his presence that we may be not only willing but may delight to do everything that the Lord Jesus teaches us. So we pray, Holy Spirit, that you will move among us as we sit in the pews today and from your Word you will give to each of us that specially shaped Word that meets our circumstances, that challenges our lives, that transforms our characters and that brings us to love, to trust, to obey and to enjoy our Lord Jesus Christ more and more and this we pray for his great Name's sake. Amen.

We continue to read as we've been doing recently in the book of James towards the end of the New Testament Scriptures, James 3:13-18. Today, you'll find this in the pew Bible in the rack in front of you on page 1,012 and children, if you have your Bible with you, it's on page 1,509.

James is concerned, as we've noticed, that the friends to whom he's writing will grow into a spiritual maturity and a spiritual stability. And he's been talking about the way in which God uses trials and tests in order to shape our lives to grow to maturity, how he uses our response to his Word in happy obedience to him to grow to maturity. And now he's going on to speak about the lifestyle that characterizes those who are growing into maturity. We're in James 3:13,

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

Many of us, I know, are very conscious of the fact that something very radical happened to our Western culture in the 18th century. The 18th century marks the great transition point in the way in which Western civilization has formulated itself. A transition took place so dramatic that there is probably no subject taught in high school or university that has not been profoundly influenced by this movement that took place in the 18th century. It's known in different languages by different names but in the English speaking world it's characteristically been known as the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment was the season in which in the Western world, in the Christianized culture of the Western world, the basic principles of God's revelation were laid aside and man became the measure of all things. Of course, it was partly in the wake of many of these scientific discoveries that had been made. Actually, many of them made by men who were real Christian believers, who understood after the Reformation, that if we had to listen to the Word of God to hear what God said, then we should similarly listen to the book of nature to hear how it was that God had put that nature together.

Then, of course, man in his arrogance and in his unbelief, laid God aside believing that man could fathom all things and the measure of everything would become whether "I could understand it. Whether I could reason it through." That transition was a transition that took place largely among intellectuals. Many of them, of course, in the great universities but it's all pervasive now as I hope we will see in the course of this study in the book of James. But the world in which our teenagers are being reared is a world that's been profoundly influenced by the thought patterns of the Enlightenment rather than by the wisdom of God.

Very simple illustrations of this, let me give you two. The great college of Harvard, Harvard University. When it was founded it was given a motto. Many of you can imagine that that emblem of Harvard University with the one word emblazoned on it in Latin, Veritas, truth. That's all that's left of the motto that the founders of Harvard College gave to the finest university in the English speaking world in terms of how they rate universities. Did you know that? It is the finest university in the English speaking world in terms of the ratings of universities but veritas was not its original motto. Its original motto was Veritas Pro Christo et Ecclesia, truth for Christ and the church. But now, truth to be discovered in the great men of learning in the university.

Lest those of you who are Harvard graduates feel that perhaps there is some little pressure being placed upon you, let me illustrate the university to which I went with a little bit of snobbery, reminding you if you're a Harvard graduate that Harvard was founded in 1636, the university I went to was founded in 1495, and it's motto, Initium Sapientiae Timor Domini, the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. You have to look very far on that university's website to find an explanation of the university motto these days. They're embarrassed about it. You can find discussions of it on blog sites where after 2-3 years there are some irate students that discover that's the university motto. And it's all reduced now to Initium Sapientiae or as people used to say, Init Sap,

the beginning of wisdom. That's what you'd hear at university for the beginning of wisdom and this is where you get the beginning of wisdom. Forget the fear of the Lord.

Everywhere you go in the world in which our youngsters are being educated in one way or another in the thought forums of society, in the words of the Psalms that pour out from the poets and the thought influencers of our time that deep dyed principle of the Enlightenment is overwhelmingly present. And James is teaching us in these verses how the Christian church is a counter-culture to the culture in which the church exists. Because James was teaching Christians who were living in what was essentially a pagan culture, how to live lives that pleased God and left a mark on society. And there is so much we can particularly learn from him in these verses in which he's teaching his dear Christian friends the nature of true wisdom.

And it's so interesting, I think here, that he had begun this chapter by speaking about teachers on the assumption that teachers in the church would be models of spiritual maturity and if they were models of spiritual maturity, he said, first of all they would be marked by the ability to discipline their tongues as an evidence that they had disciplined their lives for the glory of Jesus Christ. And now he's saying, "And yes, of course, there's something else that marks the mature Christian. The mature Christian is also marked by the wisdom that comes from above." So, verse 13, his question, "Who is wise and understanding among you?"

It seems to me that here James answers many of our questions. I want us to look just at a few of them. 1. How do you recognize true wisdom in someone? What makes you say as a Christian about a fellow Christian, "Now, there's a real wisdom in that person." You remember what St. Augustine said when he was writing about time and he said, "You want me to explain to you what time is? I could've given you the answer just before you asked the question but now that you've asked the question, I'm not quite sure what time is." And we might say the same about wisdom. We all know what wisdom is but when someone puts us in a corner and says, "Define wisdom." We say, "Well, I knew the answer just before you asked me the question. I'm kind of struggling a bit now." And I suppose the reason for that is that we recognize wisdom when we see it in somebody and James is telling us what we see when we see that wisdom in somebody.

And it's evident, isn't it, that wisdom is not the same thing as having a good education. You can have the finest education and in Bible terms, be a complete fool. You can have the finest grasp of all kinds of things and yet never be able to, or never want to, worse, never want to, put your knowledge at the feet of Jesus Christ and say to Jesus Christ, "Lord, help me to use what you've given me. The knowledge that I have, help me to use it for the glory of God." So that when you're in some need or when you have a problem, you don't go simply to somebody who knows a lot, you go to somebody who is wise enough to take what they know and apply it to your particular situation. When you go along to the pharmacist you don't want somebody who just knows the names of the drugs, you want somebody who's able to get the right drug for your particular condition, who's able to work with the knowledge in order to do you good.

That's why in the Old Testament Scriptures, there's a whole book devoted to becoming wise. And it's a book that was put into the hands of parents, largely fathers apparently, as a kind of manual. It was put into their hands and they were expected to sit down with their children and work through this manual for living a life that really pleases God and, therefore, gives us great joy and pleasure, it's the Book of Proverbs. And it begins with a series of father to son talks. You can change the pronouns and make them mother to daughter talks, but here are ten talks that every faithful father should give to his son and every faithful mother to her daughter. And then another 20 chapters, more than 20 chapters in which Proverbs is saying, "Now do you see how this wisdom works out in this fallen and strange world in which we live?"

Because wisdom in the Scriptures is knowing how to bring to bear upon every situation in life the glory of God. How to live for the glory of God in a fallen world like this. And James says, interestingly, it's marked by two things, you'll notice this: the wise person by his good conduct will show his works in the meekness of wisdom. The wise person is the meek person. Isn't that interesting. The wise person is the meek person. Now, what's the meek person? Well, that's like asking me what's the wise person, I knew what it was before you asked me. But in the Bible, the meek person is the person whose mind and heart have been submitted to the Word of God and in his or her life wants to submit to God's purposes in his providence. The meek person is the person who submits him or herself to the voice of God and is guided, sensitively guided, by the providential hand of God. Meekness is the fruit of that. It's not weakness.

Moses, we are told, in Numbers 12, was the meekest man on the face of the earth. The interesting thing is, that we are told that during the Exodus, so many people came to Moses to help them sort out their lives that he had to appoint 70 elders. I mean, this wasn't a man that when he retired you replaced him by two men, this was a man that when he retired, as it were, you'd need to replace him by 70 men. Why? Because one of the things that marks the Christian who is meek is that people are drawn to him, drawn to her, perhaps not really understanding all the reasons, but understanding that this is a person sensitive to the Lord upon whom I'll be able to rest my troubles, my problems, my difficulties, my needs.

Someone else in the Bible described as meek, the Lord Jesus, in perhaps in his second or third most famous statement, "Come to me because I am meek and you will find rest for your souls." That's always the hallmark of somebody who is meek. Somebody who is meek is a person to whom you would go knowing that in that person you would be able to find a certain rest from whatever burdened you.

That's what we are called to be as Christians, isn't it? It's not weakness. No, actually weakness is to be the opposite of this and the evidence of it is nobody would ever dream of coming to you if they had a problem because everything about you is said, "I'm strong and so I wouldn't understand you. You poor thing." But that would be terribly unlike Jesus, wouldn't it?

So, wisdom is characterized by this meekness and it's characterized also, although I'm not very comfortable with the translation in our English Standard Version because it's not very adequate, it's characterized by good conduct. Now, that's like somebody who gets straight A's, isn't it? That's not what he means. You're not talking about somebody who does all the right things and keeps all the right rules and is a pain in the neck. The word he uses the word calligraphy is derived from, the adjective here: attractive handwriting, beautifully formed handwriting. It's not so much the idea of being good in the sense of doing all the right things, it's the idea of being good the way Jesus was good, of showing the attractiveness, the beauty, the grace, the graciousness of our Lord and Master. For there to be a kind of spiritual nobility about our lives.

So you see, James is saying that the person who grows in wisdom, as our Lord Jesus grew in wisdom we're told, as our Lord Jesus grew in wisdom. He became more and more attractive and so more and more people would come to him because they felt there were resources of God's grace here. And that's how you recognize true wisdom. It may not be too easy to define but once you've seen it, you'll never forget it because its Jesus-like character and understanding in an individual.

James not only tells us how to recognize true wisdom here in verse 13 but he helps us to distinguish true wisdom from false wisdom. And he says there is a wisdom that comes from above and then fascinatingly you can see very clearly he's thinking there's a wisdom that comes from below. But you notice, he doesn't call that wisdom. He's very clever really. It's almost as though he's saying, "There's a wisdom that comes from above that's true wisdom and there's a this-worldly wisdom and I'm not prepared even to call that wisdom." It's what Bunyan portrays in his famous Mr. Worldly Wise Man. There is that kind of earth-bound wisdom that masquerades as true wisdom. And James won't dignify it with the name of wisdom.

But he does want to help us distinguish between true wisdom and false wisdom. What's the characteristic of false wisdom? Well, you notice, he tells us in verse 14, he says it's boastful and it's false to the truth. It's boastful in the sense of it conveys not a sense of, "I will bear your burdens." It conveys a sense of, "Do you see how superior and successful I am and how much I know, you little person?" It's boastful and the tragedy is, it doesn't see that it's false to the truth. It doesn't align with the truth and the tragedy is that the person who is worldly wise, then he can't see beyond the horizons of his own life to understand that actually from a Bible's point of view, he's very, very foolish. He's a person who's going to last for all eternity, all eternity and he's got threescore years and ten here and he's living as though these threescore years and ten were everything that he had and as though he himself were the measure of all things. And so, he would never bow down and worship Almighty God. No, he will put little god in his place rather than prostrate himself before the Creator of the ends of the earth.

Now, it says, James, verse 15, that kind of wisdom does not come down from above, it's earthly, it's unspiritual or fleshly or ungodly and it's demonic. Now, you notice, there is a progression down the way here. It's earthly, that is to say, its horizons are simply this world. It's the wisdom that emerges in part in the Book of Ecclesiastes, isn't it? Life

under the sun. Isn't that expression used, I think about 30 times in the Book of Ecclesiastes, "Life under the sun." I'm trying to find meaning to life under the sun and eventually I either give up in despair or I settle down into my little world of mediocrity because this world under the sun is explicable only in terms of the Creator of the sun and if I don't find my center and my joy in him, at the end of the day, all I'm doing is chasing the wind. It's striving after wind.

We've seen a few of these occurrences in Scripture recently but this is another one in which the Bible is saying, "If you could just stand outside this pathetic world of little man who struts his wares in the universe and says, I will be master of the universe, you would see he's like a foolish man who is chasing the wind." It's fascinating to see the greatest intellects in our world are still trying to do that. The greatest mathematicians and scientists, they're still striving to see if they can find some principle that will bring unity to the diversity of the world as we know it. But, so long as they are looking for it under the sun, horizontally, it's a striving after wind. You would call a man who was chasing the wind...if you saw him walking down Main Street going and said to him, "What are you doing?" And he said, "I'm capturing the wind." You would say, "You're out of your mind, man."

Well, you see, James is puncturing my pride because that's what I'm doing. In my little life without God, I'm striving after the wind without satisfaction. It's purely this world but it descends into that which is against God. And James tells us this both in verse 14 and in verse 16. He says this kind of wisdom produces jealousy and selfish ambition and eventually it leads to disorder and every vile practice.

Now, my friends, here is something we need to understand today as Christians: as the world rejects the wisdom of God, as the world that has had the Gospel rejects the Gospel, it assumes that it will go back to a decent lifestyle only without that Christian bit. But it never does. Why? Because the Western world before it got the Christian bit was a world of disorder. When a society rejects the Gospel, it doesn't descend into a kind of moral decency, it descends into paganism and that's all around us. The cheerleaders of the new spiritual realities are all teaching what people used to call when they saw clearly, paganism. Roman religion, Greek religion, ancient religion. "We need to be modern people," they say, "we've found the truth." What are they doing? They're so ignorant they don't know they're going back to pre-Christianity in the world.

Now, listen, it shouldn't ever surprise us if we have a drug ridden society. It shouldn't surprise us if we have abortion. And, incidentally, has it ever struck you that some of those faces you saw marching up to the White House for women's rights to abort babies look awfully like some of the faces you saw when people marched to save the whale? Anti-God can never be consistent. Anti-God at the end of the day thinks whales more important than babies. You see, there's no wisdom there.

And you see in our society and the more you move towards Europe the more you see this, young people developing anti-human, anti-order streaks. Fascinatingly, if you go to the great cities of Europe, it's amazing how many of them look the same, the Goths. Now,

that's interesting, isn't it? That's what they call themselves, Goths. And then, so many of our young people whose parents have never given them the wisdom of God. How are they today? They are on antidepressants in vast numbers. They are self-harming in vast numbers. They are bulimic in vast numbers. Now, why? Because when they have seen others and what they have, all they've been left with is what James says, they've got something desirable that I don't have and I've nothing to put in its place.

That's a world some of us who are older know almost nothing about. All we know is the world we can remember from high school when there was that absolutely drop-dead gorgeous girl in our class who was not only drop-dead gorgeous but she was clever and most of all, she was brilliant at sports and my nose was bent. Or if I was a boy, I developed zits as I believe the poets call them these days. And nobody came along, you see, when these youngsters were teenagers to say, "These things will pass. But there is something you can set your heart on that will never pass: giving yourself to God, growing in wisdom, developing meekness, living for his glory in such a way that that drop-dead gorgeous academically brilliant, sporting girl who is now bulimic may come and say to you, 'Where am I going to find rest?'"

And you see, James is saying when the wisdom of God is rejected, disorder is bound, bound to come through. And so, we reap the whirlwind of what was sown in our Christianized culture in the wind. And it's a great tragedy.

One of my friends years ago bumped into a boy against whom I used to compete in sporting events into which we need not here go. We didn't know each other well but we competed in the same events and on one monumental occasion, we competed against one another. We were never friends, not because we were enemies, we just were never friends and a close friend of mine happened to become a client of this man and some way or another they both discovered they knew me. And my fellow competitor said, "Well, what's Sinclair doing nowadays?" And my friend told him. Do you know what he said? Make of this what you will, "O," he said, "I thought Sinclair would do really well for himself." Obviously I hadn't but my friend who was a Christian, the friend who told me this story, as he was telling me this, we were both laughing because he knew my favorite hymn verse and lines, "Solid joys lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know." He looked at my life, what had I done, what had I accomplished. I'd become a minister of the Christian Gospel and I suppose he thought when we played against each other, "That boy's going to make a fortune." And he didn't know that I'd found hidden treasure in Jesus Christ and the wisdom of God and not the wisdom of this world.

James is teaching us about wisdom as he's teaching us how to distinguish true wisdom from false wisdom. He's also teaching us, in verse 17-18, how can we cultivate true wisdom. What it is, how we distinguish it and how we can cultivate it. And it looks to me as though this is another piece of James's little book in which he's probably preached a whole series of sermons on this text and it just flows out. The wisdom that comes from above is first pure, then peaceable, then gentle, then reasonable, then merciful, then impartial. You can do your homework on those sermons of James but just think about the bookends. He says, true wisdom is first of all, do you notice, pure. Or, I think it might

catch our attention more if we translated it, chased. Not that he's thinking here narrowly about sexual purity, although doubtless that comes into it, but he's thinking, "What is chastity after all?" It's your resolute commitment to be for one person and one person only. And that's the beginning of wisdom when by God's grace you make a resolute commitment, no matter what else you do in life, you will be chaste for Jesus Christ, committed to him with a love and a faith that will brook no rival in your life. That's the beginning of wisdom.

And do you see what its fruit is? At the end of this little section, in verse 17, it's sincerity. Now, sincerity is a weak word, although our English word "sincerity" comes from two Latin words that mean without wax. Isn't that interesting? Without wax. What's the connection? The connection is because the word picture is you go into the antique shop and you see there's a bust of Julius Caesar. You accidentally knock it over, it breaks Julius Caesar's nose, the man takes it into the back shop and he sticks some wax in where Caesar's nose was chipped off and he paints it over and then he sells it to the next customer at an even bigger profit. To be without wax is to be the real deal. No bits and pieces of spiritual Botox, as it were.

But the word that James uses is at least as graphic. The Greek word he uses is the word "without hypocrisy." And, of course, in this world, the hypocrite was the play-actor who wore the mask. And he's saying to us, "This is the liberating impact of God's wisdom in my life. I understand, I don't need to wear the mask any longer because I can be real." Remember, my late friend, James Montgomery Boice of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia telling us that when he was a doctoral student in Basil, in German speaking Switzerland, that a time of the year when there was much ungodly behavior and people celebrated it and engaged in it while they wore masks to disguise themselves, that the Salvation Army took out a great big poster on one of the hoardings in Basil, with the words on it "God Sees Behind the Mask."

And you see, one of the hallmarks of wisdom is that when you have discovered the grace, the restfulness, the salvation of Jesus Christ, you no longer need to wear a mask before God and if you don't need to wear a mask before God because he's accepted you in Jesus Christ and pardoned your sins, then you can be delivered from the mask you may have been wearing all of your life and you'll be free at last. That's why James says in verse 18 that true wisdom produces a harvest of righteousness sown in shalom, in the well-being of knowing that you are Christ's. A harvest sown in shalom by those who make shalom.

Are you wise? Does anybody in the world think you are wise? Has anybody in the world ever said to you, "You're a wise kind of person. Can you help me with this?" This is a marvelous, marvelous, marvelous wisdom of God in Jesus Christ who is the wisdom of God which, of course, is why if you don't find Jesus Christ and trust in him, you'll spend the rest of your life striving after the wind and never, ever finding the wisdom that comes from above. O, to be wise. O, to be wise.

Heavenly Father, your Word tells us that you are the all-wise God. When we come to trust in Jesus Christ who is your wisdom although the world counts him as foolish and in

Jesus Christ who is your power for our salvation, although the world counts his cross as abject weakness and we pray that you will work your wisdom into our lives. And we ask this, in Jesus' Name. Amen.