

Today the topic of our message is wisdom. The text is James 3:13-18. Please open your Bibles to the passage and I will read the passage and we will reflect on what it is that God would like us to comprehend, to understand, to put away into our own understanding, no doubt so that you and I would grow in wisdom. That would be the result of you and I taking some time to reflect upon these verses.

(3:13) *“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. (3:14) But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. (3:15) This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. (3:16) For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. (3:17) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. (3:18) And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

Wisdom: whether or not we have got it is the issue. Whether or not those whom we admire have it is the issue. Whether or not we have organized our lives so as to pursue wisdom and to pursue those who manifest wisdom: those are the issues that are laid out in front of us. But notice in the body of that text that James writes something of critical importance that could easily be overlooked, misunderstood. He says, if there is jealousy and ambition don't lie against the truth; rather own up to it. Own up to it so you can deal with the fact instead of pretending it isn't present.

Proverbs 4:7 says this, *“The beginning of wisdom is this; get wisdom. And whatever you get, get insight.”* Be focused on what it is you are pursuing. That Proverb in fact articulates, it states the dominant concern of James in the first three chapters of his letter that you and I have been going through. It is a priority that you and I should heed. How many of us are aware of the knowledge explosion in modernity? Not that long ago, a couple of hundred years, it was reasonable for a well-educated man to actually read almost everything that had been written. Today no one can even keep up what is most recently produced in their specific field of expertise. I remember when I was in Graduate School that I would be physically ill when I went into a library: Two to four hundred thousand volumes and I was supposed to read them all. That was how I felt. In order to be knowledgeable you had to master it all. It was an impossible task. So we have an explosion of knowledge, but the problem is that we know more and more but we are no better at knowing what to do with what we know. That is a paraphrase of Henry David Thoreau at the beginning of the 19th century. We as a nation, and I think the nations of the world, have forgotten wisdom.

The opening of James' letter that we have already looked at implies that the key to being joyful in the world that is full of troubles is wisdom. If we would be joyful people, people who are at peace, people who are able to navigate the shoals of life, the troubles of life, if we would be those who navigate those with an inner calm and strength we would be those who value and pursue wisdom. James says, *“Count it all joy my brothers when you meet trials of various kinds.”* How many of us have that testimony? What a task! What is it about trials, troubles, that is good for us that they should cause us joy? What James implies in this opening section (1:3-5) is that these troubles cause us to turn to [God] in prayer and to find our renewed strength in Him. That is the intention: we are to learn our need for wisdom. That is exactly what he says: *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God...”* The way to find wisdom is to ask God for it. So there is the first little application. In your notes here is something to write down: *“When is the last time I prayed for wisdom?”* Not [when did I pray for] success: wisdom. That is the exhortation that flows out of that first section.

But please notice that if you follow James on down – this is just a review of the first message on James – asking in and of itself is not sufficient. The success of an appeal to God for wisdom is contingent upon the quality of our faith. Do we notice that? What he says is that you have to have a faith without doubting. We have looked at this before, but because this misunderstanding is so pervasive I want to restate the truth. It is not that we [don't] doubt

our prayer, that we doubt that “God I need You to help me with the plumbing under the sink”. What you don’t doubt is God; it is God you don’t doubt. There needs to be in our prayer life if we are in pursuit of wisdom, the kind of wisdom that is going to give us the strength to meet the adversities of life with inner peace, there has to be the conviction that God will in fact give us what we need, that He will answer our prayer. Hebrews 11:6 says, *“Whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists, and that He rewards those who seek Him.”* Yes! So now having full confidence in God that if I have asked him for wisdom as I encounter this trial, this tribulation, this difficulty, whatever it is that I am wrestling with: having done that, and trusting implicitly that God in fact will answer my prayer, I act. I move forward. I undertake a task. I do something in light of all that has occurred. Chapter 1:25 says, *“The one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.”* That is the beginning of wisdom.

“Asking God” is prayer: surely we all know that. James directs our thoughts to prayer specifically when you come to the fourth chapter, 1-4. Consider those first four verses in chapter 4. We will get there a little later on, but in order for us to have a proper perspective on the issue that come up in understanding wisdom we need to look at the challenges that we meet in trying to pray. This is what James writes: *“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulteress people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”* You see what we have there is that we have a huge warning that says, pray, seek wisdom from God, that is where you will find wisdom, that is how you will find out how to meet the adversities of life with inner calm and peace, but let me give you a warning: pray correctly. The mere fact of prayer will not solve the problem. You have to believe that God rewards those who seek Him and then act in that belief, and you have to pray correctly, not making yourself a friend of the world but making yourself a friend of God. There are issues here that I think we need to comprehend if we are going to walk wisely in the world.

Wisdom connects us with God’s purposes. Wisdom connects us with God’s people. Basically the arrangement is this: God says, “I will care for you; you care for my people.” That is exactly what the Mexico Mission is going to do. They are going to trust that God will watch over them, give safety in their travels, work in order that they will remain in a cooperative and harmonious spirit, and they will go down into Mexico and devote their time and effort in serving other people. That is exactly correct! And they should ask for wisdom on the way and trust that God will give it.

The wise course sometimes surprises us. What indeed is the true path of wisdom? A great problem with our prayers, James has said, is that we tend so overwhelmingly to be self-focused and self-regarding. That is why the true path of wisdom is often surprising. When you begin to learn about wisdom, when you begin to study the scriptures and begin to look and see and understand the examples and the illustrations that are given to us, when you draw close to people who have walked long with the Lord, what do you find? You find this, that often times the way of wisdom means that we need to bend to the conditions and circumstances of others rather than them bending to us. When you anticipate going down to Mexico we certainly don’t expect the family [whom we are to help] to run out, instantly set up tents for us, instantly set up big tables and cook food and make sure that everything is ready just for us so that we can step out of our vehicles, walk onto the site and proceed to build the house. No, they are not going to do that at all. What will happen when they get down to Mexico, [is that] weary from having travelled, haul all of their stuff out of the back of the van, work to set up the tents, set up the place to eat and after they have taken care of all that preparation, then they will go to the site and figure out what they need to do. That is correct. They will bend themselves to become servants of those they have gone to serve. [That is] quite right.

The wise course often demands something of us rather than providing something for us. So often, is it not true, in our prayers we say “God give me.” But very often in response God says, “This is what I want you to give.” And we say, “But how can I possibly do that?” And God says, “I have promised to take care of you; you take care of My people.” There is your dynamic!

The surprising ways of God’s grace are illustrated in a variety of ways, a variety of times in the Old Testament. Did you ever read the story of Gideon? Gideon sought God’s guidance for defeating the Midianites. Could anything have been more counter-intuitive than God’s direction that the first thing Gideon was to do was to reduce his army of 32,000 down to 300? “You’ve got to be kidding me!” And what of Joshua? Having been trained by Moses as they went through the wilderness for forty years, having learned how to fight the Amalakites by relying on Moses lifting the rod and sending forth the multiple thousands of in-training warriors amongst the wandering tribes of Israel, Joshua’s first assignment upon entering the Promised Land was to conquer the city of Jericho. What was God’s big idea for that one? “I want you to walk around the city for 7 days in silence. Then I want you to walk around the city seven times on the last day.” About that time Joshua was probably thinking, “Whoa! This is not normal strategy.” “Then I want you to shout and blow trumpets.” And the wall fell down. Who would have thought?

Do you think that anybody amongst the Israelites as they walked around the city mumbled to one another, “I think the commander in chief has lost his mind!” Do you think that could possibly have happened? Murmuring and grumbling; not that the Israelites would ever murmur and grumble, not that fine group of people! We have to understand that; what did it take for Joshua to obey the Lord’s command to do something that was just simply nonsense to anybody who had ever done anything in the way of war? It took an immense amount of courage, trusting that God would do what He said: “I will deliver, I will provide what you need; you take care of My people.” And Joshua led the people around and around and around.

True wisdom is found, we are told by James, in God centered character. That is what it must have taken for Joshua to lead the Israelites. James 3:13 and 17 make it clear that true wisdom involves matters of character and not just of mind. This is what [James] says: *“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.” “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”* Wisdom is not just a matter of smarts any more than it is just a matter of knowledge. People with smarts can be clever. People with smarts can get things done. But Jesus, the Son of God, said this about Himself in Matthew 11:28-29. *“Come unto Me all who labor and who are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart and you will find rest for your souls.”* In the English Standard Version [of the Bible], which is what I just read, they translate the word “lowly”, but the same word in James 3:13 is translated “meekness”. The character quality is essential. James says there, it is the meekness of wisdom. That is a kind of formulaic way of saying something, it is what is called a “Hebraism”. What it is [saying is] that this meekness is what springs from wisdom. It is the kind of meekness that is true of wisdom. They are inseparably joined to each other. The conclusion drawn from this is that godly wisdom is meek and gentle. The etymology, the history, the background for the word “gentle” is that it is strength that is restrained, such as you have in a broken or tamed horse. How many have tried to ride an unbroken horse? An exciting moment! But how many of us have appreciated the strength of a horse that has been broken and trained to move the cart, move the chariot, to move whatever it is that needs to be moved! What an asset. So gentleness represents the breaking of our will that we become serviceable to others. Indeed, that is a good definition: meek people, gentle people are those whose strength is disciplined to serve others. We are staying on the same track, aren’t we? God says I will take care of you; you take care of My people. I say, “I don’t have what I need.” God says, “I will give you what you need; you go about serving My people. God says, trust me. We are to say, I will serve.

You can begin to see, if you think about that, how this differs sharply from what James says regarding worldly wisdom. Look there at those verses: 14 and 15. This is what James writes: *“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.”* The world tends to see wisdom not just as understanding but rather as understanding how to get things done. This is why wisdom differs from knowledge. You can have a great deal of knowledge but not know how to put it to use. True enough? Sure! However, under the influence of our fallen nature, what happens with the knowledge to know how to do things is that it very easily and often becomes knowing how to get your own way. There is an obvious distance between the first and the second of those sentences. James characterizes earthly wisdom with these two phrases: bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. We call this “normal”; James calls it “demonic”.

We are going to look more extensively at the negatives next week, but this week I want to stay with the positive. The essence of godly wisdom is knowing how to follow God’s way. The essence of worldly wisdom is “how to get my way.” The essence of godly wisdom is “how to follow God’s way.” There is a significant difference between those two. We need an unfaltering trust that what God brings to pass reflects His wisdom, that it is the right and the best thing even if it is far removed from what we thought in the first place, because what is the affirmation? [It is that] God gives generously and without reproach. God gives generously to all and without reproach. My son took a road trip about a week and a half ago. He had a couple of exciting moments on the trip. Perhaps the one that most challenged the joyful acceptance of trials and tribulations was not far outside of Las Vegas. It was in the night and he resolved that he would not spend the night in Las Vegas, a foul place he had no intention of remaining in. So he took off along the freeway and then he realized his water was in the trunk of the car. So he pulled off on the side of the road, left the car running, stepped out, went back to open the trunk and it was locked. So he walked round to the door, and it was locked! Caleb was therefore barefoot along the edge of the freeway in the night not far from Las Vegas but too far to walk [back there] and he was locked out! I did not ask him how joyful he was, but I suspect that that young man had second thoughts. In fact he said it was the only time on the trip that he was really angry. Caleb is a faithful man, and he loves the Lord and he trusts. So he looked up and he saw that approximately a quarter of a mile down the road was a gas station. So he walked down and called a tow truck, and half an hour later he was on the road.

The challenge now is for him to remember that that was the best thing, that was the right thing, that is what he needed and that is what God gave him. So he will be able to come down over the many miles with a joyful song in his heart saying, “God, You have cared for me; I will care for your people.”

Perhaps the most stunning example of godly wisdom, not surprisingly, is demonstrated in the relationship between Jesus and His disciples. It is obvious for us as we look back knowing the full true identity of Jesus that he was light years ahead of His men in every category you can think of. But Jesus demonstrated and then stated on the night of His betrayal by washing their feet, “I am your servant.” Jesus made it His business to serve those men, although we are told that for the entirety of the three years in which Jesus travelled around with them and taught them they never understood what was going on. Let me ask you a question: did you ever try to do something with a group of people and get frustrated that they were just not catching up, or catching on, or cluing in? Did it every happen to anybody here? Try it for three years running, knowing that in the end your life hinges on them, and in the end they will desert you: Love them, serve them, bless them, pray for them, every day renew your affections for them. That is wisdom. Love wins what brilliance loses. Jesus knew how to lose in order to win. Jesus did not angrily brow-beat those men nor manipulate them. He taught them patiently and let it go.

The centrality of character comes through for us in James 3:13 where the first issue is not actually knowing wisdom but knowing who is wise. Here is the practical level: how am I going to learn wisdom? What the verse says is, *“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of*

wisdom.” Ah, so you and I know, if we want to learn wisdom, if we want to pursue wisdom, the first thing we need to do is to find someone who is wise. True wisdom demonstrates itself in good conduct and in the works that are the meekness of wisdom. In verse 17 James says, *“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.”* If you desire to be wise first look for someone who is wise, for of course wisdom is best learned from those who model it. This is the inverse, the upside-down of that stunning Proverb in 22:24-25, *“Make no friendship with a man given to anger nor go with a wrathful man, lest you earn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare.”* How powerful is it when we make friends with, become companions with, walk along the road with, identify our own interests and such with a person who manifests strong character traits? Is it not true that we tend then to copy, pick-up, follow after those traits? James says don’t go with those who are angry. James says go with those who are meek, open to reason, and peaceable, gentle. Sound like the American way? Sound like your average sport event?

Sometimes I think Christians think the only way Christians are counter-cultural today is by rejecting homosexuality as a legitimate choice. But as a matter of fact following Christ puts us at odds with this culture on almost every single level. But we have forgotten wisdom.

If you wish to learn wisdom, look for a mentor who is wise. James indicates that such a person is one whose life has certain characteristics. What are those characteristics? We have read them three or four times already, but now I will move through them a little more slowly and make a comment or two about each of those qualities. The first one he mentions is purity. Purity: I imagine that when I mention the word we instantly think of someone being free of vice. There is a list of sins that we characteristically associate with that, and that is true; we should be free of vice. But I think that it is important for us to realize that the deeper meaning for purity is that we have freedom from all that compromises holiness or a simple devotion to God. So what gets in the way of my having a simple, that is an uncluttered, straightforward devotion to my God. What is it that pulls me away from Him? It won’t necessarily be a vice, not as such. Indeed often times it is our ambitions which in and of themselves are perfectly legitimate except they often times get between us and God so that we are not paying attention to Him but to the satisfaction of our own desires. So we are off and running and wonder why we stumble, and when we stumble and fall we hurt and we ask God, “What happened?”

Wisdom, James says, is also peaceable. In the Beatitudes Jesus declared, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.”* This matter of peacemaking is extremely critical. It comes up again and again in the New Testament. No wonder that it does. Notice in 2 Timothy 2:24 Paul says to Timothy, *“The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with [strength restrained] gentleness.”* Oh, if I want to be wise these are the qualities and characteristics that I want to have ruling my will. That is what I want because that is what the Word of God says. Of Elders, and we have a few in this church, not just old guys but guys that are supposed to be wise in the ways of the Lord, Paul writes this to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:3, *“Elders are to be not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.”* This is a person, obviously, who is far removed from much of what is praised and taught in American life, where self-assertion and the dream of unlimited wealth are commended for the go-getter who will make it in life. We are not a patient people. I love it and now and then we laugh about this: “Oh God, make me patient, now!” But the truth about us is that we are proud of our impatience. We consider it to be a big deal that we are in such a hurry and indeed people who are not in a hurry we look upon with suspicion: “Lazy bums, what’s up with them?”

In James 3:18 we come again to the issue of peace. Peace is not merely or simply a cessation of hostilities. Peace is more than deciding not to get upset or be bothered by the sins and failures of others. If you make up your mind not to be bothered by the sins and failures of others all that can be is indifference. So may I ask you a question: how many of us in this room have closed our hearts against others, deciding, “Don’t need you; won’t take the time;

you make the time; you make your choices, I make mine. You go your way, I go mine.” So we cover over our hardness of heart by saying they have the right to choose; I won’t interfere. That is not peace.

What is peace – and I will end with this so you all have to come back next week and get the rest of this message! What is peace? Peace entails, it unavoidably involves forgiving others and constantly renewing our relationship in the Lord, constantly. Peace entails, again is inescapably entangled with the determination to work cooperatively and harmoniously with one another. In that way we advance the kingdom of God.

I will end with this illustration. What is the reality of peace? Let’s just assume that we are all going down to Mexico and we are all down there in Mexico and there is somebody on the trip who just decides to not be cooperative. They are not going to be a part of the team. They are going to do their own thing, and they are rather a pain in the neck. Does anybody know anybody like that? Let me ask a different question: has anybody been that person? So the wise ones of the trip, look at this person and they say, “Forget you! Do what you want. Go where you will. We are going over here and doing this and at the end of the time if you are in camp, we will take you home. If you’re not, you are on your way for a long walk.” What would that say to the people round about? Love bends to the need. Love bends to make peace, that we would be together, because it is together that we give glory to God.

Let’s pray: our Father in heaven we thank You for the incredible depth of Your Word, how it speaks to our hearts. More often Father we should let ourselves be broken by it. Forgive us for being a hasty people, grabbing small portions of the Word and considering it enough. Draw us to Yourself. Humble us before You. Renew us in Your truth, and bless us, our Father, with the certainty that You will care for us as we care for Your people. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.