

I'm going to begin this morning's sermon with a simple word association exercise. I'm going to speak out a few words and let's see if you can guess the subject matter. *Are you ready?*

- Wonton Soup
- Chicken Chow Mein
- Sweet and Sour Pork

If you guessed “Chinese Food,” then you're tracking with me. I grew up in a “meat and potatoes” kind of family, but when we ate out at a restaurant we often went out for Chinese Food. But no matter how good the eggs rolls were, or the ginger beef, the best part of the meal came at the end—the Fortune Cookie. It wasn't that the cookies were good, they were often stale, it was the little, white, slip of paper we were after. Allow me to read to you some fortune-cookie-wisdom:

- *All the effort you are making will ultimately pay off.*
- *All the troubles you have will pass away very quickly.*
- These days, you may open your cookie to find that ancient Chinese wisdom has been replaced by North American self-help sayings: *Do not underestimate yourself. Human beings have unlimited potential.*
- I recently came across a fortune cookie saying that wasn't very encouraging, but to be fair, it was a lot more helpful than most: *The greatest danger could be your own stupidity.*

So true. How often have we said or done something that we later regretted? And these days, the fact that most people have a video phone means that our foolish words and actions can be recorded, posted to Youtube, and played for generations to come. I want to invite you to turn your attention to the video screen for a short compilation of *What Were You Thinking* moments.

• Play video

We live in the age of information. With our Google search engine we can find, read, or view almost anything. For example, when I couldn't remember how to change the brakes and rotors on my Dodge Caravan, I looked it up on Youtube. But the question is, with all of this information at our fingertips, are we further ahead than past generations? Have we become more intelligent? And maybe more importantly, are we growing in wisdom?

This morning my sermon is going to revolve around a particular word that is found in James 3:13-18; the word in question is **wisdom**. As we look to the Scriptures this morning, I want to ask—and attempt to answer—the following three questions: *What is wisdom? Where does it come from? And, what does wisdom do?*

At this time let me invite you to open your Bible with me to James 3:13-18. If you are using the Blue Bible located in the seat rack in front of you, our text can be found on page 978.

“13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. 14 But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. 15 Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit,

impartial and sincere. 18 Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

Q 1. What is wisdom? (vs. 13) The Bible differentiates between intelligence and wisdom. We all know people who have a high IQ—their intelligence quotient is off the charts, we may describe them as brilliant, they are experts in their field. But one can have a high IQ and a low EQ (emotional quotient); we all know people who are not self-aware or other-aware. A low EQ invariably results in poor communication, relational break down, and the like.

Sticking with the acronyms, the biblical definition of wisdom highlights GQ—the God quotient. Biblically speaking, wisdom has less to do with what we know and more to do with how we live. That’s an oversimplification of course, knowledge is intrinsic to wisdom, but the Bible is most interested in the knowledge that leads to a love for God and others. James reminds us in vs. 13 that true wisdom is seen in the one who lives a life of humility and goodness.

Proverbs 9:10 tells us that reverence and obedience before God is “*the foundation of wisdom*” and that knowledge of [God] results in good judgment. In the Bible’s way of thinking, true wisdom begins with a commitment to walking in God’s way.

The one who is wise, walks in the way of God, while the fool ignores God’s path and goes their own way. It is this perspective that shapes what James writes in his letter, in fact, he has already been beating

this drum with respect to faith and deeds. Our belief in God is proved genuine by a life lived for God; the same is true when it comes to wisdom. We cannot claim to be wise and disregard God’s instruction.

Scot McKnight writes, “Wisdom, then, for James has to do with both a grasp of God’s will and a life that conforms to that will”.¹ J.A. Motyer writes, “Nothing is known until it also reshapes the life.”² Our faith needs to be both **proclaimed and performed**³, and so, once more, James holds out the alignment of belief and behaviour, knowing and doing.

illus: I want to take a moment to draw upon an example from the Old Testament. Can anyone tell me, what was the defining characteristic of King Solomon’s life? *Wisdom*. In 1 Kings 3 we’re told that after Solomon received the crown, he felt overwhelmed by the responsibility of kingship.

One night the Lord appeared to him in a dream and Solomon made the following request: “*I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties...So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?*” (1 Kings 3:7, 9).

The Lord was pleased with Solomon's request and gave him wisdom beyond parallel; his fame spread to surrounding nations and foreign kings and queens would come to listen to his insight. Under his

¹ Scott McKnight, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Letter Of James*, 302.

² J.A. Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of James*, 130.

³ McKnight, 305.

leadership, the nation of Israel flourished—in architecture, art, culture, and economics; his reign was also marked by peace with surrounding nations.

And yet sadly, over time, Solomon’s wisdom diminished. His genius status remained—he was without intellectual equal—but his heart strayed from God. Inherent to godly wisdom is a commitment to walking with, listening to, and obeying God. As intelligent as Solomon was, he showed his foolishness by intentionally ignoring God’s instruction.⁴

There is a world of difference between having a foolish moment and leading a foolish life; it’s about the orientation/trajectory of our life. Solomon started well but finished poorly; he lost sight of God, he lost sight of the goal, he wasn’t diligent until the end.

We can learn from Solomon’s life. We need to remain diligent to the end. The fact that you may have walked in close communion with God 5 years ago, 5 months ago, 5 weeks ago, cannot sustain you today. Wisdom, like faith, requires a present commitment to trust, follow, and obey.

Before we leave vs. 13 behind, I want you to notice the connection James makes between wisdom and humility. In our day, intelligence tends to breed, at best, confidence, and at worst, pride, or, the air of superiority. The world in which James lived was similar to our own in the sense that humility was not a sought after trait. People tend to associate humility with letting others walk all over you, or,

undervaluing one’s own expertise, or, never expressing one’s opinion. Biblical humility is something different.

The one who is humble understands that all that they have and are is a gift from God, and so, they don’t boast about what they have—or what they can do—as though they were a self-made person. The one who is humble also understands that they are not God’s equal—He is higher and greater in every way. They have embraced the truth that they, along with every other human being, are in need of God’s mercy and grace. And, having encountered this grace, they choose to treat others with honour, love, and mercy. In the next few verses, we’ll see where James is going with all of this.

Let’s take a look at the second question...

Q 2. Where does wisdom come from? (vs. 14-16)

illus: In my mid twenties, I made an appointment with my dentist because I was experiencing pain in the back of my jaw. My dentist took one look and offered the following diagnosis—*your wisdom teeth are coming in crooked and they need to be removed*. That didn’t sound pleasant, and it wasn’t. When he yanked the first one out, he held it up with his pliers and said “Whoa...that’s huge...you’ve got teeth like a horse!” It didn’t sound like a compliment.

Have you ever wondered why they are called “wisdom” teeth? Is it because we all reach the height of wisdom between the ages of 17 and 25? Most people get their wisdom teeth at this time and it marks a kind of transitional period between adolescence and adulthood. And

⁴ Cf. Deuteronomy 17:16-19, and 1 Kings 11.

because we tend to associate wisdom with age and maturity, these late-arriving-teeth were dubbed "wisdom teeth."

But is this where wisdom comes from? Does it automatically accumulate with time, age, and experience? If this were the case, every young person would be foolish, every old person would be wise, and every middle-aged person somewhere in between—if only it were that simple.

In vs. 14-16, James suggests that there are two kinds of wisdom from two different sources. The first kind of wisdom comes from "below" and it is "earthly" in the negative sense of the world. This kind of wisdom doesn't take the long view—it lives for the "now"—and it only values what's best for me.

How can James put "envy and selfish ambition" in the same sentence as the word "wisdom"? James is speaking tongue in cheek when he refers to these things as wisdom. Envy and selfish ambition can fuel us—to work harder, to get ahead, to take what we want—but one cannot burn this kind of fuel without being destroyed and destroying others in the process.

More often than not, to seek the best for ourselves requires turning a blind eye to what might be good for others. And the problem is that no amount of "the best" will ever satisfy envy and selfish ambition—the whole world is not enough.

Now quoting Eugene Peterson, "Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom... Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom... Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats."⁵

In contrast to this "wisdom" from below, James speaks of a wisdom that comes from above—the source of true wisdom is God. Proverbs 2:6 says, "*For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*"

Earlier, in James 1:5, we read: "*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*" Friends, this is very good news!

Are you overwhelmed by your circumstances? Do you feel like you're walking while wearing a blindfold—unsure of what's happening and unable to make a decision?

God is omniscient—He sees and knows everything; He is omnipresent—He is present everywhere, all of the time. And so, is there anyone who is better positioned to offer us perspective than God? We need His wisdom in order to make our way in His world.

The Bible differentiates between a person who is intelligent and the one who is wise. When the Bible talks about wisdom, it doesn't negate intelligence or experience but the goal of spiritual wisdom

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, James 3:14-16.

isn't knowledge per se—the goal is to walk in step with God.⁶ When life is dark, confusing, and painful, James implores us to turn to God. God is the source of all wisdom and the good news is that He is a generous God; when we ask for wisdom, He will give it.

Before we move on to the third question, I want to offer some practical advice. If you want to be wise, **look to Christ as your example and to the Holy Spirit as your guide.**

There was a moment in time, when God the Son stepped into human history as a human being; He was born of the virgin, Mary, and given the name Jesus. Why did God become human? In part, it was to show us how to be human, how to follow God, how to walk in the way of wisdom. Jesus made God visible, tangible, touchable, reachable; He was—is—the manifestation of God's wisdom.⁷ What does humility and goodness look like? We look to the example of Jesus.

A few weeks after Jesus was raised from the dead, He ascended back into heaven, but before He left he told His disciples: *“it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the [Holy Spirit] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. (Jn 16:7-8)”*

My dear people, we are not saved by grace and then cast upon our own efforts; the Holy Spirit comes to be with us, to live in us—to remind us of God's love, to encourage, to strengthen, to teach, and to guide. God is the source of all wisdom and God the Holy Spirit has

⁶ C.f. Proverbs 1:7; 9:10.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:24.

⁸ Peterson, *The Message*, James 3:17.

made us His dwelling place. If we lack wisdom, we should ask God, the Holy Spirit; He is present to help us.

Let's take a look at the final question...

Q 3. What does wisdom do? Vs. 17-18 says, *“the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”*

If we are used to thinking about wisdom in terms of knowledge, this list will confuse us, but remember, biblical wisdom is most interested in the knowledge that leads to a love for God and others. Here, in vs. 17-18, James describes the effect God's wisdom can have on us, and, on our relationships. Heavenly wisdom produces heavenly living; remember, nothing is known until it reshapes our lives.

And so, James names 7 characteristics of a person who is on the path to godly wisdom, beginning with **purity**. While the word “purity” conveys the meaning of moral cleanliness, it also includes the meaning of “single-mindedness”, or undivided loyalty to God.

Peterson writes, *“Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others.”*⁸ This is at the

heart of James' concern. A community can't consider itself wise while at the same time destroying itself through angry words, bitter envy, and selfish ambition. It's not surprising that second characteristic James mentions has to do with peace; the one who is wise loves peace and pursues peace. I'll say more about this in a moment.

James goes on to mention five other qualities that mark the one who is wise. The wise person is "**considerate**," which is to say, they are gentle with others. He or she is **submissive**, in other words, willing to listen and yield to others, *where possible, and appropriate*. The wise person is **full of mercy and good fruit**. She or he is **impartial**, not showing the kind of favouritism we read about in James 2:1-12. And, they are **sincere**.

Stop for a moment and consider this list. James casts a vision for life together, for an alternative community. Can you even imagine what it would be like to live in a community marked by these qualities? Wouldn't you like to be a part of something like this? Scot McKnight, reflecting on these verses, offers the following comment, "The wise person lives in God's world in God's way with God's people and so enjoys the blessing of the only wise God."⁹

In vs. 18, James returns to—and concludes with—the characteristic of peace: the one who is wise loves peace and pursues peace. Notice that James uses an agricultural analogy: "*Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*" When we are at peace with God, we can make peace with others, which results in right and good relationships.

⁹ McKnight, 310.

When we embrace God's wisdom it can have a transforming effect on us, our relationships, and our community. Unfortunately, wisdom doesn't automatically accumulate with time, age, and experience. Growing in wisdom is like every other kind of growth, it requires the right conditions.

illus: If an apple seed is planted in nutrient-rich-soil, if it receives water and sunlight, in time, it will grow into a tree that produces apples. But these conditions must be met, the seed must be nurtured, growth is not automatic. If the conditions are not met, if the seed is buried under rocks—void of soil, sun, and water—it will not grow into a tree.

The same is true when it comes to peace; the conditions must be met, wisdom from above needs to be embraced before we can love peace and pursue peace.

We need to keep in mind the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:18, "*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*" While we cannot make peace with everyone, which is to say, we cannot force anyone want to live in peace, but, we ourselves can be people of peace. With the Holy Spirit's help, we can love those who hate us; we can bless those who curse us; we can forgive those who have wounded us, whether they admit the wound they have inflicted or not. Our response isn't dependent on their response.

The way of wisdom, God's way, leads to freedom from envy, selfish ambition, and disorder; the way of wisdom leads to a life of purity, peace, and getting along with others.

Conclusion: Are you a person of wisdom? The fruit of wisdom can be seen and heard in the life that we live. Biblical wisdom is concerned with the knowledge that leads to a love for God and others—if we let it, such wisdom can transform us, our relationships, even entire communities.

May we be the kind of people—the kind of community—that looks to Jesus and keeps in step with the Spirit, allowing God to shape us so that we love Him and others.

Pray

Worship

Benediction