

Wisdom From Above is Pure

James 3:13-18

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Last week Pastor Danny introduced us to the end of James chapter three as we continue through the book together, and really did a fabulous job of pointing out the contrast between heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom. The wisdom that God gives versus the wisdom that comes from the evil one. The wisdom from above versus the wisdom from below. And he pointed out that this is a significant theme because the wisdom from below is prevalent. This is not theoretical. It is active in the world, and it is active in the church.

It is insidious. The wisdom from below disguises itself. It counterfeits real wisdom and godly wisdom. And so the Holy Spirit, who is leading James to write, wants us to be able to tell the difference between God's kind of wisdom and the world's kind of wisdom. Now all sorts of things masquerade as wisdom in every area of life. We could spend the rest of our lives playing a game of whack-a-mole, saying, "Oh, there's false wisdom, oh, there's false wisdom. There's some more, there's some more." Always chasing after what is false. But one of the things that I have learned during some time overseas in a country where there were actually a whole lot of counterfeit hundred-dollar bills going around, is that the way to tell the difference between something that's counterfeit and something that is real is to study the thing that is real. You can't study all the possible counterfeits.

In fact, earlier this week I asked Google's chatbot, whatever the name of that particular one happens to be, how do you identify counterfeit money? And it said to study the real thing. Learn about the texture of a real hundred-dollar bill (or in my case, maybe a 20). Learn about the colors of the ink, the watermarks, the micro prints, the identifying ribbon. As you learn the real thing, as soon as you touch or look at something that is false, you will be able to identify it. And I am absolutely convinced that that is a truth for Christian living. There is so much garbage out there. We can spend the rest of our lives trying to chase down every form of evil, every counterfeit manifestation of wisdom, or we can spend our time learning what is true so that we can identify every sort of evil.

That is what the Holy Spirit wants us to be able to do in the book of James. Wisdom is identified, Pastor Danny told us last week, by its fruit, by its actions, by the things that we see as characteristic of godly wisdom. And we read about it in chapter three. We're going to read together James 3:13-18: "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. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the

truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 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. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness."

Those last two verses have been called a hymn of wisdom or a hymn to wisdom. They're actually constructed very carefully. Rhyme and alliteration are built into the words as well as a certain cadence as you read them. James very carefully arranged this description of wisdom so that we would slow down and spend some time on it, and that's exactly what we're going to do. The Holy Spirit led him to be careful in describing wisdom to us. We want to be careful in understanding what it is.

1. Purity

And the first thing he says is that the wisdom that comes from heaven is pure. So this morning we will be talking about purity. First of all, just to get a general description, what does that word mean in its use in the Scriptures? It's actually not an incredibly common word. The word for wisdom being "pure" is used eight times in the New Testament. If you extend it to include the adjective and the noun and the verb--in other words, something is pure, or purity, or to purify, all of those related words--it's only used 17 times in the New Testament. But it's a really interesting study to look through those and to see the characteristics of purity that we find rise to the surface through that study.

a. Ceremonial cleansing

---To be "clean"

And the first one is that it is rooted in the idea of being clean. It's rooted, in fact, in the Old Testament ceremonial cleansing practices that the Lord had given to His people. Four times in the New Testament, ceremonial cleansing is referred to, people undergoing purification rituals. The idea behind this is that God is perfectly holy and that anything, in order to be acceptable to Him, must be blameless, without spot, without a blemish. And so the clean sacrifices were the blameless sacrifices, the spotless sacrifices that God had ordained. And then worshipers who wanted to come into God's presence needed to be clean. Well, of course, none of us are blameless or without spot or blemish. And so there were purification rituals to go through in order to be able to come into the presence of God. This is an acknowledgment of my lack, an acknowledgment of human need, an acknowledgment of the nature of God and His holiness and perfection. And undergoing

this ritual in order to come into conformity to those requirements. Before you go into God's presence you must be made clean. You must be purified.

--Moral and spiritual integrity

This, of course, if you have read through the Old Testament laws and then a couple of places in the New Testament, has special implications for sexual purity. All kinds of cleanliness laws around those aspects of human life. And twice in the pastoral epistles, special words about sexual purity are given to God's people. The root of that is the fact that we are a temple of the Holy Spirit. We don't just go into God's presence on a Sunday morning and so Saturday night we better prepare ourselves for it. Or maybe Sunday morning, say a prayer. We *live* in God's presence. He abides *in* us. And so are the things that I am doing, the things that I am looking at, the things that I engage in, are those the things that I would do in God's presence? And so that helps us to understand that the fundamental idea here is moral and spiritual integrity. Does what I do and say line up with who I am as a child of God?

I think this is one of the reasons that James begins just about every paragraph reminding his readers who they are. Brothers and sisters, fellow believers, as those who follow Jesus Christ, think this way. Say these things. Do these things. Integrity is having your life line up with your identity. And purity is the practice of moral and spiritual integrity. It is whole-heartedness before God. Throughout the Scriptures we see that a clean heart, a pure heart, is an undivided heart. It is integrity in God's presence. This is so important throughout Scripture, but in particular in the book of James as we read what he has to say.

b. In process for a believer

Next thing that we see as we look at this concept of purity in the New Testament is that it is a process for the believer. Purity is not something that we guard and preserve for fear of losing it. The fact is, none of us have it. In the garden when Adam and Eve fell into sin, we all lost our pure standing before God. And then, in fact, each one of us has in multiple ways, not in just one way, violated God's holy law and placed ourselves in a position of being separated from His holiness. We are impure. We are in process towards purity. It is something that we pursue and something that as believers, we will gain.

Peter, when he's writing to the churches, tells them that they have been purified by their obedience to the truth. And so, having been impure, they learned the truth. They began to live in obedience to the truth. They have been purified. And then he calls them to progress further in their faith. We have to get the idea here. This concept of purity doesn't mean we never sin. It doesn't mean that we never fall. It means that we are turning from sin toward God. Listen to what Paul writes to the church in Corinth. Second Corinthians 7:11: "See

what this godly sorrow has produced in you: [So there was sin, followed by godly sorrow and repentance.] what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent [‘pure’ is the word used there] in this matter.

He's not saying you have this, keep it. He's saying you were far from this, and now you have been granted it through repentance, and let's continue in it. In fact, also in Second Corinthians, he tells the believers that he is striving to present them in the final day, in the day of Christ, as a pure bride for the Lord Jesus Christ. So this is a process that is going on. It is something to work at. It's something to strive for. It's a serious matter. It requires intentionality. It requires discipline. And it will be complete at the day of Jesus Christ. You have a young man like Timothy who Paul calls to be exemplary in his purity. In other words, he is growing in that and is to be an example of that to others.

But the summation of this idea of being “in process towards a day of completion” is found in First John 3:2-3, these beautiful verses that many of us are familiar with. “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him [in all of His glory, and His beauty and His perfections] as He is. All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.” Being called to this hard work of growing in purity until the day of Christ, when we get to behold Him in all of his glory. And then, amazingly, by grace are made to be like Him. I love this so much: sometime in the course of this year, I read that “sanctification takes an entire lifetime plus an instant.” That instant that we see Jesus.

c. A reflection of God's character

And the other thing we see is that it is important. Purity is important because it is a reflection of God's character, and it is a witness to who He is. We just saw the idea that it is a reflection of God's character. We will be like Jesus because we will see Him as He is. That is our hope of purification. When people look at us, they see--or they are supposed to see--Jesus, our lives being a reflection of who He is, that is a witness to Him. One of the places where Peter uses the word purity, he says that the purity of our life is a testimony to an unbelieving spouse. But probably the most picturesque description that I could find of how our life, how our practice of the purity of wisdom honors God and displays His glory, is in Deuteronomy 4:5-6: “See, the Lord says, I have taught you decrees and laws, as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’”

--A testimony to the world

The surrounding world sees the practice of wisdom among God's people, and gives glory and honor to God's name. Is that what the surrounding world does when they look at Tom? When they look at you? When they look at the church? Our testimony, our interactions with the world, our lifestyle, does it make people give honor and glory to God? That's why purity is important. And given that it's so important, we do well to ask and to examine ourselves. Earthly wisdom is ubiquitous and insidious. It creeps in and takes root and leads to moral and spiritual compromise. Compromise that's explained away by the fake kind of wisdom. One commentator says "The Christian who wants to live in wisdom can ask no better question regarding his or her thoughts, words, actions and devotion than: 'am I pure?'"

So that's the broad view. What is this idea of purity as expressed through these words in God's holy Word? And it is that it is the idea of coming into and living in God's presence, clean. It is the idea of being in a process and working hard at a process that will finally be completed in the day of Christ. And it's important to do so because it's a reflection of God's character.

2. Wisdom that is Pure

a. Of primary importance

So what about the wisdom that is pure as we see it in the book of James? Once again, the first thing we see is that it is of primary importance. James 3:17: "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all, pure." And that simply doesn't mean that there's a number one next to it in this list of characteristics. It is fundamental. Everything else flows from this. We've already talked about that idea earlier in the book of James in chapter 3, speaking about the tongue. And what's the source of the words that come out of our mouths? It is our heart. James is trying to get across the message that everything flows out from the heart: our words, our actions, our relationships. If only the source is pure, then the output will be pure.

Conversely, you can trace the source of destructive actions, of destructive speech, back to the heart. And so James asks us the question, is the heart ruled by earthly, unspiritual, demonic wisdom? Or is the heart ruled by the wisdom that comes from heaven? Yes, it is of primary importance because if our heart is pure, if we're ruled by the wisdom that comes from heaven, then everything else will flow from it.

b. Kept unpolluted

Another thing we see about the wisdom that is pure, looking at the whole book of James, is that it is free of--to use the words of chapter one--moral filth, but it is a heart that has been kept unpolluted by the world. Those are words that describe the exact opposite of purity, and he put it right out there. Moral filth and pollution are the opposite of the wisdom that comes from heaven. Looking at chapter three, we just read the verses, we just talked about those words. Earthly. Unspiritual. Demonic. Isn't it interesting that throughout Scripture you see this this description of the elements that are in opposition to the Spirit's work in our lives. The world, the flesh and the devil, you ever heard that before? That's exactly what is right here. It is earthly: of the world. It is unspiritual: of the flesh. It is demonic: it comes from the devil. That is the opposite of what James wants us to do, how he wants us to live, what should characterize our lifestyle. He wants us to be free of moral filth and kept unpolluted by the world.

But worldly wisdom explains away those things. Worldly wisdom makes excuses, justifies, minimizes. "Oh, it's not so bad. Oh, I'll do better next time. Oh, in the heart of the matter, I'm trusting the Lord." James says no. Don't allow earthly wisdom to explain away any sort of impurity. Don't allow the world, the flesh, and the devil to rule your heart. And of course, we can look at all sorts of manifestations of that in our world, and in our lives. I will focus on, just for a couple of minutes: entertainment and sexuality.

The violence and vulgarity that we subject our minds and hearts to on a regular basis is moral filth and pollution, and it cannot but taint our hearts before a God Who calls us to be pure. We can't minimize it. We can't justify it. We can't explain it away. That's earthly wisdom. We must apply ourselves. We must strive. We must take seriously the call to purity that reflects the character of God. Would I bring that into His presence? All the more, He is present in me. Would I bring Him into that moral filth and pollution? So James wants us to see that this is a matter of primary importance, and that the wisdom that is pure is free of moral filth and kept unpolluted.

c. Single-minded

James also wants us to understand that the wisdom that is pure is single-minded. It is unmixed devotion to God, undiluted. It focuses on God with all of its energies. Look at James 4:8: "Come near to God and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." One of the things that we've been talking about throughout the book of James is this concept of double-mindedness. He wants us to understand that there are two ways of looking at the trials of life, and the heavenly way is to see them as God's work to make us mature. There are two ways to look

at our finances. There are two ways to look at the Word of God and how we respond to it. There are two ways to relate with others. There are two ways of expressing faith. There are two ways of speaking. There are two kinds of wisdom. Double-mindedness runs through the entire book, and James calls us to put aside double-mindedness and to be individuals of integrity, to be individuals who are single-minded in our devotion to God alone. Worldly wisdom divides up our devotion between God and the world, or between God and ourselves. Heavenly wisdom is integral, is integrated entirely, and dedicated totally to God.

--Loyalty

Two different ways that we might see this in our lives is our loyalty. Are we divided in our loyalty, or is our loyalty entirely placed with the Lord? Do we have God not only in first place, but in the only place? Or does self, or pride, or worldly pursuits wrestle to find its position alongside? It comes through in our communications. It comes through in our relationship to our wealth. It comes through in our political expressions. It doesn't matter what party we align with. If the values of that party are placed above the values of Scripture, then our loyalties are false and double-minded.

--Ambition

The second way it comes through is in our ambitions, the things that we pursue. Do we work to gain ego strokes? Are we on a power trip, trying to look good? This can come through at work. It can come through in our relationships, in our friendships, in our homes, in our church communities. The wisdom that comes from below seeks to divide our loyalties and divide our ambitions and leads to destruction. The wisdom that comes from heaven is loyal to God and God alone and pursues Him and Him alone for the good of those around us.

3. Pursuing Purity

So James calls us to wisdom that is pure. He says it's of primary importance. He calls us to a lifestyle of purity as well as to a heart that is undivided. If we want to respond to that, what can we do? Five suggestions here.

--Everyone has a part

First of all--I don't really like my wording here, but it's what you got—recognizing everyone has a part. It's not one of these areas where we can say, “Let go and let God.” Every time that the word purify is used as a verb in the New Testament, it's talking about purifying *yourself*. Now we need to hold that in balance with the fact that the only One who can cleanse us from our sin is God, because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But we read it--

First John 3: everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself because He is pure. We have to play an active role in this. It calls for applying ourselves. We talked about it earlier. It calls for discipline. It calls for hard work. But in doing so, we must not set it up as an idol in our lives.

--Don't seek for self

That's the second point. We don't pursue purity in order to seek some advantage, or to gain some favor or some blessing for ourselves. That's the problem with what is known as purity culture. Some of you are familiar with this idea, setting up purity as an idol that has to be pursued. Because if I am pure, then maybe God will love me more, or people around me will respect me. Because if I'm pure, then maybe I'll get the blessings that I've been missing out on so far. If I'm pure, then maybe some promises will be fulfilled. In other words, pursuing purity in order to get something. It leads to the idea that if I am pure, good things happen to me. And if I am not, then, well it's already lost. Spoiled goods, may as well give up. The fruit of that kind of earthly wisdom is either self-righteousness-- "Hey, look at me!" and "Oh man, look at you..." --or living under condemnation. And so we must apply ourselves to this thing, but we must not place it in first place and seek purity for our own gain.

--Seek God

Instead, seek God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Pastor Danny hit on this last week. Pursue Christ and the purity will come alongside. When we speak of the fear of the Lord being the beginning of wisdom. We're not talking about living in a state of terror, of judgment or condemnation. We are talking about a recognition of who God is and placing highest value on Him. Again, we're talking about integrity. "I am pursuing God with all my heart" is the cry of purity. And when we seek God, when we know Christ, then we are made to be like Him. More and more transformed into the beautiful image of His character. So we have to pursue this, but we don't do it in order to gain something. Rather as a result of something, and that is as a result of knowing God.

--Use your mind

We also need to recognize that this is to some extent a matter of the mind. Philippians four. We all know and love verses six and seven: do not be anxious about anything. Philippians 4:8-9: "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." We're being called to a mindset, and then to put those things into practice so that the God of

peace will be with us. I would recommend memorizing those verses. And when we struggle with gossip, when we struggle with sexual issues, when we struggle with our attitude towards wealth, and materialism begins to stain our lives, say it. "These are the things I'm going to think about. I'm not going to think about the stock market right now. I'm going to think about what is pure and lovely and admirable and excellent and praiseworthy," and then begin to practice those things. Exercise our minds.

--Pursue purity

And then finally pursue purity as a radical, countercultural, life-changing endeavor that God has called us to. Because He's called us to wisdom that is first of all pure. He's call us to a life that honors Him and reflects His character. He's called us to an undivided heart that then results in pure speech and pure practice. Let's pray together.

Father, the words of David come to mind. Having fallen into murderous, adulterous, scheming, sin: "Create in me a clean heart, O God." And so, Father, we pray. We pray with repentance for divided hearts and divided loyalties. For lives that so often reflect the values of the world more than what You value. We pray with repentance for our lack of integrity in the workplace, in the market. We pray with repentance for eyes and bodies that have been given over to every sort of filth. We pray with repentance, recognizing that these things dishonor the name of a God who is holy and Whose name we carry, if indeed we are called Christian. And we are so grateful that at the foot of the cross is forgiveness and cleansing. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And then we thank You that in the Holy Spirit is power for living. To walk in ways that honor You. To walk with integrity in this world, in our homes and in our church. And so we ask You, Lord, to drive out from among us earthly wisdom and to manifest in us and through us for Your glory the kind of wisdom that comes from heaven, the kind of wisdom that is pure. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.