

Wisdom from Above: Wisdom vs. Wisdom

James 3: 13-18, Pastor Danny Brymer

Good morning. Welcome to church. It's always a great day to come together and experience the manifest power of the Holy Spirit as we sing His praises together, as we worship in prayer. And now in the Word, although the Word has been present in every aspect of worship that we've been doing.

For those of you who might be new or just joining us, we're in the middle of our series in the book of James. Speaking of being in the middle of something, can you believe that we are halfway through the 2020s? I mean, just think! And we're even almost done with 2025. Think of the things that have happened in the last five years. So much has changed in the world. Something I can think of is the rise of AI technology, ChatGPT, stuff like that. You might be familiar with something known as deepfake technology. What deepfake technology is, is the ability to take a video of someone and swap out their face for another face, and it look entirely realistic. So someone could take a video of this sermon of me preaching right here and swap out my face for someone much better looking than me. They could take my voice and swap it out for, say, Morgan Freeman or James Earl Jones, someone with a really cool voice. Sometimes I think, man, if I had a voice like that, then think of the revival that would happen. But if you were to watch the stream and have that version of me, and then come the next week, you'd be thrown for a bit of a loop because you would have seen a counterfeit version of the real Danny Brymer.

And so with this example, you might think that I'm about to start preaching on false doctrine entering the church, or an alternate gospel that's trying to invade the church. But that's not what we're dealing with in the book of James, although you see that elsewhere in the New Testament. But rather we are dealing with a counterfeit wisdom that is trying to infiltrate the church, a cheap imitation of the real thing. And in this day and age, it's probably even more true, more important than it was back then, because we're here, surrounded by the age of information. It seems like anyone with a laptop and a camera can be an influencer, can have a following. You can have a YouTube channel, a podcast, and there are voices everywhere telling us all kinds of things.

And so we can become confused and ask the question, how do we become wise? Well, let's start to answer that. If you'll turn with me in your Bibles to James chapter three. I'm going to be using the ESV translation for today, because I really like the way the ESV words this passage.

Follow along with me in James 3:13-18: “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.”

Let's pray together before we dive into it. Lord God, would You be with us here this morning as we dive into Your Word? Would You fill me with Your Spirit as I impart these words from the Scriptures? As I expound on them, Lord. Would You help me to be truthful and accurate? And would You open all of our ears that we may hear from the Holy Spirit, and that our lives would be changed as we apply the truth of Your Word into our lives as followers of Christ? Be with us this morning, Lord. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

1. Who is wise and understanding among you?

So the first thing that James asks his audience is: Who is wise and understanding among you? Now, according to the commentators, James is dealing with a bit of a cocky audience. They think very highly of their own wisdom, and so I can picture him asking his people this and then his audience raising their hand. “Oh, I'm wise, I'm understanding. Pick me, pick me!” To which then he says, “All right, are you really wise and understanding? How does your life look? Is it marked by the wisdom of weakness, by good deeds?” To which I can imagine his audience being like, “Oh, never mind.” And so you see, James is turning the tables on what is considered to be true wisdom. Not this self-proclaimed wisdom, because he's saying, if your lives are full of bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, if you are wise according to the ways of the world, that's nothing to brag about. Don't boast about it. Don't deny the truth.

a. Worldly wisdom is nothing to boast about

It reminds me of this one meme going around. Have you seen that one meme? It shows someone wearing a tracksuit and they're getting this medal around their neck, and then they're just, like, reveling in it. They're worshiping themselves. Come on, bring it, bring it. And then he's like opening a bottle of champagne and it fizzes out everywhere. And he's just there, going to town. But then it zooms out and it shows that this person is actually in last place, and everyone who's placed above them is just looking at them, being like, “Bro, I wouldn't be boasting if I were you.”

It also reminds me of something that happened in our family a few years ago. Now the Brymer family, we're good at a number of things, but sports is not one of them. But we thought it'd be a good idea to have our kids play baseball. And so we went to our son Lincoln's game, and he gets up to bat. And actually, there's a mic right here. I can just use this. He gets up to bat and he's waiting for that ball. I repent in advance for my bad form; maybe someone can deepfake some good form on me right here. But he's looking at the ball in the pitcher pitches it, and then he swings and he misses. Strike one. The pitcher pitches again. Lincoln's looking at the ball. He swings and he misses. The third time the pitcher throws the ball at him. Lincoln's thinking about the words of his coach: "Keep your eyes on the ball." He grips his bat the best way he knows how. And with all his concentration, he swings and he misses. Strike three. Umpire says you're out. And so then he puts his bat down on the ground and he's passing by the bleachers where we're sitting. And on his way to the dugout, he looks at us and goes, "Yeah!" and pumps his fist. And then I'm just thinking, "Oh, bless your heart, kid. I'm glad you've got some self-confidence, because that ain't nothing to brag about."

2. What is wisdom?

a. Wisdom is how we live in light of what we know

But you see, that's what it's like whenever we claim to have this worldly wisdom and we think highly of ourselves. God is looking down at us, saying, "That is nothing to be boastful about." And so James is trying to correct this problem that's permeating this church. And so it's important at this point to clearly define wisdom. What is wisdom? Now this is something that we often get confused with knowledge. We tend to use the two interchangeably, but they're actually quite distinct from one another. You see, knowledge is about what you know. But wisdom, on the other hand, is about how you live in light of what you know.

You see, you could be this super intelligent, genius Bible scholar with a PhD and publications under your belt, but be nothing more than a fool. Or you could be a simple blue-collar man, high school dropout, who reads his Living Bible every morning for his devotions, and yet be the wisest person around. It's not about what you know, It's about how you live in light of what you know.

And so James introduces us to two kinds of wisdom that we have to choose between. There's worldly wisdom, and there's heavenly wisdom, both of which we're going to talk about in greater detail. But you might describe these in a couple of nutshells. You might say that worldly wisdom is the will to make the most self-advancing choice in every situation.

But heavenly wisdom is the ability to make the most God-honoring choice in every situation.

3. Worldly wisdom

a. Worldly wisdom can be LOUD

So what does worldly wisdom look like? Worldly wisdom can be quite loud. It's loud, it's boastful, it's arrogant. It loves the sound of its own voice. It says, "Look at me. Listen to me." It is quick to speak. Now, I'm not one for making shortcuts or quick fixes in the Christian life. But if there is a good Biblical quick fix for foolishness, it's found in Proverbs 17:28 where he writes that even a fool is considered wise if he keeps silent. If you refrain from speaking, if you hold back the comments and the opinions, sooner or later someone will see your life. They'll notice you and they'll be like, "Man, that person is just so wise. They're just taking in the world around them. They're so thoughtful as they're analyzing things. Those still waters run so deep." When all the while you're like, "I'm actually dumber than a pile of rocks, but I'm glad you think so." So why ruin it by speaking up?

I'm reminded of Job and his three friends. You remember the story of Job? Satan inflicted all these tragedies upon his life. He took the lives of his children, he took his riches, his livestock. He covered him with physical afflictions. And so he was in bad shape. So his three friends come to visit. And the most valuable thing that they did for Job was simply to sit with him in silence. Once they opened their mouths, it all went downhill from there. They were stubborn. They thought that they were right, and they gave Job poor advice, poor counsel. And Job himself actually said, "You guys are miserable comforters," and nothing beneficial came from their words.

And, you know, a couple of weeks ago, our nation was shaken by the murder of Charlie Kirk. Now, I'm not getting into anything political here this morning. This is not about any kind of politics, be it left or be it right. But in response to this tragedy, whenever I looked at the internet, I saw a lot of foolishness being posted on social media. I saw right against left, left against right, all by self-proclaimed followers of Jesus. Whenever you put politics aside and just look at the reality, the reality is that someone created in the image of God was taken away from the world by an evil action. A wife was left without a husband. Two children were left without a father. A church was left without a brother in Christ. And so the best thing that followers of Christ can do in something like this is simply to be silent and to mourn with those who mourn. May we be careful with our words and not hurt one another in attempting to be wise. Sometimes the best thing to do is just to say nothing at all and simply be there. Worldly wisdom is loud. It loves the sound of its own voice.

b. It is prideful and self-focused

Something that we can tell from what James is telling us here is that worldly wisdom is prideful and self-focused. He points out that worldly wisdom is marked by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. Worldly wisdom wants to take, take, take rather than to give. And if it does give, it gives with ulterior motives, so that you can get ahead. The world is telling us “You don't have enough. You need what this person has. You need what that person has. It's not fair that this person gets to live like this and you don't. You need to get ahead. You need to assert yourself. You need to do what it takes to rise to the top. Fulfill the American dream.” And of course, worldly wisdom is going to look different depending on what culture you're in. But it's all going to lead to the same place, in that worldly wisdom is going to lead you to be prideful. It's going to lead you to be envious, to have selfish ambition. So it all goes to the same place.

And you know, the thing about it is, James is not talking to a group of people who have left the church and are now out there partying with the world, but rather he is talking to a group of people who have brought the wisdom of the world with them into the church. And so now all these harmful ideas, this harmful way of living, has now crept into the church. And ever since then, the church has dealt with keeping worldly wisdom at bay and holding on to godly wisdom. Worldly wisdom takes shape in the church in a number of different ways.

It is being harsh and demeaning in the name of exhortation. Or the opposite: it is living in denial. Not saying things that need to be said, not addressing important issues, in the name of peace and unity. It can take the shape of theological arguments when it's really a grumbling spirit about our own opinions being expressed. There's all sorts of ways that we can spiritualize worldly wisdom, but at the end of the day, it's all worldly wisdom.

And there's a specific result that happens with worldly wisdom, and that is that it results in chaos and disorder and every vile practice. Just look out in the world. Look on your social media page. When was the last time that you looked on your social media and were like, “Man, everyone's really getting along. Look at all these comments that are just so life-giving. Everyone's just being so mutually submissive to one another in their posts.” When was the last time that news articles were just flooding your feed with these stories about these selfless politicians that have nothing but good things to say about their opponents? These politicians who don't care about their own power, or these world leaders and governments who want to promote peace and to feed the poor and the hungry without a concern for their own agendas and their own power. You see, this is the world that we live in, a world full of disorder and every vile practice.

4. Heavenly wisdom

a. Proven by works

But there is another way that we can choose. It doesn't need to be like this. Because we also have heavenly wisdom as an option. Now, heavenly wisdom is very similar to the idea of faith that James talked about in the previous chapter. You remember how he said that we show our faith by our works. So he's telling us the same thing about wisdom. If you claim to be wise, then prove it. Your life is going to demonstrate that you are truly full of wisdom.

b. Pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere

If you are truly wise and understanding, then first of all you're going to be pure. Everything you do is going to be from pure motives. If you're truly wise, you're going to be peaceable. You're going to be gentle. Open to reason. Some of your translations might say submissive. You're going to be full of mercy and good fruits. You're going to be impartial and sincere.

c. Based in meekness

And the glue that ties all of this together is meekness. I love the word meekness. Some of your translations might say humility, but I like that the ESV uses the word meekness, because it's not a word that you ever hear out in the world. And it's not a word that I think we say enough here in the church. I think humility, the word humility, being humble, has gained acceptance in the world. If you call someone in the world a humble person, they'd most likely receive it as a compliment. Not that the world truly values humility, but rather they value the facade of humility.

Meekness, the world has no idea what to do with. And if someone were to call you a meek person, you might not know how to take that. So for you men in the congregation, if someone were to call you a meek man, you might be like, "I don't know how I feel about that. That doesn't sound very tough and macho and manly man." Or women? If someone were to call you a meek woman, you might be tempted to think that sounds demeaning. That doesn't sound very 21st century, strong independent woman. So there's this notion that meekness equals weakness. We have this caricature in our minds of someone who's a doormat, who gets walked all over all the time, who has no ambition, who is feeble and timid and just gets nowhere in life.

--Meekness ≠ weakness

But let me tell you, that cannot be farther from the truth, because meekness does not equal weakness, but rather meekness is the opposite. It is power, great power, under

control. Have you ever been to an airshow before, seeing those tricks that those pilots can do out in the air? Those planes that they use, they are capable of such great power, these engines. The way that these things are designed. And suppose that there is one of these planes right outside this building. And I decided to go ahead and take one of them for a spin. And I get in the cockpit and see all these dials and knobs and levers and buttons that I have no idea what they do. I can't tell you that we'd have a church building to meet in next week. But those pilots, the things that they can do with these magnificent machines. That is something that comes with great skill, with restraint, with self-control.

You see, what good is it to be powerful if you're destroying everything around you? But rather, the most effective display of power is one that is kept under the self-control that comes from the Holy Spirit. You see, to be meek is to have the power to put yourself first, yet you choose to put someone else first. Being meek is having the ability to get your own way, but rather you choose to yield to someone else and say, "Hey, why don't you have your way?" To be meek is to be willing to say, "I don't need to be right all the time, you might have a good point." And rather focus on doing what is right. Meekness is powerful. I think of that old Spider-Man movie with Tobey Maguire. Whenever Uncle Ben famously sits down with Peter Parker and says, you guys know this quote: "With great power comes great responsibility." Well, for this text, I would say with great power comes great meekness. Because it's the ultimate demonstration of power. Completely countercultural to worldly wisdom.

d. Results in a harvest of righteousness

And if we do this, it results in a great harvest of righteousness. That means that we are going to reap all these great, wonderful things. We're not going to be reaping chaos and disorder and all this evil practice around us like the world, but rather we're going to reap this great harvest of righteousness. And whenever we reap a harvest from the things of the Lord, God is not stingy with the things that He gives out. He pours it out on us by the truckload. Whenever we reap a harvest of righteousness, that means that everything that we do, our actions toward one another, are without ulterior motives but they are pure. Everything that we do, we are gentle instead of being harsh with one another. We're open to be reasoned with. We submit to one another in a humble way. We are merciful toward one another. We are bearing the fruits together. We're not playing favorites, but rather loving each other, all alike in Christ Jesus. And we don't come to church putting on a mask. We're not fake and double minded, but rather we are real, authentic, sincere.

Because you see, the meek get the better end of the deal than those who choose to play the game according to the world's rules. Because you might have some success out in the world if you choose to follow worldly wisdom. You could climb ahead in the corporate

ladder; you might have to step on a few people, you might have to use a few people. But you can have some success if you follow the world's wisdom and play by their rules. But the meek get the far better end of the deal, because Matthew 5:5 says, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Because you see, all these people over here who are playing by the world's game, their riches are going to wither away. It's like treasures where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But these treasures from heaven, this is a great blessing toward us. These are treasures that are not going to wither away. They're not going to be taken away from us, but we're going to be full of this ultra-prosperity. We're going to be filled with these blessings that shall never pass away.

e. A call to imitate Christ

--Jesus is the ultimate example of meekness

And ultimately, in all these things that we have described, this is a call to imitate Christ, the ultimate example of meekness. In fact, Jesus Christ is the essence of wisdom itself. The wisdom of God, as we find in first Corinthians 1:30. Paul writes, "it is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, Who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."

So I'd like you to turn in your Bibles with me to Philippians chapter two. And this is one of my favorite passages of the New Testament, known as the Christ hymn. Some scholars believe that this was actually a hymn that was sung in the early days of the church. Or it could have been that Paul, as he was writing this letter to the Philippians, he just became overcome with exuberant, passionate worship as he was jotting these words of praise down and just being overcome by the Holy Spirit, just worshiping and praising Him with everything that he had. Because you can feel the passion as you read this.

So I'm going to go ahead and read Philippians 2:6-11 for you. "Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death--even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father."

f. Jesus our example

Isn't that a beautiful, magnificent, glorious passage? But, you know, we can be tempted to think that this is merely a transcendent passage, one in which we can just look and admire Christ from afar. But in fact, this is a very practical, hands-on passage. I can picture Paul

saying, "What are you doing standing around looking at the air for? Get up and act like Jesus!" Be like Jesus, Who made himself nothing. Be like Jesus, Who did not come to be served but came to serve. Be like Jesus, Who humbled Himself, Who was obedient to the Father.

Now, don't get me wrong. Christ is not going to give you guys a name above every other name. People aren't going to confess that you guys are Lord, but He will lift you up and exalt you. For God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. And Peter tells us, humble yourself that God may lift you up and exalt you in due time. Because you see, this wisdom of heaven is something that we desperately need, that comes from the meekness that is found in Christ Jesus. Because Jesus is the opposite of Satan.

I want to backtrack for a little bit. Sorry projection guys. But I want to point out that there are three key differences that we have in heavenly wisdom and worldly wisdom.

Worldly wisdom is marked by three differences. It is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. It is earthly in the sense that it concerns this life only, without regard to eternal matters. It is unspiritual in that it does nothing to feed us spiritually, but rather serves to gratify our selfish passions. And it is demonic. Now, if you see the first two things, it may not sound all that bad: earthly, unspiritual. Some of your translations might say natural. Earthly and natural. That sounds like the kind of granola I get at Whole Foods. But I bet you if you were to see demonic on there, you'd put that right back on the shelf where you found it. Demonic is a strong, jarring word. It's scary. And for you, it might conjure up images of demon possession or manifestation, the occult, satanic groups, all this stuff like that. And that's a very real thing.

But what James is talking about is more simple than that. He is saying that the source of worldly wisdom is hell itself. And I think the best way to illustrate this is to look at Genesis chapter three, where the serpent is tempting Adam and Eve in the garden. He tells them, "Come on, eat the fruit. You're not going to die, live a little. Enjoy the moment." He's giving them earthly wisdom. He tells them "You're missing out. You need to go ahead and fulfill this great need that you have inside of you, so you can know the things that God knows." He's giving them unspiritual wisdom. And then finally, this serpent is revealed to be none other than Satan himself, incarnate.

And ever since then, worldly wisdom has infected everything around us. And so we have to consistently tangle with separating worldly wisdom from heavenly wisdom. And as I mentioned before, it results in disorder and every evil practice. So that's why it is so important that we look to Jesus, Who is the opposite of the demonic. We look to the heavenly, not to the worldly, not to that which comes from hell.

Three things to challenge us

1. Look to Jesus and follow His radical example of meekness

I want to challenge us with three things. The first thing is look to Jesus and follow His radical example of meekness, because His is the ultimate example. And you could see that in the moments leading up to the cross, when He stood in the midst of false accusation and yet remained silent. When He withstood the countless whippings and beatings and jeers and mocks and scorn. When He had the power to put all that under His powerful hands and end it. We saw Him get hung upon the cross when He had the power to call down His angels from heaven and attend to Him.

But we saw controlled power. We saw meekness at play. And at the end of the day, we saw the greatest display of power the world has ever seen as sin and death were forever defeated upon the cross, and by His resurrection. So may we look to Jesus, because that same power of meekness, that same wisdom, that Jesus Himself is the example of, that can be ours today.

2. Repent and ask for wisdom

Which brings us to the second thing that I want to challenge you with, and that is to repent. Repent for all the ways in which you've followed the world, maybe in which it's been disguised to look like heavenly wisdom, but it's really caused you to be selfish, to think of yourself more than those around you. I want to encourage you to repent and to ask for wisdom, because James tells us in his first chapter that if we ask for wisdom, God will heap it upon us in abundance, if that's what our heart's desire truly is.

3. Expect great things!

And then the third thing is to expect great things. You see, I want to tell you that I believe in the prosperity gospel. Not this prosperity gospel of health and wealth or name it and claim it, mind you, but I believe in the true prosperity gospel that has treasures of heaven that never perish. This prosperity that blesses us, that gives us unending wisdom, that gives us unending power, that clothes us in His love, that fills us with understanding, that enlightens our eyes, that fulfills us, that gives us the greatest fellowship and communion and the greatest satisfaction that we could ever know.

So yeah, I believe in the true prosperity gospel that comes from Jesus Christ and not from worldly possessions. If you hear another gospel, I'm going to tell you that that's false. But I'm going to tell you that the things that come from heaven, that is ultimate prosperity, that we can take with us on to eternity. So may we ask for wisdom, because we will have more than anyone in the world could ever boast of having. And may we expect these great things

to happen. Just imagine what our church would be if we are all united together in heavenly wisdom, if we're seeing these great fruits come out of one another. Think about how the Holy Spirit can use our church, how He can work in and through us if we unite together in the wisdom that comes from above.

Lord God, we come before You and we ask for wisdom, Lord, because we can't do this on our own. We cannot live this life and make our own judgment calls. We can't just look out into the world and follow what they say blindly, because we are going to be led astray. So, Lord, I pray that You would fill us with wisdom from on high. That our hearts would be meek, not serving ourselves, but serving those around You and ultimately serving You. And just as Jesus Christ brought glory to God the Father as He was exalted, so we will bring glory to You as You exalt us through our humility, through our meekness that comes from the Holy Spirit. Lord God, we need Your wisdom. We cannot be a church, we cannot be a people without that wisdom, Lord God. So I just pray that You would pour out your wisdom upon us. May we humble ourselves that we may be exalted by You, oh Lord Most High. Give us this wisdom, Lord God. May we be truly wise and understanding, and may we follow Christ. Oh, that we would be like Christ, Amen.