

James: Heavenly Wisdom for Christian Living

James 3:13-18

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to James chapter 3. We're continuing in our study of this great book this morning. Let me remind you where we've been so far. In James 1:1-18, James deals with the subject of trials and how he expects Christians to respond to them. He expects us to endure in trials with rejoicing. In James 1:19-27, he turns to the subject of true Christianity, contrasting true claims to faith and false claims to faith. In fact, in verses 26 and 27 he gives you a summary statement of what true religion consists of, and it's a three-part summary statement. First of all, it shows in our speech. Second of all, it shows in our care for needy Christians. And third, it shows in our refusal to conform to prevailing worldliness. And each of those three areas James begins to focus upon, especially in chapter 3 through the rest of the book, but there are things in which, things in chapter two as well, in which he addresses each of those three areas of true religion.

In James chapter 2, verses 1 through 13, he contrasts a sinful partiality with true fellowship. In James chapter 2:14-26, he shows the evidence of true faith, a faith which acts, a faith which works, a faith which obeys, a faith which loves. In James chapter 3:1-2, we saw James briefly address teachers and raise the particular challenge that teachers have in terms of guarding their own tongues and using their tongues to build up rather than to divide and tear down. And in much of the rest of the chapter, James 3:3-12, he focuses more generally on the issue of the tongue.

And that brings us to the passage we're going to study this morning. It's a passage in which James speaks about wisdom. And you may be wondering, "What is the connection between sins of the tongue and this challenge, this exhortation that he gives us in the area of the tongue, and then suddenly talking about wisdom?" Well there's actually a fairly obvious connection. You will remember that James, following Jesus, stressed that the tongue was simply a reflection of what is in our heart. And we said that that could not be changed by our own effort, but it has to be changed, the heart has to be changed by God. You have to have God's grace in order to have a changed heart.

Well, having moved us from the symptom of the problem to the source of the problem, in the heart, James now asks the question about how one knows whether one has true wisdom in one's heart. So let's hear God's holy word in James chapter 3, beginning in verse 13.

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exists, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord, we bow before You today asking for wisdom. We are acutely aware of the fact that we live in a world filled with knowledge, filled with facts, filled with information. Sociologists talk about an information explosion in our time. But all that information, we fear, has not made us wise. And we desire to be wise. So by Your word and Spirit, by Your grace, make us wise and give us ears to hear and hearts and hands to obey. In Jesus' name, amen.

So, how do you know if you're wise? How does a person know that she or he is wise? How do you know if there is wisdom, real wisdom, true wisdom stored up in your heart? That's what James asks in this passage today and he gives a very good, a very careful, a very nuanced answer. You will perhaps sense that James is already turning to that third topic which he mentions in James 1:26-27. In James 1: 26, James says that true religion shows itself in the speech. In James 1: 27, he says that true religion shows itself in our care and concern, our practical love shown towards Christians in need. And thirdly he says, true religion shows itself in separating oneself from worldliness, in refusing to cave into worldliness. And in all this talk about wisdom James is already phasing in to a discussion of worldliness. He'll give himself almost exclusively to that subject in James chapter 4.

But already here at the end of James chapter 3 he is on to his third topic of worldliness. You see, worldliness begins with a lack of wisdom. Wisdom begins with the fear of the lord. Worldliness begins without the fear of the lord. And so worldliness always entails a lack of wisdom. And James has three important things that he wants to say to us about wisdom in this passage. The first you'll see in verses 13 and 14 where he talks about true wisdom being shown by the behavior. The second you'll see in verses 15 and 16 where he shows us negatively what false wisdom looks like. And then the third thing you'll see in

verses 17 and 18 where he shows us what true wisdom looks like.

I. The true Christian lives wisdom, that is, his life course and choices are characterized by divine wisdom.

Let's look at verses 13 and 14 together then. Here, James says that true wisdom and false wisdom are shown by our behavior. Notice his words, "Who among you is wise and understanding?" Here's the answer, "Let him show by his good behavior, his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom." In other words, James is saying that the true Christian lives wisdom. We might say that the true Christian lives wisely. Wisdom is not just a matter of notions that you know, or things that you ascent to, but it shows in the way that you live. So the true Christian lives wisdom. That is, the Christian's life course, the Christian's choices in life, are characterized by divine wisdom.

You know, when you hear James start talking about wisdom in verses 13 through 18 you wonder if his mind is running back to the first subject he introduced in the chapter. Remember what he was talking about in verses 1 and 2? He was talking about teachers. And it would be natural that James would be talking about teachers who teach the true wisdom and who live the true wisdom, and teachers who claim to teach the true wisdom but who in fact are living a false wisdom. But whether he's thinking about them especially or not, he is talking to us about our hearts and his words apply to all of us because in taking us to the heart he is taking us to the same place that his discussion in verses 3 through 12 took us.

And as he talked about the tongue he moved us to think about the heart. The tongue simply reflects the heart and so he asks a question about our heart. Are you wise? Does your heart reveal a heart of wisdom? And in answering he doesn't give a specific definition of wisdom. He doesn't give you a nice sentence with two or three parts to it which strictly defines wisdom. He says, let me show you how you know whether a person has wisdom or not. He describes for you a person who has wisdom. He describes it negatively and he describes it positively.

And he begins in verse 13 by simply asking the question, "Who is wise?" What does a wise person look like? And his answer is that a wise man shows himself to be wise by living in a way that befits a wise man. You know a wise man by the way he lives because wisdom isn't just about knowing notions or even assenting to right truths. It is about living in the way of the Lord. Do you remember the proverbs? Do you remember the counsel of the proverbs to us about the essence of life? Proverbs 3:5 and 6. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your way acknowledge Him and He will make your path straight." Well, wisdom is about acknowledging the Lord in all your ways. In fact, Alec Motyer, in this wonderful phrase, gives us a good description of wisdom. "Wisdom is the God-given ability to see how in all our ways we may

acknowledge Him." And James is saying that, in fact he may be saying just a little bit more, he may be saying that wisdom is not simply seeing how we may acknowledge God in all our ways, but actually seeing and doing it. Wisdom is acknowledging in all our ways, wisdom is living in the fear of God, in the awe of God, in the respect and reverence of God, in all our ways. In every aspect of life living in accordance with the reverence of God. And James is saying that Christians are called by God to live in true wisdom.

In verse 14 he negatively argues that bitter jealousy and selfish ambition show that a man's claim to wisdom is false. Look at what he says. "If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth." He's saying that a man's character can belie his claim to have true wisdom. There may be a teacher, there may be an apparently spiritual, godly religious Christian person whose heart is characterized by jealousy and selfish ambition and that jealousy and selfish ambition shows that the man really doesn't have wisdom. Because James is saying that wisdom is self-subduing and other-centered, it's not only God-honoring, it's self-subduing and it's other-centered, it's good behavior that leads to deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. So wisdom is not only the God-given ability to see how in all our ways we may acknowledge God, it is actually acknowledging God in all our ways. You see, the person who is jealous and selfishly ambitious is insecure, envies other, is not thinking of their best interests, is self-focused, is self-preoccupied, and perhaps even teaches for selfish purposes. Paul talks about people, even in the days of early Christianity, who preached Christ out of precisely those kinds of selfish purposes. And James is saying such a person is not wise. We're looking for a different kind of wisdom, James says. Now that's the first thing that he says. The true Christian lives wisdom. That is, his life course and choices are characterized by divine wisdom.

II. False wisdom, though hard to pin down sometimes, shows itself in its product.

The second thing is this. In verses 15 and 16 James teaches that the character and results of the wisdom from below show you whether a person is truly wise. He says that false wisdom, though it is hard to pin down sometimes, false wisdom is harder to see than you might think. You might expect James to give you an easy, simple packaged Sunday school answer to the question of "Who is wise?" James knows that it's hard sometimes to tell the difference between heavenly wisdom and unheavenly wisdom, between true wisdom and false wisdom. And here in verses 15 and 16, he says that false wisdom, though hard to pin down sometimes, shows itself in its product. You can always see false wisdom in what it produces. You see false wisdom in its results.

In verse 15, James lists three characteristics of false wisdom or the wisdom from below. He actually calls it the wisdom that is not from above, but we can, for shorthand, call it the wisdom from below. Three characteristics of this wisdom: it

is earthly, natural and demonic.

Now, you might think, well if the wisdom has that sort of character, it's earthly, natural and demonic, surely I'm going to see right away that this is false wisdom. Not so fast. Think about it. Earthly wisdom has much to commend itself sometimes. There are people who are pagans who are full of savvy. There are people who are pagans that we go to manage our money because they're, frankly, they're really good at it. There are people that we go to as pagans to give us advice on legal matters, or medical matters. There are pagans filled with common-sensical knowledge in the world. Jesus Himself acknowledged this. Do you remember when He turned to His disciples one day and He said, "The sons of this age are sometimes wiser than the sons of the next." In other words, He is acknowledging that there are pagans out there who have been granted, in God's common grace, a lot of common sense and earthly wisdom. And it's not always easy to tell the difference between that which is merely good common-sensical earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom. James is saying here, just because a man has that kind of common sense earthly wisdom doesn't mean that he has the wisdom which is from above.

Secondly, you may say, "But surely if a man's wisdom is natural, it's unspiritual, I'll be able to recognize that." Well again, not all unspiritual or natural wisdom is bad. There are lots of good things that can come from natural wisdom, wisdom that doesn't result from the work of the Holy Spirit, wisdom that is not spiritual with a capital S, that's not the product of work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The natural man has some wisdom to offer. It's sometimes very canny and savvy wisdom.

But then you say, "Yea, but what about that third qualification. You're always going to be able to tell demonic wisdom." Oh really? Let's play a little role game. You're a disciple of the Lord Jesus. Jesus has just announced to you at a private meeting that He is going to be taken away and crucified at the duplicity of the Roman occupants of your land and of your religious leaders. Peter stands up and says, "We're never going to allow that, Lord. We'd die for You before we'd allow that to happen to You." Would you've stood up immediately and said "Peter, that's demonic wisdom."? I mean, Peter is just trying to defend his Master. He's just looking out for Jesus. He loves Jesus. He doesn't want Jesus to die. Jesus turned to Peter and said, "That was of the devil." James knows that it's not always easy to tell earthly, natural or unspiritual and demonic wisdom from heavenly wisdom.

So how do you tell it? James tells you in verse 16. "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing." What's James saying? The results of false wisdom, the results of merely earthly wisdom without the grace of the Spirit are telling in evidencing that false wisdom, jealousy, selfish ambition, disordered, division, ungodliness, these things are the product of the wisdom which is from below. You see, if jealousy and selfish ambition lead to

disorder and division and ungodliness, then we are seeing the results of a person who is living a self-serving life, and there is no true wisdom. James says, Paul says, Jesus says, the proverbs say, the whole Bible says, that there is no true wisdom in a self-serving person. A person who has not subdued himself, denied himself, and given himself over to the service of God and his brethren and his neighbor does not know true wisdom. And so, false wisdom, though it's hard to pin down sometimes, eventually shows itself in its product.

III. True wisdom, though hard to pin down sometimes, shows itself in its product.

The third thing that James says in this passage you see in verses 17 and 18. Here he shows you the character and results of the wisdom which is from above. True wisdom, though it can be hard to pin down sometimes, shows itself in its product. True wisdom isn't always easy to see. Sometimes true wisdom is a hard truth that is hard to swallow, and for that very reason it's not easy to see. The wounds of a friend are sometimes hard to distinguish from the barbs of an enemy. They hurt but they're wise. And so also true wisdom isn't always easy to see. But, though it's hard to pin down, it shows itself in its product.

In verses 17 and 18 James gives us the character and result of the wisdom which is from above. And he tells us that true wisdom is known by eight characteristics and one result. True wisdom is known by eight characteristics and one result. The truly wise person, the wise Christian, has these eight qualities, these characters.

The wisdom from above is first, James says, pure. There is a purity, there is a cleanness before God, there is a holiness in this wisdom that characterizes the truly wise person, the wise Christian. Secondly, it is peace promoting. It is peaceable. He says true religion, true wisdom, is peaceable. It promotes peace among the brethren. Now this is not peace at all costs. There are many in this room, who, precisely because they were loyal to the Bible and loyal to God have left places where they were worshipping and have joined this congregation. Some of you have left denominations for those very reasons. And you have had denominational officials, liberals, say to you, "Oh, well you're dividing the church. You're just making all this fuss over whether Jesus is God and whether the Bible is true. Shame on you. You're dividing this church." I'm not talking about peace at all costs here. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about those who are promoting peace among the brethren. Let's say you've just had a Christian friend uncharacteristically share with you some gossip that, if you were to share, would really bring division in a family or in the church. And you decide that I'm not going to pass that on. That piece of gossip that I just heard is going to die with me. It's not going anywhere else here. That is a peace-promoting Christian. Well, James is saying that Christians who promote peace amongst the brethren, they're wise. Real wisdom is peace-promoting. It has an agenda to promote godly, spiritual,

true Christian unity amongst believers. That doesn't mean that it compromises on the faith. Far from it. That's not what James is talking about. But it is desirous that the brethren would dwell together in unity. It recognizes that unity is a very, very priceless but important commodity and it seeks to promote peace. That's what wisdom does.

The truly wise Christian, the wise person, thirdly, is gentle in demands made upon others. He is gentle, he's meek. Have you ever met a young Christian, maybe just converted, very conscious of the sins which he or she was committing prior to conversion and absolutely determined that the entire church is going to repent immediately by 12:07 tomorrow afternoon of its sins? You know, he did those sins and all of you that are doing those sins, and you're going to stop right now. Now let's never forget that God was patient for 18, 19, 20, 23, 25, 27 years with that brother or sister, he wants the church to repent now. He's sensitized to that sin. He's zealous about that sin. He's zealous that that sin not be committed because he knows what it did in his life. But he's not gentle in dealing with other Christians who haven't seen yet what he's seen. You see, the mature believer, the wise believer has grown enough to know to be patient even with the sins of Christians which he or she once committed. Or maybe it's not just a recent convert. Maybe it's a Christian who's been struggling with a habitual sin for many, many years and suddenly that sin is as real as the building that we're sitting in or the pews that we're sitting on and that Christian becomes determined that the church no longer be characterized by that particular sin and begins a crusade but is not gentle in dealing with the brethren. You know, Jesus was patient with his disciples and if He had confronted all of their sins all at once and demanded immediate obedience, they all would have failed. To the end of their days, they, like you and me, were still dealing with sins. And so the person who is wise is gentle in demands made upon others.

Fourthly, the person who has true wisdom is not unwilling to respond to reasonable requests. True wisdom isn't always a monologue. I've figured it out, now you just be quiet and listen. True wisdom is reasonable. True wisdom doesn't cut you off three words into a sentence making a perfectly reasonable request. It's reasonable. It will listen, it will listen to reasonable requests.

Fifth, true wisdom is active in sympathy and compassion. It is full of mercy. It is full of mercy. It is active in its sympathy and compassion towards other believers.

Sixth, true wisdom displays the fruit of the spirit's work in life. It is full of good fruits. You can look at a person with true wisdom and in some measure be able to say, "Yes, I see the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control in some measure in that person. Not all of those fruits are of equal strength, but I see the fruit of the spirit working in that person's life." True wisdom is full of good fruits.

True wisdom is unwavering, that's the seventh thing that James says. It doesn't

vacillate. It's not hot one day and cold the next. It's not wise one day and incredible goof-bally off the beam the next. There's some consistency. There's some focus. There is some endurance and perseverance and steadiness to true wisdom.

And eight, it is not hypocritical. It is without hypocrisy. The true wise person, the wise Christian is no hypocrite. She's a person of integrity. He is whole. What he is on the inside he is on the outside. What he is on the outside he is on the inside. There's no dissonance working in the life, where you're trying to be one way, or to be perceived one way on the outside when in fact on the inside you're a different way.

You see how James describes wisdom? He doesn't describe it with verbal imperatives, 'do this and you'll be wise.' He doesn't even describe it with a definition, 'this is what true wisdom is.' He shows you what true wisdom is by how it looks in a person's life. Because true wisdom isn't just about the notions that you assent to. True wisdom is about acknowledging the Lord in all your ways.

So once again James is insisting that true religion, true faith, true Christianity shows itself in our lives. That our lives, our choices, our priorities, our behavior, is the best index of whether we are wise or not. So just as true wisdom shows itself by the fruit of righteousness so also grace shows itself in righteousness. Just like Paul said in Romans, chapter 5, here in James 3:18 James says this is the one result, the one certain result of true wisdom. The seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James is saying, "How do you know you have the seed of wisdom in your heart?" Because it springs forth in the fruit of righteousness. And then when you re-sow it in the lives others you sow it in peace. You do it with the desire of creating peace, peace between god and man, peace between Christian and Christian. And in our discipleship here at first Presbyterian we're aiming to produce wise people but we know that only the Spirit can make a wise man. Only the Spirit can make a wise man. If you lack heavenly wisdom completely today, I can't give it to you. I can't teach it to you. Only the Spirit can give it to you. The natural man does not see the things of the spirit, only the spirit can give it. And if you are a Christian today you realize that you're not as wise as you ought to be. There's no technique, there's no seven step or twelve step method to getting that wisdom. You need to apply to the Spirit. And by the grace of the Spirit, through the means of grace, the spirit will grant you wisdom.

James will tell us in a few moments that the only reason that we lack wisdom is that we haven't asked for it. And we need to go to the Father of lights who is willing and generous in the way He gives and answers prayers, and we need to pray for wisdom. May God grant us that wisdom. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Lord, grant us that we might live in wisdom and so show that you have

*implanted in our hearts the seed which springs forth in the fruit of righteousness.
In Jesus' name. Amen.*

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