7-7-24

James 3:13-16

As I stand before you about to give a sermon on wisdom, it does not escape me how fraught with difficulties that may be. So, as usual, if I say anything helpful and truthful and good, it is from the Lord. If I say anything stupid, I came up with it.

It is very appropriate that James moves into a discussion about wisdom when he has just spoken forcefully about the use of the tongue. We can often gage a person’s wisdom by how they use their tongue; and it is often demonstrated by them holding it. It fits well with his admonition that not many should be teachers; too often, one who thinks they are wise wants to prove it; and they do so by multiplying words. In doing so, they will prove that they are actually fools; and worse, fall into a multitude of sins.

Ironically, wisdom can be a difficult concept to define. Perhaps we can say that it is the ability to properly use knowledge. It’s important to know that wisdom and knowledge are two different things. Knowledge is having things stored in your mind. It is having facts and figures at your disposal; it is understanding concepts that are concrete and abstract. Quite often it denotes intelligence. But I think we all know people who are intelligent and know lots of stuff, but have just about no sense.

James basically points out that there are two kinds of wisdom: earthly and from above. It almost appears that you are better off without wisdom than to have simply “earthly” wisdom. Earthly wisdom is self-centered and divisive. It is what we see widely on display with those who are in power on the earth; be it with wealth or in politics. Obviously, it has no place in the church. But it is common there, which is why James gives warning concerning it.

James starts with what is kind of a loaded question: “*Who among you is wise and understanding?*” How does one answer that? We can imagine the fool jumping up immediately and announcing, “I am!” There might be eye-rolls and murmurings in the congregation; but the person wouldn’t be phased. A fool can simply be an annoyance, but they can also be quite dangerous. Just read the book of Proverbs and learn why we must watch out for them.

How about the person who is wise in the ways of the world? He or she may sit quietly but smugly, knowing full well that they are wise in the ways of the world. They are successful, they are powerful, and they can usually get what they want. Even if they are only big fish in a little pond, they know how to manipulate those around them.

And how about those who are wise in the Lord; how would they answer? Well, James actually answers that question. *Let him show by his good behaviour his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.* Those whose wisdom is from above won’t be trying to tell others about it or use it to gain earthly influence. They will use it to guide their behaviour and actions for the good of others and the glory of God. And that is because the source of their wisdom is from above.

Look how James goes back to the idea of works. Back in chapter 2 he made it very clear that faith without works is useless; it will not save. The point is not that the works save; the point is that the works show a true faith, a saving faith. If we have truly accepted Jesus as our Saviour and have some understanding of what that means, then we are going to want to do works that are pleasing to Him and bring Him glory.

So, if our wisdom comes from above; in other words, from God; then we will use our wisdom to do good things and glorify God. Now that doesn’t mean that we can’t use God-given wisdom to deal with the problems we have in this life. That is exactly why God will provide us with wisdom. But in using that wisdom in life’s difficulties, we will deal with them without hurting others, and still God will be glorified.

In James’ answer, we see that deeds are important; but so is good behaviour. And that good behaviour is something that is a lifestyle. We cannot be holy for an hour a week at church and live in a worldly manner the rest of the week. To live this way does not demonstrate wisdom from above, and worse, it brings one’s true faith in Christ into question. Being a Christian is a full-time endeavor. Remember, being a Christian means dying to self and giving your life to Jesus. We offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to the One who died for our sins. It’s all or nothing.

Then there’s that word “gentleness”. Wisdom is gentle; and that can be difficult when dealing with a fool or someone who is wise in the ways of the world. There are times for firmness, rebuke, and correction; but these are always to be done with the intent of guiding the person to Christ. Speaking the truth in love. Not always easy; but that is why we need wisdom.

Again, James refers to the wisdom we want as being wisdom from above. And that’s where it comes from. Another way of saying that is that it comes from God. So, how do we get it? At the most basic, it is a gift from God. But we also have to want it. Jesus comes from above; He is from God. Following Jesus is the key to wisdom. We pattern our lives after Him. We make sure that our lives are intimately entwined with His. 1 John 4:13 says, “*By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.*” We and Jesus abide in each other; that is a close relationship.

Jesus is also the Word of God; and we have the word of God in the Bible. The Bible has come down to us from above because men wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. By reading and studying the Bible, God’s word and therefore God’s wisdom come to reside within us. When following Christ and gaining knowledge of His word, we not only gain wisdom but the fruits of the Spirit. We will be able to use God’s wisdom properly.

And finally, we go back to James 1:5, “*But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him*.” We need to follow, study, and ask; but ultimately it is a gift from God so that He receives the glory for any wisdom we might display. How beautiful that almighty God will give to us generously and without reproach. He is kind and loves us; He wants us to be wise and He wants us to be with Him. That’s why He offers salvation; so He can have us with Him; if we want to.

When we ask for wisdom, we tend to think of just being given all sorts of wisdom all at once. It appeals to us to be able to sit around and answer questions for people and give them good council. Like King Solomon. The problem is that even with great wisdom, because of our sinful nature, we would become conceited and start depending on ourselves. Like King Solomon. We know that turned out badly for Solomon.

God will generally give us the wisdom we need when we need it. We will have it for the situation we are in. This is along the lines of asking for our daily bread. Praying for wisdom is not a one and done deal. We ask for it often. We ask for it to be available the next time we need it, whenever that may be. We also ask for it in specific situations. God will give us just what we need, just when we need it. And trusting Him for it is part of our call to faith.

Next James takes three verses to tell us the dangers of the wisdom that is not from above; and unfortunately, it is not uncommon. He is still telling us to take stock of ourselves. First, make sure that our wisdom shows itself by good deeds done in gentleness and that our behaviour matches. But we must look to make sure that there is not bitter jealousy or selfish ambition.

Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are both motivators. They are not good motivators; but they are effective nonetheless. As James will go into in more detail in chapter 4, people will do horrible things to others if they are driven by either of these two things.

Bitter jealousy is an angry desire to have something that someone else has; or even what they appear to have. It can be a possession, power, friends, anything. We see it rampant in the world and it is very effective at destroying relationships. It can and does destroy churches. It is easy to be envious of someone else’s position in a church or of another person’s God given gift. One can be jealous of where they sit. Jealousy is beyond reason; it doesn’t make any sense. Search your hearts to find any jealousy there. If you find it, don’t excuse it; kill it, rip it out, get rid of it.

Lots of people have ambition and that is fine when used properly. I think we can see what a problem selfish ambition is. The Christian life is a call to a life of self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice and selfish ambition cannot exist together; and it is completely opposed to what we are called to in Jesus. I think we see even more selfish ambition in the world than we do bitter jealousy, and it is also very destructive. Selfish ambition is going to get what it wants without regard for anyone else. If someone else has to suffer, so be it. And what is part of the spirit of this world today? Watch out for number one.

People can be jealous and ambitious and also be very wise in the ways of the world. They know how to work things to get what they want. In Luke 16, Jesus told a parable of a money manager who was caught squandering the possessions of his master. He knew he was about to be fired, so he changed some of his master’s invoices to favor the customer, thus making friends for himself. Jesus said, “*And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.*”

Jesus is not telling us to cheat to make friends; but that we need step it up a little in the Christian wisdom department.

James gives the warning: If you find jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, and you are wise in the ways of the world and using it as such; then you have work to do. You are being arrogant and lying against the truth; the truth that is Jesus Christ. You must confess and repent. This calls for a drastic change in life-style and in values.

James gives the reason that this change is necessary in the Christian life: it is because this type of wisdom does not come from above; it is earthly, natural, and demonic. That’s the same as the three sources of our sinful desires: the world, the flesh, and satan.

We are warned in God’s word not to be friends with the world. That doesn’t mean that we can’t appreciate what God has made and praise Him for its beauty. It doesn’t mean that we can’t enjoy some aspects of life on this earth; partake of good things God gives us. It means that we understand that this current world order is in opposition to God. This world in under a spirit of Babylon, and God is going to destroy it. There is nothing here that is worth our soul. Our citizenship, and our heart, must be in heaven.

That wisdom is not only worldly but it is natural; it is unspiritual. It is of a carnal nature. It focuses on the here and now and it is tied closely to the world. In fact 1 John 2:16 tells us: *For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.* Our natural man longs for the things the world offers and can be quite wise and crafty in getting them. Unfortunately causing destruction to oneself and others.

Lastly there is satan; always whispering in our ear to entice us to things of the world and away from God. Demons are not stupid and they have had thousands of years to learn how to tempt us. They are very good at scheming ways for us to fulfill our lusts. And they are pure evil; there is no good in them. If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, know that they are not fruits of the Spirit, they are deceptions of demons.

And these things display themselves in what James says in verse 16: *For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.* Compare that with our God. He is a God of order and He is absolutely holy.

A church is a body; and just like a body it has many parts. All the parts are necessary; they have different functions, but they are all important. If one part of a human body is sick, the whole body suffers; and it is the same with a church. Again we are called to examine our hearts. Each of us must focus on our own because none of us truly knows another’s heart. Examine to make sure there is no sickness; and if found, turn to the One by whose stripes we are healed.

Prayer

Lord God, thank You that You are so generous and gracious; You are a giving God and You desire to give good things to Your people. But You are all-wise and You will not bestow a good gift on us that will cause us harm. You will not give us what we are not ready for.

So, first we ask, create a clean heart in us, O God. Search us and find any way in us that is not pleasing to You. Then may Your Holy Spirit give us the grace to confess our sin and the strength to leave it forever. Build in us a stronger desire for You, that it may override any earthly desire or covetousness we might suffer from.

And then Lord, we do pray for wisdom. We ask for the wisdom that comes from above, the wisdom that comes from You. Provide for us in each and every situation we are in so that we may be pleasing to You and bring You glory. Give each of us the wisdom we need as part of this Your church; may each of us grow in our relationship with Jesus; coming ever closer to our goal of standing before Him perfect.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name,

Amen