

Wisdom

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[0 : 00] Well, today we're thinking about wisdom. I wonder how you would define wisdom. If somebody asked you, what is wisdom? What would you say? Last week I was on holiday up in Aberdeen, one of the best cities in Scotland, because that's where I'm from, and we walked around the University of Aberdeen.

And I wonder if you knew that the motto of Aberdeen University is this, in itium sapiente timor domini, which of course you, I'm sure you all know, translates from the Latin and means the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord.

And it's taken from the Bible, taken from Psalm 111 verse 10, which says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. But you've got to search really hard on the University of Aberdeen website to find any reference to wisdom coming from God or the fear of God being the beginning of wisdom. And I guess this is probably because in our contemporary world, most people think wisdom has got nothing to do with God. You should not reference God in the same sentence as wisdom.

And so wherever you look, whether it's universities or in school or in literature or songs or pop culture or the media, the wisdom that is being offered by our world has got nothing to do with God.

[1 : 24] It is human wisdom or it is worldly wisdom. And so what James does in our Bible reading is he draws a distinction between two kinds of wisdom. There is earthly wisdom, comes from the world, and it's a false wisdom.

But there is heavenly wisdom or there is the wisdom from above, comes from God, and that's true wisdom. And James shows us how they are in stark contrast to each other, two different kinds of wisdom.

And so that's what we're going to be thinking about this afternoon, the distinction between true wisdom and false wisdom. Because James sets these two kinds of wisdoms side by side, along with the lifestyles that each kind of wisdom leads to.

And so the challenge that James poses every single one of us is essentially, which of these two wisdoms is going to shape your life? Are you going to live according to the world's wisdom or are you going to live according to God's wisdom?

There's a choice to be made. And so we're going to look at this passage on our three headings this afternoon. The first is the question of wisdom, verse 13. The second is the nature of false wisdom, verse 14 to 16.

[2 : 41] And then the third point is the nature of true wisdom, verse 17 to 18. It's the question of wisdom, the nature of false wisdom, and the nature of true wisdom. So first, the question of wisdom there in verse 13.

James challenges anybody who claims to be wise by asking a really blunt question there in verse 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. So James might be addressing the teachers. He's already mentioned at the start of chapter 3 in verse 1.

Because the assumption is that wisdom and understanding comes from somebody's mouth. So what somebody says indicates how wise they are.

But James says, well, if you think you're wise, then show it by your good life. Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

[3 : 43] So James is speaking to people who obviously think that they are wise and think that they've got understanding. And he calls them out and he says, okay, you think you're wise, prove it.

Let's see it by your deeds. Let's see it in your life. Let's see it by the things you say, by the things you do, by the way that you treat other people.

Let's just look at you and we'll see how wise you actually are. Because wisdom comes from good conduct, says James, and good works. So wisdom, in a sense, is revealed in the beauty of your life. Your lifestyle, my lifestyle, shows the world how wise we really are. And so James continues to challenge his readers, not just in what they believe, but on how they live.

Because he says you can't really be double-minded and try to live God's way, but also try and live God's way. To have one foot in both camps, as it were.

[4 : 47] Because he's saying being wise means that you know how to live well. And how you relate to the world around you, well, you relate in a good way.

And so James pictures a good life with deeds done in humility or with a gentleness. And he's saying if you live by wisdom, your life will be attractive.

It will be beautiful. It will be nice to see. And so it's the kind of life that will operate from a position of humility or of meekness, as he says.

Because the wise person will be the humble person. Not the person who arrogantly boasts about themselves, but the person who recognizes who they are before the God who made them.

So when James defines wisdom in this way, it's obvious, isn't it, that his definition of wisdom is different from our world's understanding of wisdom.

[5 : 45] James' criteria for wisdom is completely different to our world's. And so today we tend to speak of wisdom in intellectual terms. So we think that it's those in academia with degrees and with PhDs and who write books.

Well, they're wise. Or we think it's those in education who have got something to teach. Well, they must be wise. Or it's those in politics who govern our country. Well, they're in those positions, so they must be wise.

Or even it's influencers on social media who've got millions of followers. Well, if so many people follow them, then surely they must be wise. And I guess these tend to be the people who are listened to, who are looked up to, who are followed, who are regarded by the culture as those who have wisdom and understanding.

But for James, he says, no, that's not where you will find wisdom. True wisdom is shown by a good life and by good deeds. So it's not a matter of intelligence or knowledge or position or popularity because you can have all of that and still fail to be wise.

So wisdom, he's saying, is not primarily about what you know. Wisdom is about how you live. It's your lifestyle. It's your conduct. That's what determines how wise a person you really are.

[7 : 08] And so while wisdom might be hard to define, you know it when you see it, don't you? You recognize wisdom when you see it lived out in somebody's life.

Spend some time with anyone and we'll soon see their wisdom or their lack of it. And so when it comes to the question of wisdom, do you and I show it by how we live our lives?

Would others who are watching us look at us and when they see us, would they conclude that we are wise? That's the kind of challenge that James is giving us in these verses.

And so that's the first point, the question of wisdom. The second point is the nature of false wisdom. And this is in verse 14 to 16. James contrasts each kind of wisdom, false and true.

And what he gives is the origins of each. He then gives the characteristics of each and he gives the results of each. And he wants us to see the stark contrast between them.

[8 : 10] And it matters because James is writing to Christians about how they live, about how they behave in church, about how they conduct themselves in the world. And so firstly, he describes false wisdom.

So verse 14 to 16. Let's read those verses. 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.

Okay, so there's origins, characteristics, and results here of false wisdom. So the origins are verse 15. They're earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

The characteristics are there in verse 14. Bitter envy and selfish ambition. And then the results are there, verse 16. Disorder and every evil practice.

[9 : 08] So James starts with the characteristics in verse 14. Bitter envy and selfish ambition. And they are completely negative traits, aren't they? So bitter envy is destructive.

It can take root in the human heart. And it can poison a person's attitude towards everything. So selfish ambition also is equally destructive.

It's self-centered. It's self-seeking. It's self-serving. And it's when a person really only thinks about themselves. And it's more than just trampling on others to get to the top.

It is the kind of you-do-you approach to life. Where you do what you want to do. And never mind anybody else. And so bitter envy and selfish ambition indicate, James tells us, a lack of true wisdom.

And James says you should not boast about it or deny the truth. In other words, he's saying don't live by lies instead of living by the truth. And so while this kind of lifestyle he's suggesting might seem progressive, it might seem enlightened, it might seem advanced.

[10:18] What he's saying is it is in fact the opposite. And that's why James moves from the characteristics of false wisdom to tell us the origins of false wisdom. In verse 15.

Such wisdom does not come down from heaven, but is earthly and spiritual demonic. So the wisdom he's talking about here doesn't come from above.

It comes from elsewhere. It's earthly, meaning it's of this world. He says it's unspiritual, meaning it's connected with things only on some kind of material level.

And he says it's actually demonic. So its ultimate source is Satan, the devil. And so this kind of wisdom ultimately leads to hell. And that's why we can't fail to see the results of this kind of false wisdom he speaks about.

And the results are there in verse 16. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. And so pursuing this false wisdom will always lead to disorder and every evil practice.

[11:28] And so let's just think about the results of this false wisdom in our world. Because the assumption today in society is that this world, this society, the culture would be a much better place if only we could get rid of Christianity.

If only Christianity did not restrict people and how they lived, then life would be better for everybody. So rather than have the Bible restrict us by telling us do this and don't do that, wouldn't it be better if we were just free to do whatever we want to do?

And that is what has really happened in the secular West over these past few centuries. There's been a turning away from God's wisdom, which our society was actually founded on.

And there's been a turning towards worldly wisdom. And it happens when governments promote policies that reject God's wisdom for life, which we find in our Bibles.

And it happens when there's a push to get rid of Christianity in our schools or in our workplaces, in our universities, believing that if we can only get rid of it, it will be better for everybody.

[12:40] To the extent, I guess, that there seems now to be no place in a secular nation for somebody who believes the Christian truth.

There's no place for somebody to be a Christian in public life. And I guess that's been made clear, hasn't it, in the media over these past few weeks, where the message is we will not tolerate a politician who actually believes the wisdom that is found in God's word.

We won't accept that. And yet, rejecting God's wisdom doesn't make things better in society for people. It actually makes things worse.

It's interesting that when you look back into history before the arrival of Christianity, before it came on the scene, the Greco-Roman world was a terrible place to live in.

And if you read Tom Holland's book, *Dominion*, you'll see this. Because he shows that it was the arrival of Christianity that actually brought civilization to our world. Before that, the world wasn't civilized.

[13:45] But Christianity came, and the values of Christianity, the wisdom of God's word, made the world a better place. And so to think that if we as a society pursue worldly wisdom rather than God's wisdom, we'll flourish better is false.

It hasn't happened in history, and it won't happen today or in the future. Because we actually flourish less. I would even say that we become less human.

So these days, what we do is we legislate killing. Whether it's the unborn through abortion, or the vulnerable and the elderly through euthanasia or assisted suicide.

And we redefine marriage, and we say all that matters is love. And we redefine identity, and we say, well, you can be who you want to be, even if it denies the truth of your biological sex.

If we reject God's wisdom, it's hardly surprising that our politicians can no longer define what a woman is. Or that our children grow up completely confused about their identity.

[14 : 55] Or that the statistics on poor mental health and self-harming and suicide are at an all-time high amongst our young people. But what do we expect?

If we reject the true wisdom that comes from above in favor of this earthly wisdom that is unspiritual and demonic. James really nails it on the head because he says the result is disorder and every evil practice.

That is what happens in a life. That's what happens in a church or in a community or in society when we reject God's wisdom in favor of worldly wisdom.

It is only ever disorder and every evil practice. James is essentially describing our world today. Where disorder has become the new normal.

And evil practice has now become regarded as best practice. And that's why James warns us how tragic the pursuit of false wisdom really is.

[15 : 58] It's a bit like those cartoons that you watched when you were younger. Where the character runs off the edge of the cliff. And they're running so fast that they keep running and their legs are still moving in mid-air.

And then they suddenly realize what's happened. And then you see their face and it's a look of sheer panic before they plunge to their death and hit the ground. Except it's cartoons so they never actually die.

They get seriously injured but they're back again and running off cliffs in the next scene. Well that's just a bit like pursuing the false wisdom of this world, isn't it? Because in all its boasting and in all its denial of the truth, it rushes headlong over the edge of the cliff.

Assuming that it is a much better way. And like the cartoon character, well it seems to work for just a short while. But it soon becomes obvious that the ground has gone from underneath our feet.

So if we, and not God, determine truth and reality, the result is only ever disorder and every evil practice. And so James is saying this is the nature of false wisdom.

[17 : 09] With its origins, its characteristics and its results. And so what then does true wisdom look like? That's the third point. So he starts with a question of wisdom.

He then outlines the nature of false wisdom. And then he moves on to the nature of true wisdom in verse 17 and 18. He gives us again the origins and the characteristics and the results of true wisdom.

And the contrast between the two kinds of wisdom could not be sharper. So let's read verse 17 and 18. 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 the harvest of righteousness. So James starts with the origins. He says this is wisdom that comes from heaven.

It's wisdom from above, meaning it comes from God himself. And it can be seen, James is telling us, in how somebody lives their life. And that's why James highlights the characteristics of true wisdom.

[18 : 18] So let's look through them. First one is pure. He says true wisdom is pure. So it comes from above, therefore it reflects God's holiness and God's purity.

And so God's people will also want to be pure with a desire to be free from corruption and contamination. It's that sense that we need to fight and battle against sin in our lives.

Whilst false wisdom, which is earthly and spiritual and demonic, is happy to dwell in sin and with sin, true wisdom will want to flee from sin to be pure.

And while worldly wisdom would say that this restricts our freedom as people, it is in fact the path to freedom and flourishing as people.

Jesus said, blessed are the pure in heart. And so the challenge for us is, well, is there something we need to do to keep ourselves pure? Because we'll be foolish instead of wise if we don't do it.

[19 : 23] So that's pure. Second is peace-loving. He says true wisdom is peace-loving or it's peaceable. That is got to do with harmony in our relationships. Because if we know God's peace, then we will want to be people of peace ourselves.

We won't want to have an attitude that wants to argue and start fights. Rather, we'll seek peace and want to keep peace, whether it's at home or at work and particularly in church.

And so the challenge is, well, is there something we need to do to be more peace-loving in our relationships? If we want to be wise, then we should do it. Thirdly, true wisdom is considerate or gentle.

This means being aware of the needs and feelings of other people. It's a gentleness that's willing to accommodate other people even if we disagree with them, where we can differentiate between the person and the issue or the belief.

And so how considerate are we when we are dealing with other people? That's the challenge. Then fourthly, it's submissive or could be translated open to reason.

[20 : 33] True wisdom is submissive. That is, it's willing to listen to others and even be persuaded by them. It's the ability to weigh up an argument rather than approach it with a closed mind.

It doesn't mean that you're weak or you have no convictions, but it means that you will carefully consider an issue. It's the difference between going to a meeting with your mind made up or going to a meeting where you know your mind.

Because if you've got your mind made up, you won't be open to reason. But if you know your mind, then you'll be willing to listen to others before you reach an informed conclusion.

And so the challenge is, do we need to be open to reason? Do we need to be more submissive? Then fifthly, full of mercy. So true wisdom is full of mercy.

Mercy is this word in the Bible that essentially has to do with compassion, about seeing someone who's in need, feeling their pain, and wanting to do something about it.

[21 : 37] Because if we're full of mercy, then we will feel, and we will see, and we will do. I think the Good Samaritan is a perfect illustration of this, where there's a man who has been attacked by robbers, and the Samaritan comes along, he sees the suffering, he sees the need, he feels for the man, and then he does something about it.

And Jesus says, essentially, he's the only one who had mercy. And good fruit comes from this mercy. Because we can't help but do great good in our lives, in our churches, in our communities, in our society, if we have this approach to life.

So in what ways, this is the challenge, can I have mercy and show compassion to those around me? And sixth, true wisdom is impartial.

That is, it's free from prejudice. It's just, it's fair, it's without deception and deceit. And then there's this final characteristic, which goes along with impartial, and it is sincere.

True wisdom is sincere. Sincere means being genuine, or being consistent, by acting with integrity, by being free of hypocrisy.

[22 : 56] Because the hypocrite isn't sincere. The hypocrite is essentially the actor, who is one thing in their private life, but comes across very differently in their public life.

They perform on stage, as it were. Okay, so James paints a picture of true wisdom with all of these different characteristics. As if to say, well, when you see this in somebody's life, then you know that they have wisdom that comes from above.

And if there's a little bit of heaven embodied in the lives of those who walk on this earth, then it's a good thing, surely, isn't it?

Well, I wonder if that's what happens when we walk into a room. When we walk into a room, does a little bit of heaven enter that room? Because all of these characteristics or traits that James mentions come with us, because we have wisdom.

Just think, when you're with your family, or when you're at the office, or when you're playing sport, is it good for you to be amongst other people? And do other people recognize it's good for you to be there?

[24 : 05] Do you embody God's wisdom in your life, so as to make people's lives, to make the place you're in much better? Because if James is talking of the origin and the characteristics of true wisdom, then he wants us to see the results, because they're much better than the wisdom of this world.

Verse 18 says, peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. So he's saying when wisdom takes root in somebody's life, then it produces a harvest of righteousness.

And that's the result that James wants to see in the lives of those he's writing to. Remember, he's writing to Christians, and so that's the result he wants to see in their churches. Because the Christian church is always going to be counter-cultural.

In our society, it will always have different values to the values of this world. And why is that? Well, it's because the world is in opposition to Jesus. That's why there are these two kinds of wisdom, because the world will never look to God to think that's where wisdom comes from.

And that's why the way that we show God's wisdom best is to live it out faithfully. Because James says, when you live out God's wisdom, it does produce good results.

[25 : 30] And so the pursuit of false wisdom, earthly wisdom, worldly wisdom, will never bring peace. James says it only brings disorder and every evil practice. But he says, living by the true wisdom from above brings peace rather than disorder.

And it produces a harvest of righteousness rather than evil practice. And this makes perfect logical sense, doesn't it? Because if Jesus says, blessed are the peacemakers, well, there's no way that we or anyone can ever receive God's blessing, whether in their lives or in their church or in society, if we reject the wisdom that comes from above.

So this wisdom that James is speaking of has got to be embodied in the way that we live our lives. Our lifestyle must display the characteristics James highlights on a daily basis, both in our personal life and in our public life.

So in our personal lives, wisdom should be applied in what we think about, what we look at, what we consume, what we say, how we spend our time, how we spend our money, how we treat our spouse, how we treat our children, how we handle our relationships, how we handle our friendships. And true wisdom is seen in what we do in our public life. So our approach to work, or our attitudes to authority, or our service of others, and the choices we make, and the priorities that we have, and in the lifestyles we pursue.

[27 : 05] True wisdom is also seen in our commitment to Christ's church. Because in every single thing we do, we reveal the wisdom that shapes our lives.

Will it be worldly wisdom, or will it be God's wisdom? And so, are you living according to the wisdom of this world, or are you living according to the wisdom of God?

Because whichever one we're living by, we will be a walking, talking advert for that kind of wisdom. So we need to choose the wisdom that actually works.

The wisdom that makes best sense of this world, and how to live in it. The wisdom that produces a quality of life, that is beautiful, that is good in its conduct, and that does enable human flourishing, instead of disorder, and every evil practice.

And so the question as we close is, well, how do we live a wise life? How do you do it? Well, we need the humility that comes from wisdom to recognize we can't do it ourselves.

[28 : 17] True wisdom, James says, comes from above. It comes from heaven. And that's why we see true wisdom supremely displayed in Jesus Christ, who is called the man of heaven.

Jesus is also called the wisdom of God, the one who has become for us wisdom from God. It also says that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Jesus Christ.

And so Jesus Christ is the ultimate embodiment of true wisdom. And that's why all these characteristics of wisdom that James highlights for us here are perfectly displayed in Jesus.

Jesus showed us what a wise life looks like because he was perfectly pure, peace-loving, gentle, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Jesus lived a perfect, wise, good, beautiful life. But it led him all the way to his death on a cross. And yet while his death on the cross looked like foolishness to the wisdom of this world, it was actually the supreme display of the wisdom of God.

[29 : 34] Because God's wisdom always subverts the wisdom of this world. Where through the foolishness and the weakness and the shame of the cross, God did his saving work to save his people.

And so Jesus died the death we deserve to die for our foolish pursuit of this world's false wisdom. Jesus died for all our bad conduct and sinful deeds out of our pride and envy and selfish ambition. Jesus took our punishment on the cross for our rejection of God and his ways. So that through the cross and through the death of Jesus, God saves and rescues his people.

And it completely subverts the wisdom of this world, which says, if you do you, if you look after number one, if you choose what's right for you and make your decisions, your life will go well and you'll flourish.

And yet Christianity subverts that idea and says, no, it's through the one who gave his life for you that your life will be complete, whole, that you will flourish, that you will find forgiveness, that you will

find your true identity and you will have a glorious future to look forward to.

[31 : 00] And even though there may be suffering and pain and trials, it is the best way to live because it's God's way. It's the wise way. And so, it actually is the height of foolishness to live by the false wisdom of this world, which dismisses Jesus as completely irrelevant to our lives.

The way of true wisdom is to believe in Jesus and is to follow him. So let's be wise and live this way. started jawing.