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James 3:13-18

Two Wisdoms: The Wisdom from Above and the Wisdom from Below

Pilgrim's Progress has been a beloved devotional, Christian classic for several hundred years - and for good reason. It was written by a Puritan Baptist pastor, John Bunyan, as an allegory for the Christian life - he paints the entire Christian life as an adventurous journey From the city of destruction to the Celestial city, they heavenly city of God. The book begins with the main character, the Pilgrim living in the city of destruction. He is not yet a Christian when is the book opens he becomes convicted of a sin: he becomes aware of this unbearable burden on his back, weighing him down. Then he meets Evangelist: a man who comes the city of destruction to warn everyone that destruction and judgment is coming one day. Pilgrim believes this, and Evangelist gives him a letter from the King, an invitation to come to the Celestial City and live! But there's a long road between the city of destruction and the Celestial City, and it's not an easy one. The Evangelist points Pilgrim in the way to go, telling him that he has to find the gate -a narrow gate - which is the only way to get on the Path, the only road that leads to the City of Heaven. Earnestly, the pilgrim sets off, leaving everything behind, in order to find this path. And before he can even get there, he meets someone else: Mr. Worldly Wise-man.

He asks this Pilgrim, named Christian, why he's heading this way; Christian tells him that he's heading to the gate, to find the road to the Celestial City, to begin his journey. But Mr. Worldly Wiseman doesn't encourage him, or congratulate him - instead, he scoffs, and rebukes him. Astounded, he asks why in the world Christian would want to do that! Christian tells him that he's going because he's desperate to get rid of his burden - he cannot rest or find any contentment while burdened by his sins. But Worldly Wiseman still doesn't understand; he thinks this is foolish thinking. "Who told you to get rid of this burden?," he asks. Christian tells him, "the Evangelist did," and told him the only way to get rid of it is to leave the City of Destruction, to go through the narrow gate. But Worldly Wiseman shakes his head, and says Evangelist has given him terribly foolish counsel. After all, doesn't he know that the road he's looking for is long and dangerous, full of perils? He tells pilgrim, if you go that way, you will but find "wearisomeness, painfulness, hunger, perils, nakedness, sword, lions, dragons, darkness, and (in a word) death, and what not." And this is true - these things do await Pilgrim on the Road to the Celestial City. So Worldly Wiseman concludes that this is foolish, reckless thing to do! "Why

in the world would you willingly go down that path?” he asks. But Pilgrim simply replies, “Why, sir, this burden upon my back is more terrible to me than all things which you have mentioned; nay, methinks I care not what I meet with in the way, if so be I can also meet with deliverance from my burden.”¹ Worldly Wiseman tries to steer him away, but in the end, Christian enters into the narrow gate, the only way to the Cross of Christ, where he is relieved of his burden of sins and set on the path to the Celestial City of Heaven.

This scene perfectly captures what Paul says in 1 Cor. 3:18-19: “Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God.” This world is full of people who seem very wise, who are very educated and intelligent, full of experience and understanding: the prolific author with degrees from Harvard and Oxford; the world-weary traveler who’s seen it all; the rich and capable CEO of major tech company; the crafty politician. They seem full of wisdom and understanding; but when asked about the gospel, about the Bible, about dying to self and living for Christ, living a life of faith - well, they scoff; they say this is foolish, that it doesn’t make sense. There is a wisdom - *worldly wisdom* - that *seems* wise, but is actually foolish. To the wise of the world, the wisdom and truth of God seems like foolishness. But in the end, the truth is revealed: they have it backwards. Wisdom comes from God, and worldly wisdom is no wisdom at all - it is foolishness and it leads to death.

The wisdom of this world often sounds right to us; it makes sense to our flesh; it may even be attractive to us. In fact, the counsel of this world often seems to offer us a much easier way of life, much easier short-term solutions to our problems than the wisdom of the Bible does - but we must not be deceived by it, for it’s “short term solutions” lead to long-term failure; it leads to destruction, not salvation. Therefore, we must not be deceived by false, worldly wisdom - instead we must pursue true, godly wisdom.

But *what is* wisdom? What is true, godly wisdom? What does it look like and how do we distinguish it from false, worldly wisdom? That’s what this passage, James 3:13-18, teaches us. First, he starts off by telling us how to tell who is wise by showing us that wisdom is revealed by our works. Then, he shows us what false, worldly wisdom looks like: it is the wisdom comes from below, and it is not really wisdom at all, but foolishness. And finally, he shows us what true, godly wisdom looks like: the wisdom from above, that we are called to pursue.

¹ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, pp.25-27.

So first, we see...

I. Wisdom is Revealed by Our Actions (v.13)

The passage begins with a rhetorical question, in v.13: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Then he tells us how we can figure that out, how we can tell who truly has wisdom and understanding: “By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.” James is asking the church: do any of you think that you are wise and understanding? He then answers his own rhetorical question, showing how to tell if someone is truly wise and understanding: “By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.” This answer is striking for two reasons.

First off, it cuts away any kind of notion that wisdom is association with being proud, being a know-it-all. When James first asks, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” you can imagine that some people sitting in the congregation, hearing James’s letter being read, might start to raise their hand and say, “oh, that’s me!” But as soon as we do that, ironically enough, we’re showing ourselves not to be wise after all! The wise and understanding will be known by showing “his works in the meekness of wisdom.” If someone tells you that they are very wise, that’s a good indication that they probably aren’t. Wisdom is shown, not told; it’s not a degree or a certificate that you can put on the wall.

But the second thing we see here is that wisdom is shown in what we do. Wisdom is revealed by our conduct, attitude, works, and actions. Wisdom is not the same as knowledge - knowing a lot of true facts or being very intelligent and educated doesn’t make someone wise. Nor is wisdom is not esoteric and impractical - it is very practical and relevant to all of life. Nor is wisdom *neutral*. James tells us that true wisdom is revealed by *good* conduct. Wisdom is a *moral* category. Wisdom involves right thinking that necessarily leads to right *living and doing*. Wisdom is knowing the right way to live, knowing the right thing to do. Wisdom is thinking through the lens of faith so that it transforms the way we live, how we think about things, our attitude and motivations, the decision we make, everything that we do. Being wise isn’t about saying clever things that sound nice and profound but have no meaning for our lives. No, wisdom is about knowing *the right way to live*. This is what biblical wisdom is. In fact, there’s a whole book of the Bible - the book of Proverbs - devoted to teaching us what wisdom is, and it shows us, over and over again, that wisdom is *moral*, and that it’s all about knowing how to live a righteous life. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

Therefore, if you want to know if you are truly wise, you have to look at their life, their conduct, their works. The way we live our lives reveals whether or not we are wise.

But now, this passage diverges like two paths in a forest: the two paths of wisdom are set before us: the wisdom from above, heavenly wisdom; and the wisdom from below, worldly wisdom. But these paths are not equal. Only one is the true path - only one is truly wisdom. In the verses that follow, James shows us how to tell the difference. He paints two portraits of what true and false wisdom looks like, setting them side by side; and each time, he shows us where it comes from, what it looks like, and where it leads. So let's begin by looking at the first path he shows us: the false wisdom from below.

II. What is False, Worldly Wisdom? (3:14-16)

In verses 14-16, we're given a picture of worldly wisdom - and we're shown that it isn't really wisdom at all. V.14 tells us what this wisdom looks like: "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth." False, worldly wisdom is driven by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. James has just asked who of us are wise and understanding; and he's just told us wisdom is revealed in our good conduct and works; now he's telling us that even if we have good conduct and lots of good works to show in our lives, if we do them because we're motivated by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, then we aren't actually wise. True wisdom is meek and humble, not arrogant and proud. But if we're honest with ourselves, this cuts us deep, because we are *all* full of pride. We're driven by bitter jealousy when we do things in order to be better than someone else or to get what others have - be it more money, more pleasure, more happiness, a better reputation. We're driven by selfish ambition when we put ourselves first, when we are seeking our own praise and glory instead of the good of others and the praise and glory of God alone. This kind of thinking is selfish. This kind of thinking might even lead us to do *the right things* - but for the wrong reasons. This kind of thinking leads us to do things - maybe even good and right things! - in order for people to think highly of us; we do this anytime we do good, maybe even biblical and godly things, all because we care about what people think of us. But that's not true wisdom; if this is why we do things, then we aren't wise - we're fooling ourselves.

The next verse, v.15, tells us where this false wisdom comes from: "This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic." This "wisdom" is not true wisdom: it comes not from above, but from below; not from God, but from all the opposite

places. It is *earthly - worldly wisdom*. It abounds in the culture all around us. We live in the world, and that means we're surrounded by all kinds of examples of worldly wisdom: in the books we read, the movies and shows we watch, worldly education, secular advice and counseling, our news sources and entertainment. None of it is morally neutral, and the world is chock full of worldly wisdom. And this worldly wisdom is *unspiritual* - it does not come from faith, but unbelief. It doesn't come from the Spirit, but from our sinful flesh. And that's why it can be so attractive to us, because it appeals to our sinful desires, our sinful ways of thinking. Ultimately, this false wisdom is *demonic*; when we pursue and practice false wisdom, we aren't initiating God, we're imitating the Devil. And that should strike fear in all of our hearts. James is underlining the importance for us to *avoid* this kind of worldly, fleshly, demonic wisdom.

And so he shows us where this kind of wisdom leads, what it produces in our lives; we see this in v.16: "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice." When we adopt ways of thinking that are worldly and flow out of unbelief, it necessarily shows up in our lives. It leads to "disorder" in our lives and relationships. Worldly wisdom tells us that everything is about us, and when everything is about you, and not about other people, then after a while, everyone around you is going to catch on - and they're not gonna like it. Worldly wisdom tells us that the ends justify the means, that white lies and minor sins and partial obedience are ok, because shortcuts are alright as long as we end up in the same place, right? But don't be deceived: this kind of thinking comes from the Devil, the Father of Lies, and it *is* a lie; it won't lead you to the same place at all. Worldly wisdom does not lead to our happiness or satisfaction or to us being better - it leads to more and more sin, to "every vile practice." When we adopt worldly ways of thinking it leads us to live like the world. When we adopt unbelieving ways of thinking, it leads to us justifying and doing every kind of sinful and evil thing imaginable. When we adopt demonic ways of thinking, it leads to demonic ways of living - but a Hellish life is no life at all, and only leads to death and destruction.

We've already seen that wisdom is revealed by our actions - and the same is true for false wisdom. If you want to know if someone is walking in false, worldly wisdom, then you can look at their conduct; where you see disorder and vile practices of sin, there you see worldly wisdom. So now comes the painful part: this is a call for us to examine our own hearts. Think about your life: is there disorder in it? Do you feel like your life is out of control? Are your relationships with others out of whack? If so, then you're probably living according to worldly wisdom in

those areas. Are there vile practices and sins in your? The answer is yes for all of us - we're all sinners. But now think about the specific sins you struggle with. Think about the vile practices that you allow to go on under the radar in your life, that you fantasize about in your heart, or give into when you've had enough or when no one is looking. These reason you and I struggle with certain sins more than others is because we've bought in to the reasoning of worldly wisdom in order to justify those sins - whether it be all of the time, or some of the time. When you click on the website that you know you shouldn't, or have another drink after you know you've had enough, or you take a hit "just this once," you're listening to the worldly wisdom that says it doesn't matter since you're not hurting anyone; and after all, you've had hard week and you deserve to cut loose a little, right? But that is fleshly, unspiritual, demonic ways of thinking, and it's not true - it doesn't lead to the happiness you think it will, does it? When you fantasize about adulterous thoughts or read racy romance novels, or consume entertainment that glamorizes relationships and romance that is contrary to God's design for love and marriage, then you're letting worldly wisdom capture heart and lead it astray. When you solve your problems with anger, or the passive aggressive "silent treatment," or forms of flattery and manipulation, instead of working towards genuine reconciliation, then you're buying into the bitter jealousy and selfish ambition of worldly wisdom. And we could go on: you and I both struggle with sinful thoughts, words, and actions daily; and that means we have a whole lot of worldly wisdom imbedded in our hearts and minds that we might not even be aware of.

So I encourage each of us to pray and ask God to reveal these false ways of thinking in our lives, to reveal to us the worldly wisdom that we've bought into, so that we might see it as the foolishness that it really is. And as we pray this, I'd encourage to think carefully about where you might be learning wisdom *from*. What forms your sense of wisdom? What are you turning to as sources for wisdom in your marriage, your parenting, your work life, your schoolwork, your friendships, your values and desires? From the shows and movies you watch? From the articles, blogs, and books you read? From entertainment? From secular "experts"? If we allow worldly sources to shape and cultivate our sense of wisdom, discernment, and moral understanding, then we should not be surprised when it leads to us making terrible, immoral decisions that ruin our lives and them a disordered, chaotic mess.

Instead, let us learn wisdom from *God* - let us pursue and practice the wisdom that comes from above. So how do we do that? What does true, godly wisdom look like?

III. What is True, Godly Wisdom? (3:17-18)

James now draws a contrast between the wisdom that comes from below with the wisdom that comes from above - that is, the true wisdom that comes from God. We see this in verses 17-18: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere." True wisdom is, first and foremost, morally *pure*. It does not start with sin, end with sin, or include sin at any part of the process. To be wise is to have morally good and righteous ways of thinking that lead to morally good and righteous ways living. A life of wisdom *looks like* a life of being peaceable and gentle with others; being wise means being "open to reason," being humble and teachable, actually caring about the *right answer* rather than *being proven right*. Being wise means being full of mercy and good fruits, loving God and loving others, with sincerity and impartiality, all the time and in everything. True wisdom leads to a life of righteousness and living at peace with others.

As we think about this list of qualities that true wisdom has, it sounds remarkable similar to the list of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5, doesn't it? I think the reason for that is because the end of wisdom is *spiritual maturity*. To grow in wisdom is to grow in godliness and spiritual maturity. Our wisdom isn't measured by how many books we've read, or how many theology questions we can get right, or by how many Bible verses we've memorized. All of those things are very good and important! But they don't do us any good if they don't effect our heart, if they don't change the way we view the world, make decisions, and live our lives. Wisdom is measured by whether or not we are walking in spiritual maturity, by whether or not we have spiritual discernment to know right from wrong, good from bad, helpful from not helpful. Wisdom is a way of life. We don't just need wisdom for the big decisions in our lives - like where we should live, who we should marry, what career we should pursue. We certainly need wisdom for such decisions! But as this passage shows us, wisdom doesn't lead to just making big decisions - it leads to a *righteous, spiritually mature way of life*. Therefore, we need wisdom in everything that we do, in every little decision we make. God cares about every single thing we do and every decision we make, no matter how big or how small; nothing is ever morally neutral - everything we do either flows from the wisdom of this world or the wisdom of God. This means wisdom is not an optional thing that some Christians have - it's absolutely necessary for our spiritual growth and sanctification. So if we want to grow in Christ, if we want to grow in

spiritual maturity and have a life that is more pleasing to God and filled with peace and righteousness, then we need to grow in wisdom.

So how do we do that? How do we grow in wisdom? For starters, we *pray and ask God for it in faith*. Remember when James talked about wisdom earlier in this letter, in chapter 1, 5-8? He said, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with not doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” As we’ve studied worldly vs. godly wisdom today, I’m sure it’s been convicting for us all; it’s painful to think about how we have worldly, ungodly, foolish ways of thinking about life that lead us to foolish ways of living. But if you’re convicted of worldly wisdom in your life this morning, that shouldn’t lead you think, “Great, well, I guess God wants nothing to do with me.” Nor should it make you think that there’s little hope for you to grow in wisdom. No, God *promises* to give us wisdom when we ask Him in faith! He does not show us reproach - he doesn’t give wisdom to *some* Christians, or say, “Hmm, maybe, we’ll see.” No, he gives wisdom generously and freely to all His children who ask for it! But we have to ask for *real, true wisdom*. To ask for wisdom in faith is to ask for the wisdom we need to worship, glorify, and obey God in all that we do; the wisdom to live a righteous life and grow spiritually mature in Him, even amidst the trials and sufferings of this life. So we humbly pray and ask God to grant us the wisdom we need.

And as we do so, we should pursue wisdom by growing in Christ. Or to put it differently: if we grow in the faith of Christ, we will necessarily grow in wisdom. To develop spiritual maturity is to develop true wisdom. So we pray for wisdom, we trust God will bring it, and then we *pursue wisdom* through the ordinary means of grace that God has given us: the godly disciplines of bible study, prayer, and being part of the church. We’ve already mentioned prayer: let us commit ourselves to daily prayer, asking God for wisdom in all the specific circumstances, trials, and temptations of our lives, trusting that the Lord will give us the wisdom we need to grow in spiritual maturity and walk with Him. As we read and study the Bible, God’s Word, he renews our minds, convicting us of our worldly wisdom and sin, and teaches us the wisdom from above instead. As we daily meditate on God’s Word, it changes the way we think about

everything, giving us greater spiritual understanding, discernment, and wisdom. So let us grow in maturity and wisdom by committing ourselves to daily Bible reading and prayer.

But we also grow in wisdom through the Spiritual discipline of being part of local church. As Eph. 3:10 says, the gospel is preached to all “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” The wisdom of God is revealed in the church. As we gather with the church family for corporate worship and prayer, for sitting under the teaching and preaching of God’s Word, for fellowship, mutual encouragement and accountability, and observing the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper - all of these things are part of God’s plan for our spiritual growth; as we pursue these disciplines in faith, asking God to grow our wisdom through them, He promises to do so.

But perhaps you’re still asking, “Ok, but *what does it look like* to actually be wise?” Well, to answer that question, we need only to look to Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom of God made flesh. We learn wisdom by imitating the wisdom of God as revealed in Christ, the God-Man. We pursue and practice wisdom to the goal of being like Jesus in all that we do. *This* is the goal of spiritual maturity. And we can only grow in Christlikeness through the wisdom that only comes from God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And we can also just as truly say: the beginning of wisdom is to humble yourself before God by repenting and believing in the gospel of Christ. This means that the *second* you become a Christian, you gain wisdom! If you are in Christ today, then true wisdom is yours! And God promises to grow that wisdom throughout the rest of your Christian life. Apart from Christ, we could never be wise - we could never have any hope of living a righteous life, or finding the life of peace, or getting rid of the burden of our guilt and shame and finding our way to the Celestial City of God. No, Christ is the only way! The only true path to life and righteousness is through death - through dying to ourselves, acknowledging our sin and guilt, fearing the Lord’s wrath and judgment which we justly deserve, and then turning to the cross of Christ in faith, believing that Jesus died *in our place*, and rose again, so that in Him we are freed from our burden of sin, declared righteous with the very righteousness of God, and guaranteed the promise of eternal life! And though the world may think it foolish, this message is worth *living for, suffering for, and dying for* - no matter what the cost. For even if it costs us our earthly life and comfort, it is all worth it if we gain life that last *forever*. This is the only wise option - only a fool would think otherwise. So let us pursue the

wisdom of God by turning from the wisdom of this world, believing in the gospel of Christ, and seeking to imitate Him in all that we do. And if you're not a Christian this morning, then I invite you to do this for the very first time. Turn away from the foolishness of this world and turn instead to the wisdom of God - repent and believe in Jesus Christ. If you have any questions about this, I would love to speak with you. Let us pray.