

Who Are the Wise?

By Mark Jarvinen

Here's the million-dollar question we all face: ***“With all the access we currently have to knowledge and information, do you think we'll be any wiser?”*** Given our human track record, I'm dubious. If it would only be as simple as amassing knowledge and information, we'd be in business. But Scripture teaches that what we really need is wisdom and understanding from above, the result of a changed heart. There's a big difference. Biblically speaking, where does this wisdom begin? **Proverbs 9:10** says, ***“The fear (reverential awe) of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”*** In other words, true wisdom begins as we bow in humble recognition of the character of God in both His holiness and love, acknowledge our sin, and receive new life through faith in Jesus Christ. That said, the wisdom from above is not simply head knowledge, but applied knowledge – knowledge that shows forth in the way we live. Therefore, wisdom demonstrates itself in willing obedience to the ways of God. **James 3:13** asks the question – ***“Who is wise and understanding among you?”*** Without missing a beat, **v. 13** says, ***“Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom.”***

Wisdom, then, is vitally important in living the Christian life. **James 1:5** says it's ours for the asking:

“If any of you lacks wisdom (applied knowledge), he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

Thankfully, our gracious God is both willing and able to bestow upon His children the precious gift of wisdom.

In today's text, we'll see that there are two kinds wisdom. There is ***the wisdom that comes from above (heavenly wisdom)*** and ***the wisdom that comes from below (earthly wisdom)***. Only the humble of heart will be in the right place to receive the wisdom from above that God desires to give. Let's read the text from **James 3:13-18** and then contrast these two forms of wisdom to clarify our understanding of who are the truly wise and who are the foolish among us, i.e. those who operate according to earthly wisdom.

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. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness (James 3:13-18).

I. ORIGINS – Where the Two Kinds of Wisdom Come From.

A. Wisdom From Below

"Such "wisdom" ... is earthly, unspiritual, demonic." (v. 15). This triad is essentially what Luther's Catechism refers to as the enemies of our soul – ***"the world, the flesh, and the devil."*** Notice James starts with the least of these enemies and moves to the worst.

1. Earthly wisdom is measured in worldly terms, i.e.

having limited, mostly temporal value. Along this line, I think of **Benjamin Franklin's** pithy sayings as examples:

"Love your neighbor, but don't pull down your hedge."

"Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." "Nothing but money is sweeter than honey."

2. Unspiritual wisdom is mostly that which is *instinctual*, having to do with our instinct to survive; or *emotional*, based on that which "feels right."

3. The devil's wisdom, which speaks of the numerous paths in life propagated by *"the god of this world"* that run counter to the will and purposes of the one true God, and will, if followed, ultimately destroy us.

B. Wisdom From Above

Verse 17 spells out the contrast – *"But the wisdom that comes down from heaven ..."* takes us back to **James 1:17**, where we read that *"every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..."* God is the source of heavenly wisdom.

The main difference in the origins of these two forms of wisdom is that the wisdom from below comes from **reason** (human understanding), while the wisdom from above comes from **revelation**, (God's Word).

II. OPERATIONS—What the Two Kinds of Wisdom Look Like.

The origins of earthly and heavenly wisdom are vastly different, and they also operate differently.

A. The Wisdom From Below

Look at v. 14 –

¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

Have you noticed we live in a world that seems to make everything all about me? Bitter envy and selfish ambition are simply outgrowths of an all about me mentality. Listen to an example.

Several years ago, **Carl Ericsson**, a once-successful insurance salesman from a small town in South Dakota succumbed to bitter envy, when at the age of 73, he rang the doorbell of a high school classmate named Norman Johnson and shot him dead on his doorstep. The reason? Apparently, Johnson, a popular student athlete in the 1950's had made Ericsson, the student manager, the brunt of an embarrassing locker room prank. As Johnson went on to play college football and coach the hometown alma mater, Ericsson's grudge, fueled by envy and a desire for revenge had simmered for 55 years before exploding on his classmate's doorstep. Ericsson, expressing remorse at his trial, received a life sentence for his crime (Preaching Today, August, 2012). In this case, a man stuffed his anger with tragic results, a classic example of how the wisdom from below operates.

B. The Wisdom From Above

The wisdom from above operates very differently. Consider v. 17 -

¹⁷ “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.”

- **PURE** – This is the first quality that James mentions under the wisdom from above because it is the overarching quality out of which the rest of the list operates. In the OT, this purity is used in connection with the character of God and means, in the context of James, that a maturing Christian mirrors (although not perfectly) the character of God, mainly from the standpoint of having single-minded motives. Instead of operating from a “what’s in it for me” mindset, there’s a growing sense of a “what’s best for the Kingdom” mentality, in terms of a maturing Christian’s relationship to others .
- **PEACE-LOVING** – Wisdom from above is also peace-loving, which is a term that seems to characterize the remainder of the list, qualities which all speak to the importance of getting along with others. Someone who is always stirring the pot or looking for a fight is not operating with a peace-loving mindset, which is the dominant relational characteristic of the wisdom from above.

III. OUTCOMES – What the Results Look Like.

The wisdom from below and the wisdom from above produce starkly different outcomes that are easily observable. Notice **v. 16** –

¹⁶ ***“For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”***

A. The Wisdom From Below

When worldly wisdom is on the ascendency you’ll have disorder, which yields instability and confusion. Things will seem unsettled and agitated. I’m reminded of the story of the **Tower of Babel**, recorded in **Genesis 11**. The people of the world, leaning heavily on worldly

wisdom, decided to unite around a building project, building a tower that would reach heaven. But they were filled with pride, and God disapproved of this **“evil practice.”** As a result, God scattered them and confused their one, common language so that they couldn’t understand each other. Things don’t work when we try to do things our own way. We need God to come down to us if we ever hope to find forgiveness and peace. Thank goodness He did come down when He sent Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the world. How the world needs Christ today!

B. The Wisdom From Above

Verse 18 describes how the root of godly wisdom results in some very attractive fruit:

¹⁸“Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”

J.B. Phillips’ paraphrase renders **v. 18** as follows:

“And the wise are peacemakers who go on quietly sowing a harvest of righteousness – in other people and in themselves.”

I love this reference to **“a harvest of righteousness”** granted to **peacemakers** who sow in peace. This certainly speaks to being part of the process of helping others come into the Kingdom of God. I’m on the email list of my former Regional Pastor, **Joel Nordtvedt**, who now lives in Arizona, and along with his wife, Mary Beth, serves as a missionary to International students and professors at **Arizona State University**. In his email he mentioned a good friend, also a CLB pastor, who once told him that he prays daily: **“Lord, make me a part of someone’s salvation.”** Joel has tried to include this as one of his own prayers each day as a missionary. What a great prayer request

to incorporate into our lives! After all, there's a sense in which, we're all missionaries.

However, being a peace-maker isn't limited to being a missionary. Peace-makers are also those who work for oneness in relationships among people. With this in mind, we could broaden Joel Nordtvedt's prayer request in light of today's message and pray: **"Lord, use me to plant peace in someone's life today."** This certainly doesn't exclude praying for the salvation of someone you know, or sharing the gospel with someone whose heart seems ready to hear the good news. But beyond that, perhaps planting peace in someone's life will mean praying for or encouraging someone who needs to deal with their unresolved anger toward a spouse, their kids, their parents, their boss, or their friend, so that a root of bitterness doesn't persist in their life, causing broken relationships that may disrupt the unity of a church, or shatter the oneness of a family, or steal an individual's joy. After all, **Hebrews 12:5** says:

"See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

Unresolved hurt or anger doesn't remain an individual or personal issue forever. It inevitably spills over into the lives of others to ***"defile many."***

And so, in closing, I leave you with **Colossians 3:13** –

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

And **Matthew 5:9**, from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – ***"Blessed are the peace-makers, for they will be called sons of God."*** Who are the wise? Those who plant peace in the lives of others. **A-men.**