

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his 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, of the devil. 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 raise a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:13-18)

Are You Wise?

Who is the wisest person you know? I don't mean the smartest person or the most knowledgeable. I mean the wisest. Well, what's the difference? The most knowledgeable person knows the most stuff. That person can tell you who was king of England in 1600 and where Gambia is located and can rattle off the stats for his favorite team. That's different from the smartest person you know. That person thinks the deepest and sees the heart of a problem and understands and uses tools that baffle most of us. But both of those things are different from wisdom. We usually think of wisdom as knowing what's best in a given situation. The wise parent can give their child advice that will help them to figure out what to do in a tough situation. A wise mentor gives real life guidance as you try to chart the course of your professional life. So who is the wisest person you know? Even that question could have more than one answer. We might distinguish between different kinds of wisdom. If there is more than one kind of wisdom, this morning we want to talk about what the Bible considers to be true wisdom: spiritual wisdom, the wisdom that comes from faith. Today, James, the brother of Jesus himself, a man who had seen wisdom in action, asks us to evaluate ourselves. **Are you wise?**

I.

James doesn't engage in a philosophical discussion of wisdom. He doesn't even talk much about where true wisdom comes from. Rather, he focuses on what it does. That's a very practical and modern approach to the question, even though he wrote these words almost 2,000 years ago. **Are you wise? Wisdom is a force in our hearts and lives.**

James offers us a test to see if we have wisdom. He says, **“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.”** Do you see the test? It really has two parts: your life and your attitude. Like all good tests, James describes both a negative and a positive result. He goes to define the negative: **“But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.”** When we can't help but brag about all that we've accomplished, when we have to make it sound like our kids are smarter and more talented than anybody else's, when we have to slant everything we say to make ourselves look good and we cannot stand to hear the truth about ourselves, then we are not operating from the wisdom that the Holy Spirit gives. That's the life part of the test. And the heart part is even worse. What comes from spiritual foolishness and stupidity? Bitter envy and selfish ambition. When I hate what other people have because I don't have it, when I have to push myself forward constantly, when all I care about is me, then I am being spiritually stupid.

James contrasts that with the positive result of the test for true wisdom. He says, **“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.”** True wisdom is pure. It isn't infected by sinful wants and desires. It isn't contaminated by pride. It's humble and it seeks what God wants. True wisdom then seeks peace among God's people. It takes the time to think about how my words and my actions will be taken. Will they hurt someone's feelings? Will they be easily misunderstood? And true wisdom is full of mercy. It wants to help people in trouble. It brings forth fruits of faith in kindness and love to the people around me. It seeks the good of all, not just the people I like best.

Are you wise or are you foolish? This is a tough lesson for me, because I know the sinful pride of heart. It's hard to see people driving nicer cars and living in more beautiful homes than I will ever own. I struggle with that sometimes. It's hard to see people who are more popular and it's easy to be jealous and even to wish the worst on people who have it all. It's hard to love peace and work for it, to think always about what is best for others without putting myself first. It's a struggle to be sincere and submissive and considerate. That's

what I find, anyway. What about you? Do you struggle to be humble? Do you struggle to be happy for the success of others and to avoid envy and strife? Do you find yourself boasting and pushing yourself forward and talking just because you like the sound of your own voice? Are you wise or foolish spiritually?

James calls the false wisdom of pride “earthly,” “unspiritual” and “of the devil.” It comes from this sinful world and the society that we live in. It comes from the evil in our own hearts, the sinful nature. Worst of all, it comes from the devil. God wants us to be wise and humble and loving. The devil wants us to indulge our sinful pride. He wants us to argue and push ourselves forward and generally be difficult to live with. And he succeeds because inside of each of us in an arrogant, self-centered sinner who loves himself and what this world calls wisdom and who hates everything God says. And if we’re honest, don’t we have to admit that again and again, we fall victim to that pride and sin? Again and again, we follow the devil instead of God. And that earns us nothing but death and hell.

What are we going to do about our hearts? What are we going to do to break the cycle of pride and sin in our lives? There is only one thing we can do: repent. We need to admit to God that we are sinners who love the things the devil and the world love so we do deserve his punishment. And we need to seek his mercy and forgiveness. Then we need to trust that Jesus has set us free from that punishment. He was born without a sinful nature so he had no sinful pride. Neither the devil nor the sinful world could succeed in luring him into sinning. So Jesus’ words and actions, his thoughts and his feeling were perfectly wise – they were perfectly humble, perfectly trusting in God and perfectly willing to do and say whatever God wanted him to. And he didn’t do that just to be an example. He didn’t do that to make us feel even worse because we can’t. Jesus did all that in our place. His wise heart and life replace our sinful hearts and lives in God’s record books. Then Jesus died and paid for all the times and all the ways that sinful pride led us into the spiritual stupidity. Jesus died and paid for all our boasting and arguing, for all the envy and selfishness of our hearts, for all the times we failed the spiritual wisdom test. Then he rose and said that we are totally forgiven.

Then he sent the Holy Spirit into our words through that good news to give us faith. In that great act of love, he made us new. He gave us true wisdom. As our faith grows, our wisdom grows. As God strengthens the new man inside us, he changes the way we think and feel and he changes the way we speak and act. Wisdom becomes a force in our lives and in our hearts.

II.

That force doesn’t just change us. It radiates out of us into all that we’re a part of. Who is the wisest person you know? Without a doubt, if you’re thinking in spiritual terms, you’re thinking of a man or a woman who lives their faith and who touches others with that life of faith. You can be that kind of Christian. **Are you wise? Wisdom is a force in our congregation and our society.**

James says, **“For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”** Think about the effect that pride and sin have on our congregation. In every church I’ve ever served, a relatively small number of men participate in the leadership. Here at Peace, the men who come to voters meetings are around five percent of our total membership. The church council is even smaller. How are their decisions received? When sinful pride is in control of our hearts, we can resent those decisions. Now, I’m not saying that every decision we make is a good one. But sinful pride leads us to think ill of those men and wonder why they’re so stupid. Or we can find ourselves arguing and complaining and obstructing the process because pride insists that we speak, that we insult, that we attack, and that the congregation do what we say.

And every church that has fallen away from God’s Word did so because the men and women in that church thought they knew better than God what we should believe or how we should live. They were offended at God’s commands about fellowship, about marriage and divorce and living together. They thought that they could redefine sin and make it sound better – and they succeeded at least in the sense that they accepted what God rejects. And so every evil practice took over those churches, as we see all over the visible church today.

But James’ words here don’t just apply to the church. They apply to our families and to our societies, too. When I was a child, if a young man and woman moved in together without getting married, their grandmother would call the pastor and tell him he needed to do something about that. Do you know what happens today? That grandmother says, “Don’t let the pastor find out.” Times have changed and that attitude shows how far our society and our families have traveled down the road of sin. The traditional nuclear family, with one man and one woman married to each other with their own children is a minority now. Families of all

types are filled with strife and anger and hurt. Our society and our families have forgotten what it means to be civil and what it means to hold each other to a higher standard.

Where does all that come from? It is the inevitable result of sinful stupidity ruling our hearts. But it doesn't have to be that way. After spelling out for us the attitude and actions that come from true wisdom, James says, **“Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”** True wisdom tries to make peace. Now, James is not saying here that we should avoid anything that might be controversial. He's not saying that the sins of our family members or our congregation members are nobody's business. Rather, he's talking about raising a harvest of righteousness. He's talking about helping each other to live God pleasing lives. That's the peace he calls us to make: peace with each other based on peace with God. When wisdom reigns in our hearts, we speak the words that need to be spoken, but we do it in love. And the Holy Spirit works. Men and women repent and they repair relationships. They turn from sin and try to live together as brothers and sisters in Christ. They make their families and their churches places of refuge against the sin in the world and in our own hearts. They cheer each other on as they all fight against the temptations and lies of the devil.

True wisdom is a force for healing in our congregation and in our society. But only when you and I live that wisdom. We can only do that when we constantly go back to Christ. He is the source of all strength and power. We know that we haven't always been a force for peace in our churches. Each of us must look at when and how we have been the source of controversy and sin. But then we trust in Jesus who took that sin away. We trust in the Holy Spirit and the work he does daily in our hearts. We trust in the Word of God to work in us and in the people around us. We trust in the gospel to renew each other's hearts and we work day in and day out to rebuild and renew, to forgive and to call to repent. In the wisdom God gives, we speak frankly, but in love. And we encourage. And God's blessing will be on that work. We can't change the whole world. Sin will reign here until Christ returns. We can't even make ourselves perfect. But we can live our faith. We can put wisdom into practice. We can be a positive, spiritual influence in our families, in our congregations, in our jobs and in our neighborhoods, all because God works through us when we reflect the wisdom that comes from faith.

Are you wise? It doesn't matter if you have a Ph.D. or not. It's not a question of how much you know or how good you are at problem solving. Do you go back to Christ for forgiveness every day? Do you trust in his love and hear that message often? Do commit yourself daily to living as he calls us to, forgetting yesterday's sin and focusing on today's grace? Even if your life up to this point has not been that kind of life, every day that God gives us is a new day to live in the wisdom of the gospel. Be wise in Christ! Amen.