

“Wisdom from Above” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Pentecost 18 September 22, 2024

- I. **James 3:17** – ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.
- II. **Everyone wants to be wise, but not everyone knows what that means.**
 - a. I’ve asked this quite a few times in Bible class, but what’s the difference between knowledge and wisdom?
 - i. The answer is that knowledge is gathering and retaining information, while wisdom takes knowledge and experiences and applies them as we live out our lives.
 - ii. I can spend a lifetime reading books, learning about everything there is to know, but my personal life could still be a complete wreck because I make terrible choices.
 - iii. I can travel the country and the world, but if I don’t remember those experiences as teaching moments for later, I make the same mistakes over and over again.
 - iv. You’ve probably heard me say this quote I read somewhere, “A fool learns nothing, a smart person learns from his or her mistakes, but a wise person learns from the mistakes of others.”
 1. I suppose this is true, but wisdom is about making good decisions and having good judgment.
 - b. Here’s a big problem though... there is a difference between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom!
 - c. James says that jealousy and selfish ambition are worldly wisdom. (vs 14)
 - i. Jealousy looks at others like they are rivals... and it’s very hard to work with people when you feel like you are competing against them.
 1. Remember the story of Joseph and his brothers?
 - a. Joseph got more attention from his dad, Jacob, so they no longer treated him like family, but an enemy to be destroyed...so they sold him off to Egyptian slave traders.
 2. Jealousy is also closely related to coveting... in that we don’t want to see others succeed.
 - ii. Selfish ambition is also worldly wisdom... as you can hear it now, “You need to look out for yourself!” and “Quit putting others ahead of yourself, because you deserve success, or fame, or money...”
 1. Selfishness is thing the world embraces without apology – and it drives our economy, our politics, and our personal lives.
 2. Most people are trying to get ahead, with the needs of others coming in second.
 3. Martin Luther and other theologians used a Latin phrase, “*incurvatis in se*”, which means living life turned inward on oneself.

- a. This is a product of sin, and every person in the world is suffering from turning inward on themselves.
- b. Unfortunately, even we Christians struggle with this kind of brokenness – on an individual level... and even as a church operating in our community.

III. **James writes his letter to Christians struggling in the world.**

- a. It isn't so much geared toward struggles because of persecution, or trials, or sickness... it is about our sinful nature coming out.
- b. He lists all the ways that we struggle to get along with others – which means we have sin coming out of us – and then says, "...friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." (vs 4)
 - i. Essentially, James equates sinful behavior with all the evil stuff going on in the world.
 - ii. Again, the wisdom of the world is full of jealousy and selfish ambition – which is the way to get ahead, and the way to take care of yourself... and certainly NOT the kind of humility that Jesus calls for in our Gospel lesson.
 - iii. The worldly wisdom that lacks humility will destroy relationships.
 - iv. It's almost like a rushing current of worldly wisdom, and we just get caught up in the flow because it takes so much to live in a different way.
 - 1. Yet James, and God Himself, does not give us an excuse for just going along with the crowd – we are held accountable for our actions.
- c. The trouble with so many of us Christians, along with churches all over the world, is we don't separate ourselves from the flow of sin and evil with the "wisdom from above".
 - i. We just go along with everyone else, and pretty soon, the Church is just the same as the world... a total, non-factor.
 - ii. Do you know why the Church has been persecuted for centuries?
 - 1. Persecution was a direct consequence of going against the world and its ways since Jesus ascended to heaven.
 - 2. I read a quote from someone who said, "The greatest criticism of the Church today is that no one wants to persecute it: because there is nothing very much to persecute it about."¹

IV. **We are set apart by the work of Christ**, and we are now different by nature.

- a. When we all act just like everyone in the world, and we're friends with the world as James puts it, the work that Christ did for us on the cross is dishonored and devalued.
 - i. Jesus died on that cross to reconcile us to God by paying for our sins.

1. Our sins include the sin sickness we inherited from Adam and Eve, but also the actual sins of jealousy, selfish ambition, and pride... all those things that break down our relationships.
- ii. Hear what St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, “¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them...” (2 Cor. 5:17-19 ESV)
- iii. Hear this good news... Jesus Christ died for your sins in order to make you right by God... as you believe that Jesus died and rose again for you... your sins are forgiven, and you are reconciled to God.
- b. The fact that we have this new life in Jesus changes everything in how we live our lives with godly wisdom in a world full of earthly wisdom.

V. **No longer do we have to be a friend of the world to live in the world.**

- a. James tells us that God’s wisdom is “pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” (vv 17-18)
- b. When we live as the new creation God made us in our baptisms, we cast off the old ways and put on the new ways... which ultimately lead to a “harvest of righteousness”.
 - i. This harvest reminds us of the people who come to know Jesus because we are out there going against the flow.
 - ii. What’s the opposite of jealousy, pride, and selfish ambition? They are listed by James as being holy, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, merciful and full of good works, along with being impartial and sincere.
 1. In other words, don’t be divisive and judgmental... don’t be selfish and ruin relationships.
 2. This all seems reasonable enough, but sin has a tendency to creep back in... along with the wisdom of the world... and we struggle to live in God’s wisdom.
- c. However, we can take heart that Jesus knows what it’s like to go against the flow of the world.
 - i. He knows the challenges we face in being humble and building relationships that put the other person first.
 - ii. He understands that we constantly need to seek Him and His will for our lives, because the pressure to sin is always on us.
- d. By the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of Baptism – the Scriptures tell us that we are new creations in Christ. (Rom. 6:3-5; 2 Cor. 5:17; Col 3:10, Eph. 4:24)
 - i. We have an endless source of wisdom from above – and we find it all throughout the witness of Scripture.

- ii. True wisdom is never going to be found in our world, but only comes from above... out of God's heart and mind.
- e. Yes, it's a struggle, but always remember the harvest of righteousness that flows from God through us... as we go against the flow of the world. Amen.

¹ Source: George F. MacLeod, Leadership, Vol. 2, no. 4.