

“Man’s Wisdom vs. God’s Wisdom”

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Scriptural Foundation: James 3:13-18, ESV

Wisdom from Above

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

In James 1, God invites His people to ask Him for wisdom, when He says,

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

What is this “wisdom” for which we are entreated to ask? We often become confused at this point, thinking that wisdom is an accumulation of information, an amassing of knowledge, and a sharpening of intellectual perception. We think we are asking God to make us clever when we are asking for wisdom, but biblical wisdom is far more than mental acuity. Biblical wisdom is life change; it is transformational. Biblical wisdom is the ability to live beautifully in a misshapen world. It is the ability to live life skillfully so as to find real, lasting joy.

As modern people, we often deceive ourselves into thinking that we are much wiser and sophisticated than previous generations because our storehouse of knowledge and our storehouse of information have exploded in size over the past three decades. A teenager is tempted to look with condescension upon a senior citizen who does not know how to use a cell phone or send an email. They wonder, “What kind of person does not know how to do that?” But, we have to ask, are we as a people, as a culture, moving toward more beauty and more wholeness or are we as a people moving toward more chaos in our lives and more conflict? Are we really living our lives more skillfully than the generations of our past?

Professor Allan Bloom touched on this in his best-selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind*. He writes, “My grandparents were ignorant people by our standards, and my grandfather held only lowly jobs. But their home was spiritually rich because all the things done in it, not only what was specifically ritual, found their origin in the Bible’s commandments, and their explanation in the Bible’s stories and the commentaries on them, and had their imaginative counterparts in the seeds of the myriad of exemplary heroes. My grandparents found reasons for the existence of their family and the fulfillment of their duties in serious writings, and they interpreted their special sufferings with respect to a great and ennobling past. . . I do not believe that my generation, my cousins who have been educated in the American way, all of whom are MD’s or PhD’s, have any comparable learning. When they talk about heaven and earth, the relations between men and women, parents and children, the human condition, I hear nothing but clichés, superficialities, the material of satire.”

In our study of James 3:13-18, God warns us away from this wisdom that is full of clichés and superficialities, the material of satire, and the wisdom that does not transform our relationships, that does not lead us Heavenward, that does not change our attitudes or our behavior so as to be a joyful people. James distinguishes between two contrasting kinds of wisdom. Both are wisdom, but they are two contrasting kinds of wisdom. He contrasts man’s wisdom with God’s wisdom.

Remember that James has been laying out a series of tests by which we can evaluate the authenticity of our faith. These tests are given so that we can discern whether or not we are born again or not, whether we are truly regenerate or not, and whether we possess God’s life inside of us or not. James lays out before us, beginning in Chapter One, a series of questions, or tests, by which we can measure the genuineness of our faith. In Chapter One, he says that the genuineness of our faith can be measured by how we respond to trials, how we respond to temptations, and how we

submit to the Bible. In Chapter Two, James teaches us to assess the genuineness of our faith by how we love people who are needy. At the beginning of Chapter Three, God relates that we can judge whether we have living faith on the basis of how we are using our tongue and what kind of speech pours forth from our mouth. In James 3:13-18, James announces the next test of real, living faith; the faith that saves, the faith that God honors, and the question: what kind of wisdom directs our lives?

There are three contrasts between man's wisdom and God's wisdom and the first is two opposing origins. That is the only contrast we will discuss in this study. The remaining two: two opposing attributes and two opposing endings will be discussed in the next study.

Most of us like to consider ourselves to be wise. We like to think that we are worthy of having other people ask us for our advice or our opinion or our counsel, yet Isaiah the prophet warns, in Isaiah 5,

²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!

Isaiah is not warning against rejoicing in God's wisdom, and he is not warning against pursuing wisdom and being happy when we obtain it, but he is warning against thinking that we have obtained wisdom from a source other than God and from other than God's revelation. Do we think that we are wise because of our own experiences? We may have had a myriad of them, but do we think that we have something to say about life because of what we have experienced in this life? Do we think we have wisdom because of our education, because of our successes, because of our failures, because of our family, because of the friendships we have acquired, or because of our vast intellect? Where did we obtain our wisdom? James asks that question in Verse 13,

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you?

At this point, James anticipates his readers raising their hands. They might not raise their hands outwardly, but inwardly they are saying, "Yes, that is me! Talk to me James! I am ready." So James says, to give them a test whether or not their wisdom is dead or alive,

¹³ ...By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

James relates that genuine wisdom is not tested by the conceptions that we can verbalize, but by our conduct that we live. Genuine wisdom is not tested by our abilities to perceive complex truths, but by our ability to live righteously in a rebellious culture. James then turns to the origins of true wisdom in contrast to the origins of man's counterfeit wisdom. We read in Verses 14 and 15,

¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

He is saying that any wisdom that does not transform your life towards righteousness is not from God, but rather it is earthly, it is unspiritual, and it is demonic. The Bible teaches us that the believer possesses three enemies that tempt us away from God and toward sin and that seeks to rob us of our joy in our relationship with Jesus. Those three enemies are identified by the Bible as: the world, the flesh and the devil. James says that these three enemies, the world – earthly, the flesh – unspiritual, and the devil – demonic, are the sources for the false and counterfeit wisdom that many grab ahold of think that they have wisdom because they possess it.

The world is the first origin of false wisdom that James mentions. The world is that mindset, that culture, that system of life that unredeemed man creates as a society. When we gather together, unredeemed man creates a culture and a society, a perception, a lifestyle, an attitude, a way of living, and a way of thinking, and the Bible calls that "the world". It is what Paul warns against when he writes, in Romans 12,

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...

Similarly, the Apostle John warns against when he says, in 1 John 2,

¹⁵ Do not love the world, neither the things in the world.

Don't love it! Don't desire it! Don't move toward it! Don't be squeezed into its mold. The world loves to pressure us to make us fit its shape and likeness and to follow its wisdom. Where will we find this wisdom that the world presents to us? We will find it everywhere. Children, you will find it on the playground. Other children will tell you how you are to live, how you are to talk, and how you are to think. You will find it in the workplace. You will find it in business leadership seminars. You will find it on Dr. Phil and Tony Robbins. You will find it at family reunions. You will find it in graduation speeches; over and over again in graduation speeches. You will find it in the counselor's office, over the radio waves, and on TV channels. You will find it on blogs and Facebook, in newspapers, and in magazines. It is everywhere! This wisdom permeates every part of this world's expression of life.

As you go through your day, make a list tomorrow of the ideas about life, about God, about meaning, about purpose, about relationships, about what is important, about what is righteousness, about what is ethical, about what is moral, of what the world around you presents to you about wisdom. I believe that at the end of the day, if you are conscious of that list, you will be surprised at how many messages the world has tried to press against your soul regarding what is wise and what is true.

But, let us be careful, friends. One of the most disheartening and deceiving places you will hear wisdom from this world is from the pulpits of many eloquent preachers and in the counseling offices of many Christian counselors. I believe well-intentioned believers accept and submit to more of man's wisdom as the result of false teachers and of Christian counselors than any other worldly source. Remember that a Christian friend can give you worldly wisdom just as surely as an unbelieving friend. I urge you to test what you hear from preachers, from friends, and from counselors against the Word of God; "What does God have to say about that?" If you cannot find it somewhere taught from the Bible, question it. If you find it contradicted by something in the Bible, discard it. Verify any counsel you receive by searching the Scriptures to see if it is man's wisdom or God's wisdom. Life and death will be found or lost on the basis of the evaluation you are able to make in regard to the counsel that you listen to and that you submit to.

James also says that false wisdom is "unspiritual"; that is to say that it is of our own flesh. Our sinful nature, the way we naturally think about life, the wisdom that we use from the source that is within us, has a wisdom that seeks to find ways to appease our sinful cravings and desires. Our flesh wants to give voice to its own opinion regarding morals, ethics and happiness in life. Be careful of listening to yourself. Don't listen to that inner voice within you. Listen to the Scriptures and what God's Spirit has to say through His Word. We are called to listen to God. Do not trust yourself to be your guide.

Finally, James says that false wisdom has another source and that is from the realm of the demonic. The Bible teaches us that there is a real world of spirit beings who actively work to rob God of His glory and to rob us of our joy in God's glory. Anytime we come to believe something about life and righteousness that is contrary to the Bible, know that demons are at work in your life. Anytime you say, "I know that the Bible says this, but this is how I believe...", please absolutely know that demons are involved in your life. How do we know that? Satan," Jesus says, is the father of lies. Every lie somehow proceeds from him. Satan might use our flesh and the world around us, but be assured that the demonic realm is actively involved to cloud your mind and to darken your heart so as to rob you of the joy of God's presence and of the joy of God's Truth being lived out in your soul. Just because demonic voices are not vocal does not mean that they are not real. All temptation to sin is an enticement from the demonic realm to embrace false wisdom. Adam and Eve came to believe that eating the fruit would benefit their lives. They said, "I know that this is what God said, but this is what I have come to believe about life and about blessing and about happiness and about purpose and meaning and joy." They discarded God's wisdom for a wisdom that was demonic and they were wrong and they died and they brought pain and suffering into this world.

Friends, when we believe that demonic wisdom, we are also wrong and we will suffer horribly and unnecessarily because of it.

Now we turn our attention to the source of true wisdom,

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

We will discuss those attributes and characteristics in the next study. The point is that there is a huge contrast between the origins of these two kinds of wisdom. One is from above and one from the opposite direction below. One is of a Heavenly origin and one is of an earthly, even demonic, realm.

In Job 28, Job asks the question,

¹² “But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? ¹³ Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. ¹⁴ The deep says, ‘It is not in me,’ and the sea says, ‘It is not with me.’ ¹⁵ It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price.”

Modern man thinks that wisdom, the secret that unlocks the purpose and meaning of life and happiness, can be found in scientific discovery or through human philosophy. Man searches the depths of the sea, the geologic strata of the earth’s crust, the far reaches of outer space, and the confines of the human brain in hopes of finding answers to the big questions about life; questions like, “How did we get here? Why are we here? How should we live? And what is the purpose of it all?”

As believers in Jesus, we are incredibly excited about science and about discovering the order and beauty that God displayed when he create His world. We Christians ought to be the most optimistic and most enthusiastic of scientists, astronomers, biologists, chemists, physicists, oceanographers, archaeologists, engineers and a host of other scientific disciplines. It is an awesome thing for Christians to engage in the scientific world. Why is that? It is because we know that order and wonder exist because the God who created this world is the God of order and the God of wonder. When we begin to explore this world we don’t expect to find chaos and disorder, we expect to find order and beauty and wonder because that was the Source from which all that flows.

The atheistic evolutionist has no reason to give as to why there is order and beauty and wonder in this world. It shouldn’t be if everything was just by chance, but we as believers can pursue science with the absolute knowledge that God who created this place is a God of order and a God of wonder, but let us also know that God smiles in derision, when man sends a telescope into the sky or begins a dig into the earth’s crust with the hope that he will find out the meaning of life up there in outer space, or down there in deep depths of the oceans.

God mocks and laughs at man when we think that we will evolve through our discoveries into a peaceful planet, full of bliss and harmony because of them. We cannot discern morality, we cannot discern righteousness, and we cannot discern justice by gathering strong minded philosophers together around a table to discuss these questions. Wisdom is not there. Man’s arms are too short to reach God’s wisdom. God must come down and give it to us. When man abandons God, man abandons wisdom. Man’s pursuit of God’s wisdom through his own endeavor will forever leave him frustrated in the futility of his failure to reason himself upward towards the answers to the big questions about life. Any wisdom that does not come from God is a wisdom that will surely fail us, no matter how pleasant it may seem for a time. Remember that Adam and Eve, for a little while, when they ate that fruit, said, “Ah, this does taste so sweet. Yes, it does give us the knowledge of good and of evil.” Undoubtedly, for awhile, there was a rush of pleasure and a rush of a sensation that they made the right decision before everything crumbled away from their feet.

That is what it is for everyone who pursues man’s wisdom. For a time there will be a rush and a sensation, and I do not know how long that rush and sensation will before all foundation falls away from our feet and we realize that we are lost.

We continue in Job 28,

²⁰ “From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? ²¹ It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air. ²² Abaddon and Death say, ‘We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.’”

Verse 23 has the answer,

²³ “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. ²⁴ For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. ²⁵ When he gave to the wind its weight and apportioned the waters by measure,

²⁶ when he made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder, ²⁷ then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out.”

One author writes this true observation: “Wisdom is to be found with God and no where else, and unless the quest for wisdom brings a man to his knees in awe and reverence, knowing his own helplessness to make himself wise, wisdom remains a closed book.” It will not be accessible to us.

If God understands the way to wisdom, and God established wisdom, and if I need this wisdom in order to live life beautifully, wholly, completely, and joyfully, how can I get it? That is a big question. If you are not asking that question, and asking it actively in your life, and today is the first time you thought about that question in a long time, then the Bible says that you are living as a fool. That is harsh and I hate to say it. I acknowledge that there have been times in my life that I have lived as a fool because I did not have that question foremost in my mind. God commands us to search after wisdom as treasure hunter seeks after treasure. That is how badly we need it. In fact, Proverbs 8 says of wisdom,

³⁵ For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD, ³⁶ but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death.

How do we actively pursue God’s wisdom? There are four commitments on our part that are necessary for us to gain wisdom from God. These commitments are written all through Scripture and I believe that you have heard them before, but there are worth recalling. The first is a personal commitment to fear God; a personal commitment to reverence. This is a personal commitment to say, “God, you are God and I am not! You are God and I will bow my whole life to you. You are God and I tremble before you. You are the omnipotent, righteous, just One. When I think of standing before you I am uncomfortable because you are awesome and I am a sinner.”

Consider how Job concludes his paragraph about the wisdom of God,

²⁸ And he said to man, “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.”

Note also Proverbs 9,

¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

When we see God in His holiness, His righteousness, His splendor, His power and His sovereign justice, we look into the window of wisdom. This fear of the Lord appears to be absent among many within modern, evangelical Christianity, and I believe that it is the primary source for the loss of wisdom within Christ’s church. Many in the modern, evangelical church come and together sing glibly about God’s mercy and God’s grace as they gathered together with other believers while, at the same time, without repentance, without submission, and without fear of the Lord, live lives that are in rebellion against God. They are living lives in rebellion against God before they come to church; they continue to have that attitude while they are singing together and committing themselves over to God; and they know that when they walk out of church they are going to continue in the very same way of life. How can you do that, the Scripture asks.

When I was a child I was taught by my mom and dad and my Sunday school teachers the story of Aaron and the golden calf. Moses is on Mount Sinai and he is receiving the Law, the Ten Commandments, and in the first part of that experience the mountain is on fire and it is shaking from an earthquake and the people are afraid. It is a tremendous display of the glory of God. Moses is on the mountain for weeks. The smoke dies and they get used to the lightning and the thundering. The people come to Aaron and say, “Moses has been up there a long time and we don’t know if he is ever coming down. Make us a god that will go before us.” Inexplicably, as a little boy, I was shocked when I heard that Aaron did that. He took gold and fashioned a golden calf. After he made the golden calf, the people had a huge party. It was a religious party, but it was a party of idolatry. It was a party filled with alcohol, sexual immorality, singing and dancing to this god.

I remember listening to that story and thinking to myself: didn’t they fear God? Had they not just seen what God had done to the Egyptians when they defied Him? Didn’t they fear God? The answer is, no, they did not. They forgot.

They allowed God's mercy and God's grace to bring them to a state of spiritual lethargy; there was nothing to fear. Moses came down and he had to plead with God that He would not destroy that people right then and there and start all over. Three thousand people died in the judgment of God.

The Scripture was written that we might learn that God is not only a God of grace of mercy, and I rejoice that He is a God of grace and mercy, but what is grace if there is not righteousness and justice? If we forget God's righteousness and justice then we forget the fear of the Lord and we lose the ability to be wise.

Secondly is a personal commitment to Christ as Savior. When we believe in Jesus as our Savior and Lord, then we become united to Him, and when we become united to Him we become united to His wisdom. 1 Corinthians 1 says,

³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God...

The only way we can have wisdom is by being united to the Wise Savior. Have you been united to the Wise Savior? The Scriptures are able to make us wise unto salvation,¹ Timothy says. Have you come to faith in Jesus Christ? Apart from that you are separated and cut off from God's wisdom.

The third is a personal commitment to God's Word. Psalm 119 affirms that wisdom is found as we meditate upon and obey God's Word, when David writes,

⁹⁷ Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. ⁹⁸ Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. ⁹⁹ I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. ¹⁰⁰ I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.

God has written a Book to make us wise. We must not neglect it. We cannot shrug our shoulders and say, "I am not much of a reader." Friends, God does not say that we need to read the newspapers, the philosophers, magazines, science digests, or self-help books to be wise, but He says, "If you want to be wise, you had better become a reader, and you will become a reader as you do receive wisdom and life and joy!"

One of best friends, who became a believer this past year, said that he had not read a book all of his life. Now, he says, everyday that he cannot get enough of reading the Bible. He says that he doesn't know what has changed in him, but he loves to read because he is reading the wisdom from God. Friends, we need to take up the Word of God. We need the Word like we need the air. We need the Word like that diabetic needs insulin. It is not something we take in one time and then leave it alone. If I stopped reading the Word of God today, and I have studied the Scriptures for over thirty years of my life and I have committed myself to studying that text, the Word of God, in spite of all that I have studied in my past, I would become a fool in short order. It is like air; just because I have breathed all of my life and taken in much oxygen in my life, it does not mean that I can stop breathing now and still live.

The last source is a personal commitment to prayer. James says,

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

I challenge you, begin each morning with a simple prayer, "Lord, I need your wisdom today. I know that you are the source of all true wisdom. I want to live my life beautifully so that it is whole, complete, and joyful. Grant me the ability to live skillfully today in the way I speak, in the choices I make, in the way I think about life, and in the way that I act. I need your wisdom today. Please provide it." I believe that this will change your life.

Remember biblical wisdom is life change, it is the ability to live beautifully in an misshapen world and it is the ability to live life skillfully so as to find real, lasting joy.

Moms, you need wisdom for living your lives. It is an awesome task. You need wisdom for training up your children, for responding in a godly way to your husbands because we husbands are not always godly and you need wisdom in those circumstances, for holding on to joy in the midst of pressure, for keeping hope alive when spiritual trials hit.

¹ 2 Timothy 3:15

You need wisdom for following God's design even when the world does not affirm you as a mom in your commitment. You need wisdom to be joyful in your labor, in your role, and in your purpose. Where will you find it? Can you find it on the Oprah Winfrey show? No! Can you find it from the ladies on "The View"? No! There is only one source, but He is a generous source willing to pour wisdom into your life.

Jesus tells a story at the end of The Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7 He says,

²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

What was the difference between the wise man and the foolish man? They both listened to the same message. They heard what Jesus had to say. They both agreed and affirmed to that message and would say, "That is good and it is true." They both went to the same church. They both experienced hard trials in life and the rains and wind blew against both houses, yet one was wise and the other foolish. What made the difference? One obeyed and one did not.

Friends, may we call out to God for wisdom to live life beautifully for Him.