

## Heavenly Wisdom in a Foolish World

James 3:13-18

**Introduction:** Take your Bible and join me in James 3, James chapter 3. We were supposed to be hearing from our brother, R.J. Krystowiak this morning, but he and his family were unable to make it from MI to the wedding yesterday because of car trouble. So, in God's providence we are between sermon series – having just finished Deuteronomy and having not yet started the Gospel of John, and so I got to just pick a text and go with it for this morning. And so, we find ourselves in James 3. Let's start reading in verse 13, and we will read down through verse 18.

The past few weeks in our society have put us on notice about the fragility of civilization. Mankind is volatile and our man made systems of government and societal interaction are volatile as well. They are fragile and can be overthrown and destroyed. As we have watched this wave of destruction and division sweep our country, I have been concerned about you. You are hearing so many voices about all of this. You are reading blog articles and reading news websites and listening to talk radio and cable news and you are talking to your co-workers, family, and friends – and so, you are getting a lot of ideas presented to you about what is going on, who is to blame for what is going on, and what the solution is to what is going on. So, how do you know what the truth is anymore? How do you know who to listen to, who to disagree with, and who to completely keep away from?

And if you couple that with the very real and present danger of insidious and dangerous philosophies which are infiltrating our society and therefore our churches – then you have the potential for a very great problem. I have long been gravely concerned about the worldly philosophies of critical race theory, intersectionality, cultural Marxism, and the social justice movement. I have often toyed with doing a series of sermons exposing the lies of those worldly philosophies – and I still might – but, we do not have time to get much into those specific worldviews this morning. But I will say that those philosophies are seeping into so much of what you are hearing and listening to and reading – even from many once trustworthy sources. I don't say that to you to say that you should only listen to me or to be a Chicken Little and tell you that the sky is falling. I am just saying that the threat is real and very present and has the potential to destroy the gospel witness and faithfulness of many a local church. So, in this one sermon, with that burden on my heart, where do we go to help equip you for such a serious battle? Well, obviously, we go to James 3.

Maybe you have never heard of social justice or cultural Marxism or intersectionality or critical race theory – but you are definitely seeing the fruits of it played out on the national stage. The chaos and rioting and insurrection and opposition to government is the explosion of a cultural bomb that has been in the making for many decades. But many within the church are giving up

ground to these human philosophies and ways of thinking. So, what I desire to do this morning is to present to you from this text a paradigm to help you discern between what is wisdom from God and what is wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

What we have in James 3 is yet another example of what James does all throughout his short letter. He is intent on presenting to the church a series of tests to help her decipher between that which is true and that which is false. Talk is cheap and easy, but that which is true and right will be seen in the conduct of life. True faith – faith which truly saves – is a faith which will pass the test of affliction in chapter 1, and the test of the Word and how we receive it in chapter 1, and the test of how we treat the least and downtrodden in the church at the end of chapter 1 and beginning of chapter 2, and the test of a faith which produces good works in chapter 2, and the test of the tongue in chapter 3, and now the test of wisdom here in these verses. James is concerned with the authenticity of faith in the life of the believer, and therefore in the life of the church. And so, his book is very pedestrian and practical. It's been called the Proverbs of the New Testament, and rightly so.

And in this section in particular, James is focused on truly wise living as evidence of true saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Wisdom is both philosophy and practice. Wisdom is the skill to take the knowledge and facts of this world and put them together in a way which directs your life down a good path. Christians and non-Christians alike want that for life. And so, humans are constantly seeking to make sense of life and to find meaning in life and to live in a way which is pleasing to them. This is the application of wisdom, and everyone does it. In fact, no one truly thinks they are unwise or foolish, do they? It seems to be a fundamental strand of our human bravado to think that our current understanding and opinion about some aspect of life is wise. We are normally pretty convinced that we see it rightly, and that if everyone just understood it our way, the world would be a better place. And now we live in a world of unprecedented opportunity to vent that oh-so-wise opinion to the rest of the world through social media. Now we get to let loose on the world with our great wisdom about all things. And that is a lot of what has happened in the last few months. There have been so many words, so many opinions, so many expert takes, so many politicians spouting their wisdom to us, so many friends and co-workers and family members telling us how they see everything that is going on. The question of the hour is really this question posed by James – Who is wise and understanding among you?

The question is obviously for the immediate church family. Teachers were hungering for positions of prominence to spout their wisdom. So, James lays out for the church a way to decipher between those teachers of truth and wisdom and those who are waterless clouds. But these distinctions that he makes between heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom can apply to society as a whole as well. So, we see in this text a paradigm to help us understand and discern between the wisdom of the many things we are hearing and seeing today. James draws out the distinctions between heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom by contrasting their source, their character, and their result. These contrasts will help us discern between what is from above and what is from below in all that we hear and see.

## I. Source (15, 17a)

- a. The first contrast is in their source. False wisdom is sourced in that which is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic in verse 15. When we look at the character of this wisdom in a moment you will see how the character of this wisdom proves its source. But consider what James says is the source of false wisdom. It is not from above – from God – but it is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. This mirrors the three enemies of the soul identified in Scripture – the world, the flesh, and the devil. This false wisdom is derived from this world – its source is found in the here and now. And this is a truth presented all throughout Scripture – that the world has a wisdom it presents in contradiction to the wisdom of God. Proverbs 14:12 says that there is a way that seems right unto a man, and the way thereof leads to death. Psalm 14:1-4 says – “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one. Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the LORD?” – this is the epitome of this worldly wisdom. It is sourced in a rejection of God as God and therefore it is set on figuring things out on its own. It creates a worldview which is completely empty of God’s truth and of God’s wisdom, and it spouts that wisdom as good and right and true.
- b. In 1 Corinthians 1 we have probably the most helpful text exposing the vast difference between the source of false and true wisdom. The worldly wisdom can’t make sense of the greatest display of heavenly wisdom – which is found in the cross of Christ. So, Paul says in 1 Cor. 1:18 – the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.”
- c. He goes on to say in verse 23 that we preach Christ crucified which is folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, this message of Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. And he says in verse 25 that the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. And then he says in chapter 2 and verse 14 that the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. So, back to James 3 – the Scriptures are clear. The world is operating on its own wisdom – its worldly wisdom which is unable to receive the truth from God. In fact, the wisdom from God is folly to them because they are not able to understand God’s truth. This worldly wisdom is derived from human logic and reason which is founded upon the tenet that we need to find our own way. This is the logic of humanity which was in the Garden of Eden. Satan tempted Eve through the use of worldly, unspiritual, and Satanic

logic. He reasoned with her from a worldly and man-centered perspective about the fruit, and she bought in. This is the worldly wisdom seen in Genesis 11 at the Tower of Babel. They, as puny little humans, thought they could literally build a tower to ascend to the heavens and be near God. This was the wisdom of man built upon godless human reason.

- d. The contrast to this false wisdom is the true wisdom which comes to us from above. That is the source – the Lord God of Heaven. He is the ultimate fountain of all that is right and true and wise.
  - i. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. – Prov. 9:10
  - ii. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. – Ps. 147:5
  - iii. It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens. – Jer. 51:15
  - iv. Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. <sup>21</sup>He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; <sup>22</sup>he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. <sup>23</sup>To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, – Daniel 2:20-23a
- e. This wisdom from above begins with the right and true understanding of God as God. All true wisdom starts with Him as the right and proper source. Wisdom from above is one of the good and perfect gifts that He gives to His children as they ask. All true wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord as we see Him as God over all and we receive from Him all that he desires to give us in the truth. Where human wisdom is brought about by human reason, this true wisdom from God is brought to us through revelation.

## II. Character (13, 14, 17)

- a. And this leads then to the character of these two wisdoms. The opposing nature of the different sources is seen very clearly in the character, or the spirit, of the false and true wisdom. Because the false wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic in its origin it will keep with that nature in its character. Like James said about the tongue, does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? If the source is fleshly and worldly, then the character of the wisdom coming out of it will be fleshly and worldly. And this is described in verse 14 as having a character of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. If the source of this false wisdom is the reasoning and logic of sinful mankind, then it follows that the character of this wisdom will be filled with sinful selfishness. Bitter jealousy is the poisonous zeal which seeks its own interests. It spouts a wisdom which will best serve the self out of a bitter jealousy about what others have that I don't. And this is combined with the knockout punch of selfish ambition. This is the heart motivation of what is best for me – and what is best for me alone. This is the self-

serving and self-exalting and self-promoting character of this worldly wisdom. Any wisdom that originates in the heart and mind of man, absent of the redeeming grace of God, will be a wisdom which is characterized by this bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

- b. This is contrasted with the true wisdom from above in verse 13 and verse 17. James says that this true wisdom will be shown in the conduct of the one who possesses it. In other words, wisdom has a show-me component to it. True wisdom is not mere theory shared in the classroom, but it is life shaping for every aspect of life in this world. This wisdom will be shown in good and right and true conduct. Did you notice that very helpful phrase in verse 13 – the meekness of wisdom? The truly wise person will live life in the meekness of wisdom. Meekness is not an effeminate description for passivity and weakness. Rather, meekness is used to describe Moses in Numbers 10 where it says that he was the meekest man in the world. And you remember the context of that statement was a the great challenge by Aaron and Miriam to Moses' leadership. They were basically asking what was so special about Moses. Why can't they have a bigger slice of the leadership pie? Sounds like the wisdom of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, doesn't it? But Moses responded with very reserved and calm and self-controlled trust in the Lord. He let the Lord fight that battle, and he trusted in the Lord to work it out. Moses didn't fight for his position or for his rights or for his territory. Rather, he trusted the Lord.
- c. The Greek philosophers in the NT time period used the Greek word for meekness to describe a horse that had been broken in. It described the strength of the horse now under the control of the rider. And this is the character of wisdom from above. There is a brokenness in the heart of the one who possesses it. They have long ago learned that God's way is best, that God's sovereignty can be trusted, that God's truth is supreme that God's designs are good, and that God's providential work will further his purpose and plan. And this comes out in the character then of the wise person's life.
- d. Verse 17 describes this wisdom from above as first of all being pure. This is the header description for the rest of the list that will follow. If wisdom from above is anything at all, it is most definitely pure. It is pure in the sense of containing no defilement of sin. It flows from the purest source available – the God of Heaven. Because it is from God, it has no defect or stain. It is not corrupted in any way. Because that is true then, the rest of the character qualities of this wisdom can be true. Because it is pure it can be and will be peaceable, gentle, and so on.
- e. This pure wisdom from God is peaceable in that it is peace giving and peace sustaining with others. This wisdom gives you the ability to make decisions and take steps in everyday life which will decrease conflict and will increase peace. This is the exact opposite of the world's wisdom which fights for its own way and brings the conflict of selfish ambition into every situation. Instead of coming into every situation and every relationship with a posture of seeking to get my way out of it, this wisdom from above seeks and fosters peace with others. It can do that because it has already dealt with who is in charge of it all. When you have

submitted your heart to the Lord God of heaven and have gladly determined to follow His ways, you have given up control of others and of the circumstances and you are freed to be a servant to others and a peace maker in every interaction. This peace making and peace keeping character of wisdom from above lets us know that conflict with others is ultimately conflict with God. Where there is not peace between people, there is not peace between those people and God. This lack of peace is rooted in the bitter jealousy and selfish ambition of human wisdom. But Godly wisdom is peaceable.

- f. It is also gentle – or you might think of it as kind and tolerant and forbearing. This wisdom from God suffers long with others. God’s wisdom will never make us short or impatient or harsh or unkind. That is always a product of our own fleshly wisdom. This is the sweet reasonableness which characterizes the heart set upon trusting God’s wisdom in all things. When I am living under the reign of God’s wisdom in my life, I have already yielded control of the situation. I have already recognized that other people’s reactions are out of my hands and the timetable of getting things done is the Lord’s business. Having given all of that to God then, I will be gentle and kind with others. Where that gentleness is absent you can be assured that the selfish ambition and manipulation of worldly wisdom is at play.
- g. The next characteristic is that it is open to reason. Godly wisdom will make us people who are like what James described in chapter 1 – swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. They will know that the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God and so they will with meekness receive the implanted word into their hearts. In other words, Godly wisdom does not give you a know it all complex where you now think it is your job to set everyone else straight with your newly discovered wisdom from above. Rather, if it is truly God’s wisdom you are operating under, you will be humbled and seeking to learn and grow all the more. This doesn’t mean that you won’t challenge those who are wrong, or that you passively sit and listen all the time. It just means that you will not always think you see it perfectly or completely. You will always be open to further instruction from the Word of God. And this will be especially true when you are interacting with God-given authority. If you have an issue with authority in your life, where you always think you know better than them, this is a sure sign that you are operating in the bitter jealousy and selfish ambition of worldly wisdom. Wisdom from above is open to reason.
- h. It is also full of mercy and good fruits. This mercy is compassion of heart for the needs and hurts of others. It is a heart posture which is ready to see the needs of others and then is full of action to help the person in need. Mercy is only helpful where it produces the good fruit of action to help. Wisdom from above will make you concerned for others and will compel you to engage in helping them when you see a need.
- i. And this godly wisdom is impartial and sincere. Being impartial means that you do not judge between people based on selfish things. It is what James already talked about in chapter 2 where the church might make a distinction between a

wealthy visitor and a poor visitor to their gathering. They are judging between the men based upon their appearance. This is sinfully partial, and this is motivated by the selfish ambition of seeking personal favor from someone who can do something for me. Wisdom from above is not partial like that. It sees people as created in the image of God – each uniquely designed by God and each in need of God’s kindness, mercy, love, and truth. To be sincere is companion thought. It means to be without hypocrisy – to be free of play-acting and putting on your stage mask to perform whatever is expected of you. That is the stuff of worldly wisdom. It is always insincere – saying one thing and meaning another. It fakes like it cares about others, but in reality, it is using others to accomplish its own good. But godly wisdom will never do that. It will be entirely sincere in its submission to the Lord and in its service to others.

### III. Result (16, 18)

- a. This character of worldly wisdom and godly wisdom will obviously produce vastly different results. This bitter jealousy and selfish ambition of worldly wisdom will produce disorder and every vile practice, in verse 16. The word for disorder means more than just having a few dishes out of place in the cupboard of life. It means total upheaval and opposition. One lexicon defined it as “to rise up in open defiance of authority, with the presumed intention to overthrow it or to act in complete opposition to its demands—‘to rebel against, to revolt, to engage in insurrection, rebellion.” (Louw-Nida) This is the violent opposition that produces the mob action and riots. And I am not making that up – that is what the word means. So, we can work ourselves backward from the results of cultural wisdom by seeing what it is producing. This will help us know the character and ultimately the source of this wisdom. So, when a worldview is producing the poison of riots and rebellion, you know that it is corrupted at the source.
- b. It is also corrupted with every vile practice. If the source is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic, you can bet that the product will be evil and wicked. Where self is king, the ethics of that kingdom will be self-serving and self-pleasing. And this will lead to every wicked practice of sinful rebellion against the God of heaven.
- c. But the result of wisdom from above is a harvest of righteousness in verse 18. This harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. This is a beautiful description of the Christian life, and especially of the life of the church. The body of Christ should be filled with people who are submitting themselves to the wisdom of God found in the Word of God and given to us in the Son of God. And this will make them people of peace – both with God and with one another. And this will lead them to the meekness of wisdom whose conduct will be like a farmer planting seeds and watering seeds and waiting for the harvest. And those seeds planted will be seeds of righteousness. But righteousness needs just the right climate in which to grow and be harvested, and that climate is the peace afforded it by the wisdom of God. As you walk in the wisdom from above you sow and plant the seeds of righteous living within the body of Christ. These seeds grow and prosper and produce a harvest of righteousness.

- d. The positive result might be easier to see in contrast to the negative which describes so many churches. They have bought into and are operating under human and worldly wisdom and this is creating conflict in the body which is hurting the harvest of righteousness before the Lord. They have lost their effectiveness and their witness. They have done damage to the next generation by their selfish ambition and they have turned the church into a political marketplace of human wisdom, and therefore of turmoil and ungodliness.

**Conclusion:** So, like James, I ask you, who is wise and understanding among you? Some of you need to take this paradigm of worldly versus godly wisdom and you need to lay it over your marriage and ask the Lord to show you where you have been operating in accordance with human wisdom. Teenager, you need to take this paradigm and use it to evaluate your relationship with your parents and with other authority figures that God has placed over you. Church member, you need to take this paradigm and see if your life is a life of peace which is sowing this harvest of righteousness in the Body of Christ.

But as we close, let's apply this paradigm to our cultural moment. If you only apply these truths to our society and never to your heart, you are missing the point. But what is the harvest being taken in across our land today? Is it not the disorder and every vile practice of verse 16? The voices of human wisdom which have long been trafficking in the academy are now seeing the fruit of their labors in our society. They have trained human hearts and minds in philosophies of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. And this is producing disorder and every vile practice. The human philosophy of critical race theory proposes that society is dominated by the oppressive power structures of one race over the others and that those power structures need to be fundamentally altered and changed. Cultural Marxism teaches people that culture needs to be completely reinvented. Old power structures and historically followed laws and economic systems need to be abandoned and literally torn down so that it can all be rebuilt with new values of inclusivity and freedom from oppression. Intersectionality has trained the next generation to see how many categories of life they have been victimized in. It trains them to see the world through the lens of oppressor and oppressed and their quotient of pain as a victim is increased based upon how many categories in life they have been oppressed by others. So, you would have a high quotient of intersectionality if you were a minority woman with a minority sexual orientation. And you would be in the oppressor group if you were a white man because you are inherently in the majority group – even though technically, there are more white women than white men. And all of these theories are at play in the current social justice movement in which the majority culture is being called upon to wake up to their oppression and racial prejudice by which they have been hurting others all these years. I know this is an emotionally charged issue, and there are elements of truth in these human philosophies which need to be addressed. But you do not need to read Robin DeAngelo's book "White Fragility" to help you understand the problems of our society and to learn the world's proposed solution of toppling all the current tenets of society under which we operate. Rather, you need to evaluate these human philosophies in accordance with this text. What are they producing? And how does this show their character and ultimately their source? But don't let this diagnosis tempt you to replace one system of human wisdom with another system of human wisdom. Don't drink deeply from the well of human wisdom coming from sources which you would rather hear from.

Rather, immerse yourself in the wisdom which is from above. Turn your gaze to the great and glorious Savior who is wisdom incarnate and learn from Him – Take his yoke upon you, for he is meek and lowly in spirit. His yoke is easy, and his burden is light. And his wisdom will be pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.