

Wisdom from Above & Earthly Wisdom

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[0 : 00] Thank you for this opportunity to share God's word with you. As Alistair said today, it's a bit different for me and for yourselves, as I had hoped to join in the building.

But yes, due to a holiday down to Costa del London, we were contacted by Track and Trace and asked to self-isolate. So hopefully the wonders of technology being live over Zoom will be acceptable.

So we are continuing our study in the book of James, the book that focuses on Christian maturity. Today in this passage, we will be looking at wisdom.

And more accurately, we will be looking at two different kinds of wisdom. Wisdom from above, as James titles it, and earthly wisdom, comparing the wisdom of this world with the wisdom of God. We will look at the two sources of these wisdoms, the roots, and what they look like and show in our lives, the fruits. So to reflect this, I have titled this sermon, Two Roots and Two Fruits.

[1 : 09] So I would like you, in your mind, to picture the most clever, intelligent person you can think of. Who is it that pops into your head when you think clever, intelligent?

Some of you may have thought of Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, perhaps, Leonardo da Vinci, maybe Stephen Hawking. How about if I now ask you to picture the wisest person you can think of?

Are you still thinking of the same person? Or someone completely different? Did anyone picture King Solomon? How about dad? Maybe granny?

Can we see a difference between being clever and being wise? A difference between knowledge and wisdom? On the flip side, I'm sure we can think of people who are intelligent, but have no wisdom when it comes to relating to people.

This is what James is tackling in this passage. The stark difference between earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom, and their results in the life of the Christian.

[2 : 20] It's a practical wisdom. I find this study challenging as I look at my own life, especially at the moment, going through, as many others are, being locked in the house, stuck with my nearest and dearest.

And I'm reminded of how much I struggle with my own heart and tongue, and how much I need God's forgiveness. And James doesn't pull any punches here, as we will see, but it also has a message of hope and love, that God can and will change our heart as we mature as Christians. I hope we will all come away with this too. So the first question is, who are the wise? James asked this at the start of the passage in verse 13, who is wise and understanding among you.

So to answer this, let's have a quick recap of this chapter as a whole. At the start of the chapter, James first states his argument in verse 1, that not many of you should become teachers, because you will be judged more strictly.

This was to address the problem of false teaching in the early church. James then goes on to illustrate this argument in verses 3 to 12, where he gives examples of the power of the tongue, the power to destroy or the power to delight.

[3 : 52] And now, in this section that we are looking at today, he applies his argument and shows how this should affect our lives as Christians. What are the true motives behind how we speak and act?

In this chapter, as a whole, he is asking us, how can I carry my faith from the bottom of my heart to the tip of my tongue?

So, as we can see from verse 1, the wise that James is looking to are the mature Christians and the teachers, those with influence over others, and as a result, those that will be watched more closely. In these verses, he's giving us illustrations of how wisdom should be displayed in their lives. Now, this can equally be applied to all of us as we all have positions of teaching or influence.

This may be teaching our children, our tasks at home, our position at work, or in our role in church. And also, wisdom is a gift from God that we should all ask for.

[5 : 03] In chapter 1, verse 5, we already heard that if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

This wisdom is something we should all seek. So, James starts off today's passage, in verse 13, with a strong challenge. The wise should show it by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom.

What does this mean? Deeds and humility that comes from wisdom? Well, that no task is beneath us. We should humbly realise that if we are able to serve, then we should.

Let our lives show the love that God has put into our hearts by serving each other, and also serving those that are not Christians. Let us show our wisdom by our deeds.

Is there something we know that we can do to help a brother or sister at church? Then do it. Don't wait for others, but humbly do it. James is spurring us into action here at the start of this section.

[6 : 16] Can we help with an outreach? Can we be in contact with those that are on their own or lonely? Do we pray for our elders and those that teach? The wise are the ones who serve.

Let our wisdom show by our deeds, done in humility. James is challenging us again, as in previous chapters, to act out our faith. So what is this wisdom that James urges us to seek?

Today, we seem to confuse having knowledge with being wise. This is not the wisdom James is discussing in this passage. It is more than knowledge, or even knowledge of the truth.

It is living a life that points others to God. It is a life lived by God's standards, not those of man. It is a practical wisdom. How our needs, and those of others, all fit within God's plan for us as Christians.

So we now come to the roots and the fruits. Let us look at the roots and fruits of the different wisdom found in this passage. What is the purpose of a plant's root?

[7 : 32] What do the roots do? Well, they supply the plant with moisture and nutrients. The food it needs to survive. They feed it. I remember at school, they were studying plant structures.

So we placed celery into a glass of water with black food colouring in it. After some time, we could see the black colour moving up the celery from the root end towards the leaves at the top, spreading throughout the whole plant.

This is similar with wisdom. The type of wisdom we are rooted in will spread through us and will be evident in our lives. We need to ask ourselves, and I include myself in this, what kind of wisdom are we feeding on?

Where is it rooted? Is it rooted in the value system of this world? Or is it rooted in God's wisdom? James shows us here that these are two completely different, opposite types of wisdom.

They have very different roots, leading to very different fruits. So firstly, let us look at the wisdom that is rooted in this world.

[8 : 43] So let's remind ourselves of the passage. So in verse 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.

But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

This is worldly wisdom, if we can call it wisdom at all. We see this in verse 15. Such wisdom does not come down from heaven. By this, James means the world system which is opposed to God, the system that wants nothing to do with God and his son.

He says here it is earthly, unspiritual, and it is from the devil. It's demonic. These are the three enemies of the Christian. The world is earthly, our desires is unspiritual, it's the opposite of being spiritual and it's from the devil.

It's demonic. So these are the three enemies we have to be aware of. The wisdom of this world rejects God and it rejects the gospel of God. 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 18 tells us, For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

[10 : 12] For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. And that's just the way the devil wants it, for people to reject God's wisdom and the life that only God can offer.

And also, when we look at the fruits in this passage, we can see that this worldly wisdom has a very proud, selfish line of fruit. In a word, it's self-serving.

It is the opposite of God's wisdom. For we read in James chapter 4 verse 6, which you'll be looking at in a few weeks time, that God opposes the proud, but shows favour to the humble.

So what are the fruits of this worldly wisdom? Well, firstly, it's the wrong motives. If you look, we can see that it comes from bitter envy and selfish ambition in their hearts.

many today are full of knowledge, but empty of wisdom. This is a wisdom meant to impress rather than to help in any sort of practical way.

[11:16] The world's way to get up is by climbing up over others. It doesn't matter what it takes to get you where you need to be. It's about showing that you've done this by yourself.

No help. You are the best. And this may also be evident in the church. jealousy of how God is using a fellow Christian, but not us.

Or it may be envy of another's gifts, gifts that God has given them to strengthen the church. Do we want what they have? This is not the way to get it.

We will see this as we look at God's wisdom later. Worldly wisdom also leads to the wrong standards. It is boastful and it denies the truth.

So it is rooted in self and self interest. Pride loves to boast. We can sometimes pretend that everything we have is from our own hard work.

[12:14] It's not a gift from God. Look what I have achieved with my hands. We boast. It denies the truth. What is truth was asked of Jesus 2000 years ago.

This is still the case today. If you don't like the truth you can just invent your own version of it. We measure things by our own standards not God's truth.

We do what is right in our own eyes. It also exhibits the wrong characteristics. James describes it as unspiritual earthly.

This is animal-like or essential, the absolute opposite of spiritual. It is focused on fleeting superficial feelings rather than in genuine love.

There is nothing deep there. It is about using people, not loving people. Can we see this in the world today, the shallow superficial love? Do we see this in our own lives?

[13:19] Ultimately, it ends with the wrong results. If we look at verse 16, we have envy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder in every evil practice.

It affects the Christian as spiritual growth is stopped, our witness to others is destroyed and ultimately our intimacy of Christ is broken. We can see the overlap with last week's message.

Jonathan challenged us how we use our tongue and he said, are we causing our feeling conflict?

Our words and actions can cause others to disregard the gospel and that the tongue is the outward showing of the heart.

We can see here in this passage that the fruit of worldly wisdom leads to disorder and we can see that all these fruits are a result of the trap of being rooted in wisdom from this world.

And as we heard last week, we need God's grace. So as we go on now and look at wisdom from above, we can see the contrast in verse 17, where we are presented with the wisdom rooted in heaven, the wisdom from above, which is like a breath of fresh air compared with what we have just read.

[14:39] Let's read this together. So in verse 17, What a list!

This is the complete opposite from earthly wisdom. This is very evident when we look at the fruits. This wisdom is a gift from God. it is humble and it is evident by how we serve others.

Likewise, the fruits of the wisdom from above. Heavenly wisdom is first of all pure. This is the idea of having integrity and principles that won't be compromised, of being set apart.

It's interesting that being pure is first in God's list. Peace loving comes next. Sometimes in our life, there may come a time when we need to take a stand for living a holy life, for being pure.

And there are certain things that we can't give into. And I'm not just talking about in a war with the world when we're fighting against the world's ways.

[16:02] We may think of Paul's disagreement with Peter in Galatians. Paul took a stand for truth and peace followed. So firstly, be pure with the holy life and this ultimately will bring peace.

And as we continue to look at the fruits from heavenly wisdom, they are all relational wisdom, how we relate to and treat other people. This wisdom is peace loving, the idea that we will not antagonize others.

Earthly wisdom we have seen puts ourselves first and doesn't care for the feelings of others. Well, this wisdom from above will have us put others before ourselves and seek peace.

It is also considerate, the opposite of being self-centered. We will consider all the joys and pains that others have gone through. We will put their feelings before our own. We will not respond based on just one incident, but we'll consider the whole picture of what they are going through and up until this point, we will cut them some slack.

[17 : 12] We will not go nuclear when someone makes a mistake or wrongs us. It's been considerate. It is submissive or gentle.

Now, this is not a weakness or being a pushover. It conveys the idea of avoiding harsh criticism of others. It makes allowances. wisdom from above is also full of mercy and good fruit.

If God had not been merciful to us, where would we be? The idea of not dishing out punishment when it's due, but being forgiven. This brings to mind the Lord's prayer when we ask God to forgive our sins in the same way that we forgive those who have sinned against us.

We must be forgiven. Are we? And it's also an impartial wisdom. It treats all as equals. James covered this in chapter 2 with the treatment of the rich and the poor.

And in this world where people aren't always treating as equals, as Christians we should realise that this is something that should be displayed in our lives to treat all as equal and to be impartial.

[18 : 27] It's a sincere wisdom. we also read, being genuine without ulterior motives. Basically, don't be a hypocrite and hide behind a mask.

And what does this wisdom lead to? Well, we're peacemakers who sow in peace and ultimately leading to a harvest of righteousness. Harvest of righteousness.

This brings to mind the words of Jesus found in John chapter 15 verse 5 where Jesus says, I am the vine, you are the branches.

If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing. Does that make us think of today when we're more disjointed possibly than we ever have been with COVID and being isolated from each other?

We really need to meet together as a church, be peacemakers together, and sow in this harvest of righteousness. Do this through Jesus. Let's not give up meeting together.

[19 : 37] So how amazing would it be to be described in this way as peace-loving, as considerate, as full of mercy. Very challenging, but it's an amazing list.

But has James just given us these two lists, one list of earthly wisdom to make us feel guilty and that God is angry when he sees these in our lives? And this other list, the list of heavenly wisdom being things that will make God happy when we try to grasp them?

Because let's be honest, some of them are almost impossible to meet. Is that what James is intending here? Is it a balance weighing good fruits against bad, seeing what's active in our lives? Absolutely not. James is showing that on our own, it is impossible to meet God's standards, just as it is to tame the tongue. We need God's forgiveness and grace.

How do we apply all this in our lives as Christians? I don't think we can deal with this section of scripture without addressing the passage as a whole.

[20 : 45] So the course of the chapter flows as follows. Not everyone should become teachers as they will be judged more strictly. due to the position of influence that they have.

This is shown by the power of the tongue, which has the power to build up our witness and build up other Christians, or the power to destroy this when we get it wrong. So we need to tame the tongue, but we can't.

And what flows from our tongue shows what is in our heart. The only way to change our tongue is to change our hearts. And this can only come from God.

God is here in this section from verse 13 that James gives a solution to this impossible problem of taming the tongue, of changing our heart.

Godly wisdom comes from knowing God. We've read this already in chapter 1 verse 5. If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God. How do we ask God for what we need?

[21 : 47] Through prayer. prayer. It is spending time with God in prayer and reading his word. It is serving others. The more time we spend getting to know God, the more important God's love and forgiveness becomes to us, the more important his grace.

He has forgiven us through Jesus' death on the cross. When we think on what it costs Jesus and how much we have been forgiven, the less important our own pride and ambition becomes.

the more we want to serve him. Now a friend sent a little message to my wife during the week. Don't you love friends who encourage you with things like that?

You should try to be a positive influence in the lives of others. So this little message was titled Be Rooted and it goes as follows. The more you know God, the more you will learn to trust him. the more you know him personally, the more you will love him. The more you love him, the more you will serve him. When we spend time with him, when we get to know him, when we respond to his grace, God can work on our hearts and the fruits of godly wisdom will grow in our lives.

[23 : 08] It's not from us or anything that we do. It's God working in our lives, giving us a heart transplant. we will want to share this love with our family, with our friends, with our enemies even.

Just as the food colouring rose from the root of the celery through the whole plant, if you spend time getting to know God, in prayer, reading his word, if you spend time with other Christians, God will act on our heart.

We will be rooted in God's wisdom from above and its fruits will show in our lives. Now that doesn't mean that we're perfect, but we are forgiven. What does this passage mean?

If you're not a Christian, friend, this section may seem like a heavy, gloomy chapter. There are lots of things in it that are impossible to do. It even tells us this, such as no man can tame the tongue. Or it may seem like a checklist of things to try and do to earn God's approval. I won't harbour envy. I will try and be considerate. But this is a point that James is making.

[24 : 14] We need to realise that we are broken and sinful. There is nothing that we can do to earn God's favour and fix our heart. God's standard is perfection, not one mistake.

And this is impossible for us to achieve. But Jesus did it. He died to take the punishment that we deserve, that we can have life and God's justice.

The need to punish my sin was paid by Christ. The fruits that we have looked at in James should not make us feel guilty, but grateful. The cross of Jesus shows us just how important we are to God. I think the second verse of the hymn before the throne of God above sums us up much better than I can. It reads, God is offering us his true wisdom.

It is a gift. We don't have to worry about gaining the right grade or pass mark to earn it. The only marks we need to focus on are the marks on Jesus' body as he was crucified so that we can live.

[25 : 46] The only entry requirement as we have heard is humility. This humility, admitting that we have wronged others and sinned against God, admitting that we need God's forgiveness.

This is the humility that comes from God's wisdom and which changes our heart. Friend, if you have not done this, come and know the peace and reassurance that comes from trusting God with your life and with your future.

Just let us pray. Father, we thank you for your son and his sacrifice for us on the cross. It is humbling to think of what it cost you.

That we might be forgiven and be called children of God. We thank you for your work that we can study and learn more about you and your love. Help us to live a life that points others to you, that they may also know the peace that comes from your love and presence in their lives.

In Jesus' name, Amen.