

“Wisdom from Above” – James 3:13 – 4:3, 7-8a – September 23, 2018

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What does it mean to be wise? The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines wise as “marked by deep understanding, keen discernment, and a capacity for sound judgement.” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wise>) Another online source defines wisdom as “the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense, and insight. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wisdom#cite_note-1) Wisdom is a hard concept to grasp. Various philosophical, religious, and psychological systems measure wisdom using different scales, different criteria. A wise Buddhist monk will probably exhibit different characteristics than a wise secular humanist.

The wisdom literature in the Bible characterize wisdom as having its roots in God. And wisdom that has God as its source will look different than earthly wisdom. Much different. In this third chapter of the Book of James, the author confronts his audience with the question, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” It’s a rhetorical question James uses to set up the message that follows. He states that wisdom is shown through one’s actions. Wisdom is discernible in a person who lives a life of gentleness. The way a person lives life – how they act on a daily basis - is the evidence of that person’s level of wisdom, and the measure that James uses is a scale of gentleness.

Now gentleness is not normally something that our world strives to attain. James knows this and he immediately points out that many of us pursue life out of bitter envy and selfish ambition. That is the wisdom of the world. The world’s wisdom would have us always wanting and seeking more. More stuff, better stuff. We seem to never be satisfied with what we have. There is always a nagging desire to keep up with everyone else – and when we see that someone has a better relationship, a better house, a better mobile phone, better clothes, cars, luxuries it is not uncommon for us to covet those things. We want that for ourselves. And the marketers know that. They prey on our human tendency to envy our neighbors. To want what we don’t have. When someone has something we don’t have, our natural desire is to attain it.

James points out that ambition is the same. We are driven by competition. We want to reach a particular level of success in our lives. Noone wants to be average, or below average. We want to be at the top of the food chain, we want to be better than everyone else, we want to attain greatness. Now there is nothing wrong with doing your best. James is talking about achieving a higher status out of a selfish need. Sometimes we push

ourselves beyond what is healthy. Ambition motivates us to surpass everyone else. We want a better job, we want to make more money. We want to be skinnier, or healthier, or smarter, or prettier, or more athletic. We want to be the best, in whatever it is we are pursuing. We long for greatness. We want the adulation and praise of others, to have others look at us and be envious of our status.

In Mark's passage, Jesus reprimands his disciples for seeking greatness. As they were traveling, a few of the disciples were arguing about which of them was to be the greatest. When they had stopped at the house where they were staying, Jesus sat down with them and taught them that true greatness was defined by servanthood. To be great one must serve. He then picked up a little child. Children were the lowest people on the social scale. They were the most vulnerable, having absolutely no status and relying on others to care for them. Jesus told the disciples, when you welcome one like this child, one who is completely at the mercy of others, one who is weak and defenseless – you welcome me. And not only me, but the one who sent me. To be in service to one who is helpless – that is what is great.

To James, seeking after things we don't have because we are envious, and striving to attain a level of status in order to promote self are characteristics of worldly wisdom. It is wisdom that does not come from above, or in other words, it does not come from God. Pursuing goals out of envy or selfishness is not a Godly way to live life. It is earthly, it is unspiritual, it is wicked – it is wisdom from below. And the problem, says James, with following this paradigm of wisdom is that it will taint everything that one does. If one holds onto envy or ambition as one's model for living life, it will produce additional negative results. You can't have it both ways. Worldly wisdom and Godly wisdom are diametrically opposed.

So James talks about the attributes of Godly wisdom – wisdom that comes from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

These qualities don't come naturally to us. Perhaps it is a holdover from the instinctual part of our brains – but our basest desires tell us to focus on the self. And perhaps those qualities were necessary for our ancestors' survival. But we are called to a higher level of living. A way of life that strives not for possessions or status, but instead strives to grow closer to God. In the final verse of this passage, James says that as we draw near God, God will draw near to us.

James knows that these qualities of peace and gentleness and mercy do not come easy to us, especially when the world wants to pull us in a myriad of opposing viewpoints. The wisdom from above comes from God. It is only as we actively seek to draw closer to God in our daily living that these qualities will become more a part of who we are and will be evident in how we live out our lives on a daily basis. In a world that, especially now, seems to thrive on division, pursuit of greatness and power, and values self-promotion over caring for the vulnerable – may we strive to draw nearer to God and grow in the wisdom that only comes from God. Wisdom that pursues peace, avoids hypocrisy, extends mercy, cares for the weak, and promotes gentleness.