

MBC – 10/31/2021 – Pastor Doug Thompson
 JAMES: TESTS OF A LIVING FAITH
“The Wisdom Test”
 James 3:13-18

Last Lord’s Day we looked at Proverbs 9 where Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly both cry out for anyone who will listen to come into their house and learn from them. But one gives life, and the other gives death. Those who follow God’s wisdom will find eternal life, but Proverbs 9:18 says of the one who follows the foolishness of this world: *“he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.”* Just this week I heard of at least 2 young people who died because they followed foolishness. The wages of sin really is death – physical, and spiritual. And James is going to show us the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of this world – and how to know which one you are following.

- James 3:13–18 ¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? (This is how you know:) 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.

I. “Show me your wisdom!”

Paraphrase of v.13—

- “So who out there claims to be wise and have all the facts? (A lot of people, right?) Well talk is cheap. Faith without works is dead – and so is wisdom without good fruit. *Prove that you are wise by responding to life’s ups and downs with gentle and godly discernment. Live out God’s wisdom!*”

James was really *bothered* by people who claimed to be Christians but talked and acted no differently than the unsaved world. Once people know you are a Christian, then God’s reputation is at stake – amen? People will judge your God by your actions. You want a scary thought for Halloween! But it’s also an amazing opportunity—

- People who will not pick up a Bible or darken the door of a church can read our lives, hear our words, and see the wisdom of God on display. That happened this week after one of our MCS chapels, an unsaved parent said to someone, “That young man who led the chapel this morning (and also prayed) was so confident and well-spoken!” I.e., He was good advertisement for the Gospel! Unfortunately he’s graduating this year. . .

Do we really *get* that people are constantly judging our God by our actions?

- I read about a former homosexual, recalling being in a gay pride parade and hearing the insults being screamed out from church people standing on the sidelines. He said he thought, “Who would ever want to be part of their religion?” A few years later a young pastor saw him as a person, not just as a homosexual, and led him to Christ.

We need to write Jesus' words on the doorposts of our homes—

- Matthew 5:16 “. . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven!”

James' point is this: godly wisdom is *observable*. It's not the way you think or what you *say*, it's the way you live. Let me give you a definition we used back in ch.1—

- Godly wisdom is the ability to perceive the true nature of a situation and to implement the will of God in that situation. Wisdom is the practical application of God's truth to a specific situation. *Wisdom is knowing what God wants you to do and then doing it.*

It's not *just* knowing – it's doing. The Greeks could separate thinking from doing, but not the Hebrews: You were only wise if you *applied* wisdom to life. If you don't, no matter what you say – you're *not*—let me break it down--

- Maybe you know of a person who claims to be very wise – oh, they can see through all the “fake news” in the world. They understand politics, science, religion and philosophy. They even understand the conspiracies behind it all. Whatever topic you bring up, they know all about it. But they are estranged from their family. They can't keep a job. Their car never seems to be running. They invite you over to their house and it's a mess: junk everywhere, doesn't smell so good, cats are everywhere (the alarms should be going off), and they would fix you some coffee, but they don't have any.

Could this just be a wise person on hard times? Well what does the evidence say? Remember what Lady Wisdom's home looks like? - Like it's out of Better Homes and Gardens. Neat, clean, organized. She has coffee in her pantry.

Seriously – Listen as I read Ps.112. This describes the life of a godly, wise person—

- Psalm 112 ¹Praise the LORD! How joyful are those who fear the LORD and delight in obeying his commands. ²Their children will be successful everywhere; an entire generation of godly people will be blessed. ³They themselves will be wealthy, and their good deeds will last forever. ⁴Light shines in the darkness for the godly. They are generous, compassionate, and righteous. ⁵Good comes to those who lend money generously and conduct their business fairly. ⁶Such people will not be overcome by evil. Those who are righteous will be long remembered. ⁷They do not fear bad news; they confidently trust the LORD to care for them. ⁸They are confident and fearless and can face their foes triumphantly. ⁹They share freely and give generously to those in need. Their good deeds will be remembered forever. They will have influence and honor. ¹⁰The wicked will see this and be infuriated. They will grind their teeth in anger; they will slink away, their hopes thwarted.

To paraphrase Forrest Gump: “Wisdom is and wisdom does.” James says, don't be fooled: Wisdom shows in “good conduct,” “good fruits” and “*works done in the meekness of wisdom.*” I want to look at that phrase—

The best translation of “meekness” here is *gentleness* – the *gentleness of wisdom*. The Gk. word here was a weakness and a character flaw to Roman philosophers. But it's not weakness: it's not passive

resignation. *It's strength under control.* It was used to describe a horse that had been broken and trained to submit to the bit and bridle.

*I want you to think about this: the godly wisdom that James calls us to demonstrate is marked by *gentleness* – humility – restraint. Doesn't Jesus immediately come to mind? Strongest Man who ever lived, and the wisest, but He called Himself "*gentle.*"

- Matthew 12:19–21 ¹⁹He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; ²⁰a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; ²¹and in his name the Gentiles will hope."

But the opposite of godly, gentle wisdom is in v.14—

- James 3:14 ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. And then—
- James 3:16 ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

What jumps out? Self-centeredness – it's all about me, what I want, even if it belongs to you. It's not gentle, there is no restraint. It's aggressive, do-eat-dog. And it's vindictive. It says, "You punch me, and I will punch you back 10 times." Let me read you the lexicon definition of the Gk. for "selfish ambition"—

- "A desire to put one's self forward, a partisan spirit which does not disdain low arts (it has no hesitation in going low.) This word is found before NT times only in Aristotle where it denotes a self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means."

A whole lot of politicians come to mind here – people who are supposed to lead us in wisdom. But by their deeds they prove that they have *no* wisdom. So James says to these blowhards in v.14, and let me paraphrase—

- I.e., "If you're not going to walk what you talk, then keep your mouth shut – oh, but you claim to be a Christian? Do the rest of us Christians a favor: please don't tell anyone!"

And then James tells us where this false, phony wisdom comes from. It's not from God—

II. The wisdom from below.

- 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.

Notice: true wisdom comes down from above – you only get it if you know God: "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" I.e., an unsaved person might be very smart, but they will never be wise. So this is not wisdom at all, it's foolishness. First, it's—

A. Earthly.

- *rather* than heavenly. And it is earthbound: it can't rise any higher than man's own reason. It can't get beyond this world to see life from God's infinite, eternal perspective. When William Shatner returned from his recent 4 minute trip into space he was blown away by being able to look down on the earth. It gave him a perspective he had never had before. But beloved, when God's children look into the pages of His Word, we see the entire universe and life from the eternal, infinite, perspective of our Creator God! God puts the "uni" in universe.

But don't expect this from unbelieving teachers or philosophers – or judges or politicians. Their wisdom is earthbound. And it is—

B. Unspiritual.

This means unsaved, unregenerate, apart from God's saving grace. Devoid of the Holy Spirit—

- 1 Corinthians 2:14 ¹⁴The 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.
- Jude 19 ¹⁹It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.
- John 3:3 Remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

No comprehension of heaven, hell, or spiritual truth. Again, unbelievers might be intelligent and know a lot of facts, but they have zero true understanding of life and death and sin and salvation because they don't know God. They don't even have the *beginning* of wisdom. And then, shockingly, James says that the "wisdom" from below is—

C. Demonic.

It comes from the pit of hell. James means it: Satan and his demons are actively influencing and poisoning the thinking of unbelievers—

- 2 Corinthians 4:4 ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.
- 1 Timothy 4:1 ¹Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,

Demons do this through influencing public education, universities, through the media – and if you think that sounds reactionary, when they call the Bible and the Gospel, foolish, unloving, and unsophisticated – what does say about their so-called "wisdom?" It's really demon-influenced foolishness—

*You need to underline vv.15-16 in your Bible: it explains so much about life around us. We wonder why politicians, presidents, and judges make laws and decisions that are so stupid and destructive – just plain irrational – and why there is "*jealousy and selfishness. . . disorder and every vile practice*" all around us – but beloved, we shouldn't be scratching our heads! The very best they can do is still earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. Listen—

- Proverbs 28:5 ⁵Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it completely. Isn't that profound? But it should help you to adjust your expectations – amen?

God bless those Christians in the media and in Congress – and on our Supreme Court – who fight to stand against satanic foolishness. We need more Christians in those places. Then James describes the wisdom from above, and you might be surprised at what it looks like—

III. The wisdom from above.

- 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.

God's wisdom, the wisdom we find in His Word is, before anything else – *pure*. The word he uses is from the word for *holiness*. Consecrated to serving and obeying God; blameless – beloved, it means to be *Christlike*. But let's look at the others quickly. First and foremost, *pure, then—*

Peaceable – God's wisdom loves peace, it seeks peace, and look at v.18—

- James 3:18 ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

This is an awkward verse, but it means that those who are truly wise sow the seeds of peace. They are *peacemakers*, and the crop that results is *righteousness*.

God's wisdom is *gentle* – same word we looked at before: strength under control, it is restrained and gracious. Then it is *open to reason* – man, that is rare nowadays, amen? Everyone seems to have their minds already made up on just about everything, but that is no different than the world. Then God's wisdom is *full of mercy and good fruits* – it is kind, compassionate, and always looking to do good and to help those in need. And finally, it is impartial and sincere – literally, without hypocrisy.

So I want us to step back from this passage: what does God's wisdom look like? It looks a lot like the fruit of the Spirit – it looks a lot like Paul's definition of love in 1 Cor.13, doesn't it? It's gentle, kind, godly; it does good to others, and it is always, always, seeking peace and unity.

*Honestly, I don't think many folks in the church today would define wisdom like that. I think they would say that the wise man or wise woman is the one who is ready to fight: for truth, for our God-given rights, for *freedom!*

- I want to tell you how I had this passage taught to me, and what I thought it meant for many years: Wisdom is first pure – that means *doctrinal* purity – then, and way down the line, it's peaceable. I.e., be quick to pick a fight over doctrine. Quick to find error. Go to the mat over every nit-picky difference. And be ready – even eager – to split the church, or denomination if they won't admit their error: *“Never sacrifice truth for the sake of unity!”* Have you ever heard that? I sure did.

Now listen: **This passage is not talking about doctrinal purity – it's talking about personal holiness.**

James asks us, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Are you pursuing holiness, and are you pursuing peace? And unity?” Didn't our Lord make that a huge deal in Jn.17: “That they may be one as We

are one?” Wisdom is not just about being right. You can be right, but be very wrong in the way you are right. Right? It’s just what Paul said in his chapter on love—

- 1 Corinthians 13:2 ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

And James would say – you’re a fool. His description of godly wisdom is way different than many of us seem to think—

*Beloved, God’s wisdom is more about being *gentle* than being *right*: It is ready to listen, ready to reconsider its own positions. It “does nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility counts others more significant than itself.” And it yearns for peace in the body of Christ.

Demon wisdom is exactly the opposite: aggressive, self-centered, self-seeking. Demon wisdom says, “The end justifies whatever it takes to get there, because I’m right!” Even if the price is peace and unity. And its fruit is “disorder and every vile practice.” How in the world can we justify that?

- But we see a lot of that today: Christians who care more about being right, than about preserving brotherly love, and peace in the body. Oh, they are standing for truth, and freedom! Onward Christian soldiers! – I’ve heard Christians say, “My only King is Jesus,” but what they mean is: “No one tells me what to do.” But how is that distinctively Christian when most unbelievers say the same thing? Everybody thinks they’re Braveheart: “They can take our lives, but they will never take our **freedom!**”
- I’m all for freedom – but it’s over-rated. We can follow Christ and let our lights shine under *any* form of government – even under Gavin Newsoloni. What did Paul say to Christian slaves – children of God who were literally the property of another? “Freedom!?” No. He said, “Do not be concerned about it – you’re free in Christ!” Look it up: 1 Cor.7:21-22.

Beloved, God’s wisdom is something that the world can’t pull off. Period. God’s wisdom speaks the truth, but does it in love. God’s wisdom seeks truth *and* unity – not one or the other. I want you to leave here this morning with this phrase in your mind and heart: “The gentleness of wisdom.” And I want to give you some illustrations—

IV. The gentleness of wisdom illustrated.

A. By James himself—

Turn with me to Acts 15: This was some time after James wrote his letter to Jewish Christians. Paul and others had been preaching the Gospel to Gentiles and they were getting saved! Here is the issue—

- Acts 15:1 ¹But some men came down from Judea (they came to the church at Antioch that was stuffed full of new Gentile Christians) and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

I.e., “You have to become a Jew before you can become a Christian!” So what was the issue here? The *Gospel*. Are we saved by faith alone in Jesus alone – or is something, *anything* else required? The whole

Great Commission can't go on until this issue is resolved. It's dead in the water until there is agreement between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.

So the Apostles and the elders called a summit meeting in Jerusalem to settle this issue. James, the Pastor of the church in Jerusalem, presided over this meeting. Now James in a tough, tough spot: Of course he wants to see the Gospel go to the Gentiles, but he also doesn't want to alienate or offend the thousands of Jewish believers who were still keeping the Law. He needed the "gentleness of wisdom" to speak the truth in love. And God gave it to him. After Paul and Barnabas gave their pitch, James gave the verdict—

- Acts 15:19–29 ¹⁹Therefore my judgment is that we (we Jewish believers) should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.

What did that mean? It meant that Gentiles believers were *not* under the Law of Moses. Period. We are not under the law of circumcision, or the Sabbath, or any of it, as Peter said in v.11, we are "*saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus.*"

- That was massive! It was literally changing covenants – and it was *hard for Jewish believers!* It was hard for Peter. It was hard for James: for his entire life up to that point, his love for God had been expressed by keeping the Law of Moses – but now he says, "It's a new day. We need new wineskins for this new wine."

– But here is the balance: Gentile believers must also be very sensitive to the consciences of their Jewish brothers and sisters. So this is what James says to Gentile Christians—

- ²⁰but (we) should write to them (Gentile believers) to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues." (He means that there are Jews everywhere – and if Gentile Christians want peace with their Jewish brothers, and have a witness to unbelieving Jews, they need to be sensitive to those things that were particularly offensive to Jews.)

Beloved, that is "speaking the truth in love" – and it's the "*gentleness of wisdom.*" But the issue kept coming up. It came up in ch.21, and here we see the gentleness of wisdom in James and Paul.

B. By James and Paul—

Paul shows up in Jerusalem again and meets with James and the elders of the church there. And the Jewish believers are still struggling with the New Covenant—

- Acts 21:20–22 James says . . . "You see, brother, how many *thousands* there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, ²¹and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. (That wasn't true: Paul never told Jewish believers they *couldn't* keep the Law – But this rumor had spread and Paul was getting a bad rap.) ²²What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.

So James comes up with a plan for Paul – we won't read it right now, but it involved Paul paying the expenses for some Jewish men who were taking a Nazirite vow – and taking the vow himself. Very Jewish. That would put the Jewish believers at ease.

Now Paul knew that he wasn't under Moses anymore. He was a free man. He could hang with Gentiles and eat bacon cheeseburgers. I picture Paul biting his lip when James asked him to do this. I think it was very distasteful to him. But how did Paul respond to James' request?

- Acts 21:26 ²⁶Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

This was a huge personal sacrifice for Paul to do this. Truth said he didn't have to – but love told him to do it for the sake of peace and unity in the body. That's the kind of wisdom James is describing in our passage. Paul was constantly confronted with hard situations – just like we are – but the *gentleness of wisdom* guided him—

- 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 ¹⁹For though I am free from all (there's truth), I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them (there's love). ²⁰To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.
- *How desperately we need this attitude in the church right now – *today!* We hear so much about rights: "I know my rights, you can't tell me what to do!" Paul said, "I left my rights on the road to Damascus. I'm a happy slave of Jesus. I surrender my preferences to Him, and I use my freedom now for the sake of the Gospel!"

Listen: If you are truly free in Christ, then you are not in bondage to your own freedom. You can take it or leave it; enjoy it when possible, surrender it when the Gospel requires it.

C. A test for us on 10/31/2021.

Here is the test: Let me read you the question someone wrote to their pastor (not me!)—

I work in a secular workplace, and my new colleague is transgender. When I was introduced to him and found out that he wants to be addressed by a female name and pronouns, I was caught off-guard. I didn't know if I should address him by his real name or by the female name he wants to be called, and I certainly don't think I can address him in good conscience using female pronouns. How can I speak to him and work with him in a loving way without compromising my Christian convictions?

I.e., how do I speak the truth in love? How do I apply the "gentleness of wisdom" in this situation? Paul never dealt with this one! But sooner or later, you and I will. And the stakes are high: in Canada, *mis-gendering* someone is against the lawful. It's also against the law to "dead-name" someone: using their

pre-transgender name. That could land you in jail. It's not illegal here, yet, but people have lost their jobs for refusing to use the pronouns someone chooses.

- We had a gal come in to enquire about teaching at MCS. She currently teaches at a public school in our county and said that she was forced to sign a document agreeing to use the preferred pronouns a student chooses.

So what do Christians do? We can't lie: God made them male and female – he and she. It's not loving to affirm something that isn't true – even if that upsets someone. But we all know that 'some of us' might be inclined to go out of our way to confront a transgender person, and get in their face about it, because 'we have truth on our side,' and "no one is going to tell me what to call people." Remember I said you can be right and still be wrong in how you are right?

- And you are wrong if you don't speak the truth in love – to another person who bears the image of God, just like you.

So how do we speak only the truth, but do it in love – how does the gentleness of wisdom guide us? Let me give you a few principles—

1.) You can only speak what is true – but you don't have to speak everything that is true.

We learn that in Proverbs, don't we? Just because something is true, doesn't mean that we have to say it. Only fools say everything on their minds. And in the case of speaking with a transgender person, especially if it's someone you just met, the wisest thing is probably to *avoid the issue* until you have established a relationship—

- Think about it: If you are speaking to a transgender person, the only pronoun you need to use is "you!" It's only when you're speaking *about* another person that you use he, she, them, or their. So just say you, or call them by their name.
- "But what if a man wants to be called Betty?" That's not a hill to die on! All sorts of names can go both ways. If I ever met Caitlyn Jenner, I wouldn't insist on calling him *Bruce*, but if I am talking *about* him, then it's he, not she. Because he is a man.

2.) Have compassion on all sinners, even when they are wrong about their gender.

Don't you want people to sympathize with you when you are wrong? Don't you want compassion when you struggle with temptation? Then treat others the same way. The hard part is to communicate sympathy and compassion, without affirming their sin – amen? But wisdom will pray and find a way.

- The key is to see a *person*, bearing the image of God – not a *transgender*, or *homosexual*, or whatever. And whatever they are, they are your neighbor, and you are to love your neighbor as yourself.

2.) Be ready to explain God's truth, in love.

I have to admit, I have not been ready for this, but I'm sure the day is coming. We need to be able to say, like Martin Luther: "My conscience is bound by the Word of God, and God's Word says that He

created only two genders. We are born male or female – it’s not left to our choice. But the Bible also says that all of us are born with a sin nature that rebels against God – that’s you and me both. And until our sins are forgiven, we are cut off from God. But God sent His Son to take care of our sin problem, and bring us back to God. So let me tell you about Jesus. . . “

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I want to give you the takeaway from this passage: the wisdom of God isn’t some formula that you just plug into any situation. It requires personal holiness and time spent with God in His Word: what Jesus called *abiding in the Vine*; what Paul called being filled with the Holy Spirit, praying without ceasing. This is how you get the wisdom from above. Just listen—

- Colossians 3:12–17 ¹²Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. ¹³Make allowance for each other’s faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful. ¹⁶Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. ¹⁷And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.