

Wisdom That Honours God

Honouring God, Part 3

James 3:13-18

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 20 August 2006

Introduction

It's interesting how little children go through different developmental stages. There's the oral phase, where they put whatever they find into their mouth. Then there's the "No" phase, where they learn the power of the word "No." There's the toilet-training phase ... Our sweet, darling little Emma is going through one of the most interesting of phases of all: the "Why?" phase. She has developed this inextinguishable, interminable, incorrigible thirst for knowledge and answers and understanding. I was reflecting on this during the week. I guess it's this thirst for understanding, for wisdom, that sets us as humans apart from the rest of creation. We are, after all, *homo sapiens*. Wise man. *Sapiens* is Latin for wise. Does anyone know the Greek word for wisdom? *Sophia*. So a philosopher means "lover of wisdom." The Bible urges us to be lovers of wisdom. Five books in the Old Testament: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are together known as wisdom literature. They stress the importance of wisdom, of sound judgment. For example, Proverbs 3:15-18 says this: "Wisdom is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her... She will guide you down delightful paths; all her ways are satisfying. Wisdom is a tree of life to those who embrace her; happy are those who hold her tightly." Proverbs 4:7 says that "getting wisdom is the most important thing you can do." So how do you get wisdom? Turn with me to James 3:13-18 (p.1174).

Notice in this passage that James says that there are two kinds of wisdom on offer. He says that there is a "wisdom that comes down from heaven," heavenly wisdom, and there is "earthly" wisdom. There is spiritual wisdom, and unspiritual wisdom. There is wisdom that is of God – a gift of God – and wisdom that is of the devil. There is, in other words, a wisdom that leads to life, and a wisdom that leads to death. You've got to pick one, so the question is: How do you distinguish between the two? What are the characteristics of true wisdom? In this passage James says that there are three marks of true wisdom.

The first mark of true wisdom: goodness

First, James says, true wisdom is characterized by goodness. Verse 13: "Who are wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life..." By their good "deeds." In James' day there was a group of people known as Sophists. They used their powers of oratory to achieve extraordinary influence and power in society. Along with the prostitutes, these Sophists were the standard after-dinner entertainment at a first century dinner party. For them, wisdom was a matter not of moral goodness but rhetorical ability and intellectual brilliance. Is it any different in our world today? Many of our brightest politicians see no connection whatsoever between their behaviour in parliament and their behaviour in private business. Most of us know business people who see no relationship between their behaviour in the boardroom and their behaviour in the bedroom. There are university professors who have a string of letters after their names, but their private lives are in ruins. Bertrand Russell was one of the most brilliant mathematicians and philosophers in the twentieth century. He was a distinguished lecturer at Cambridge University and at several distinguished American universities. He was the author of around 30 books in subjects as diverse as mathematics, philosophy, ethics, education, and politics. Academically brilliant. But relationally challenged. He was married four times, divorced three times, and throughout his life had a number of mistresses who one biographer called, "the pathetic victims of his amorous energies." He was a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, but Russell didn't realise that wisdom from above, true wisdom, is characterised by goodness. Verse 17: "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure ... full of mercy and good fruit." Good deeds. Wisdom is a lifestyle. Like faith, it's not something you *know* so much as something you *do*. It's not about the way you *talk* but the way you *live*. It's knowing and choosing what is good. Rejecting what is evil and destructive. When I reflect back, I realise that I'm a follower of Jesus today because the Christians who I knew when I was a teenager displayed this kind of wisdom. Their lives were pure, full of mercy and goodness. Just living a life like that is enormously attractive.

The second mark of true wisdom: Humility

So true wisdom is characterised by goodness. But it's also characterised by humility. "Who are wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the *humility that comes from wisdom*." This was revolutionary in the context of the first-century. The ancient Greeks and Romans prized humility – meekness – no more than they prized goodness. They thought that humility was appropriate only for slaves and weak people. Their whole social order was instead structured around a hierarchy of rank and status. The whole point of knowledge or wisdom was to acquire greater status. So the wisdom of that world was characterised by what James calls in vv 14 and 16 "selfish ambition." Is it any different today?

I've been reading this week about Dennis Kozlowski. He was raised in a poor family in New Jersey but rose to become CEO of a vast conglomerate, Tyco International. His income was extraordinary. Over the ten years he served as CEO his authorised compensation added up to more than 500 million dollars. He owned a private jet, a helicopter, luxury apartments. But it wasn't enough. Half a billion dollars wasn't enough. He wanted more money, more status. So he engineered illegal payments, he stole 600 million dollars. It was discovered and he was convicted. It's easy to dismiss Dennis Kozlowski's ambition as monstrously, inconceivably selfish. But isn't that kind of selfish ambition common to us all? Even in the church? Last week, Sue McIntosh gave me a copy of a fascinating article from *Harper's Magazine*. About 85 per cent of Americans call themselves Christians, 75 per cent claim they pray to God daily, and 33 per cent say they manage to get to church every week. But in 2004 the US ranked second to last among developed countries in terms of foreign aid. While it is the first ranked in terms of violent crime. The author, Bill McKibben, says "America is the most professedly Christian of the developed nations but the least Christian in its behaviour." Why? His conclusion: "Most Americans have replaced the Christianity of the Bible, with its call for sharing and personal sacrifice, with a competing creed." The creed of self-improvement. Most of us, he says, simply reflect the dominant culture, "a culture of unrelenting self-obsession." What do you think? What are your ambitions? What are your priorities? What occupies your time? What fills your mind? Making money? Looking good? Building your career? Status? "Jesus said, "If you want to be truly great, if you want to be truly wise, if you want to live a life that really counts, a life that honours God, become the servant of all."

This church is full of servants. I got an email this week from Shelagh in the church kindergarten. We as a church have been helping provide meals for a mum who's been in bed for five weeks. Her husband popped in this week. He said, "We are overwhelmed by the way you've been serving us." We're also helping another lady from the kindergarten. She has four children. Some time ago she was in hospital having an operation and she received a text message from her husband. It said, "I don't love you any more. I'm leaving. And I want a divorce." He's left the country and wants the family home sold. The only problem is that it needs some minor work done on it, work that this lady herself can't do. So we said, "We'll help." The woman in question was so overwhelmed with gratitude she broke down in tears.

The third mark of true wisdom: Peace

Wisdom from above – wisdom that points to heaven and honours God – is characterised by goodness and humility. Thirdly, finally, it's also characterised by peace. Verse 17: James says that people with this wisdom are "peace-loving, considerate [they doesn't insist upon their own rights], submissive [they're willing in an argument to listen, to be persuaded, to yield], full of mercy and good fruit, impartial [they don't show favouritism towards people in order to further their own interests] and sincere [they're not two-faced]." Verse 18: People with this wisdom "sow in peace" – or, as *The Message* paraphrase has it – they "do the hard work of getting along with each other." By contrast, James says, the wisdom of this world is marked by "bitter envy" (v 14), "disorder" (v 16), "fights and quarrels" (4:1). That's true. In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, promoting your own selfish ambitions meant taking your rivals to court to publicly shame them and rise above them. James refers to that here in 2:6. The wisdom of the world, with its fighting and quarrelling, seems to have seeped into the churches to which he writes.

It often does, doesn't it? This is what the seventeenth century Jewish philosopher, Spinoza, once wrote: "I have often wondered that the persons who make a boast of professing the Christian religion – love, joy, peace, temperance and charity to all men – should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith." A couple of weeks back I was talking to my niece about the Christian faith – suggesting, hinting, that she consider it. You know what she said? Why would I? Christianity – and religion – are the cause of most of the conflicts in the world. Conflict between Christians over non-

essentials is the best advertisement for atheism you could imagine. But the reverse is also true. When I was away on study leave I met an elderly lady in her seventies at a church in the Hawkes Bay. She was teaching Sunday School. After the service I said, "Thanks for doing that. I love your commitment." She said, "There's always been a wonderful sense here of community and commitment to one another." She went on to say, "My daughter visited church once. She wasn't a follower of Jesus. But after the meeting she said to me, 'Mum, you've got something with those people that I don't have. And I want it.'" The daughter returned to church for the evening service, and gave her life to Jesus that night.

During my study leave I was studying why the early church grew so rapidly. How did this obscure, marginal group of people, without any political power or institutional influence, manage to subvert and transform the entire Roman Empire? This is what Rodney Stark concludes: "Christianity did not grow because of miracle working in the marketplaces (although there may have been much of that going on), or because Constantine said it should, or even because the martyrs gave it such credibility. It grew because Christians constituted an intense community." A loving, committed, peace-filled community that was too attractive for people to ignore. When you think about it, we're in a very similar situation to those first century believers. Christianity has very little institutional power or influence today. But we don't really need it. Like those first believers, we can transform our country as we take hold of, and live out, the wisdom that comes from above: a wisdom that is characterized by goodness, humility, and peace.

Questions

1. Read Proverbs 3:15-18. What are the benefits of wisdom? How important is wisdom to you?
2. "Who are wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life..." (James 3:13) Can you think of someone whose life is marked by this kind of goodness or purity and mercy (3:17)? What kind of effect has it had on you?
3. James says that godly wisdom is also marked by humility (3:13). What is the opposite of humility?
4. Do you agree with the statement that most Christians in the West reflect the dominant culture, "a culture of unrelenting self-obsession." Do you agree? In what ways might we have "replaced the Christianity of the Bible, with its call for sharing and personal sacrifice, with a competing creed"?
5. Read Philippians 2:6-11. In what ways could you engage in an act of humble service this week? How might God be calling you to swallow your pride and serve among his people?
6. Spinoza wrote: "I have often wondered that the persons who make a boast of professing the Christian religion – love, joy, peace, temperance and charity to all men – should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith." Why do you think it is?
7. Spend some time reflecting on your life. Where do you sense your life is not at peace? What might God be calling you to do about it?
8. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones once wrote: "We have been told that we have to make the Church attractive to the man outside, and the idea is to become as much like him as we can ... yet ... the glory of the gospel is that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it ..." Discuss.
9. What is the secret of wisdom? How can we become more wise? See Colossians 2:3; 2 Timothy 3:15; and James 1:5.