



AS WE THINK, SO WE DO – James 3:13-18

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Have you ever felt like this? Sometimes it can become overwhelming as we try to navigate difficult decisions and complex relationships. It is not always easy to know the right thing to do. But somehow, although sticking out my tongue might make me feel better, I don't think it will help anything!

The heart of the matter

Last week we talked about our tongue – not sticking it out but forming words! James said that the words we use have the potential for blessing or cursing. In the next couple of sections of his letter, James goes beyond the tongue to all aspects of our behaviour. He wants to help us see a better way to know the right way to live – to make good decisions and to build loving relationships.

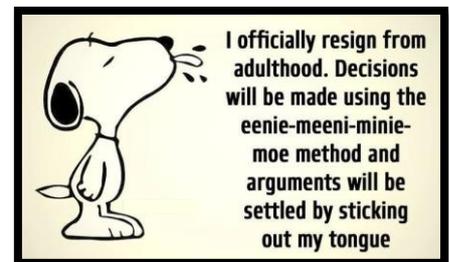
Last week, we saw from Jesus' words, that what we say reflects our heart and James seems to agree with that assessment. In the next two sections, we will see James looking at things which shape and motivate our hearts – wisdom, or our thinking, and friendship or our commitments. These things go deep into our hearts and how they work to direct our speech and actions.

As I mentioned last week, James tends to move from topic to topic, linked by common ideas. If you divide his thoughts into small chunks for preaching you can miss how one idea relates to the next. To help us see where James is going, I think it is helpful to take the time to read through this whole section (James 3:1-4:10). We will look closely at the middle verses this week and the final section next week. As you read, notice words which James uses repeatedly or ideas which are similar. These help us to catch the focus of his thinking.

In the section we will look at today, James returns to the theme of wisdom which is a thread that runs throughout this letter. He says:

If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honourable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. (v. 13)

But not all "wisdom" comes from God. The world around us, which may not acknowledge that God even exists, has its own wisdom. James sets up a contrast between the wisdom from above (from God) and the wisdom from below (literally "not from above/God"). The wisdom from below is



motivated by jealousy and selfishness and results in disorder and evil. On the other hand, the wisdom from above is motivated by humility and results in peace and righteousness.

The purpose of these few verses is to help his readers to see the two kinds of wisdom and how they affect our actions.

Wisdom from below

James says that the wisdom which does not come from God is earthly – it comes from the perspective that this world is all that there is – and it is unspiritual – it is limited to human thinking and human abilities. This is not surprising. If the world doesn't believe in God, of course its wisdom is limited to what we can see and investigate. But James goes on to say that the wisdom is also demonic. Satan's desire is to kill and destroy all that God has made and he sets out to twist our thinking and understanding so that we follow his agenda all the way to destruction. It is not just that the wisdom from below isn't guided by God; its danger is that it is actively guided by the devil.

And "wisdom" coming from him is motivated by *"bitter jealousy and selfish desire"*. This is what caused Eve to stumble, isn't it? We read:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. (Genesis 3:6)

The serpent told her that if she ate the fruit forbidden by God, they wouldn't need to seek God's wisdom anymore. They would have their own wisdom. Adam and Eve were motivated by jealousy of God's supremacy and knowledge and selfish desire to have something God hadn't given them and so they followed devilish wisdom into destructive sin. Putting themselves first, they said, "I want what I want when I want it – and I'm not going to let anyone stand in my way – even God!" And what did they do then? They tried to cover up the truth of their actions and the motivations behind it. Boasting and lying – trying to make themselves look better than they were and covering up their sin. We never do that – do we?

The results of Adam and Eve's sin are easy to see. The beautifully designed and ordered world which God had made no longer worked as it should. The land and vegetation and animals and humanity no longer existed together in harmony. People stopped trusting each other and within only one generation, they started killing each other. Why? - because of *"bitter jealousy and selfish desire"*. Very quickly, *"disorder and evil of every kind"* became the norm instead of the peace and prosperity God had intended.

How does this affect us today? Many of us grew up in a society where it seemed like the morality of the world around us was formed and guided by the Bible and God's wisdom. Most people would have said that they believed in God and that their ideas of right and wrong came from Him. However, I wonder how deeply those affirmations really guided their lives. As time has progressed, we are discovering that hidden underneath the surface, things were going on which were not in line with God's goodness – even among God's people. Some of the deep-rooted social problems we face today come from sins of the past which were covered up and excused by people who should have known better.

As our society moves away from any profession of belief in God, let alone belief in the Gospel, the pull away from God's wisdom is almost impossible to avoid. Everything we see or read or hear proclaims the wisdom from below. When was the last time you watched a movie or TV show which acknowledged the existence of God? Most are not anti-God; they just ignore Him. And when have you ever come across a positive depiction of a Christian or Christian beliefs? The presupposition of our culture is that God of the Bible does not exist. And if He does exist, He has very little relevance to how we live our lives. It is up to us to work out what is right or wrong and what values should

guide our decisions. We are the centre of everything, and our desires and happiness should be the driving force of our world. This wisdom seeps into our thinking and influences our actions as we are constantly exposed to it. The devil uses it to destroy us and pull us away from God and His good.

Wisdom from above

This is not God's desire for us. He wants to give us His wisdom which will lead us into life and peace. His infinite perspective and unlimited love and uncompromising righteousness means that God's wisdom is just the opposite to the wisdom from below which is driven by jealousy and selfishness. It is good and perfect, *and "whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father." (1:17)* Our sinful world, and the devil who controls it, cannot create what is good and perfect. Only God can give us this gift. All we need to do is humbly ask for it and submit ourselves to it.

James goes on to describe the characteristics of God's wisdom and the people who are guided by it. "Pure" indicates that they are morally blameless. They don't engage in shady or questionable actions. They are "peace-loving, gentle at all times and willing to yield to others". They don't demand their own way but consider others and seek their best. They are "full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds". They serve others and care for those who cannot care for themselves. Finally, they "show no favouritism and are always sincere". They don't treat people differently in order to get benefit for themselves. Imagine the impact on a community of people who act like this!

James finishes this section with what many believe is an early Christian proverb:

And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness. (v. 18)

The wisdom of the world around us cannot produce righteousness because it is inspired by the devil himself. When I am honest, I must admit that I am so influenced by the wisdom of world around me, that I often don't even know how God wants me to live. To counter this influence, I need to be reading God's word and focusing on Him so that I can begin to see things as God sees them. This is where the community of God's people can be so helpful. Together we can help each other become aware of God's wisdom and how the world around us is saying something different. We can give each other courage to live differently and support each other to make hard decisions which may go against the prevailing wisdom of society. Together, we can humbly submit to God's wisdom and allow Him to change us. Together we can discover that the Holy Spirit enables what God's wisdom prescribes.

The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Be a thoughtful doer

James's desire is that his readers have lives which reflect their faith in God. But he knows that it is not just about trying harder to do the right things. He knows that what we do is influenced by our heart. Our heart includes our thinking – our beliefs and values and what we think is right and wrong. He wants our thinking to be moulded by God's wisdom.

If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honourable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom. (v. 13)

As our thinking becomes more and more aligned to God's wisdom, this will show itself in our actions. It will affect both what we do – good works instead of selfish acts – and how we do it – with humility instead of boasting.

I'd like to suggest that one way we can begin to be more guided by God's wisdom instead of the world's wisdom is to become more aware of how we are being influenced by the world around us.

For instance, when you watch a movie or TV program or read a book, do you ever stop to think about its assumptions about the world, what is important, and what is right and wrong? These assumptions create a what is called a “worldview”. It is a view of the world which guides what is affirmed by the story and what is condemned or even ridiculed. For instance, what are the desirable traits in a person – physical beauty, kindness, smartness, humour, wealth, trustworthiness, courage, other? What is valued – doing what makes you happy and fulfilled, being respected, having money and power, doing things which help others? What actions are assumed to be right or wrong and what are the consequences of these actions? Does God appear in the story in any way and if so, how is He depicted? This doesn’t need to be a formal process of evaluation, nor do I think we should never watch something which does not align completely with the Biblical worldview! I am just suggesting that we need to be more aware of the “wisdom” to which we are exposed and not accept it without questioning it.

Another significant shaper of our lives is the pull of consumerism which is the assumption that we will be better off if we have more. Whether that is more money in the bank for security, or more and fancier toys to play with, or more education to make us smarter or more gadgets to make our lives easier – the temptation is always there, isn’t it? I like to sew, and I buy most of my fabric from an online site based in Perth. They are extremely effective marketers. Every Sunday, they release a dozen or more new fabrics. There is a video with the owner displaying the fabrics and showing their texture and stretch - and several other fabrics that go with each of the new fabrics. They have people around the country who sew up the fabrics into wonderful garments and model them on Facebook. I almost always see a fabric that I’d love to have – even though I already have a shelf full of fabric waiting for me to find time to sew it up! And I am not alone. Some of the purchasers take pictures of their stash and I am not kidding when I say they have upwards of a hundred fabrics waiting to be sewn. But that new fabric ... I love it and I must have it! This desire for more is such a powerful influence on our lives and it is the very opposite to God’s call for us to give ourselves away – to Him and to those who need us.

We are always surrounded by the wisdom from below, but the more we are aware of how we are being influenced by it, the less power it has to shape our thinking and our actions. Asking questions gives us the opportunity to consciously choose what to accept and what to challenge with God’s truth.

Conclusion

To live a life that is based on God’s wisdom instead of the wisdom of the world around us is not easy. In fact, I would say that it is impossible. Impossible on our own – that is. God alone can give us His insight and wisdom and what a blessing it is that He gives His wisdom freely. God also gives us, through His indwelling Spirit, the ability to live according to His wisdom. It is the fruit of His work within us. And when we fail and wander off the path, He forgives and points us back in the right direction toward peace and righteousness and the life He always intended us to live.