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Wisdom from Above and Below

James 3:13-18

I think all of you are familiar with the oft-heard statement that Christians are people who are **“in”** the world but not **“of”** the world. There isn't a specific biblical text that says it in precisely those terms, but James 4:4 does describe followers of Jesus as people who should avoid developing a “friendship with the world.” In fact, James says that to be a “friend” of the world is to be at “enmity with God” (James 4:4b). The apostle John exhorts Christians, “do not love the world or the things in the world” (1 John 2:15a).

So what then does it mean to be “in” the world but not “of” it? I think the idea is that we cannot avoid or evade the fact that we live physically in this world. Our feet are planted on the soil of this earth no less so than are those of people who hate God. We are card-carrying citizens of an earthly, this-worldly nation. We earn a living by working in the “world” of business. There is no escape from this rather obvious truth.

But we are to live “in” this world ***without embracing its beliefs or its values***. We are to conduct ourselves according to its laws without breaking the laws of God. We are to enjoy the culture and do what we can by God's grace and power to transform it but we must be diligent not to let this culture shape our ideas and aspirations and desires and conduct. As Paul said in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

I would also suggest that there is even more involved in this tiny preposition “of”. To say we are not “of” this world means that ***we do not draw upon its energy to live, that we do not derive our motivation from the spirit of the world, that we do not identify with it in such a way that its power serves to drive and sustain us***. Instead, we derive our power and energy and motivation and values from the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. We are undoubtedly “in” this world until we die or until Jesus returns, but we are never “of” it. ***It has no hold on us. It claims nothing from us. It doesn't own us. It doesn't dictate how we believe or live or govern the decisions we make. Or so it should be.***

James 3:13-18 is like many other texts in the NT that describe the Christian's relationship to the world. Here we are confronted with the unmistakable and decisive contrast between what this world prizes and approves and what followers of Jesus prize and approve.

The simple fact is that the values of the kingdom of God and those of the kingdom of Satan and this world are utterly opposite from each other. The world's "treasure" is not our own.

The world insists that God doesn't exist, or if he does, he's irrelevant to our lives. The Christian insists not only that the God of the Bible exists, he is the *only* God that exists, and he is supremely relevant to our lives. In fact, apart from him, nothing else has any relevance whatsoever.

The world insists that the world is either eternal or that it simply came into being out of nothing without a sufficient cause to explain why it is. The Christian insists that the world came into being out of nothing when God called it into being.

The world insists that nothing governs the course and direction of human affairs outside the will and actions of humans. The Christian insists that God governs everything in human affairs including the will and actions of humans.

The world insists that history is going nowhere. One day, it will all simply come to an end, perhaps in as big of a bang as the big bang by which the world believes it came into existence in the first place. Everything will simply cease to be and nothing will remain. The Christian insists that history is providentially under the direction of a loving and all-wise God who will bring everything to its proper consummation in such a way that Jesus Christ will be seen and honored and glorified as Lord of all.

The world insists that good and evil are whatever you want them to be, or they are whatever a group of human beings decides them to be, or they are whatever circumstances require them to be, or they are whatever makes the most people happy. The Christian insists that good and evil are determined to be such by God. What God says is good, is good; and what God says is evil, is evil. His will is the deciding factor.

The world values physical appearance as a supreme value. The Christian values the inner beauty of the heart, regardless of external size, shape, or weight.

The world pursues wealth as an end in itself. Its motto is: “Whoever dies with the most toys, wins.” The Christian pursues the glory of God as an end in itself. Its motto is, in the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

The contrasts could go on seemingly without end. The simple truth is that what the world regards as truth, the Christian regards as error. What the world regards as of ultimate value, the Christian regards as dung, or “rubbish” if you prefer a more sanitized translation (see Phil. 3:8)! To put it as simply as possible, ***the world and the Church tell two entirely different and utterly contrary stories about the nature of reality, the meaning of life, where truth and goodness may be found, and what the ultimate destiny of mankind will be.***

The tragedy in our day is that instead of watching the Church stand firmly in opposition to the world, calling it to repentance, men and women who say they know Jesus do everything in their power to merge the two. Whereas the Bible clearly says the world and the Church ***intersect***, many today argue that the world and the Church ***coincide***. Thus what we hear so often today is not a message of conviction and confrontation but one of compromise and convenience.

James will have nothing of this compromise with the world. Here in James 3:13-18 he identifies for us yet another way in which the world contrasts and conflicts with the Church. It has to do with ***their respective views on wisdom***.

It’s important that we understand what James means by “wisdom” in this passage. I think he’s telling us that ***“wisdom” is the way we understand and interpret reality and then how we live in the light of it.*** The wisdom of the world says:

“Be angry at those who have something you don’t have but wish you did. You have every right to be jealous and envious of them. Make it your ambition to lay hold of everything your heart desires and then boast about it once it is yours. And if you have to disrupt your circumstances and the people who stand in your way or if you have to resort to so-called ‘vile’ or evil practices to make it happen, so be it.”

James' assessment of this sort of so-called "wisdom" is that it is decidedly "earthly, unspiritual, and demonic" (James 3:15b).

On the other hand, the sort of "wisdom" that Christians must pursue and embrace will invariably lead to the kind of good works that are aesthetically pleasing and attractive. Spiritual wisdom is always characterized by humility, not arrogance or loud boasting. If you possess genuine, heaven-sent wisdom you will love purity and peace and will display gentleness in your relationships with others. You won't be arrogant or prideful but instead will happily listen to what others have to say. Mercy and peace and righteousness will be the hallmark of your life.

So, yes, we must live "in" this world that is governed by corrupt and destructive "wisdom," but we must never yield to its influence or live in such a way that we are "of" it.

The "Wisdom" from Below

James identifies several characteristics of worldly wisdom. And note that he focuses his attention on what wisdom produces in terms of personal conduct and motivation.

(1) The first indication that you have yielded to the world's manner of interpreting reality is that you are consumed by "**bitter jealousy**" that fuels and energizes "**selfish ambition**" (v. 14a).

Instead of "bitter jealousy" the word "**envy**" is more likely. He has in mind the sort of person who is bitter and resentful of others because they have things or power or name recognition that he/she does not. This is the sort of "sour soul" that results in disdain and even hatred of other people. It's a perverse emotional energy that says: "You have what I ought to have and because of that I don't like you anymore. Not only do I not like you but I'm going to devote all my efforts to getting what you've got. And once I've got it I'm going to flaunt it and make sure everyone knows that I've finally obtained what I ought to have had from the start." That's what v. 14 is describing.

(2) James then explains that when this perverse energy takes hold of a man or woman it leads invariably to "**disorder and every vile practice**" (v. 16). In other words, peace and propriety and a reasonable approach to life are cast aside and chaos takes over. And the sort of heart that is given to such things will eventually find a way to justify every manner of evil and immorality and vile behavior. That's what v. 16 is describing.

And what is James' assessment of this sort of so-called "wisdom" that expresses itself in this way? He says three things about it.

First, it is "*earthly*" (v. 15a). That is to say, this is the sort of wisdom or perspective on life that is altogether circumscribed or limited by the values and beliefs of this world. No appeal is made to anything transcendent or heavenly or supernatural. *What man wants is the measure of what matters. What man enjoys is the measure of what is good. The revelation of God in Scripture simply plays no part in forming this person's world view or value system.*

Second, it is "*natural*" (v. 15b). There isn't a great deal of difference between something being "earthly" and it being "natural." The point in both cases is that the mental and emotional energy that gives direction to life need look no farther than the depraved and self-serving interests of a fallen and corrupt heart.

Third, it is "*demonic*" (v. 15c). It's fascinating to note that this is the only place in the NT where this particular word appears. James appears to be saying that the sort of "wisdom" that leads to bitter envy and selfish ambition and arrogant boasting is "demonic" in nature and origin. This is how demons think and behave. And they love nothing more than to seduce people into thinking and acting like they do. Don't ever forget that Paul talks about "teachings" or "doctrines of demons" in 1 Timothy 4:1. And here James says there is such a thing as "demonic wisdom" as well.

Demons have a strategy for this world and for this church and for your life. And at the heart of it is to lie to you and make it sound like the truth. They aim to convince you that following Jesus is stupid and anti-intellectual and "on the wrong side of history" and contrary to the prevailing winds of enlightened culture. Following Jesus will only rob you of sensual and sexual pleasures that you deserve to experience. Such "wisdom", says James, is demonic. Don't be duped by it!

And if you are wondering if James' language of "*earthly, unspiritual, and demonic*" corresponds to what the apostle John refers to as the "*world, the flesh, and the devil,*" the answer is Yes!

And what, in the end, will result from this sort of earthly, natural, demonic wisdom? Two things are noted in particular.

The first is what James calls **“disorder”** (v. 16), by which he means the disruption of God’s will and ways for how humans should live. Disregard for the revelation of God’s will, confusion rather than clarity, chaos rather than purposeful action. Just stop and look around the world today and what do you see at every turn? Disorder. Don’t mistake what James means by “disorder” as if he’s denouncing genuine, godly fervor and excitement. They are not the same! “Disorder” is whatever steps outside the boundaries of God’s revealed will for how we live and speak and worship. But within those boundaries there must always be freedom and joy and excitement and passion.

But not only disorder, says James, **“every vile practice”** (v. 16) is in some way justified and said to be within your rights and ought to be protected by law. After all, you have a right to do what feels good. You have a right to pursue your pleasure in whatever way fits your fancy.

Nothing is under control. Everything is permissible. Such is the fruit of the “wisdom” of this world.

The “Wisdom” from Above

And what of the “wisdom” that comes from God, the wisdom of heaven? James describes it in **ten** ways. But first note **the challenge that he issues in v. 13**. It’s as if James says, “O.K., all of you who think you’ve got it all figured out; you who pride yourselves in the expanse of your understanding and insight. Step forward so we can analyze the legitimacy of your claim. You may find yourself to be the object of unwanted and painful scrutiny.”

(1) He tells us in v. 13 that if you are genuinely filled with good and godly wisdom your conduct will show it. Earlier in chapter two James said that the quality of a person’s faith is put on display by the presence of his works. Here James says the same thing about wisdom.

If you have God’s wisdom you should display this by means of **“good conduct”** (v. 13). I don’t like that translation, as it misses the point of James’ careful selection of terms.

Behavior can be strictly righteous in the sense that the will of God is carefully and meticulously obeyed. But such “obedience” or behavior is hardly appealing. It lacks the joy of spontaneity and delight. It is rarely appealing. So James uses a word (*kalos*), here translated as “good” to modify

or describe the sort of “behavior” that ought to characterize Christians. The word *kalos* doesn’t simply mean good or righteous or in conformity with a moral standard but instead something along the lines of “**attractive**” or “**morally appealing**” or even “**beautiful**.” When you see a person’s behavior that is “good” in this sense you are drawn to it; it has a quality that is alluring; you find yourself saying, “I want to be like that man or that woman.” There is a joy, a peace, a sense of freedom and satisfaction that characterizes the “works” of this sort of person.

This is the kind of life that is known for humility and gentleness. In other words, a truly “wise” person is the sort who recognizes that arrogance and jealousy and selfish ambition ultimately accomplish nothing of eternal value. Wisdom recognizes and embraces that humility is more like Christ, that humility actually achieves more beneficial results than does pride and self-promotion.

(2) The “wisdom from above,” which is to say the sort of wisdom that reflects God’s value system and embraces God’s purposes for this world and your life, is “**pure**” (v. 17a). That is to say, it leads to purity of life, a life untouched by the sort of immoral behavior that stains the soul. To say it as simply as one can, this sort of person is **morally blameless**. It isn’t that he/she never sins, but if sin occurs there is instant conviction, confession, and heart-felt repentance.

(3) This “wisdom from above” is “**peaceable**” (v. 17b). The person who is always looking for a fight, whether with his fists or by means of his words, is devoid of this heavenly wisdom. **The person filled with God’s wisdom hates conflict, unless it is in defense of the truth.** The man or woman who is always quick to engage in verbal warfare and has a combative spirit is not energized by the wisdom that comes from God. James is appealing to us to turn our energy toward unity and conciliation rather than division and alienation.

Related to the former is the sort of person who is (4) “**gentle**” and (5) “**open to reason**” (v. 17c). Heavenly wisdom produces in the heart a considerate and respectful attitude that says to those who disagree with him, “Let’s sit down and talk; I’d love to hear your point of view; help me see the ways that I might be misled or misinformed.” To be “open to reason” is the opposite of being stubborn and unyielding.

It grieves me to say this, but within the past few years there has been a disturbing trend among some younger evangelicals to articulate a vision for what it means to be a “real man.” In their efforts to restore to the church what they believe is “biblical masculinity” they have suggested that a real Christian man will resemble a mixed-martial arts fighter who cusses, smokes, drinks

excessively, and bullies his wife under the guise of being a strong leader. Dare I say that James' perspective is of a different sort!

There is more. When you are filled with and governed by "the wisdom from above" your life will be (6) "*full of mercy*" and (7) "*good fruits*". Your interaction with and evaluation of others will be (8) "*impartial*" and (9) "*sincere*." And your commitment to live in peace and to pursue peace with others will yield (10) "*a harvest of righteousness*."

Let me say a few words about this term translated "*impartial*". It refers to *a person who refuses to make value judgments based on anything other than the principles and truths of God's Word*. In other words, this is the person who takes no note of the color of one's skin or the size of one's home or the amount in one's investment portfolio or the quality of a person's clothing. The "impartial" person is the one who is devoid, or at least not governed by, prejudice, in whatever form that prejudice might assume.

It doesn't mean he/she never passes judgment or lacks discernment or the backbone to stand on what he/she believes is true. It simply means this person bases whatever judgments are drawn on the principles of God's Word.

Now contrast what James has said about how you should identify the presence of heavenly wisdom in a man or woman with how we so often do so today:

"Hey, look over there. Do you see that man? He's a man of deep and Christ-like wisdom."

"What? How can you say that? He doesn't even know how to read Greek? He probably even struggles with English!"

"Yes, but if you spend much time in his presence you'll notice that there is a sweet aroma surrounding his life. There is an almost tangible beauty in the way he treats others and goes about serving without so much as a twinge of envy or selfish ambition."

"Yeah, but he never even went to college. And he barely earns above minimum wage. And have you seen that broken down heap of junk he drives. How embarrassing!"

“Well, that may be true, but his life is unmistakably pure. No one has ever accused him of immorality. And he has such a gentle spirit. And although he has strong beliefs about what he thinks is right and wrong, he’s always got the time to listen to what I say, even if it’s a bit crazy.”

“Hold on, now. Are you trying to tell me that this guy who can barely string together a coherent sentence, who couldn’t preach a sermon if his life depended on it, is full of heavenly wisdom? Is that what you’re saying? And how do you know that?”

“Well, I know it because he’s full of mercy and overflowing with the good fruit of the Holy Spirit. And he hasn’t got a prejudicial bone in his body. And if you’ll look closely you’ll see an entire harvest of obedience to God and love for other people that is so very rare in the church today. That’s how I know he’s very, very wise.”

Conclusion

Whereas I certainly believe that James’ counsel in this passage applies to women no less than it does to men, I want to close by speaking directly to the men here today.

Let me take you back several years to the publication of a book by John Eldredge entitled, *Wild at Heart*. I’m sure that many of you read it and loved it. I make no judgments against you for that. Perhaps it even changed your life for the good. But whereas there were many good things in this book, there was also in it a portrayal of masculinity with which I disagree profoundly. [You can read my lengthy review of it at my website, www.samstorms.com, Resources, Book Reviews.]

At one point Eldredge asserts that “aggression is part of the masculine design; we are hardwired for it. If we believe that man is made in the image of God, then we would do well to remember that ‘the Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name’ (Ex. 15:3).” I have several problems with this. First of all, “aggression” is characteristic of man’s nature within a fallen and corrupt and hostile world. But there is no indication that aggression was a constituent element in Adam before the fall and therefore one cannot contend that it is a fundamental and divinely ordained characteristic of the man as male. And just so you know, I’m not a passivist! Second, women are also formed in the image of God. Are they for that reason inherently aggressive? And third, God is a “warrior” because he fights against sin and Satan and corruption and evil and unbelief and decay.

Eldredge asks us to compare our “experience watching the latest James Bond or Indiana Jones thriller with, say, going to Bible study” (13). O.k., count me weird, call me a “girly-man” (to use Arnold Schwarzenegger’s language), but I would much prefer, on any day at any time, to spend time with friends digging deeply into the Word of God than watching any kind of movie, Bond, Jones, or otherwise.

I’m not advocating male passivity or weakness or fearfulness or timidity or hesitancy to defend when danger is at hand. Men are called and ordained by God to lead and protect and provide and defend. But I see no basis for equating this with an aggressive and adventurous spirit that craves for horses to break and enemy soldiers to kill and mountains to climb. I have numerous friends who love to hunt and fish and scale mountainous peaks. But I don’t think that makes them more real as men or more biblically masculine any more than those who prefer the library or the art museum or the office.

Perhaps I’m reacting this way for reasons other than my own inclinations, likes and dislikes. The fact is, my own father was the most masculine and godly leader I’ve ever known. He was strong and firm and courageous and kind and tender and loving. He was everything James describes in our text today. If he ever went fishing or hunting, it was for the fellowship of his friends who enjoyed such pursuits. It certainly wasn’t because he wanted something to conquer or an outdoor adventure to pursue. Eldredge seems to suggest, or merely concedes (and reluctantly at that), that being “nice” and “good” and “well-mannered” are important. But they aren’t what real men are like. I beg to differ. My father was the nicest and best and most well-mannered real man I’ve ever known, and from what I’ve been told by others their lives are forever changed for the good and for the glory of God because he was that way.

The man that James has in view is perhaps best seen in the character of *Atticus Finch*, wonderfully portrayed by Gregory Peck in the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He tenderly loves his children after the death of his wife, takes on unpleasant tasks that no one else would dare to touch, puts his reputation at risk for the sake of honor, and refuses to fight back when the town drunk spits in his face. He confesses to his son that he’s “too old to play football with the Methodists” and, despite a lucky shot at a rabid dog, doesn’t know how to handle a gun very well. Here is a man whose strength and courage and masculinity are expressed in non-violence, non-aggression, and unshakeable integrity. I’m not saying that Eldredge wouldn’t applaud Atticus Finch or his moral valor. But neither do I believe that Finch or my father or others that I’ve known would fit the mold for what he and many others consider to be a real man.

So men (and women), listen closely to what God says through James says is the man (or woman) of wisdom and deep understanding. Don't listen to the world. It's so-called "wisdom" is deformed and self-serving. The truly wise person, male or female, the person of deep understanding, the person who most honors Christ is humble and pure and peaceable and gentle and open to reason and full of mercy and impartial and sincere.