

Two Kinds of Wisdom

James 3: 13-18

Rev. Philip Parker
March 3, 2024

Solomon has always been thought of as one of the wisest men who ever lived. One Old Testament account is particularly illustrative of that assertion. Two women who lived in the same house were brought before him. Each of them had given birth to a child. During the night one of those children died. Now both of the mothers along with the child which was still alive had been brought before the king. Each of them were claiming that the child was theirs. How was the king to decide to which mother the child belonged? Summoning one of his servants, the king said, "Bring me a sword." Then he instructed one of his soldiers, "Take this sword, cut the child in half and give one half of the child to each of the mothers." The real mother was filled with compassion and cried out, "Don't kill him. Give the baby to the other woman." The other woman said, "Go ahead, cut the child in half so that neither of us shall have him." The child's life was spared and the king decreed that the child should be given into the care of the rightful mother, the one who had been willing to give him up. In response, this is what the Scriptures tell us, "When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice" (1 Kings 3:28).

Wisdom, the ability to make a decision that reflects reality, a decision that is actually true and righteous, can sometimes be very challenging. That's why Solomon was held in such high regard following his discernment regarding the identity of the true mother and that's why James addresses the subject of wisdom in his letter to fellow believers. He wanted them to make wise decisions, especially when they were in positions of leadership within the life of a church. Let's see what he had to say. Basically it can be broken down into four observations. First, there are two kinds of wisdom. Second, both have a different origin. Third, each has a different set of character traits. Fourth, each creates a different outcome.

Like me, you may have thought that wisdom is simply wisdom. It's the ability to discern what is right and wrong and come up with the right course of action. But that, says James, is not necessarily so. He states that there are two kinds of wisdom, heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom and that both are traits of human beings. Heavenly wisdom is dependent on a set of values and beliefs that rise above our most basic human passions and

pursuits. It takes others into consideration as it makes important decisions. Earthly wisdom, on the other hand, is relegated to the more self-serving pursuits of humanity. In its most basic form it's simply the survival of the fittest. Or to put it another way, it's getting ahead in this world no matter what you have to do and no matter how many people you have to step on to get there. It can best be illustrated by a man who is considered to be a wise businessman, even though he has taken unfair advantage of his competitors, even putting some of them and their employees out of business. Another example would be a dictator who is considered to be quite savvy, even though he has imprisoned and murdered thousands of people to arrive at the pinnacle of power. Speaking of earthly wisdom, James says, "Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil" (James 3:15).

This observation about the two kinds of wisdom naturally leads to the second one. Where do these two wisdoms have their origin? Where do they come from? Heavenly wisdom, of course, comes from the one who resides in heaven, the Lord God Almighty. It's the kind of wisdom that Psalm 111:10 declares, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." Going back to Solomon for just a moment, do you remember how he obtained his wisdom? He had a dream one night in which the Lord told him, "Ask for whatever you want and I will give it to you." Instead of asking for wealth or power or even long life, Solomon asked God for a discerning heart to govern his people. God was so pleased by this request that He granted Solomon not only great wisdom, but a lot of other things as well (1 Kings 3:1-15). In other words, Solomon's wisdom was a gift from God. The same is true for earthly wisdom. It too is a gift but from a different source. It comes from the devil as James rightly points out in verse 15.

This brings us to James' third observation. Earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom have different character traits. Speaking of earthly wisdom, James informs us in verse fourteen that it is derived from "bitter envy and selfish ambition." It's the kind of passion that arises in our hearts when we scheme to get what we want and then brag about our accomplishments. We want everyone to admire what we have done, even though we know there is no truth in what we would like others to praise us for. It produces an empty sense of accomplishment. Heavenly wisdom on the other hand possesses an entirely different set of character traits. James describes them in this way, "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). It is the kind of wisdom that has no ulterior motives, which always desires harmony, which is considerate and open to another's suggestions, which is full of kindness, desiring what is best for everyone, never showing favoritism or condoning hypocrisy. It's the kind of wisdom that makes life a blessing instead of a burden.

Speaking of blessings and burdens, there is one more observation about these two kinds of wisdom. What kind of outcomes do these two kinds of wisdom produce? When they are fully utilized, what happens? Here's what transpires when earthly wisdom takes charge. James says that there is disorder and wickedness of every kind. In other words, things go from bad to worse. Strife and discord become rampant. Things fall apart. On the other hand, heavenly wisdom produces a harvest of righteousness, a harvest of accomplishment and satisfaction, a harvest of right relationships one with another.

I have used this illustration before, but I can think of none better which so vividly portrays what James is speaking about regarding the two kinds of wisdom and how they are employed in everyday life. When my mother graduated from high school, she went to work for the Nestles Milk Company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The company sold evaporated milk. Each month the salesmen would come to the office where my mother worked to report their sales. They were a boisterous, loud, self-centered mob, strutting around, bragging about all of the cases of evaporated milk they had sold. Everyone wanted to be the top salesman, the best, the most cunning, the most shrewd purveyor of evaporated milk. They were rude and obnoxious. They turned the office upside down and transformed it into a hostile work environment. They were the epitome of earthly wisdom. Fortunately there was a corporate manager who also visited the office from time to time. He was a kind, quiet gentleman who spent time with the employees, asking how they were doing, eager to hear their suggestions as to how things could be improved. He possessed a kind of gentle, humble wisdom that brought out the best in everyone. The employees at that Nestle Milk Company office looked forward to his visits. They loathed the arrival of the salesmen.

At the beginning of this passage of Scripture, James raised a question which he then proceeded to answer, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom" (James 3:13). I count it a privilege to serve as the interim pastor of a church which exemplifies the kind of heavenly wisdom that James encouraged us to pursue.