

Discerning True Wisdom from Worldly Wisdom

James 3:13-18

A 1961 IBM advertisement introduced the world to the phrase “information explosion.” They had no idea. We have seen an information supernova unparalleled in human history. With the internet and digital technology our ability to communicate, access and store information has multiplied exponentially. The total store of human knowledge has mushroomed from 2.6 exabytes in 1986 to 295 exabytes in 2007.ⁱ Let me put this in perspective. That means the sum total of human knowledge amounted to less than one CD-ROM worth of information per person to 61 CD-ROMs per person in 20 years. Stacked together they would reach the moon, and a quarter distance beyond. And yet, according to another source, we will generate more data in the next 4 years than in the history of the world.ⁱⁱ

All of this knowledge is available to us at our fingertips. I carry around more computing and communications power in my pocket that what put Neil Armstrong on the moon. If the answer to our problems are to be found in human wisdom, then we should be getting really close to solving them. The world certainly seems to think so.

In 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations ratified a document entitled the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document was to be the guiding light to help the nations of the world finally unite in peace. The preamble to the Declaration makes it very clear that the primary instrument to accomplish this goal is education. What a plan: take all of man’s wisdom and knowledge and build the perfect world. A presidential candidate declares that education is “the single most important issue,” because “it is the answer to every other problem we confront as a people.”ⁱⁱⁱ A 2012 *Time* magazine article boldly declared *Why Education Is the Answer*. There is a growing movement that says making college free for everyone is the solution to our woes as a nation.

I spent just a little bit of time accessing this seemingly endless trove of human wisdom this week and read about how education is the answer to environmental problems, animal extinction, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, violent crime, global warming, sustainable development, poverty, income inequality, gender inequality, obesity, and making yourself recession and downsizing proof. If knowledge is the key to wisdom, then we should be the wisest people in history. But with this vast expansion of human knowledge, there hasn’t been a corresponding increase in solving our problems. If anything, our problems are only getting worse.

We are not the first to wrestle with this issue. Nearly 2,000 years ago a Jewish church leader by the name of James tackled this question. He had a unique perspective, too. He grew up as the kid

brother of Jesus. He didn't believe at first. But after Jesus' death and resurrection, there was no question in James' mind as to who Jesus was.

James tells us that true wisdom isn't always what we think it is. And he warns us that there is a worldly wisdom that pretends to be something it is not. However, as followers of Christ, we can tell the difference, because true wisdom and worldly wisdom have different origins; they have different operations; and they have different outcomes.

(Read Text)

James gives us three tests by which we can discern true wisdom from false wisdom.

I. Different Origins

The first test is the origin test. Where does the wisdom come from? What is its source? Because true wisdom and worldly wisdom have very different roots.

A. True Wisdom Comes From Heaven

True wisdom, James says in verses 15 and 17, comes from heaven. It is based on something beyond us. It is not the product of our own brainpower. It comes from God. You can have all the knowledge available, but unless it is rooted in divine truth, you lack the glue to hold it together and make it stick. It's like having all the ingredients for a complicated recipe, but not the preparation instructions to make it work.

It takes spiritual truth to understand and apply knowledge, and that spiritual truth is not found by looking within. Such wisdom only comes from above. It is heavenly wisdom. Psalm 111:10 declares, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding."*

And listen to what Paul writes in Colossians 2:3, *"In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* Paul, do you mean to tell me that Jesus Christ knows every detail of knowledge from all of human history, and that he has all of the information yet to be processed? Yes! Jesus Christ is the greatest mind in the universe. Yet, that is not the point the either Paul or James is making. What makes Jesus so special is that he distinguishes for us the difference between the trinkets and the treasure. Paul did not say all the trinkets of wisdom and knowledge lie in Jesus Christ. He said all of the treasure. It is this treasure of divine wisdom that makes all the difference.

B. Worldly Wisdom

Worldly wisdom focuses on the trinkets. We think if we can gather and access all the trinkets of human wisdom and understanding, we can solve all of our problems. But where has all this human wisdom gotten us? Has all this knowledge solved our problems? We pump millions of dollars into program after program. And what do we get? We get more drug abuse, more crime, more poverty,

more financial crises, more homeless, more jobless. How come all our human wisdom has failed us? How come more knowledge and better information hasn't led to better people?

Because Human wisdom is powerless to answer life's 4 most basic questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where do I go when I die? Surely our hearts long for a better answer than you are the product of a sperm fertilizing an egg. It's something no Math PHD from MIT can calculate. No Harvard psychiatrist can analyze its depths. Because they're just playing with the trinkets of wisdom and knowledge. When will our culture wake up to the fact that human wisdom without the revealed truth of God is nothing more than a trinket? Oh, it has all the glitter of a golden calf, but it has none of the power of God.

Human wisdom cannot answer these questions, because their answers lie beyond human knowledge. In 1884 Edwin Abbott wrote a satirical novella called *Flatland*. *Flatland* takes place in a two-dimensional world populated by lines and polygons. The story is told from the perspective a square named A Square. His life is thrown into turmoil when he is visited by a three-dimensional sphere named A Sphere whom he only sees as a circle from his two-dimensional perspective. Eventually A Sphere proves to A Square that there is more to existence than what he can see. However, nothing A Square does can convince others that there is a 3rd dimension in space. They don't believe it because they can't see it or understand it.

That's the problem with human wisdom. It is trying to grasp three-dimensional truth with a two-dimensional perspective. James says human wisdom is limited by its worldly origins.

1. Earthly

In verse 15, James says human wisdom is earthly in origin. It is confined to this box of time and space. It lacks the perspective of eternity. It lacks the divine knowledge of an all-knowing God. Worldly wisdom tries to make sense of the creation without the perspective of the Creator. It trying to put the puzzle pieces together without the picture on the box.

2. Unspiritual

James furthers his point by telling us not only is human wisdom earthly, it is unspiritual. The word he uses here conveys the idea of sensual. It is limited by what we can see and feel. As R.J. Knowing writes in his commentary on James, It has to do with that part of humanity "where human feeling and human reason reign supreme."^{iv} To paraphrase Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:14, the unspiritual cannot understand the spiritual.

3. Demonic

James saves his most scathing accusation against the origins of human wisdom for last. He says it is “of the devil;” literally –“pertaining to demons.” He doesn’t mean every bit of human knowledge and learning is demonic, but some of it certainly is. Satan loves to make untruth sound like truth. He makes evil sound good, and wickedness appear to be ethical. I have no doubt that much of what parades as truth in the media, in politics, in entertainment, and in academia is demonic to the core. But even human wisdom that is true and right, Satan loves to twist it, confuse it, pervert it so that it serves his purpose. If you want to discern true wisdom from godly wisdom, the treasure from the trinkets, you have to look at its origins.

II. Different Operations

James gives us a second test to tell the difference between true wisdom and worldly wisdom. Not only are they different in their origins, they operate in different ways. They operate from very different motivations, and you can tell the difference by how they work in your life.

A. True Wisdom Operates Through a Good Life

In verse 13, James asks, “*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life.*” It’s that whole idea of taking your faith out of the box, of living your faith from the inside out. If you have true, heavenly wisdom, it will display itself in a good life. Notice what James doesn’t say, he doesn’t say your wisdom will be seen in how eloquent you speak, or how educated you are, or how well you can make complex, nuanced arguments. James gives no attention to the things that the world thinks demonstrate wisdom. He simply says wisdom will be seen in what you do– in how you live.

The word *wisdom* comes from a word that means *watchman*. In the Old Testament these were the guys that would climb a mountain to get a high vantage point so they could see all around. They could get all the information and intel needed so that the commander could act accordingly. It was someone who acquired farsighted knowledge and acted on that knowledge with prudence. That’s what true wisdom is. It is the ability to take the right action based on the right knowledge. That’s as good a basic definition of wisdom as I can give you– the right action based on the right knowledge. That’s why true wisdom will show in a *good life*. What does James mean by *good life*?

1. Good Deeds

Make no mistake, James doesn’t mean the same thing we mean when we say the “good life.” He’s not talking about houses and cars and parties and food. He means, first of all, good deeds. Living the good life of true wisdom means doing good works– Living a righteous life and doing what is right.

2. Humility

Secondly, a *good life* means these good works are done out of humility. These aren't the kind of good deeds designed to say, "Hey, look at me. Look at how good and noble I am." True wisdom doesn't serve a personal agenda. It's not looking to further its own cause. Godly wisdom serves a purpose greater than self. The more truly wise you are, the less you feel the need to be the center of attention.

B. Worldly Wisdom Operates through Bitter Envy and Selfish Ambition

Now, look at verse 14. Worldly wisdom operates in a completely different way. It comes from a place of bitter envy and selfish ambition. *Envy* here is that consuming desire to possess and control that which isn't ours to have and control. It's bitter, because like a poison it infects everything it touches. It says I should get what I want and here are the wise sounding reasons I should get it.

Selfish ambition is that driven selfishness that creates rivalries and antagonism. Worldly wisdom is always looking for ways to prop up the self, even at the expense of others. It says, "Hey, look at me. It's about me." It views others as a threat. It is a selfish partisanship.

It is easy to identify this attitude in the world. You can find it where you work in all the office politics and subtle power plays. It has thoroughly corrupted the world of politics. But it also rears its ugly head in the church where it is especially destructive, because such a person is not working for the glory of God or the good of body. Mostly, they are in it for themselves. Oh, they will never say that. They disguise it with Scripture and spiritual sounding reasons. They will question the methods and motives of everyone else, but the bottom line is they are in it for what they can get out of it. If your feelings are repeatedly hurt by others in the church, if you frequently have disagreements with others serving in ministry with you, you need to ask yourself some soul-searching questions. "Would I still do this if I got no recognition? Would I still be passionate about this ministry, even if we don't do it my way? Would I still put my heart in it, even if I'm not the one to be in charge?"

These can be uncomfortable questions to ask, but they might reveal a spirit of bitter envy or selfish ambition in our hearts. And this points to a deeper problem. A key phrase here is "in your heart." It is the place of motivation. Why do I want what I want? Why does it need to be that way? What am I getting out of it? Why am I really doing this? The reason we don't ask these questions often is because we might not like the answers. Instead, we'd rather quit a ministry, and take our ball and go home? We would rather find another church where the people are nicer, at least until we learn each other's flaws. Or we could allow the Holy Spirit to perform some spiritual surgery on our hearts and work the transforming power of heavenly wisdom in our lives? Many times our problems with others in the church reveal more about what's wrong in our own hearts than what's wrong with our brother or sister in Christ, or what's wrong with the church.

III. Different Outcomes

Since true wisdom and worldly wisdom have different origins, different operations, they lead to two totally different outcomes. This is third and final test. Different roots. Different fruits. Let's begin with worldly wisdom this time. In verse 16 James tells us wherever we find worldly wisdom with its bitter envy and selfish ambition *"there you will find disorder and every evil practice."*

A. Worldly Wisdom Leads to Disorder and Every Evil Practice.

Worldly wisdom leads to chaos and disorder. Human wisdom isn't the answer to all our problems, but it creates lots of new ones. I mentioned earlier the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights that made clear that education was the key for creating peace. That declaration was put together in the aftermath of WWII, which itself was the result of unresolved issues from WWI. Together, they were the most bloody, destructive, widespread conflicts in human history.

What seems to be ignored by the United Nations is that these wars were not started because of a lack of education. These conflicts didn't originate in third world countries, but with the most educated countries of the West. Nazism was rooted in celebrated philosophers like Hegel and Nietzsche. Human wisdom didn't keep those wars from happening. And what have we seen since 1948? Let me quote from the Encyclopedia Britannica article on war. "With the evolution of literate civilizations has come an increase in the frequency and intensity of war." How many Koreas, how many cold wars, Sudans, Arab-Israeli conflicts, how many Vietnams, how many Yagoslavias, how many Somalias, and Rwandas, how many Iraqs, Afghanistans, and Syrias do we have to have before we realize that it isn't working. How many South Africas, how many Irelands, how many Cambodias, Ugandas, and Bosnias do we have to have before we can admit that human wisdom without the wisdom of God is not getting the job done?

How many will die of AIDS? How many will suffer through sexually transmitted diseases? How many marriages and homes will be ripped apart? How many millions of babies will we abort? How many suicides? How many gangs, and murders, and rapes, and riots, and how many lives consumed with stress and depression before we finally wake up and realize we can't do it with our own knowledge? The internet will never be fast enough. Hard drives will never store enough data. Schools will never teach enough, be accessible enough, be cheap enough to solve our problems with our own wisdom?

Let's quit picking on the world for a second and look in the mirror. How many of our marriages will be torn apart? How many affairs will our families suffer through? How many of our men will struggle with potency problems because of their addiction to porn? How many churches will fight and split? How many will we lose? How many will flee from church leadership to swear never again? How many will crawl away from ministry so they can lick their wounds? How many times will we hop from church to

church to church in hopes of finding the “right one” without ever letting God deal with our own stuff? Shall I go on, or do we get the point? We will never figure it out using the trinkets of wisdom and knowledge.

B. True Wisdom Leads to Good Fruit

No, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Jesus. One of the things that I love about Him is that He doesn’t give me the trinkets. He gives me the treasure. You know Jesus never would look at us and naively say, “Well you know, if you just teach people good things, they will make good choices.” That is the overriding assumption of our culture, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. No, Jesus, would look us right in the eye, with a breaking heart, and with loving eyes, and He would say, “No, you are sinful by nature, and it is only a rebirth of water and spirit that can turn it around.” If you want good fruit you must have good roots. Now there’s the treasure.

When we rely on heavenly wisdom it leads to a whole different set of outcomes. Listen to the things that James lists here in verse 17. Godly wisdom leads us to a place that is “*pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*” It is the opposite of everything we see in the world.

It is *pure*. There are no hidden agendas or ulterior motives. It is peace-loving. Gone is the strife and division and the arguing because you always have to be right. It is *considerate*. We will be gentle with others because we are just as concerned for them as we are ourselves. It is *submissive*. When necessary we are even happy to put the other person first. It is full of mercy. We are quick to forgive and ready to show grace. It is *impartial*. We play no favorites here because we are all one in Christ. It is *sincere*. What you see is what you get. We have taken off the masks and put away the pretense. Grace means I don’t have to pretend to be somebody I’m not to make you think I’m someone I could never be. This list is just the beginning, James says. It leads to all manners of good fruit. It leads to a harvest of righteousness.

If we find the outcomes are not these things, then we need to look at our hearts, and we need to look to the wisdom from God. It is the very same wisdom that in James 1, he told us, “*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*” You won’t find it in a university. You won’t find it in a book from a library shelf. It doesn’t come from a Google search. You won’t find it from a talking head on TV. You can only find it from God, and all you have to do is ask.

If you are a follower of Christ, this wisdom is yours. If you are a follower of Christ then this heavenly wisdom will show itself in your life. This wisdom has nothing to do with your IQ or your

education. It isn't based on how well-read you are. This wisdom can be demonstrated equally by the person who aced graduate school and the high-school dropout. The Corporate executive and the blue-collar grunt can both have it. The Bible college professor and the Sunday School nursery volunteer have equal access to it.

(Take and apple out of the box)

Turn with me to the book of Galatians. In Galatians 5 we see the education program of Jesus Christ. Starting in vs. 22, to people that have known nothing but hate, Jesus teaches love. To those who've known nothing but sadness, he teaches joy. To those who are killing themselves in the rat race of everyday life, He teaches patience. To those who've only know insensitivity and injustice, He teaches kindness. To those who've known only evil, Jesus teaches goodness. To those who have known only fractured and broken relationships, He teaches faithfulness. To those who've known only brutality, He teaches gentleness. To those who have known only the domination of a weak flesh, Jesus teaches self-control. That's where the treasures are. The world can't give you that. No other religion can give you that. Only Jesus.

ⁱ "The World's Technological Capacity to Store, Communicate, and Compute Information", Martin Hilbert and Priscila López (2011), *Science* (journal), 332(6025), 60-65; see also "free access to the study" and "video animation".

ⁱⁱ From a Kissmetrics infographic <https://blog.kissmetrics.com/information-explosion/?wide=1>

ⁱⁱⁱ Dodd, Chris at Democratic Debate on MSNBC. Oct. 30, 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/30/us/politics/30debate-transcript.html?pagewanted=32%27s%20Going%20On?&sq=UFO&st=cse&scp=19%27s%20--%20What>

^{iv} Knowling, R.J. 1904. *The Epistle of St. James*. Methuen & Co. London, England. p. 87