

James 3:18-4:3 True Wisdom Brings Peace

In Matt. 5:9 Jesus says, **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”** Our passage today is James’ commentary on this verse. James is concerned with PEACE, especially in the body of Christ. As usual, this is VERY PRACTICAL JAMES. And James’ key to peace is “wisdom,” particularly “wisdom from above” (v. 15). It is interesting that James does not define wisdom, as he does not define faith. But, there is no question for James, you will know faith by its works. And, you will know wisdom by what follows, namely PEACE. I have 4 truths from this text.

1. The source of wisdom is God. In this passage, James is merely comparing godly wisdom with worldly wisdom. According to James, worldly wisdom is “earthly,” “unspiritual,” and “demonic.” But, godly wisdom comes from God. Look at v. 15. Speaking of the wisdom of the world he says, **“This is not the wisdom that comes down from above . . .”** Do you remember Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus? This very religious man (also a leader) comes to Jesus to ask him about how a person can be saved. For He knows Jesus is a wise man, a **“teacher from God.”** And Jesus says to him, **“unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** The word for “born again” is the same word James uses in our passage. It can be translated as “again” or “from above.” And our context makes it clear. In the same way, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above, no one will find true wisdom unless it is from above. This truth is implied in 1:17 when James says, **“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above . . .”**

When I think of my first real thoughts on this verse, I must go back to my wedding. We had this verse posted at every table. I don’t know what other people were thinking about the verse, but I was thinking about God’s gift of Kristen in marriage. As I look back, this applies; for EVERY good gift comes from the Father. But, in this context, James is separating wisdom that comes from the world and wisdom that comes from God. In fact, the wisdom that comes from the world is not wisdom at all; the ONLY TRUE WISDOM is from above.

Do you remember the friends of Job? They were trying to console him with what they thought to be wisdom. But, in the end, their words were as James says, “earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.” But Job says, **“But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says, ‘It is not in me,’ and the sea says, ‘It is not with me.’ It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price. It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire. Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold. No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal; the price of wisdom is above pearls. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold. “From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, ‘We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.’ “God understands the way to it, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he gave to the wind its weight and apportioned the waters by measure, when he made a decree for the rain and a way for the lightning of the thunder, then he saw it and declared it; he established it, and searched it out.**

2. The product of wisdom is righteousness. In other words, true wisdom produces good fruit. In James' practical theology, to be wise is to be godly, which is evident in the way you live. Look at v. 13: "**By his good conduct let him show his works . . .**" And then in v. 17: "**But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.**" And then in v. 18: "**A harvest of righteousness is sown . . .**" On v. 18, think of the farmer who sows seeds. Think of the different kinds of seeds, beans, corn, beets, okra, peas, carrots, squash, etc. Each one produces a specific fruit. Wisdom is like a seed. Wisdom that comes from above is like a seed that produces a crop of righteousness. As the farmer looks out over a beautiful field of corn and finds delight, so the wise man looks out over a field of righteousness.

And what's cool about this text is that we don't have to wonder what this kind of wisdom produces. James is specific. V. 17: "*Wisdom is first "pure."*" This is the umbrella of wisdom. To be pure is to be innocent and morally blameless. Paul uses this word many times in reference to the church. For example in 2 Cor. 11:2 he says, "**For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.**" So what does it look like to be "pure." Here it is: "peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, sincere." So how do you know you are wise? Well, what comes from the garden of your life? What is the normal way you respond to the things around you? The best place to ask these questions is in the home. When your spouse is angry, do you respond with greater anger, or is there a tendency toward peace? Are you gentle when your teenage kids press you to give them an answer? Are you open reason, full of mercy and good fruits? Do you show favoritism? Are you sincere?

Now, the opposite of "purity" according to James is bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. The opposite is boasting in what you think is right, and acting against what is true. Look at v. 14: "**But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.**" Then in v. 16: "**For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder.**" Is there disorder in your home, in your family, in your church? Is there quarreling and fighting? Look at 4:1: "**What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?**" (next week's topic)

If you sow these things in your home, with your spouse, your children, your neighbors, your workplace, I promise you good things will follow. The same will happen in a church where its leaders do the same. I don't know how well we've done; you may be able to say better about such things. But, this is my goal! This is the goal of the elders! These are the things that characterize a wise church. In fact, since wisdom is from above and this wisdom is given by the Spirit of God, and only Christians have the Spirit, then it makes sense that the church is the greatest display of wisdom that leads to peace.

3. The proof of wisdom is humility. This truth goes along with works or righteousness. But the emphasis is more on the heart behind the works. Look back at v. 13: "**Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works . . .**" How? "in the meekness of wisdom." And then in v. 14 he speaks to the heart. He says, "**But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.**" I think James is saying that behind our works, there must be a heart of humility. And it is clear to me in this translation that this "humility" comes from wisdom. In other words, if a person is truly

wise, there will be humility. This is a major theme in James. He commands it in 4:10: **“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”** In 1:21 he says, **“Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”** And let me say here by way of application, this is how we should hear the Word of God, especially week to week in the preaching of the Word, with humility, knowing these are the Words of the living God, which are able to save our souls. And I can tell, you listen, week in and week out, and with humility. Thank you! This is a sign of wisdom. But, we are all at different places in our sanctification. And, it is easier to listen (at least on the surface) than to put these things into practice in our homes. But, back to our truth: the proof of wisdom is humility.

What is humility? It is the opposite of pride. Pride says, *“Look at me. Look at my ways. Consider how strong I am? I can take care of myself. I don’t need your help.”* Humility says, *“I know who I am. I know I am weak. I need all the help I can get.”* From a biblical perspective, humility says, *“God, I was created by you. Everything I have comes from you. And when I look at my life, I know I am a sinner. And I know I would be lost without you and your mercy and grace.”* Humility says, **“EVERY GOOD AND PERFECT GIFT COMES FROM ABOVE.”** This kind of attitude is wise! I am reminded of the story of Jesus in Luke 18. He says, **“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”**

4. The application of wisdom is peace. Look at v. 17. **“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable . . .”** And then in v. 18 **“And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”** James is concerned with PEACE, especially in the body of Christ. Let me recall the context. The rich were showing partiality, leaving out the poor (entire book). They were quick to speak and slow to listen (1:19) They were quick to get angry (1:19). They were saying they had faith, but good works did not follow. They were emphasizing judgment at the expense of mercy (2:13). They were quarreling over who would be teacher. In our text today, they were selfish and jealous. They were speaking evil of one another. They were grumbling against one another, judging one another wrongly (5:9). There were other things, but I think you get the picture. Not much peace!

The Church of Jesus Christ is the place of peace! If it is not, then we must question if we are truly wise. If selfish ambition and jealousy are what marks us, then at best we are simply unwise, at worst, we are false professors, having a form of godliness but denying the power of Christ that brings wisdom.

Considering all the differences in our midst over masks, over how we handle COVID-19, over social justice and other issues, our text today is particularly helpful and very timely. If we have ears to hear and eyes to see we can navigate these waters with peace. (Certainly one of the applications even when we disagree is to check our motives according to James. And then, after we’ve checked our motives, take a look at what is coming by way of fruit. Do you find yourself

with ill will against a brother or sister with whom you disagree? Further, do you make it known that you disagree with your brother or sister to others? Further, do you question the motive of you brother or sister with whom you disagree? This is when we approach slander. And when this happens, you may mask your heart, but you will find great unrest and lack of peace from within yourself.

On the mask issue, this is my desire. On the one hand, I would love to see more of us say, *“I will wear a mask if it means my brother or sister won’t come to the service.”* At the same time, those who decide not to come realize their brothers and sisters really have no ill will against them by not wearing a mask. (This example can be carried over to many issues where there is disagreement either doctrinally or morally.) We need peace! And in order to get peace, we need wisdom! And this passage and others like it are our source as we follow James’ advice to “ask God” who gives liberally to all who ask (1:5).

At the end of the day, as a Christian, you should be encouraged as you see certain fruits of righteousness and humility in your life. But, you should also be very convicted, as you strive to obey the implanted word and move down the road of sanctification in this life. Now, if I were to stop the sermon here, and say, *“Be wise! Ask God for it! Live godly! Be humble! Peace be with you!”* I would fall short in every way as preacher. I may be a preacher but I wouldn’t be a gospel preacher. We must present Christ as the aim of our affection and as the example of our wisdom and as the One in whom wisdom must be found. Let’s reconsider our 4 truths in light of Christ!

i. Jesus is the wisdom of God. He is the wisdom of God, coming down from above. In John 3:31 John the Baptist says what James is saying about Christ. **“He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.”** And then in 34-36 he says, **“For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”** The world may desire a particular kind of wisdom, but if they do not find it in Christ, they’ve missed it.

ii. Jesus is the righteousness of God. 1 Cor. 1:30: **“And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption . . .”** Concerning the Gospel Paul says, **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”** (Rom. 3:21-22).

iii. Jesus is true humility. **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”**

iv. Jesus is the prince of peace. Jesus says to us: **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid”** (John 14:27). He also says, **“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome**

the world” (John 16:33). He came to us. God took on flesh. He lived without sin. He died as God’s perfect sacrifice on the cross, taking the sins of his people upon himself. He rose again. He has given us the Holy Spirit. And now he sits in heaven where he reigns over the church and the world until all his enemies are made his footstool. EVERYTHING from beginning to end has been done to bring us peace! **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”** (Is. 9:6).