

Two Kinds of Wisdom

A Present-Day Illustration

So what did we decide?" asked J.D.

"It depends on who you ask," replied Quentin. Morris wanted to open the gym for midnight basketball for youth, free of charge. He said he could gather sponsors to support it and provide jerseys and shoes for free!

"Morris has those kind of connections?" asked J.D.

"Yes, and Morris has money of his own," informed Quentin. "He doesn't advertise it much."

"So, what is the problem?" continued J.D.

"Terrance. He's some kind of manager with an athletic shoe company, and he wants his company to make money off the project, thereby giving him an economic advantage at work."

"Doesn't his company give donations and do community work?" asked J.D.

"Yes, they do," said Quentin, "but that's not the proposal he's presented to the board. He wants to make money off this deal and shine to his employer. But Terrance also let it slip that he is using the company name but plans to profit personally."

"What does that mean exactly?" asked J.D.

"I'm not sure, but it doesn't sound good," replied Quentin.

"So, what's the reasoning behind Morris's decision? What does he stand to profit from the deal?" asked J.D.

"Morris made his decision based on doing the most good," said Quentin. "He just wants to bless the young children."

1. *How much do you think the world's wisdom influences what you say and do?*

2. *Why does your character show if you are living a wise life?*

3. *In your relationships, when have you followed God's wisdom and not the world's and were better off for doing that?*

LESSON FOCUS: Beware! The world's wisdom leads to envy, disorder, and judgment.

Wisdom of the World

James 3:13-16, KJV

13 Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

James 3:13-16, NIV

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

¹⁵Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

James's description of worldly wisdom is not pretty. First, we see that so-called wisdom harbors bitterness, envy, and selfish ambition in the heart. Envy and selfish ambition are the unholy companions of bitterness in the heart of the worldly-wise person. The Greek word here for "envy" is *zelos*, from which we get our English word "zeal," and carries with it the idea of fierce jealousy. When we have *zelos* toward another, we fiercely crave what that person has. This, of course, can lead to disorder in the promotion of selfish desires and ambitions over the interests of others. Those who harbor such attitudes in their hearts have nothing to brag about; rather, they actually deny the truth about how harmful bitter envy and strife can be. Such a heart condition not only negatively impacts relationships with others, but it also can stymie our fellowship and walk with the Lord, thereby leaving us to wander in spiritual darkness.

James then observed that this kind of so-called wisdom does not come from our Lord in heaven. Rather, this way of thinking is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic in nature, meaning it comes right from the "prince of this world," the devil (John 12:31). And sadly, before coming to Christ, we too were willing

participants of the worldly ways of the devil.

The thinking and ways of the devil and his world system are certainly deserving of God's wrath because they bring disorder and every possible kind of evil practice. God, who created an orderly universe, is not the cause of all the confusion we see in this world (see 1 Cor. 14:33). And neither is He the source of this world's evil. Apart from Christ, disorder and evil will reign. However, in Christ, believers have the power to let order and righteousness reign by standing against the devil and his evil ways.

4. *How do we exhibit godly wisdom?*

5. *What are some characteristics of earthly or worldly wisdom?*

6. *What is the source of earthly or worldly wisdom?*

Wisdom of Heaven

James 3:17-18; 5:7-9, KJV

3:17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

5:7 Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.

8 Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the

James 3:17-18; 5:7-9, NIV

^{3:17}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. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

^{5:7}Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹Don't grumble against one another, brothers

KJV

Lord draweth nigh.

9 Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door.

NIV

and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

After describing how ugly worldly wisdom is, James then painted a beautiful picture of heavenly wisdom, drawing a stark contrast between the two. Instead of the evil of worldly wisdom—which brings bitter envy and selfish ambition,—heavenly wisdom is pure and brings peace and mercy.

Those who pursue the wisdom from heaven will be blessed. Because of these blessings, God’s people can be patient with one another, knowing that the time will come when Jesus will return and set all things right. James used the patience of a farmer as an example for the patience we should have. When a farmer plants seeds, there is no expectation that the next morning there will be a fully mature crop ready for harvest. Rather, the farmer understands the need to wait patiently and trusts that God will provide the rains in due season. And after weeks, even months, the crop comes just as anticipated.

Likewise, believers are to stand patiently and firmly, trusting that the Lord will return. In James’s day and ours, we can know that the Lord could come at any time. Indeed, patience with one another is very important, for our heavenly Judge is at the very door of heaven, and we will be held accountable for how we treat one another.

7. *What are some characteristics of the wisdom from above?*

8. *What earthly example of patience did James give?*

9. *Why do we need to be patient with one another?*

Wisdom Exemplified

James 5:10-12, KJV

10 Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example

James 5:10-12, NIV

¹⁰Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets

KJV

of suffering affliction, and of patience.

11 Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

12 But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.

NIV

who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

¹²Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise you will be condemned.

Knowing that the Lord could return at any time for us is great motivation to live rightly and patiently in the light of heavenly wisdom. Along with knowing the Lord can return at any moment, another great motivator for living rightly and patiently in heavenly wisdom is the godly example of others. Therefore, James pointed his readers to the patient suffering of the Old Testament prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

James specifically named Job as an example of patience and perseverance under trial. Job suffered great loss, but he remained true to the Lord through it all. As a result, God's grace and mercy set everything right in the end for Job.

Our lesson's passage closes with the admonition not to swear by heaven, earth, or anything else. The heavenly-wise person recognizes the potential pitfalls and even condemnation of taking an oath in such a manner.

10. *How are the prophets of old good examples of godly patience?*

11. *How is Job a good example of godly patience?*

12. *What is the proper way for the heavenly-wise person to make a promise?*

Beware!

James said to beware of the “get ahead” and “promote yourself” wisdom that the world gives out. He warns us that envy and selfish ambition come from the devil, not from God. James also said that when we are focused only on personal advancement, we may not be concerned with the issues of ethics. Moral boundaries become obstacles in the way of our success.

In contrast to devilish, earthly wisdom, heavenly wisdom is always morally pure, promotes peace, and produces good fruit.

To grow in spiritual maturity, we must have this wisdom that comes from heaven. Righteous living is impossible without it, and our churches suffer when we don't have this wisdom. Without it, we get envy and selfish ambition as well as disorder and chaos in any fellowship of believers. Heavenly-wise people bring peace to situations and help build up the Body of Christ. They refuse to participate in destructive arguments or follow those who do. They ask others about their preferences rather than always promoting their own. They show respect for others, especially those in authority, and they are always willing to listen to both sides of the story. They always tell the truth, even when it is uncomfortable to do so, but they don't do so with the intent of hurting others or uplifting themselves.

Those with heavenly wisdom have a high tolerance for the weaknesses of others; they don't regularly criticize and belittle others. They are known for their patience and perseverance, not for jumping to conclusions. Other people will stand and testify to the positive impact these righteous people have had in their lives, and our churches will thrive as more people decide to follow the ways of heaven rather than the ways of the world.

13. *Why is peacemaking so important in everyday life and in church life?*

14. *When have you seen “get ahead” and “promote yourself” wisdom create problems at work, at home, or at church?*

15. *How much heavenly wisdom would you say your church has most of the time?*

Look Up for Wisdom

Every day, minute, and second ungodly things are happening around us. When we look down or around, we only find envy, disorder, selfish ambition, and conflict. We need the wisdom of God to direct us and keep us on the right track. If we don't seek heaven's wisdom, we will surely serve the world's wisdom. As James says, all good gifts come from God in heaven (1:17); therefore, we must look up to find the wisest way to live.

► *Write here or on an index card, "I look up for wisdom." As you make decisions this coming week, make that your pledge, and write on the card or here decisions you make that reflect your seeking God for the wise choice.*

KEY VERSE

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. —James 3:17, KJV

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, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of August 31 through September 6

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Genesis 30:22-24; 35:16-20—Rachel, Mother of Joseph and Benjamin.
- Tues.** Genesis 37:12-17—Joseph Checks on Brothers at Dothan.
- Wed.** Genesis 37:29-36—Jacob Convinced that Joseph Is Dead.
- Thurs.** Genesis 40:14-27, 33-40—From Slave to Ruler of Egypt.
- Fri.** Acts 7:9-15—Jacob Lives with Joseph in Egypt.
- Sat.** James 4:1-7—Caution, Disputes May Lead to Violence.
- Sun.** Genesis 37:2-11, 23-24, 28—Jealousy Divides Families.