

WISE DECISION-MAKING

James 3:13-18

Sermon for Peace Church

June 14, 2009

PURPOSE – To help people discern the ways of wisdom in the process of decision making, choosing those ways that produce a good life.

MAIN IDEA – Jesus is the wisdom that has come from heaven whose ways & life, when chosen, lead to a harvest of righteousness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to James 3:13 (p. 1883)

1. Continuing in this letter written by the ½-brother of Jesus, we covered last week James' admonition to "TAME THE TONGUE"!

- For out of it, he observes, we both praise God & diss human beings made in God's image!

- We both SING hymns & GRIPE ABOUT about "hims" & "hers" - behind their back.

... This should not be! – ch. 3:10

In fact, when this is the case, v.11, something deep is wrong , "*How can fresh & salt water come from the same spring?*"

Verse 12 – *A salt spring can't produce fresh water.* The spring must be fixed!

2. This leads James into today's lesson where he invites us to PROBE the heart-springs within - with a call to ACT & SPEAK from the source of GOD'S WISDOM.

Read James 3:13-18

II. SOLOMON

WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM? – is the question that James is asking us today. In the words you say; in the deeds you do; in the decisions you make, what source of wisdom are you coming from?

Fresh water / living water / thirst-quenching water comes FROM THE SPRING OF GOD'S WISDOM within!

1. The Bible exhorts us to SEEK this WISDOM:

“Though it cost you all you have – Prov. 4 – esteem her & she’ll exalt you ... her ways are pleasant, her paths are peace (Prov. 3) – wisdom is a tree of life to all who embrace her!

2. King Solomon sought a HEART OF WISDOM.

You remember his story – Following after the great king, David – BIG shoes to fill – God meets him while in worship and says, *“Ask for whatever you want me to give you!”*

“I’m only a child”, he responded. “My duties are overwhelming ... so give me a discerning heart to govern your people, to distinguish between right & wrong.”

- That’s asking for wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to distinguish between right & wrong – wisdom is not so much knowing the WHY behind things, but the WHAT ... to do. It’s having the skill to live rightly. The Hebrew root of the word for wisdom means SKILL.

(i) Well, Solomon’s answer blows God’s mind! He didn’t ask for long life. He didn’t ask for honor. He didn’t ask for riches. He didn’t ask for the death of his enemies. He asks for WISDOM.

- So God gladly grants him his heart’s desire, along with those other unasked-for blessings!

3. Now one thing that comes with wisdom is the ABILITY TO RECOGNIZE IT IN OTHERS!

That’s behind the story that Judy read for us – the 2 prostitutes & their sons.

(i) Both mothers claim the living son was theirs. So Solomon threatens to cut him in half. By that he’s able to determine:

WHOSE HEART truly LOVES THE LIVING SON?

Whose heart loves that Living Son – EVEN MORE THAN HER OWN LIFE?

A. That’s the critical issue in the Bible’s teaching about wisdom – for the Living Son is still among us in spirit & truth. He is the pure, peaceable, considerate, merciful, sincere One. And the life of wisdom embraces him / glorifies Him / gives him LIFE – even over the self’s ambitions & envy’s.

This is the fullest meaning of this story – Behind all decisions, words, actions ... ARE YOU FOR THE SELF OR THE SON?

WISDOM LOVES THE SON, EVEN ABOVE ONE’S OWN SELF.

A. The true mother shows us this. She would rather HE LIVE and she be in pain of loss than that he die. (Imagine if that had happened ... how painful it would have been for her to live seeing him as the son of another woman – yet she was prepared to do that!!)

B. Not the other woman - The false mother didn't really care about the life of the Son. She cared more about her SELF - her pain & loss; her jealousy mattered more to her than his life
 She would rather have it that both mothers lose their sons than to know that her colleague has a living son and she not.

- Using James' words, she was marked by ENVY & SELFISH AMBITION.

For her a son was more about meeting her needs – probably she was lonely, unfulfilled. She would have been a lousy mother. She USED the son for the self. Sons were pets, trophies, play-things.

So speaking & acting out of envy & selfish ambition, she was prepared to sow DISORDER – between her & this woman; even between her & this child who was not truly her son.

The word that James uses in v. 16, translated “disorder” means “confusion / instability”. No doubt that would have been the result if she had her way – confusion / instability all around – in relationships, even the son himself!

4. But Solomon sees through it.

He threatens the act that reveals the HEART-SPRING of each woman's speaking & acting. That act is the EXECUTION OF THE SON!

- How would each woman respond to that “death”?
- Where are they coming from? Do they truly love the life of that son?

One does; the other loves the SELF - It's exposed!

(i) Then as THE story goes on ... the SON LIVES – to everyone's surprise. That's the Mighty One's verdict!

And having made the wise, selfless, the son-centered choice – the true mother LIVES ON WITH HIM!
 = THAT'S SALVATION!

5. It's also the heart of wisdom. WISDOM IS CHOOSING the life of the Son over the life of SELF.

(i) The Son Himself – Jesus - would later say, *“He who loses his life for my sake, will gain it ... but he who seeks his life will lose it.”*

- The two mothers illustrate this. One gains life – the life of the son – by giving up her life; the other loses life because she sought her SELF, more than the son!

(ii) And I take time to teach the deepest meaning of Solomon's story for two reasons:

A. One, it illustrates the 2 sources of wisdom that James describes in our passage.

B. Two, it illustrates the heart of the decisions that YOU & I must make everyday in order to live wisely today:

(iii) Which mother are you? Where are you coming from?

- Are your decisions about bringing glory & "life" to the son – even if it costs you a lot of pain?

- Or really is the son ultimately someone you USE for your benefit?

A. In your everyday decisions:

- Do you come from a heart of self expressed in envy & ambition?

- Or a heart of wisdom – that brings glory & life to the son?

THAT'S THE QUESTION JAMES ASKS TODAY?

6. Sometimes that's easy to know:

You face the choice to gossip or cheat – That's not who the Son is – those temptations come out of the SELFISH AMBITION & envy.

(i) Other decisions are not as easy:

Do I take that trip? That job? Buy this home?

Do I fight for this change? What are the ways of wisdom?

How do I discipline my child? Do I press hard in painful consequence or show mercy? If I press hard, where am I coming from? What's my motive? Am I concerned most to shape the life of the Son in her? Or is it out of self ambition / envy that my kids aren't like I want them to be? Am I motivated by my anger or the son's love?

What's the wisest use of my time? Do I go visit a friend or minister to the grieving? – What are the motives in each option? What best exalts the Son?

Do I/we take this ministry step or not? Where am I coming from? Am I inclined by selfish ambition – or is this about bringing life to the Son among us?

WHAT IS THE WISE CHOICE, GOD? WHAT IS THE JESUS-CHOICE? WHAT BRINGS LIFE TO HIM?

To answer those questions, let's go back to James' teaching & look more closely at his description of 2 springs of deciding, speaking & acting.

These descriptions help us to know the PRESENCE of the SON & SELF in our decisions.

III. DISCERNING FACTORS

1. TWO ORIGINS of “WISDOM”, James notes:

(i) Verse 15 - One is NOT from heaven. It is EARTHLY, unspiritual & of the Devil.

A. EARTHLY – simply means it is tied to things associated with this world

– 1 Jn. 3:16 – “cravings of the flesh, lust of the eyes, the boasting of what he has & does” = worldly

= PRIDE in MY church, my kids, my business, my life

B. This “spring” is UNSPIRITUAL – that word literally means “sensual”

= who we are APART FROM the Image of God in us – it appeals only to our animal nature / a “survival of the fittest” / = power, control, position, taking advantage of others

C. And it’s OF THE DEVIL – because it’s all about the self, not the son.

You remember how, in the Garden, Satan tempted mankind to fall into sin by saying, “You shall be like God ... Life’s about YOU, not Him! ... live that way!

- Your feelings, your needs, your desires!

(ii) So the NATURE of this source of “wisdom” is:

A. SELFISH AMBITION – it’s about ME - my needs

- my position / prestige / power

B. ENVY – is the other quality description

= Looking around ... your church / house / education / job / family... is better than mine! I don’t like that. I’m even bitter, I want to be better than you

- Again, it’s not about glorifying God. It’s about my image. It’s about the SELF – like the false mother

(iii) The RESULT of speaking & acting out of this source of “wisdom” is DISORDER – verse 16 – instability, division, confusion in your life, your work, your church ... even evil practices.

So, for example, to have an AFFAIR is of earthly wisdom – Maybe the marriage is stale – perhaps there’s some envy in the heart - of other couples enjoying themselves; maybe it’s only an appeal of the senses – a lust of the flesh. Chosen, it WILL BRING disorder, confusion, evil into your life and those around you.

It’s not the life of the Son – pure, peaceable, considerate, merciful, sincere

I.e. – Another example - To be concerned about your life or church or job because of what OTHERS think of it is EARTHLY WISDOM – that’s selfish ambition. It will lead you to make bad decisions that bring confusion & instability. You want only to be concerned what heaven thinks of your ministry, not earth.

William Barclay comments: *Instead of bringing people together, earthly wisdom drives them apart. Instead of producing peace, it produces strife. Instead of producing a fellowship, it produces disruption in personal relationships ... It is a sobering thing to remember that the wisdom that man possesses is devilish rather than divine, and that such a man is engaged in Satan’s work and not God’s work.*

Verse 14 – *“If you harbor envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.”*

James writes that in such a way as to indicate that “selfish ambition & envy” ARE already in the heart of his audience. It’s not a hypothetical situation that might arise in the future. This NATURE is sadly in us.

We’re NAÏVE if we can’t discern it and take it into account.

2. BUT HERE’S THE GOODNEWS FOR THE CHRISTIAN:

What also lives in you is the “wisdom that has come down from heaven” (v. 17)

(i) It’s the WISDOM OF THE SON.

He has come down from heaven and lived wisdom among us.

Colossians 2:3 – *“In Christ are hidden ALL the treasures of wisdom & knowledge.”*

More than that, He has GIFTED His people with wisdom – by the power of His Spirit living in us.

1 Corinthians 2:16 – *“We have the MIND of Christ.”*

His Spirit lives in us to teach us the ways of wisdom

(ii) Let’s look at the NATURE of the Son’s wisdom – v. 17 - so we can discern it in our everyday decision making. We want to come from these places:

A. It’s PURE – clean / INNOCENT – there’s no selfish ambition, no jealousy.

It’s TRUE / HOLY / faithful to God & his Word

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s; and to God what is God’s”

- That’s clean wisdom Jesus displayed in a tight situation.

B. It's ways are PEACE-LOVING – It seeks to avoid strife.

Steven Cole comments: *“Purity is first, but then wisdom is peaceable. In other words, if you compromise purity for the sake of peace, you are not acting in godly wisdom. On the other hand, if you hold to purity in a contentious or cantankerous manner, you are not displaying godly wisdom, because it is peaceable.”*

C. It's CONSIDERATE – this word is sometimes translated “gentle”.

- So even if you know your decisions are of God, you're yet considerate. You hear others out. You're not haughty with your thought, as if you're one-up on others.

2 Tim. 2:24 – *The servant of the Lord must not be quarrelsome; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.*

D. Next, the wisdom of the Son is SUBMISSIVE – other translations = “reasonable” – it submits to reason:

On one occasion, Abraham Lincoln, to please a certain politician, issued a command to transfer some army regiments to another location. When Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, received the order, he refused to carry it out. He called the president a fool.

When Lincoln was told of this, he replied, “If Stanton said I'm a fool, then I must be - for he is nearly always right. I'll see for myself.” Then the two men talked, the President quickly realized that his decision was a serious mistake. Without hesitation he withdrew it.

HEAVENLY WISDOM IS SUBMISSIVE

E. Fifth, it's FULL OF MERCY & GOOD FRUIT

This refers to COMPASSION for people, even those who suffer because of their own folly. That's God's mercy.

When you have a thought that's compassionate to someone even though they're acting stupid – that's of heaven, that's of the Son.

F. 6th, IMPARTIAL & SINCERE

= no pretense; no hypocrisy – that Greek word was originally used of actors who played a part on stage that was not like what they were in person = honest & sincere

There's a story that comes from the life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes novels. He loved practical jokes & once sent a telegram to each of 12 friends - all of them respected men of society.

The telegram read, *“Flee at once, your secret is discovered.”* ... Within 24 hours, the story goes, all 12 had left the country! (Your secret is discovered!)

Impartial & sincere means no secret agendas in where you’re coming from. Heavenly wisdom comes from the CENTER of who we are. It doesn’t try to put on a show!

(iii) AND HERE’S THE PROMISE – verse 18

When we decide, speak, act out of that HUMILITY (v. 13), it produces a harvest of righteousness.

- Earthly wisdom results in confusion, division, disorder – the marks of hell
- Heavenly wisdom – the wisdom of the Son – results in righteousness on earth.

A. James describes wise-living in FARMER TERMS. It’s work – daily & ongoing sowing & reaping. Sowing the son or the self. You’ve heard that phrase:

“Sow a thought; reap an ACT.

Sow an ACT of wisdom; reap a HABIT.

Sow HABITS of wisdom in our life together; we’ll reap CHARACTER.

Sow heavenly character together; we’ll reap heaven’s DESTINY!”

= A “harvest of righteousness”

B. Sowing is work. Seeking heavenly wisdom is not always easy. But its results are worth it!
THE SON LIVES. RIGHTEOUSNESS ABOUND!

IV. CONCLUSION

1. So James is asking us to look within today:

WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM IN YOUR THOUGHTS / DECISIONS / WORDS & ACTIONS?

WHO WILL LIVE THROUGH YOUR DECISIONS – THE SELF OR THE SON?

(i) Many times those decisions are clear. Other decisions are less clear. So let me finish with a great promise – James 1:5 -

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask of God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

2. Like Solomon we pray for wisdom – and God gives generously. He will reveal wisdom's ways on earth, glorifying Jesus.

... so that we may make the choices whereby the SON LIVES, even as the self dies.

For he who loves his life, for my sake, Jesus promised, WILL FIND IT.

AMEN!