

Wisdom For “Dummies”

James 3:13-18

April 29, 2012

Introduction:

One of the great movies to come out of the 1990's was a little film starring Tom Hanks entitled *Forrest Gump*. The movie is about a young man by the name of Forrest Gump who isn't exactly the sharpest crayon in the box, if you know what I mean. Forrest is sort of a simpleton who isn't very bright, and certainly not as worldly-wise as his dear childhood friend Jenny. As Forrest and his friend Jenny grow up, they grow apart and their lives take two completely different paths.

Forrest haphazardly goes through the 1950s and 60s, almost totally clueless as to the important historical events and persons he repeatedly encounters. Yet through all the social turmoil of those years, Forrest retains his purity and innocence. The goodness of his character and kindness of his heart remain intact from beginning to end. On the other hand Jenny, his friend and later love interest, is an intelligent young woman who goes to college and eventually becomes a hippie. As time passes we watch Jenny slip into drug addiction, abusive relationships, sexual immorality, and flirtations with suicide.

As a result one can look at the movie *Forrest Gump* as a tale of two people. It contrasts the “stupid and dim-witted” character of Forrest Gump and the simple joy and richness of the life he leads with the “worldly-wise” Jenny who shipwrecks her life through sex and drugs. In the end, the movie begs the question, “Who's really the stupid one here?”

This morning, we have the same sort of question to ask ourselves. But our question is not about “stupidity” but about “wisdom”. The passage in the book of James that we'll be looking at this morning is concerned with the question, “What makes a person truly wise?” In order for us to answer that question correctly, we need to see what God would have to say to us through his servant James. So please turn open your Bibles with me to James 3:13-18 and follow along as I read from the NIV. If you don't have a Bible with you, please grab a Bible from the pew in front of you. You should be able to find our passage on pg. 855. James writes, **“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 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. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”**

As we go through this passage this morning, I think we can sum up what James would have us learn here about wisdom by altering a famous quote from the movie *Forrest Gump*. Forrest Gump famously said, “Stupid is as stupid does.” In this passage of Scripture, I think the main idea that James wants to teach us is that...

Main Idea: Wisdom is as wisdom does

Many people think wisdom is all about what you know, but James challenges his readers to see that wisdom isn't so much about what we know as it is about what we do. Wisdom ultimately is an action word. So in our first point this morning James is going to show us:

1. The nature of true wisdom (v. 13)

James begins by asking us a question in v. 13, "**Who is wise and understanding among you?**" Since James is asking let's go ahead and answer: Who here thinks they're wise and understanding? If you do, raise your hand. Nobody will think you are arrogant for doing so. They might think you are gravely mistaken, but that's another thing entirely! I would raise my hand for that question. I think I'm a pretty smart guy! I earned "A's" throughout school, I went to college and even got my Master's degree. So yeah, I think I have some wisdom and understanding.

James then lays down a challenge for those of us who think we're wise. He says, "If you think you're wise, then **let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.**" Now that's not what I was expecting. I mean, shouldn't James be asking for our school report cards or our SAT scores as proof? James, don't you see the impressive diplomas that I have hanging up in my office? Come on, James! I took Greek and Hebrew in seminary. I can even explain the ontological argument for God's existence. How many people here can do that? Doesn't that count for anything James?

No, not really. Wisdom is not about how much stuff we know. Wisdom is about what we do with the stuff we know. Perhaps you have a Masters degree or a PhD or a really high IQ. That might make you very smart, but it doesn't guarantee to make you wise. Wisdom, James says, is shown by the kind of life you lead. Wisdom is as wisdom does, and what wisdom does are **deeds done in humility.**

Note where James says humility comes from. He says that **humility... comes from wisdom.** Humility without wisdom doesn't exist. So that means if you're a boastful, arrogant person, then you don't possess wisdom, no matter what college degree or really impressive title you have.

Consider for a moment Muhammad Ali. Ali was a very intelligent man who once held the title of the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. But Ali was not wise. And I can say he wasn't wise because he didn't demonstrate any of the humility that comes from wisdom. Instead, his boastful and arrogant demeanor is legendary.

For example, there is a story told about him that once during a flight on the way to a boxing match, the aircraft ran into foul weather, and moderate turbulence began to toss it about. The passengers were accordingly instructed to fasten their seatbelts immediately. Everyone complied but Ali. Noticing this, the flight attendant approached him and requested that he

observe the captain's order, only to hear Ali audaciously respond, "Superman don't need no seatbelt." The flight attendant did not miss a beat and replied, "Well, Superman don't need no airplane either."

- Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God*, (Word Publ., Dallas: 1994), p. 7

So if you raised your hand before to affirm that you think you are wise, you need to examine yourself and ask, "Do I have the deeds done in humility to prove it?" And if you didn't raise your hand, maybe because you think you're as dumb as a brick, you might need to reconsider your answer as well. A person who never graduated from grade school can be wiser than a person with a PhD because wisdom is not shown by the kind of stuff that you know but by the kind of humble life that you lead.

Moving on now, we've talked about the nature of true wisdom, now we need to turn our attention to our second point this morning, which is...

2. The nature of false wisdom (v. 14-15)

Having shown us the nature of true wisdom, now in v. 14-15, James wants to contrast the nature of true wisdom with false wisdom. Look back at your Bibles with me at v. 14. **"But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil."**

False wisdom is easily distinguished from true wisdom because it will manifest itself differently. Whereas the nature of true wisdom is humble, the nature of false wisdom is self-centered. James mentions "**bitter envy**" in v. 14. The idea is of wanting something for yourself you don't have and growing angry as a result. He also says false wisdom is characterized by "**selfish ambition**". A person with false wisdom is concerned only with one's self and striving to get what he wants at all costs, regardless of what it does to others. In particular, as Douglas Moo points out in his commentary on this passage, "[James] is thinking of the kind of jealousy or envy that people display when other people challenge their own ideas and gain some hearing for them." (Moo 171)

False wisdom always has to be right. Have you ever met someone who always has to be right? Annoying, isn't it? It's the kind of person who always has to have the last word, who can never concede that you've made a good point or admit that some point in their argument is not a strong one. And if you challenge them too much, they get mad and take it as a personal attack. Do you know someone like that? I know someone like that - me! I fear I can be this way sometimes, although I think I've improved over the years. Sometimes when I'm discussing a theological or political issue with somebody, it's easy for me to insist on my point of view and get irritated if the other person fails to grasp the flawless beauty of my irrefutable reasoning and gifted intellect. It's hard work to try to really listen to what the other person is saying and be humble enough to admit when they've made a good point.

Well, my experience has shown me that I am not alone in this. In the majority of conversations I have where differences of opinions or positions are involved, I find people are rarely willing to listen with an open-mind or concede points the other person makes. The political realm is littered with this kind of thing. If you listen to Rush Limbaugh, you'd think that liberals are all just a bunch of touchy-feely morons without an ounce of sense in their heads. And if you read any liberal columnist or liberal news commentator, you'd think all conservatives are just dim-witted, slack-jawed religious bigots who want to turn America into a theocracy. These days it's like finding a needle in a haystack to come across someone who can discuss political matters without resorting to straw-man arguments and personal attacks!

So let me say to you guys, don't be like this! Demonstrate wisdom by having the humility to listen to other people who disagree with you. Don't just dismiss them out of hand because they're on the opposite side of whatever position you think is true. Don't immediately rush headstrong into the conversation to show them how wrong they are. Listen, really listen to what others have to say and if they make a good point, admit it! Let them know. Chances are if you show others that kind of humility, they will likely be willing to do the same for you.

Why is it so important for us to do these kinds of things? It's important because of where false wisdom comes from. James identifies the source of this kind of self-centered, argumentative "wisdom" in v. 16. He says it comes not from heaven, but rather it is "**earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.**" There is nothing righteous or spiritual about being pig-headed. That's not a virtue. We can't try to baptize our intellectual arrogance under the waters of "conviction" or "being opinionated". A haughty, arrogant, self-assured attitude is not godly: it's demonic! True wisdom that comes from God is humble; so-called "wisdom" that boasts arrogantly of how right it always is comes from the devil, not from God.

So then we've seen James contrast the humble nature of true wisdom that comes from God with false wisdom, a self-centered "wisdom" that is **earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil.** Now in the next few verses, James is going to lay out the fruit of these two types of wisdom. What are the practical results of false and true wisdom? Let's look at our third point where James talks about the fruit of false wisdom.

3. The fruit of false wisdom (v. 16)

Follow along with me in your Bibles starting at v. 16, "**For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.**" James reiterates the nature of false wisdom here by using the same words he used back in v. 14. False wisdom by nature is characterized by "**envy**" and "**selfish ambition**". When people insist on always being right and are only concerned about themselves and championing their opinions, then James says that "**there you find disorder and every evil practice.**"

This is a passage that should be a required memory verse for everyone in any type of church leadership. How many times has a church been destroyed by those who

put their own personal agendas ahead of the needs of the whole church body? Far too often I fear. Back when I was doing the job search, I was the number two guy that a church in Ohio was looking at. This church was having their first choice come out to visit, but if he didn't work out, then I was on the on-deck circle to come out to candidate next. Well, a couple of weeks later this church contacted me. The other guy did come out and the congregation voted on him. He needed 75% of the vote; he got 74%. Because it was so close, they thought they take another vote the following week, which they did. This time he only got 69% of the vote. When the voting results were announced, about half of the congregation got up in anger and walked out of the church. This group of people who left then called this pastoral candidate and told him that they had left the church and planned to start a new church and wanted to call him to be their pastor. He accepted.

While there are many things that make me sad about that situation, the thing that really gets my goat is this pastoral candidate. Why in the world didn't he chastise these people for splitting the church? The damage these self-centered people did not only to the interpersonal relationships in the church but also to the reputation of the church in that community was terrible! Yet this pastor sanctified their behavior by accepting their call to lead their new splinter group. He had the opportunity to gracefully accept the church's vote and then call these folks who walked out to repent and submit to the church's decision. But he took the route of selfish ambition which resulted in the kind of **"disorder and every evil practice"** that James writes about here in v. 16.

This is a very timely passage for us here at GBC. We've been going through plenty of changes over the past few months by being out of our building and now we are facing a whole host of new changes as we move back in. But with change often comes conflict. Not everyone is going to be in perfect agreement about the changes that have been made. So the question before us as we sit in our new remodeled church facility this morning is, "How are we going to respond to changes?" Are we going to be characterized by **"envy and selfish ambition"** when things haven't gone the way we wanted? Or are we going to demonstrate true wisdom by being humble and seeking peace?

I think we've done a fantastic job so far in how we handled our remodeling project. I haven't witnessed any kind of selfish ambition or grumpiness or bitterness about the decisions that have been made or the length of time it has taken for us to get back in here. We've rolled with the changes pretty well; our time at Locke's went about as well as I could have hoped. So great job! But now that we're back and we've had a chance to look around and see all the changes that have been made, let's be a church that continues to practice wisdom. Be kind with your words, be thankful for those who made hard decisions, and be gentle and respectful in your suggestions. There are still a host of various little decisions that are going to need to be made over the next few months – do not act out of **"envy and selfish ambition."** Show you are wise in your words and actions.

And what wisdom looks like is spelled out for us in the last two verses. James concludes this section by describing for us our fourth point this morning...

4. The fruit of true wisdom (v. 17-18)

Again, look back at what James writes in v. 17-18, **“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. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”**

If you want to know if somebody has wisdom, you don't need to give them an IQ test; all you need to do is look at the fruits of their life. James gives us a list here of some of the characteristics of a person with true godly wisdom. First he says that person is **“pure.”** He is not a corrupt or immoral person, but strives to keep himself pure in thought and deed.

Next, the person with true wisdom will be **peace-loving, considerate,** and **submissive.** These three character traits are the exact opposite of the person who is driven by **“bitter envy and selfish ambition.”** Whereas an unwise person is contentious and always trying to stir trouble, a wise person **loves peace** and makes it his goal to deal with conflict in healthy ways. Instead of always pushing his own agenda, he is **“considerate”** towards others. He listens to what others have to say and gives their viewpoint sincere consideration without interrupting them. The wise person also is **“submissive.”** He realizes that occasionally decisions won't go his way, but instead of rebelling against it, he commits himself to submit to the decision and support it to the best of his ability.

James goes on to say that wisdom from heaven is also **“full of mercy and good fruit.”** A wise person isn't quick to condemn, but is willing to extend mercy to others, realizing that he himself is the recipient of God's mercy. He demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit in his life. He also is **“impartial and sincere.”** He's not quick to give undue deference to one position and then vilify the opposing view. He has a desire to fairly consider opposing views and give sincere thought and consideration to viewpoints other than his own.

That's quite a list! So now I need to ask you, how do you measure up? If we would consider this a spiritual checklist for wisdom, how many boxes could you check off? In light of this list, how would you answer the question James asked at the beginning of this passage, **“Who is wise and understanding among you?”** Or you know what might be even better for you to do than asking this of yourself? Ask somebody who knows you really well if these traits characterize you. Our hearts can be very deceptive and sometimes we see only what we want to see about ourselves. A close friend who is willing to shoot straight with you can help you see character flaws and sinful behaviors that you may be blind to. If we want to be considered wise, these are the characteristic that need to be true of us.

Finally then, James wraps this section up in v. 18 saying, “**Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.**” The exercise of true wisdom results in peace. Wise men are peaceful men, not quick to quarrel or cause strife, but who rather devote themselves to living in harmony with others. When one strives for peace in relationships with others, then James says that such a person will “**raise a harvest of righteousness.**” Those virtues just listed by James will grow stronger in your life when you steadfastly pursue peace instead of strife. And even beyond the harvest of righteousness in your life personally, living in humility and seeking peace will have an effect on others around you. If you treat others like this, with humility and respect, sincerely listening to what they have to say, then they are likely to treat you the same way as well.

Conclusion:

So as we close this morning, I'd like to return to the character of Forrest Gump as an example of wisdom. Forrest Gump was not smart by anyone's recognizing, and that's part of the charm of his character. But although he was not smart, Forrest Gump was wise. He was wise because he lived in humility, wasn't full of selfish ambition, but was considerate, sincere, and pure towards others. While he never said it this way, I think he would agree with James that **wisdom is as wisdom does**. May each of us, as we settle into our newly remodeled facility, live as men and women who demonstrate the true wisdom of God, allowing that wisdom to bear fruit as a harvest of righteousness, all to the glory of God.

Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Brethren Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2012.