

The Question of Wisdom

James 3:13

July 21, 2024

Today we're in the book of James. So if you'd open your Bibles to James chapter 3, James chapter 3, we're continuing on in this book, and it's a new section of the book from the last time I was up here. We'll be beginning to look at the section which is in verses 13-18 of James chapter 3.

We saw, if you remember maybe a month ago or so, the first 12 verses in this chapter were on the importance and the power of the tongue, the way we speak, and the need for Christians to be in control of their tongue, to use it for the good and the growth of others, and also the glory of God.

Like every section that we've seen in James, there is a sense in which that section as well as this section is about what true and false faith looks like. There is a way that one

with true faith is in control of their communication and uses it for good, and a warning to those who do not control their tongue and not control their speech and what it might say about them.

The section we're going to begin to look at today at the end of James 3 flows naturally out of the discussion on the tongue. It does not just come out of nowhere, as many liberal scholars kind of see it. They want to take James and make it a connection of a bunch of loose teachings all compiled together and thrown together in this letter.

But that's not what it is. As we've seen in other places in the letter, there are not only connections between the two topics logically, but also with James' use of connecting vocabulary. We've talked about how James is very careful to use these connecting words to keep people from maybe coming to the assumption that this is just a bunch of random stuff thrown together. We've talked before about how James uses these linking words from section to section to help remind us that though this letter contains many different topics, he does intend for it to

be seen as a unified document of helpful, sanctifying instruction in righteousness that's all connected.

So you can see if you're looking there with your Bibles open, you can see a few of the linking words. The use of the word "bitter" in verse 14 seems to be there to specifically link to its use in verse 11. While it's a good adjective to use to describe jealousy, as it does in verse 14, it is likely chosen from other adjectives in order to link the two sections together. Remember, if you're just reading the whole letter in one sitting and not breaking it up over weeks and months, you'll have just read that word a few seconds ago when you see it again here, so you'll make that connection.

Similarly, the closing section in 1:12 uses an agricultural illustration to describe what should naturally be produced from the Christian life when it comes to our speech. And this section in 13-18 closes with a similar metaphor illustrating the natural fruit of righteousness that is the product of peacemakers who have sown in peace.

This is the type of thing that James does throughout the letter, again weaving together these similar words, phrases, metaphors to demonstrate that, yes, many different topics, but all linked together under one broader subject. Our thinking, our actions, they're to line up to help us to understand what it is to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, all coming together again to show us what one who is not double-minded looks like, what one who lives out in their life, in their actions, the same faith that they claim to have with their words.

So we see the literary linking there. But logically, it also makes sense that this section on wisdom would come directly after the section on the taming of the tongue because whether or not you have a controlled tongue, whether or not you are able to govern your conversations in a way that glorifies God, or in a way that does that forest-fire-level damage, is directly related to whether or not you possess true wisdom.

So if we had difficulty really applying the instruction from the last section on the tongue, or actually any section in James for that matter, what we're going to be looking at today

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

in this important section at the end of the third chapter might just be what we need the most in order to help us be obedient to the rest of the teaching in the book. Indeed, I can promise you that if you will dedicate yourself to striving after the wisdom that comes from God, you will not be able to help but become more sanctified in all of the other ways that we have seen in James and that we will continue to see.

So with that as an introduction, let's go ahead and read verses 13-18 of James 3 together. "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good conduct his works in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not coming down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.

"For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder in every evil practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits, without doubting, without hypocrisy. And

the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

What we see in this passage is that James is personally challenging this community on their understanding of wisdom. Notice he says in that first verse, “Who among you,” “Who among you,” indicating that he probably knows that there are people in this community who might think of themselves as wise and understanding, possibly some of their teachers and leaders, but whom he clearly seems to see as those who need to rethink that in their lives.

So in this section, he challenges them on their understanding of wisdom. And then he explains the characteristics of the two types of wisdom: the wisdom that comes from above, and wisdom that does not come from above but rather is earthly and natural and demonic. And we're going to break up this section over these next three weeks in a similar way.

Today we're going to think about what wisdom is, what wisdom is, why it's important, its value, where it comes from. And then next week we will look at earthly wisdom and what characterizes it. And finally we will look at the wisdom from above and what characterizes it.

So today we are really only going to spend our time in verse 13 and actually spend a lot of our time in other passages, flipping around to some of the important passages of Scripture that will help us to gain a more complete understanding of what James kind of expects his readers to already have in their minds.

So we're going to break this verse up today, verse 13, into two points, two main outline points: number one, the question of wisdom; number one, the application of wisdom. The question of wisdom and the application of wisdom. So point number one, the question of wisdom, and we see this right there in the literal, rhetorical question that James asks at the beginning of verse 13: "Who among you is wise and understanding?" "Who among you is wise and understanding?" He asks a question that, maybe for a

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

moment, lets people begin to consider whether or not they fall into that category, whether or not they're wise and understanding, based on their own understanding of wisdom.

And that brings up the question to us, also. And it's actually a good thing for us to think about and introduce the subject to us. How do we define wisdom? How does our culture define wisdom? What does a wise person look like?

There's a bit of a different question in our social media Internet culture than it might have been at other times in other generations, probably more so now. Back then it was an issue, too, but even maybe more so now. Many of us typically equate wisdom with some sort of superior intellect. That's the easy thing to go to, almost like a synonym for being really, really smart.

We watch YouTube videos of our favorite, you know, political commentators, or sometimes we see Christian apologists, and we watch them kind of seamlessly handle these arguments and then put the person who's questioning them to

shame, right? "That guy's wise. He knows what's going on." It's a combination of having knowledge and then wielding that knowledge, which is actually a pretty good definition if you're thinking about wielding knowledge the right way. But so often we mean how you handle that knowledge in demonstrating that you have the superior viewpoint, the superior argument.

And what is worse in our culture is that if you'd ask most people whether or not they believe themselves to be wise, they would most likely give a negative answer because everyone kind of knows that wise people don't say they're wise. They don't boast. That kind of takes away what you said.

However, because of how saturated, again, with Internet access, instant access to information, everything else out there, we live in a culture where even though no one would claim they believe they are wise, they all run around acting like it, speaking and acting with authority on subjects that they have relatively little experience in. We do it all the time. We see it all the time. We're saturated in this type of thinking.

You need only to go to the comments section of almost any post, any post, anyone you see, everywhere. It's kind of fun to read all of the experts commenting on the Trump assassination attempt this week. Just so many people know exactly what was going on, there. You see those things.

Or better yet, read the customer review section of almost any product. It's kind of funny to read a review of someone who would almost certainly not call himself wise, but nonetheless is able to give the most confident, most definitive review of a particular appliance that they've owned one time, or a Pizza Hut location that they visited once. They're just, "This is the truth. This is what's going on, here. Trust me."

It's even worse to read reviews of churches online. People feel so confident in their wisdom and understanding about how a church should be, what it should look like. They feel emboldened to lead others in not ever attending this particular one "because I, in my wisdom, have done this for you. And here you go."

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

They give no biblical warrant, no Scripture cited, just a review that gets to, again, have the same place, it gets to have the same weight as anyone else, a review from some all-knowing 22-year-old who hasn't been a part of a church in years, has only visited this particular one once, but can speak definitively about whether or not this is a good church and can confidently call others to "follow me. I have this knowledge which I've gained from, from literally hours of experience or because I read a book on the subject, or I took a class, or I read an article, or I listened to a podcast.

"I have this knowledge, and now I am ready to live it out, to live it out humbly and help others who don't have that knowledge or maybe even those poor people who have studied it way more than me, but sadly somehow still don't quite have the grasp on it that I was able to come to quite easily."

The prophet Isaiah spoke of this problem in the culture that he lived in, an issue which is only magnified here in the Internet age. In Isaiah 5:20-21, he says, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and understanding in their own sight.”

The same issue, the same problem of being wise in one's own eyes, that's always existed in humanity. It's always been there. But now, in a culture that is handcuffed to the Internet, it's able to be on display with arrogant hearts much more quickly and clearly than before. There was a time when you'd have to, you know, spend some time with a person before you could make the judgment that they're wise in their own eyes. And now you can just read a comment.

We're immersed in this today. We're a culture who is wise in our own eyes, making decisions, important decisions in life, in politics, in our interactions, in our relationships based on a totally self-contained, self-learned wisdom, so-called wisdom and understanding.

And it's not because most of us, at least most of the time, are trying to substitute darkness for light. We're not trying to

substitute sweet for bitter, but we've come to have an unearned trust in our own instincts, our own feelings, no matter how uninformed or biblically based they might be or might not be, and then we kind of live our lives accordingly.

When our wisdom and understanding that we've become pretty settled on and comfortable with gets challenged, what we typically like to do is something we call "counsel-shopping." "Oh, I don't actually know the answer to that. Let me go find someone, somewhere, who believes the same thing as me, who will back up the view that I've been comfortable with in order to keep doing what I'm doing."

We'll find someone maybe close to us, or maybe through a Google search. It doesn't matter if we know them or not as long as they can help us better articulate and excuse our own thinking and our own convictions, and answer the questions that are challenging the views that we want to keep having. Then we will defer to their wisdom, trust them, trust the one who already agrees with us. That's where we go for wisdom.

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

So before we look into what wisdom truly is, it is important for us to just step back and gain a right perspective of how immersed we have been in false understandings of wisdom and understanding, and that it is almost impossible for you to live in this culture and not have been affected in any way. In fact, if you would say that that's not the case for you, "I have lived in this culture, and I haven't been affected in any way," that sounds like someone who's wise in their own eyes. So you're in the category, too.

So looking back to our passage for today, we see that James uses the words "wise and understanding" in his question, "Who among you is wise and understanding?" And he uses those words that are often joined together in other places in the Bible in talking about wisdom. They were in the Isaiah 5 passage that I just read from. They are in many other places. They're often joined together, but they're probably used here more for the sake of emphasis.

Even though they're different words, there's a little bit of nuance that's worth pointing out. The word that is used for

“understanding,” here, this is actually the only place in the entirety of the New Testament where this particular word is used and translated as “understanding.” It's a word that means “to be skilled” or “to be well instructed” or “to be an expert on something.” So there's a little bit of overlap. And James' imperative in verse 13 is strengthened with that extra information because possessing skill or being an expert should lead to the proper application of knowledge, which is wisdom.

But in order to know the full strength of what James is saying, here, it is necessary that we know what James would have expected his audience to have in their minds about wisdom, and what it is, and where it comes from, and its value. He doesn't define wisdom, here. He merely describes what it should look like, how it should be shown. True wisdom is something that can be shown.

So we see implications of wisdom in James' answer to his rhetorical question, but it isn't defined clearly; and a big part of that probably does have to do with his audience. It's a Jewish congregation, as we've talked about before, who has a lot

more familiarity with the biblical understanding of wisdom than a typical Gentile congregation might have who are immersed in Greek philosophy. So it's important for us to make sure that we have a biblical understanding of wisdom before we get into the rest of the passage. The foundation of wisdom that he would expect to be in place in the minds of his readers is necessary for us to have also.

So necessary, in fact, that I was looking to see John MacArthur's sermons on this passage, and he used two whole sermons before he even got into verse 13, just going through the Old Testament teaching on wisdom. But everything that James says on the wisdom from above and earthly wisdom hinges on and is strengthened through really understanding what wisdom is biblically and where wisdom comes from.

Wisdom, true wisdom, comes from God. It comes from God. And I know that's not surprising, but we need to think about why is that? It's because God is wisdom. He's not merely the giver of wisdom. He is wisdom. Wisdom is not merely something that God possesses. Wisdom is who God is. It is an attribute of God. He

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

is wisdom in its perfection, in its totality. Last week in my equipping hour class, we, we talked about this a little bit when we were talking about divine simplicity. God is not the sum of his attributes. He is his attributes in perfection. Wisdom is an attribute of God.

It's not just that God, again, possesses the most wisdom; it's not merely that he is the most wise. He is all wisdom. And it's not that God created wisdom. Wisdom just exists in him. God cannot be more or less wise. He does not grow in wisdom. He doesn't become, again, wiser as time goes on. He is perfect wisdom. And anything or anyone whom we would call wise can only be so insofar as they are emulating the character of God.

So he doesn't merely see the virtue of wisdom and then apply it perfectly, whereas we can only apply it partially or finitely. Wisdom exists because God exists. It's who he is, not an ideal or virtue that he lines his character up under. So therefore, to grow in wisdom and to grow in godliness are the same thing.

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

To see this further, to help us really get a grasp on what biblical wisdom is, turn in your Bibles to Proverbs 8, Proverbs 8. It's almost Proverbs 8 and 9 because they really go together, but we're just going to go through Proverbs 8. This is one of the most famous sections of Scripture on wisdom. In Proverbs 8 and 9 we see wisdom personified. So what's going on in Proverbs 8 and 9, what's being represented by the author, is the concept of wisdom, wisdom itself being personified, describing itself and pleading with the reader to answer her call, to seek after her, to seek after wisdom.

So Proverbs 8, we'll just slowly go through this together. Proverbs 8, let's look at verses 1-11. First, "Does not wisdom call, and discernment give forth her voice? At the top of the heights upon the way where the pathways meet, she takes her stand; beside the gates at the opening to the city. At the entrance of the door, she makes a shout: 'To you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men. O simple ones, understand prudence; and O fools, understand a heart of wisdom.

“Listen, for I will speak noble things; and the opening of my lips will reveal upright things. For my mouth will utter truth; and wickedness is an abomination to my lips . . . There is nothing twisted or crooked in them. They are all straightforward to him who understands, and right to those who find knowledge. Take my discipline and not silver, and knowledge rather than choicest find gold. For wisdom is better than pearls, and all desirable things cannot compare with her.”

So here we see in this poetic chapter how God thinks of wisdom, and therefore how we ought to also. Just in these verses we see that it is the greatest thing that we can desire, according to this passage. It is upright and true; it has nothing to do with wickedness. So to seek wisdom is to simultaneously flee from evil. The discipline that wisdom requires is greater than silver. The knowledge of wisdom is greater than fine gold. It says it's better than pearls.

In fact, it says anything that you could ever desire, anything, is not even comparable with her. It's not even comparable. So it's not saying that it's just better than any of

those things. It's saying not comparable. It's not like, would you rather have \$100 cash or \$150 in gift cards, and you have to sit around and think and decide, "One of these is better than the other, which one?", where you have to think and compare. No, it's not comparable. It's like, would you rather have a million dollars or get punched in the stomach? It's like that type of comparison.

Wisdom is what we should desire above everything else. The way it talks about wisdom and our desire for it is the same way that the Bible talks about how we should desire and value God and the knowledge of God. Ah, that's the point. God is wisdom. It's what we should desire above everything else. If we desire wisdom, we desire God. The two things go together.

Verses 12 through 16: "I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion. The fear of Yahweh is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the mouth of perverted words, I hate. Counsel is mine and sound wisdom; I am understanding, might is mine. By me kings reign, and rulers mark

out righteousness. By me princes rule, and nobles, all who judge rightly.”

So here we see that with wisdom comes perfect discernment, the fear of God, and the hatred of evil. With the pursuit of wisdom, temptations to sin lose power as wisdom is pursued because as you pursue wisdom, evil is no longer something that you want to do but no, you shouldn't. But now it's something that you hate and want no part of. Pride and arrogance flee from wisdom; “the mouth of perverted words,” it says, is despised. So there's the connection to that last section in James 3. The pursuit of wisdom and bringing your speech under control go hand in hand.

It's only through the pursuit of wisdom that true and good leadership and governance take place. So those aspiring in our culture to be influencers should take heed because it's only through the pursuit of wisdom that righteous leadership, righteous influence, takes place. If you pursue wisdom rather than influence, you will have both. If you pursue influence apart from wisdom, you will only bring about destruction.

Continuing on, verse 17, "I love those who love me; and those who earnestly seek me will find me. Riches and glory are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness. My fruit is better than fine gold, even pure gold, and my produce better than choice silver. I walk in the path of righteousness, in the midst of the pathways of justice, to give those who love me an inheritance of wealth, that I may fill their treasuries."

So here we see the promise of wisdom and the blessings of wisdom. Those who love wisdom will be loved by wisdom. In other words, love of wisdom results in receiving the benefits of wisdom. Those who earnestly seek wisdom will find wisdom. Notice, wisdom is found by those who earnestly seek. That means that they put an effort into it. It's hard. You, you dig for it, as other passages in Scripture talk about it. You work for it.

It's more than reading one article. It's more than listening to one podcast, watching one infomercial when you can't sleep. You don't just have it when you visit a church one time or think you have a good perspective on how church should

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

work because you've seen it done in a way that worked for you, even if you haven't really bothered to talk to anyone else or a pastor about it, even if you can't make a biblical case. You may have an opinion, but don't confuse that with wisdom.

It says, “In wisdom lie riches and glory, fruit that is better than gold, better than choice silver. Those who love wisdom have their treasuries filled and are given an inheritance of wealth.” And while wisdom will certainly have applications for physical wealth, I mean you're more likely to have more money if you're wise, this clearly isn't speaking merely of physical wealth, because it says that its fruit, its produce, is better than silver and gold. It's better than silver and gold. So not only is wisdom more valuable than riches, what it produces is more valuable for you than riches.

And then bringing us back to what is the source of wisdom, look at verses 22-31: “Yahweh possessed me at the beginning of his way, before his deeds of old. From everlasting I was installed, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth. When there were no depths, I was brought forth, when

there were no springs heavy with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills I was brought forth; while he had not yet made the earth and the fields outside, nor the first dust of the world.

“When he established the heavens, I was there, when he marked out a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when the springs of the deep became strong, when he set for the sea its boundary so that the water would not pass over his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth; then I was beside him, as a master workman; and I was a daily delight, rejoicing always before him, rejoicing in the world, his earth, my delight is in the sons of men.”

So here we see exactly what we were just talking about earlier, that wisdom exists in God. It is present during creation. To avoid confusion, it does say, “‘From everlasting I was installed.’” So the idea is, once again, that wisdom has always been present in God. When it says, here, that it was “brought forth,” wisdom was brought forth during the creation of the earth, it's because, though it is everlasting, though it is

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

always in God, even before creation, wisdom can only be seen, can be shown in the action of God.

In his creation, we can now see the wisdom of God as his sovereign power works out his perfect knowledge in creation. So though wisdom has existed perfectly and eternally in God, it was not possible for it to be made known or to be shown until God's action. And that is very helpful for us to keep in mind because action and not mere intellect, that is important when it comes to the accurate definition of wisdom that our passage in James requires.

So when it comes to thinking of a good definition for the wisdom of God coming out of Proverbs 8 and other passages that we don't have time to go to, but how we're to think about what we just read, rather than making up my own definition, I was tremendously helped by definition that Joel Beeke gave. Let me read it to you.

"What then is God's wisdom? It is that aspect of the divine life by which God is infinitely skilled to create the world and

rule it well as its righteous Lord. Wisdom is the riches of God's royal intelligence by which he directs all things to his glory, even using the unbelief of some people for the salvation of others. Wisdom is God's infinite knowledge at the service of his holy will."

"Wisdom is God's infinite knowledge at the service of his holy will." We are to see the perfect wisdom of God on display as all that he has created perfectly and precisely accomplishes that which it was created for, in order to bring about the perfect end that he has desired to ordain.

And as we observe this and think about all that is being said here, and the purpose of Proverbs 8 and 9 to drive us toward a desire for that wisdom as well, look at how this chapter ends. "So now, O sons, listen to me, for blessed are they who keep my ways. Hear discipline and be wise, and do not neglect it. How blessed is the man who hears me, to watch daily at my doors, to keep watch at my doorposts. For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from Yahweh. But he who sins

against me does violence to his own soul; all those who hate me love death.”

So this attribute of God that exists in him perfectly, through which he has brought everything into existence, fulfilling its perfect purpose, wisdom, this same wisdom, beckons us to pursue it, to seek it out. This is the key to the blessed life. In fact, we're told that if we find wisdom, to find wisdom is to find life and to obtain favor from God. But to reject wisdom, to hate wisdom, is to love death. So we should leave a passage like Proverbs 8 with a desire to somehow be able, oh, if we only could tap into the wisdom of God, to be able to have this unbelievable treasure, at least in some measure ourselves. So how do we do that? Where do we go?

Well, Proverbs 4:7 says, “The beginning of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom, and with all your acquiring, acquire understanding.” Again, we see wisdom and understanding linked, but the point, here, is that it's a command. A command: “Get it. Get wisdom. Acquire it.” It's not something that just happens to

you. It's something that you go after. The CSB renders it this way: "Wisdom is supreme—so get wisdom."

Just because you are getting older doesn't mean you are necessarily getting wiser. Very sad. Even though the Bible often links age with wisdom, it doesn't just mean it automatically happens. The life lived in pursuit of wisdom is the one who grows in wisdom as they grow in age.

This brings us to an important question, a critical question that we all need to ask ourselves. Do we really desire wisdom? Do we really desire wisdom? Do we really want it? If we desire it the way that we are implored to in Proverbs 8, if we really believe that this is the key to the blessed life, this is the key to obtaining favor with God, that to reject wisdom is akin to loving death, if we really believe that, if we really want it, then it stands to reason that we would be willing to work for it, to discipline ourselves toward that end, to dig, to search.

GRACE CHURCH

Grace

The problem is that most of us, if we're honest, we don't really want it as bad as we might say we do, or as this passage indicates we should. We aren't really willing to put in the effort. Of course, we'll say that we want it. We'd sound even more foolish if we said we didn't. But in truth, when we say we want wisdom, most of us mean it something like we want wisdom the same way we want a birthday present. "I'm excited for it. Give it to me."

But when we're told it actually requires some effort, some discipline, we I find that we maybe don't actually want it that much. Now we'll just say, "Tell me more about this present. Is it worth the effort?" If we're honest, most of us aren't necessarily pursuing wisdom so much as we are just trying to do enough to not be foolish. There's a difference.

It's usually less important for us to be seen as wise than it is for us to just not to be seen as fools. That speaks even more to our pride, more to our arrogance. No one likes that feeling of being in a conversation, not knowing what everyone

else is talking about, so we maybe guard what we say, try and make a joke, just nod our heads.

We tend to treat biblical wisdom the same way, not so much pursuing it. "Only if the occasion requires am I going to put some effort into this." Not so much pursuing it, but just wanting to make sure we're not foolish. So, "I need to know enough so that I can kind of sound like I know what I'm doing here in this Christian life," or "I'm embarrassed that, you know, something was brought up. My kid asked a question that I don't know the answer to, don't know how to respond to it. So I'm going to look into it enough that I'm no longer a fool about this particular thing."

But we're called to acquire wisdom and not merely to rid ourselves of foolishness. Do you really desire wisdom? Is this something you actually long for? Do you believe what the Bible says about it? Do you really believe what the Bible says about it, or do you not?

I'm going to move on in the assumption that we do, but make sure you go back to this question throughout the week as you prepare to study the rest of this chapter. Maybe work through Proverbs 8 and 9 again. Look at other passages on wisdom. Really challenge yourself, "Do I really believe the Bible on this? It's pretty clear how valuable wisdom is. And is that evident in the effort I'm putting into it in my life?"

So we are to actively go after wisdom, but where is it found? Well, we know the answer to that. James 1:5 tells us if we pray, we pray to God. If we lack wisdom, we pray, we ask God. Proverbs 2:6 says, "For Yahweh gives wisdom," Yahweh gives wisdom, "for from his mouth come knowledge and discernment."

Turn to another passage in Job, more of the wisdom literature. Job 28, starting in verse 12, where Job asks this same question. Job 28, starting in verse 12: "But where can 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.'

"Pure gold cannot be given in place of it, nor can silver be weighed as its price. It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in the precious onyx or sapphire. Gold or glass cannot meet its worth, nor can it be exchanged for articles of fine gold. Coral and crystal are not to be mentioned; and the acquisition of wisdom is above that of pearls. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot meet its worth, nor can it be valued in pure gold.

"Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? Thus it is hidden from the eyes of all the living and concealed from the birds of the sky. Abaddon and Death say, 'With our ears we have heard a report of it.'"

So you see a lot of the similarities in Proverbs 8. We see that nothing is valuable enough to purchase wisdom. "God understands," verse 23, "God understands its way, and he knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he set weight to the wind and meted out the waters by measure, when he set a limit for the

rain and a course for the thunderbolt, then he saw it and recounted it; he established it and also searched it out. So he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to turn away from evil is understanding.'"

The fear of the Lord is wisdom for us, beloved, and the corollary, "to turn away from evil is understanding." Both things go together. Wisdom equals the fear of the Lord. The way that we gain wisdom is through the fear of the Lord. This is a common refrain of Scripture. This is something that would have been present in the minds of the original readers of James as they heard our passage read.

It's all over Scripture. Psalm 111:10: "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom." Proverbs 1:7: "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of knowledge. Ignorant fools despise wisdom and discipline." Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."

One who fears the Lord will be wise. The fear of the Lord means that he is the one whom you regard above all else. It's

not necessarily a physical fear that keeps you always walking around scared that he might smite you at any time, but it's not actually as disconnected from that idea as a lot of people tend to make it. They quickly dismiss it. "That's not what God means by fear of the Lord. Don't be scared he's going to kill you."

The fear of the Lord is actually directly connected to the fact that he could, that he can, that this is the God who holds all things under his sovereign control, understanding that he is ultimate over all. He is eternal and all powerful, and anything and everything that is of any true meaning, any true importance, is from him, is of him. He is the sovereign Creator and King over the entirety of his creation, and he has spoken, and he has given us instruction.

The right response to these truths should be an appropriate fear of the Lord and the beginning of wisdom. This fear of the Lord will of course lead to walking in wisdom because it has been said, and I'm not actually sure who originally said this, but "If you fear the Lord, you will fear nothing else." If you fear the Lord, you will fear nothing else. And if that is in

fact the case, then his pleasure and joyful, grateful obedience to him will direct your life and your day-to-day decisions, and you will be walking in wisdom.

If the fear of the Lord directs your life and your decisions, you will be walking in wisdom. And this is, again, just kind of scratching the surface of the Old Testament revelation of what wisdom is, where it comes from, how to gain it. We could go to a lot more places, but for now, this will suffice.

This concept of fearing the Lord as the beginning of wisdom leads us nicely into our concluding point, here. So you can flip back to James now, as we look again at verse 13. We see that James gives an instruction for the one who might think that they could maybe hear that question, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" And then maybe, "It's me." It gives instruction for that person. "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good conduct his works in the gentleness of wisdom."

Just as he has argued previously that true faith must be seen, so, too, wisdom is something that must be shown. Any claim that one might have to wisdom should be seen in the life and demeanor of that person. The one who is wise and understanding isn't the one who has the most knowledge. It's not the one who can answer the most questions. It's not the one who gives the best advice, even, or the one who can just silence his opposition.

It's the one whose life proves it. The word translated as "conduct" here, the word *anastrophe*, is a word that refers not just to an event in one's life, but how they are always behaving. That's what "conduct" is, here. It could also be translated as, and it is in some places, as "way of life." The idea is that the person with wisdom should be able to show it through a lifestyle that is marked with good works that are done in the gentleness of wisdom, not just pointing to a certain time when they did a good work, or maybe even a few of them, but a life that is lived in them. "Oh, you think I'm not wise? But remember that one time when I did that one wise thing?"

Because wisdom has its source in God and therefore any time we do anything that is in line with his decreed will, we act wisely. That's not the same as being wise. It's a lifestyle of wisdom. It's possible for us to make wise decisions that we feel good about and that are maybe right without falling into the category of one who is wise and understanding.

Don't get confused on that. A truly wise and understanding person lives this life of good works in the gentleness of wisdom. They don't have to answer the question: "Yes, I am wise and understanding." It's just evident to those who are around them. Since biblical wisdom can only be seen in a lifestyle, this means that we notice this. This is important. This means that we really can't describe many of the people who have a great influence in our lives as wise. They may be wise, but we don't really have enough evidence. We don't have all the facts we need to know for sure that they are.

Again, in this media-saturated society, a lot of the people who have the most influence on our lives are people whose lives you've never actually seen. You may see little snippets. They

might say a lot of things that sound wise. They're polished and edited and thrown on YouTube. But we really can't know with any certainty if we're really receiving counsel from the wise. Maybe we can measure their words against Scripture and see if the words have wisdom in them.

But this leads us to the point that if we're going to actually follow wise counsel, the primary influences in our lives will be those whom we know and whose lives we are able to observe. The only way we can be certain that we are receiving the counsel of the wise is if we can see their lives. Proverbs 13:20: "He who walks with the wise will be wise." Walking with the wise is different than just seeking out wise advice to follow.

Since wisdom has to do with actions and lifestyle, the only way to truly gain wisdom, not just wise advice but to gain wisdom, is to watch and imitate a lifestyle. We gain actual wisdom from others by looking at how they live and imitating them, not merely applying advice every once in a while. Again, we may be able to Google an answer from our favorite online

pastor or website, and it may even be helpful, and it may even be based in wisdom. But if we truly desire wisdom and not just occasional good advice, not just help, not just Bible answers, then it will lend to the practice of walking with the wise. A Google answer might help you in a moment, but it won't help you to live in such a way that those desperate moments when you need advice come around less and less and less. Only wisdom can do that.

Hebrews 13:7: "Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you, and considering the result of their conduct," same word as our passage, "imitate their faith." Look at their life. Imitate it. This makes so much sense because the reason we need wisdom is because we know we are going to go through times of difficulty and trials. That's been clear as we've looked at James. Those times are coming.

God has ordained those times for us. If everything in life were easy, we wouldn't actually need wisdom if you think about it. But true wisdom will be on display the most and is most evident in a believer during times of trial. And it is also the

time when wisdom is most needed. So as you watch the life of a God-fearing man or woman as he or she endures a trial or goes through a time of testing, you learn wisdom. "He who walks with the wise, will be wise."

So wisdom is shown in a lifestyle of good works; and these works, if they come from true wisdom, we're told, will be gentle. True wisdom is described as gentle. It bears the marks of meekness. Again, this would run counter to the beliefs of those in the surrounding Greco-Roman culture and many in our day who believe that meekness is a sign of weakness.

Probably true for us a little bit, where it can be easily thought that someone who's truly wise, that leads to power. Wisdom leads to owning someone else in an argument, or maybe not the goal, but certainly a byproduct of wisdom is making someone else look like they're less than you, almost like this confident arrogance as you dismiss the foolish arguments around you. If the opposite of wisdom is foolishness, then the understanding is that the one who is putting the fool in his place, he's the one who's wise.

But according to this verse, gentleness is an essential characteristic of wisdom. In fact, there is no wisdom apart from gentleness. Where there is no meekness, there is no wisdom. Wisdom is seen not in responding to that which is harsh with that which is devastating, but responding to that which is harsh with that which is soft and kind.

One commentator pointed out that "one who is truly wise will have a constant disposition in their relationship with others of being giving and forgiving." That's just the constant, that's the air you breathe. That's how you walk. Giving to those around them, quickly forgiving those who offend them, this is the true mark of wisdom.

This is different than being timid or shy, which is how we often think of meekness. It takes real strength to live like this because it requires a great amount of discipline, a great amount of self-control to not respond and live the way you are naturally inclined to live, which is not gentle, just self-seeking.

Gentleness is a constant mark of the Christian life throughout the Bible. Galatians 6:1: "Brothers, even if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." Ephesians 4:1-2: "Therefore, I, the prisoner of the Lord, exhort you to walk worthy of the calling which you have been called with all humility and gentleness."

Colossians 3:12: "So as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Titus 3:1-2: "Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to slander no one, to be peaceable, considerate, demonstrating all gentleness to all men."

Finally, in 1 Peter 3:14-15 we read, "But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their fear, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a

defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you." Make a defense, "yet with gentleness and fear."

In Matthew, we shouldn't be surprised by this, in Matthew 11:29, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is wisdom incarnate, described himself as "gentle and humble in heart." So in light of these things, it makes total sense that true wisdom is marked by gentleness. Someone who is not described as gentle cannot also be described as wise.

We should not be surprised about any of this since it is the fear of Lord that is the beginning of wisdom. One who fears the Lord is one who knows his place, one who understands that the justice of a holy, sovereign God should have him spending eternity under the terrible wrath of God, and having been spared this through Christ Jesus, and knowing that, carrying that around with you all the time, it should be impossible to not be someone who is marked by gentleness.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. True wisdom is something that is lived out, that is seen, that is

shown. It's demonstrated in a lifestyle marked by good works and the gentleness of wisdom. And that'll lead us over the next two weeks into the body of the passage, which will show us just what type of living is connected to what type of wisdom.

But as we prepare for those verses, be asking yourselves this week, "Do I truly desire wisdom?" Look at some of these verses again. Is that really your heart's desire, enough so that you're willing to sacrifice for it, that you're willing to put in effort for it? Let's think about those things this week, beloved.

Father, we thank you so much for your Word, for what it shows us: the manifold wisdom of God put into words for us to read. Lord, I pray that this church would be one that pursues wisdom, that each of us would, each of us individually, we would have a desire to pursue wisdom and that corporately, it would be seen that that is our desire, that we might spur one another on towards this wonderful pursuit.

GRACE CHURCH

Greeley

I pray that you would now help us as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table, that we would think well about Christ, the wisdom and power of God, that we would think well about that: Christ, the wisdom and power of God on display on the cross, and the unbelievable wisdom of God that we see in the Gospel, the mercy of God, the justice of God perfectly on display for our good and your glory, that that would be on our mind as we head into communion, now. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.