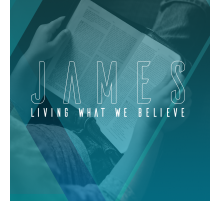


DISCUSSION GUIDE :: SESSION 6

LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE
THE WORK THAT WISDOM DOES
JAMES 3:13-18
03/05/2017



MAIN POINT

Wisdom produces good fruit that will bring about peace.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

How would you define “wisdom”? When you think of someone wise, who comes to mind? Why?

Why is wisdom an important attribute for a Christian? What should we do if we feel that we aren’t very wise?

Is intelligence the same thing as wisdom? If not, what is the difference?

In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit because they saw “it was desirable for obtaining wisdom” (Gen. 3:6). Their quest for wisdom ended in folly because it went against God’s law. To be a wise person, we must seek to gain understanding by following and acting in accordance with God’s will for us.

If wisdom is an essential characteristic of every Christian, then we need to have a good understanding of what wisdom is and what wisdom does. Wisdom is the ability to discern the best course of action in a situation, not only for ourselves, but also for others. Wisdom is not interested in the easiest or most pragmatic solution for life’s challenges; it seeks the course of action that will bring the most glory to God and the best for our fellow man. These verses in James will help us to understand the essence of wisdom, and they will demonstrate that wisdom doesn’t just know the right path to take, it also acts upon that knowledge.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 3:13-14.

What does it mean to be gentle? How does gentleness relate to wisdom?

Is it easy to confuse showing our good works with a works-based understanding of salvation? Why do Christians need to show good works through wisdom if works don’t save us?

How is wisdom the opposite of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition?

Jesus told us, "The gentle are blessed, for they will inherit the earth." We know that if we wish to inherit the earth with Christ, then we must be a gentle people. James links being gentle with being wise because the wise understand the difficulties of life. Wise people know temptation, they understand why people make mistakes and why people sin, and they know the pain it brings. Wisdom empathizes with the hurting. When wise people conduct themselves well, they know it is because of God's grace and not because of their own cunning. This is why wisdom leads us to humility and not into pride.

We can also see that James believes wisdom to be the opposite of jealousy and selfish ambition. Wisdom, by its nature, works for the good of others and not just for the good of self. A wise person gives counsel to others for their good, not just to manipulate them to their own ends. A wise person serves others out of the joy of service, not because he or she expects payment in return. When we live such lives of "good conduct," others will take note of it.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 3:15-16.

How does wisdom bring order instead of chaos? How do selfish ambition and envy bring disorder to a community?

What do you think James means by "such wisdom" being "demonic"? What do you think he means by it being "earthly"? What is the difference in earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom?

The world teaches us to take what we can get, but Jesus teaches us to give our very lives away in service to others. Foolish people envy the possessions and talents of others because they cannot find contentment in what God has given them. Because of this jealousy, the foolish will seek to acquire what rightfully belongs to others, whether it is money or prestige or even another person's spouse! It is no wonder that such earthly wisdom brings with it "every kind of evil".

Earthly wisdom is 'demonic' in that it copies the same sort of foolishness we see in the demons themselves. Their works are at odds with the works of God, and instead of seeking to bring God glory, they seek to bring about their own glorification. We can see this in action in Satan's temptation of Jesus. "The Devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. And he said to Him, 'I will give You all these things if You will fall down and worship me.'" (Matthew 4:8-9). When we seek our own selfish ambition, we act demonically.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 3:17-18 AND ANOTHER READ GALATIANS 5:22-23.

Why would an unwise person be unable to bear the fruits of the Spirit? How do the wise bring peace to a difficult situation?

What does it mean to be compliant? Is compliance seen as a strong trait in our culture? Why or why not?

Why is it important for a wise man not to show favoritism? Why are the wise merciful?

If wisdom results in making peace, how was Christ's death on the cross an expression of wisdom?

Jesus taught us, "The peacemakers are blessed, for they will be called Sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Proverbs teaches us that "the tongue of the wise brings healing" and that "a wise man's instruction is a fountain of life, turning people away from the snares of death" (Proverbs 12:18, 13:14). A wise person is also able to receive and learn from instruction. "A wise heart accepts commands, but foolish lips will be destroyed" (Proverbs 10:8). So the wise are compliant and quick to receive instruction from others. Wise men and women bring peace and instruction and life through their counsel and actions. If we are unwise, we will bring strife and promote ignorance, this is why the foolish cannot bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit.

If you ever had to go to court, wouldn't you hope that your judge would be wise? A wise judge is impartial because he or she sees knows that favoritism can blind us to justice. A wise judge is merciful because wisdom knows how easy it is to fall into folly, and a wise person knows that through Christ people can repent and be changed.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Since we have seen the many ways in which wisdom is essential to our Christian character, shouldn't we pray each day for God to gift us with wisdom?

If wisdom is about action, how can we act wisely in our families? Among our friends? While at our jobs?

When we lose our temper, we ought to know that we have acted unwisely. Let us pray that God will grant us wisdom so we may be peace-loving and gentle.

PRAY

Offer a time for group members to pray aloud, thanking God for salvation through Jesus Christ. Ask for the Lord to show us ways in which we have behaved unwisely, and ask for the Father to be generous in showering us with the gift of wisdom. Ask the Father to help us be a people known for actions that bring about peace and reconciliation in the lives of others. Thank the Father for giving us Jesus Christ who made peace for us through the blood of His cross.

COMMENTARY

JAMES 3:13-18

3:13. James 3:2–12 presents shortcomings of the tongue to which teachers and all individuals are vulnerable. 3:13–18 reminds us of our need to demonstrate genuine wisdom. The words particularly apply to aspiring teachers, but they have relevance to all believers.

The opening rhetorical question asks how we can show that we have wisdom. Wise refers to someone with moral insight and skill in deciding practical issues of conduct. Understanding pictures someone with the knowledge of an expert. We are to show the presence of wisdom by good deeds practiced with humility. Only obedient deeds, not mere talk, prove the presence of wisdom.

Humility refers to a submissive spirit opposed to arrogance and self-seeking. The person with humility is not a doormat for the desires of others, but controls and overpowers the natural human tendency to be arrogant and self-assertive. Non-Christian Greeks felt that this type of humility was a vice. Christianity made meekness into a virtue. "Meek" in Matthew 5:5 is the adjectival form of the noun translated here as humility. Jesus promised the "meek" they would inherit the earth. Jesus meant a believer who relates to God with dependence and contentment will reap God's abundant blessings.

3:14. Bitter envy and selfish ambition prove that a person is following the route of false wisdom. Envy describes a determined desire to promote one's opinion to the exclusion of the opinions of others. Selfish ambition pictures a person who tries to promote a cause in an unethical manner. This person becomes willing to use divisive means to promote a personal viewpoint. Bitter rivalries develop out of these practices.

James warned that people who had envy and selfish ambition could boast about it or deny the truth. Boasting describes the malicious triumphant attitude gained by one party over its opponents. Those who choose to deny the truth can end up rejecting the truth of the gospel. Envy of Jesus led the religious leaders to deny his person and power and to plot his death (John 11:47–53).

3:15. This verse uses three adjectives to describe the distinctive traits and source of false wisdom. First, negatively, false wisdom does not come from heaven or from God. Its source is earthly. It belongs to the way of life of this world. Second, false wisdom is unspiritual, belonging to the natural world and not to the supernatural world. It comes from the mental and emotional ideas of fallen human beings. Unfortunately, we Christians are too often guilty of using this twisted wisdom. Finally, this false wisdom is of the devil. Satan uses it to corrupt relationships.

3:16. The results of envy and selfish ambition are disorder and every evil practice. Disorder describes an experience of anarchy and disturbance. Such disarray affects private relationships between Christians and public meetings of believers. Every evil practice pictures an evil from which no good can come. People who cater to selfish ambition need never expect to develop any fruit which is godly, righteous, or helpful to others.

False wisdom promotes self-assertion and independence. It destroys a spirit of mutual concern. Where Christians “do their own thing” instead of caring for one another, a community of support and mercy can disintegrate (see 1 Cor. 1:10–17). Paul outlined a solution for this epidemic of selfish living, telling us to look out for “the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4).

3:17. True wisdom is free from self-interest and strife. This verse lists eight traits or characteristics of true wisdom. The first is purity. People with true wisdom are pure in that they have put aside the vices of a self-seeking nature and factionalism. This trait provides the secure foundation for all that follows.

The following five traits show the attitude of true wisdom toward other people. Peace-loving means it demonstrates a desire to promote peace between struggling factions. Considerate refers to being reasonable in the demands it makes on others. Submissive indicates a willingness to learn from others by being open to reason. Full of mercy is revealed by offering compassion to those in distress. Full of good fruit is shown by kind actions and helpful deeds to others.

The final two traits describe the essential nature of true wisdom in itself. It is impartial, without prejudice and unwavering in its commitments. True wisdom is sincere, genuine and open in its approaches to others. Jesus particularly showed his genuineness in his dialogues with Pilate (John 18:33–37).

3:18. Verse 18 concludes this section with a description of the effects of true wisdom. True wisdom results in a harvest of righteousness, that is, a conformity to God’s will. True wisdom also lets one experience peace, the enjoyment of harmonious relationships between human beings.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

James 4:1-6