

SERMON

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

*Live Well, Live Wisely*  
 September 23, 2018  
 James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a  
 Rev. Dr. Thomas P. Groome III

An angel appears at a faculty meeting and tells the dean that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, the Lord will reward him with his choice of infinite wealth, wisdom or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selects infinite wisdom.

"Done!" says the angel, and disappears in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning. Now, all heads turn toward the dean, who sits surrounded by a faint halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispers, "Say something."

The dean looks at them and says, "I should have taken the money."  
*Betsy Devine and Joel E. Cohen, Absolute Zero Gravity, Simon & Schuster.*

Do you want to be counted as wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? I cannot imagine anyone saying no to this question. Who doesn't want to be wise? Only a fool would say no. James gives us a hint on how to build that reputation for wisdom. He says, live well, live wisely, and live humbly. Pretty simple, wouldn't you say? Well, easier said than done.

The one way in which expression is given to wisdom is through what we say. The advice of James is, "Christian, when you speak, manifest the meekness of the One who indwells in you." *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth* (Matt. 5:5). A missionary in Jamaica questioned some boys on the meaning of this Beatitude and asked, "Who are the meek?" One young boy answered, "Those who give soft answers to rough questions." The one who has wisdom in his head and heart does not need to shout at others. Wisdom speaks softly and persuasively, instead of impelling and forcing. By what comes out of our mouths, people will know whether we are wise or not.

There's an old adage that goes like this . . . Never wrestle with a pig. You'll get dirty . . . and the pig likes it.

The word translated "meekness" in the Greek [*praute*] can also mean humility. Meekness is more than gentleness of manner. It is the ability to turn to God and thank God when we are unjustly treated by others. It is the ability to thank God when we have been stepped on and humiliated by others. It is the ability to thank God when life seems so unfair. When everything goes wrong and troubles abound and we can still go about our duties in life without revolting against God, against wisdom, then we are possessed with this wonderful meekness of wisdom.

Live well, live wisely, and live humbly.

Mean spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. In fact, James says it's the furthest thing from wisdom.

Words are very useful things, but they certainly can cause a great deal of confusion. There's always certain subjectivity in their use. This is demonstrated here in James's discussion about wisdom. There are two people who have it, and the wisdom that they have originates in two different places.

On one hand, there's the wisdom from above. James speaks of God as the giver of all good and perfect gifts. These gifts come from above, because that is where God's dwelling place is said to be. Don't get me wrong here, I'm not trying to limit God to any particular place or location.

A philosopher once asked a Christian, "Where is God?" The Christian answered, "Let me first ask of you, where is God not?" Indeed, God is everywhere. We speak of God as dwelling high above us in order to show that we recognize that God is in a position to watch all of us at the same time, and that we cannot of ourselves receive anything higher than we are, unless it comes from above . . .from God.

On the other hand, there is false wisdom. This false wisdom is not from God, but is a product of humanity. It is not God-made or God-given. It produces envy and strife and resentment. Unfortunately a great deal of people believe in the kind of Christianity that enables people to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. This is the tendency of new age Christianity—it tells us we are inherently good, that goodness, righteousness, and salvation are within us, and that all we need to do is develop these qualities and everything will be all right. This type of "feel good" Christianity speaks of salvation, but it is an earthly salvation. It speaks of wisdom, but it is an earthly wisdom. It says it begins with ourselves and ends with ourselves.

True wisdom, true salvation, as taught in the Holy Scriptures, which is the revelation of God to us, is something that is found outside ourselves. It is something that comes from above and is beyond the physical world which can be perceived by our physical senses.

Has your wisdom descended from above? If it has, it must have brought you happiness and joy. If your wisdom is from below, it is no wonder that you keep looking for material things to fill your hearts with peace and joy and happiness. If your wisdom is heavenly your eyes will be fixed upward, but if it is earthly, your eyes will be bent toward the earth.

We have so much knowledge, yet many of us are floundering. We can send men and women into space for months at a time, yet we cannot feed and clothe everyone.

The suicide rate has sky-rocketed in last few decades. For children ages 10-14 the suicide rate has tripled in the last 10 years. Over the past couple of decades our divorce rates have soared, even within the church, with 1 of 2 marriages ending in divorce. Since 1900 the divorce rate has increased well over 100%.

Our families are riddled with all kinds of abuses and aberrations.

*So, “where are we?” you ask. “Where are we now and where are we going?” Let me tell you where we are and what we are. We are a nation of empty people. Our heads are crammed full of knowledge, but our souls are a spiritual vacuum.*

*We complain about the youth in our country, about how they have lost their drive, their push, and their willingness to work and to get ahead. We cannot understand why our children don’t want to work, but just want everything handed to them on a silver platter. We cannot seem to understand that our well educated, carefully brought up children are actually empty inside. They aren’t filled with the spirit that makes work a joy. They aren’t filled with the determination that makes pushing ahead a pleasure.*

*And why are they so empty? Because they don’t know where they come from, why they are here, or where they are going! Our young people today are asking, no I take that back, our young people today are screaming for direction and perspective. They are looking for models to follow, for patterns of purpose.*

*Our young people are like rows of beautiful new automobiles, perfect in every detail, but with no gas in the tanks. Their exteriors are fine, but there’s nothing inside to give them power. And so they just sit and rust—with boredom.*

Taken from *Peace With God* by Billy Graham, Word Publishing, Nashville, TN. 1984.

If we say we have the wisdom of God and are consequently pure in heart, we must act in a prescribed way. The world has no way to observe our vertical relationship (between us and God), but by observing our horizontal relationships it bears certain conclusions as to our vertical relationship with God.

James speaks of the fruit of salvation is not the outside peace of the world, but an inner spiritual tranquility. It is for this peace that our hearts have longed for. In the early days of Israel we have the benediction in Numbers 6 *the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.* And where can we secure this peace that humanity has longed for throughout the ages? Jesus gives us the answer in the gospel of John. *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.* This is the peace that comes with the forgiveness of sin and that brings calm to our souls, even amid the storms that sweep over our lives.

When you have peace with God, then peace with our neighbors follows. One follows the other. But it is peace with God that must come first. The meaning of what James has in mind was beautifully expressed by St. Francis of Assisi in a prayer for peace:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace!  
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
 Where there is injury, pardon;  
 Where there is doubt, faith;  
 Where there is despair, hope;  
 Where there is darkness, light;  
 Where there is sadness, joy.  
 O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
 To be consoled, as to console;  
 To be understood, as to understand;  
 To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;  
 It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
 It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating others with dignity and honor.

*The Message*. Eugene H. Peterson. NAVPRESS, Colorado Springs, CO, 1993.

We have become a people who are governed by our passions and our pleasures and they have the power to deceive us. We set our hearts on something that we suppose will produce pleasure. We set our hearts on having a beautiful home, a luxurious automobile. We acquire these things in hope that it will give us pleasure, that it will make us happy. And all we find is that material things do not give us pleasure, they only create more and more emptiness. But peace with God makes us happy and gives our hearts and souls all the pleasure we'll ever need and more.

Charles Kingsley once said, "If you wish to be miserable, think about yourself; about what you want, what you like; what respect people ought to pay you; and then to you nothing will be pure. You will spoil everything you touch; you will make misery for yourself out of everything good; you will be wretched as you choose."

God does not want to make us miserable giving us things that we intend to use selfishly. The wise sage in the Book of Proverbs put it succinctly, *Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need, or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, "Who is the LORD?" or I shall be poor, and steal, and profane the name of my God* (Proverbs 30:8,9).

Live well, live wisely, and live humbly.

Do these things and true wisdom and peace will fill your hearts and your minds with those things that are "from above."

### Sources:

Harper Collins Bible Commentary, James L. Mays, Editor. San Francisco, CA, 2000.  
 The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 1991.

The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.