

James: Faith / Works - Sermon 7: Foolishness / Wisdom

July 10, 2016

Try to picture in your mind the wisest person you know. Other than me; I don't want you all to fixate on me. (That's humor) Think of the wisest person you know... Now, what makes you choose that person? I hope you're not just thinking of the smartest person you know. There are lots of really smart people who live really stupidly. We're talking about wise, not smart. Think of the wisest person you know. Now ... why do you consider them wise? How do they talk, how do they act, how do they live that makes you consider them wise? The point is: wisdom is observable. It is more than just being smart, it is the ability to live well.

On the other hand, if wisdom is observable, the lack of wisdom is too. If you were to dig around in a thesaurus or a dictionary for the antonym of wise you'd find words like stupid, or idiotic, or foolish, or knucklehead. Have you ever known any really, really smart people who are just knuckleheads? Have you ever known any really smart people who live stupidly, who make a lot of stupid choices? You see, stupidity is just as observable as wisdom is.

Now I know some of you mommas would rather I didn't say the word "stupid," right. I'm using it technically. And culture would say it is politically incorrect to judge, that we should tolerate any lifestyle. Our culture says there's no such thing as wise or stupid; it's your call to choose your own way to live, your own right and wrong. But that's stupid, isn't it?

- It's stupid to suggest an adult should be able to have sex with a preteen child, claiming: "After all, there is no right or wrong, just lifestyle choices." No, it's just wrong, stupid wrong.
- It's stupid to suggest someone can shoot down cops because there might possibly be some who are corrupt. That's just wrong, stupid wrong.
- When a redneck says, "Hold my beer and watch this," you can pretty much guarantee that whatever comes next is stupid.

You see, you and I both can name people we consider wise, and people we believe make stupid choices. The point is: both wise and stupid are observable. As one great theologian says, "Stupid is as stupid does," you can see it. And "Wise is as wise does." You can see it, too.

Now let me ask you this: Where would you put yourself? Are you wise, or are you stupid? Most of us put ourselves somewhere in between. Do you lean towards wise, or foolish? And do you ever stop to think about what makes something wise or stupid? Have you ever really dug down to the core of what defines wise or stupid? Well here's the deal: The Bible defines a way to live that is wise, and a way to live that is stupid. And that's what we're going to explore this morning. Now, if you are not a Jesus follower, you're probably going to want to disagree with our conclusions. But may wonder whether James is right. And if you are a Jesus follower, this will be challenging. Because James shows us how to live wisely, and yet we still tend to choose stupid. I suspect God's Spirit will be nudging a lot of us this morning.

So if you have a Bible or a Bible app, open up to James 3.13. This summer we're working our way through a little book of wisdom written by James, the half-brother of Jesus (same mom, different dad). We're about half-way through the book, and these verses are about two ways to live – a way that is wise, and a way that is not. Verse 13: (He says,) "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom." There it is: Wisdom is observable. You can see it in the way someone lives. Here's the way The Message puts it: "Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts."

Now James is going to do something very insightful. He's going to contrast what the world calls wisdom, and what God calls wisdom. There are two definitions of "wisdom." One is going to make you and everyone around you miserable, and the other is going to bring peace. Here goes; here's the rest of the chapter. He says, "But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying. For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always

sincere. And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.” (James 3.14-18)

So, there are two kinds of wisdom: one will make you and everyone else miserable; the other will bring you peace. What’s the difference? And I don’t just want to look at the symptoms, I want to dig down and find the causes. I want to take you on a bit of an excursion that I hope will lead to an “aha” moment. It did for me when I was studying this stuff. I’ve studied this stuff for years, and I never really saw this before. There are a couple of things about God, and about our world that we have to understand first. These are foundational. If you reject these, you will live stupidly. If you live these out, you will live wisely. Here they are. I’m going to give you three big ideas, and then start unpacking them.

- Big idea #1: God is for God. That’s it. God is for God.
- Big idea #2: God designed life to work best when life is for God. In fact, that’s pretty much the path to wisdom: to live life for God.
- Big idea #3: God gives us a choice. We can choose to do life for God, or not. Wisdom, or stupidity: your choice.

That first one is the biggest. It’s huge. I’ve got to give Matt Chandler credit. I’ve studied this stuff for decades, but I’ve always focused on the symptoms. Chandler went to the cause more clearly than I’ve ever seen it before. He says it like this: God is for God. Which means: You are not the point. You are not the sun around which everything else revolves. Rick Warren wrote a great little book a few years ago, called “The Purpose Driven Life.” Here’s the first line: “It’s not about you.” He’s dead on! Life is not about you; God is not about you. God is for God.

Which is really hard for us. Because ... I want to be the point. I want life to revolve around me. I want God to be for me.

- When I come into the office I want the staff and the elders to treat me with respect, and with deference.
- And when we worship I want us to sing the songs I like, the way I like to sing them.
- And then when I jump in my car, I want everyone else to get out of my way. I want slow drivers to move over when I get behind them. And I want the cops to look the other way when I’m in a hurry – which is a lot.

- And when I get home, I want everything to revolve around me. I want Julie to meet me at the door as excitedly as my puppy does. And I want her to take my shoes as I sit down on the couch, and rub my shoulders for a few minutes as I turn to my favorite show. And then go to the kitchen to make my favorite meal.
- And while we're at it, I want God to take care of me. I want him to take care of me financially. I want him to give me enough that I have enough for everything I really want. I want him to minimize my suffering, and my pain. After all, God exists to make me happy, doesn't he? To serve me? To heal me when I hurt, to protect me when I am in trouble, to help me on those rare occasions I need it? Because when I am happy God looks good, right?

And God whispers: "Steve, it's not about you. It never was. It never will be." And then he whispers something that actually is rather troubling, at first. He says, "It is always and only all about me." Matt Chandler, a great pastor, puts it like this. He says, God is uppermost in his own affections. He is the sun we all revolve around. What he does, even for us, is for his name and his glory. God is for God. Really?! Well ... that sounds a little uppity, doesn't it? Does it bother you, that God is for God more than God is for you?

Now that's not to say God doesn't love you, that he doesn't pursue you, that he doesn't want to bless you. It's that you have never been uppermost in his affections. For God, it has never been about you: God is for God. I mean, all through the Bible, God is kind of like: "Worship me, praise me, sing to me." God is kind of like: "Love me most, serve me first, give me your first part." Now if any man or any woman talked like this, we would be repulsed, right? Sounds a little out of control, more than a little egotistical, doesn't it?

Remember, it's not that he doesn't like you; it's that he's not about you. We read scriptures and think, "Well, it sounds like God is about me." But when you dig deeper ... Here's one of the most famous, the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths ..." That kind of sounds like God is for me, doesn't it? He's my shepherd, he finds me great resting spots, he stills the waters for me, he revivifies me! God must be crazy about me!

Which is cool, because I kind of agree with him. Go God! And then the very next line kind of spoils ... my egocentric revelry. It says God does all this ... "For his name's sake," ... not mine. The NLT says, "Bringing honor to his name" ... not mine. Huh. So when God blesses me, and loves on me, and encourages me, and rescues me, and protects me ... it's for his name's sake? It's not because I am so awesome, but it's that he is so awesome that he would do all that for someone like me?

C. S. Lewis was a really, really smart professor at Cambridge. He was an agnostic for much of his life, but became I think the greatest Christian thinker of the 20th century. He says, sometimes it sounds like God is an old lady begging for compliments: "Worship me, praise me, clap your hands for me, bow your knees to me, sing about me, adore me. But then he says, "Duh!" He says, I was blind to the most obvious fact about praise, any kind of praise. He says, when we truly love someone we cannot contain the joy it brings us and we cannot help but burst into praise! Real love always evokes praise.

Think about it: when you fall head over heels in love — some of you can still remember that, others ... well, you're old.

- When you fall head over heels in love you can't help but compliment everything about her. "She is so beautiful."
- You tell others the things he does well. "He is so considerate."
- You tell your friends how romantic she is. She's a great kisser.
- You compliment her dress. You brag on his job. You annoy your friends with all your talk about him, or her.

- Or maybe it is some great song, you just love it. How do you respond? You applaud! You cheer!
- Or maybe it's a magnificent sunrise, and spontaneous praise slips from your lips – "Wow God! Well done!"
- Or maybe it's your favorite team. They do something great, and you can't stop talking about it.
- Or your child does something you think is amazing, or whatever ...

When you truly love something or someone you can't help but praise... Ready? ...because praise completes the joy! Joy is incomplete until it is expressed.

Guys, listen: if God is amazing, if God is great, if God is supremely valuable, how could we not praise him above anything else? Our joy would be incomplete without praise. Listen, guys – God doesn't need our praise. God doesn't feed on our praise. He's not begging compliments like a vain child. He's trying to give us what we need to complete our joy. We will never discover joy as long as we think, "It's all about me."

Listen, not to praise him means we're blind, and we're deaf, and we're stupid. If we don't praise someone who is supremely good, and supremely powerful, and supremely gracious ... what's wrong with us? And how could we ever fully enjoy the perfect God without praise? ... You see, God knows that the only path to a great life is to understand: God is for God, and we should be too. It's not about you; it's about him – because he is that great! And that frees us in astounding ways. Guys, the greatest discovery you could ever make is that it is not about you.

You see, here's the irony: the more you make your life about you, the more miserable your life will be. The self-centered, self-absorbed life is a pathetic, stupid life. It's weird: some of you guys are angry, or depressed, or miserable all the time. And the more you think life is about you, the more miserable your life will be.

- Want a miserable marriage? Go ahead, make it all about you.
- Want a miserable relationship with your parents, or your kids? Just make it all about you.
- Want a miserable job? Do you want to be despised in the workplace? Make it all about you.

Just be the point of everything – like our culture encourages you to do, and your life will be a mess, and everyone around you will be miserable. But ... when you discover, it's not about me, it's about him – it's about what he wants, what he likes, what brings him honor – you will be set free. You will be free to love, you will be free to serve, and you will be free to taste joy. You see, when God is for God, and when he tells you life works best when life is for God, he's not trying to steal our joy. He's trying to help us experience life to the fullest, the way he designed it to work.

That's the second of those big ideas I mentioned a few minutes ago. Remember? Big idea #1: God is for God. Big idea #2: God designed (our) life to work best when (our) life is for God. In fact, that's pretty much

the definition of real wisdom: Doing life for God. You see, there are really two paths: God's way and any other way; the first one is called wisdom that comes from heaven (true wisdom), the other is called wisdom that is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. That's the one I'm calling "stupid." True wisdom says God is for God, and life works best when life is for God. False wisdom says, It's all about me, what I want, what I like. False wisdom says, there is no one way to live life, there are just preferences. It's up to me to decide what works best for me. And if there is a God, he's all about me, too; and if God is good, he'll support however I choose to live. That is earthly wisdom, unspiritual, and demonic.

Let's jump back into the text. James 3, starting with verse 14. He says, "But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" (false wisdom) does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (14-16)

So what is the root of envy? It's all about me. What's the root of selfish ambition? It's all about me. Is there any of that in you? Truth is, you and I see miserable people every day who think it's all about them, whose lives are a mess. And ... how could it not be? Seriously! If it's all about you, if you think you're the point of it all, if it's about doing life your way and finding happiness your way, how could you not be bitter, and envious, and jealous? Because the people around you aren't going to agree with you. If you live like, "It's all about me," Your life will be marked by bitterness, and envy, and jealousy.

And as you reject the ideas that God is for God, and that God has designed your life to work best when you live it for him, then you will deny the truth, and try to boast in your ignorance. You will defend the stupid choices you make, as you reject his authority, and his truth. You see, when you reject the truth that God is for God, and that's how you were made to live too, you will end up trying to defend the absurdity that there is no real right or wrong way to live, so my way is best for me. Have you ever listened to miserable people who are trying so hard to convince themselves that they are really not miserable? As they deny the truth, and boast about it?

James says this false wisdom is earthly, and it's unspiritual, and it's demonic. It's earthly, because we live like it's all about now. We fixate on things that don't last, and ultimately don't matter. We chase happiness, and surrender joy.

And it's unspiritual. In other words, we ignore the nudges of God's Holy Spirit. We act like we don't need His guidance, or His power. "I don't need you on this one, God." "I don't need your advice on this one, God." "I don't want your nagging on this one, God." This false wisdom is unspiritual, because it pushes the Spirit away.

And it's demonic. No kidding! What could be more demonic than telling the Designer and Creator of the universe that you are smarter than he is, that your way is better than his way, that he needs to back your play, or you'll be disappointed with him? Did you know that demons are great liars? They lie to you about God: "He's not that good. He's holding out on you. He doesn't have your back. He's an old prude. He's all bark and no bite." And they lie to you about you: "It's all about you. You have a right to be happy. He's got his way, you've got yours. A man has to decide for himself what's right and what's wrong." Guys, this false wisdom is earthly, it's unspiritual, it's demonic.

And then James says, eventually there will be "disorder, and every evil practice." No kidding! Guys, look around! If you are not seeing disorder and every evil practice in a world that rejects that God is for God and life works best when life is lived for God ... then you are blind. Did you watch the news last week: Baton Rouge, St. Paul, New York, Dallas? There have been threats here in Frankfort! You see, as long as you think life revolves around you, you are headed for a crash and burn. And our culture is there.

And then James describes the other side. He says, "But the wisdom that comes from heaven (true wisdom) is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness." (James 3.17-18)

He says, true wisdom is from above. It doesn't come out of me ... it comes from God. It's admitting that God is for God, and that God

designed life to work best when it is lived for God. You see, we Jesus followers believe that doing life for God is the very best way to live, the fullest way to live. We believe in doing life God's way even when we don't understand him. We believe in doing life God's way even when we don't agree with him.

Is that blind faith? Are you kidding? You can look back on your own experience and recognize that God is smarter than you are. We can look back on millennia of evidence that his way is better than our way. Is it blind faith to trust that our Creator is smarter than we are, and that his way will be better than our way? Really? Is it blind faith to trust in the heart of a Creator who loved us so much that he sent his Son to die in our place?

When you recognize that God is for God, and you accept that life works best when it is lived for him, then you will experience these outcomes. James says, "The wisdom that comes from above is first of all pure." Because it is not self-centered, it is God centered. And it's "peace-loving," because it's not about you. And it's "considerate," because it's not about you, and as Jesus followers we are free to love people. And it's "submissive" – mostly to God. It is "full of mercy and good fruit" – because faith works. It is "impartial, it is sincere." And this is so cool. James says, "Peacemakers who sow in peace (people who do life for God will) reap a harvest of righteousness." Not only now, but 1000 years from now, and 10,000 years from now, and a million years from now – you just keep adding the zeroes. Do you figure that's real wisdom?

So, #1: God is for God; and #2: God designed life to work best when life is for God. And here's #3: God gives us a choice. We can choose to do life for God, or not. You see God is gentle, and he won't force himself on us, he won't impose His will upon us. He gives us a choice. Listen guys, God is big enough and he's powerful enough, he could make you do anything He wants you to do. He could easily impose His will on you. But there are limitations he sets on himself because he loves us, and because he wants us to love him back. Real love requires giving us the freedom to choose him, or not, to live as God meant us to live, or to live as if it's all about me.

So you have a decision to make. You can accept what I have taught today, God is for God, and life is for God, or you can decide, "No, it's all about me, and if there is a God, God is about me."

Most people choose: life is all about me; it's about what I want, what I need; I get to decide is right and wrong, for me; I get to do whatever makes me happy, right now. But that choice will lead to a miserable existence ... for you and for those around you. But in our stubbornness, that's still how most of us choose to live – even those of us who claim to be Jesus followers.

But he offers you a different path. You can choose to acknowledge that God is for God, and life is best when we live life for God. From that truth you can accept that your joy is complete only when it is not centered on you, but on him. From that truth you will be free to love, and to serve, and to create a harvest of righteousness.

So ... we have a choice to make, don't we? Often we live like two year olds. Have you been around a two year old lately? Maybe you need to volunteer in the nursery to stir your memories. Why do we call it the "terrible twos?" Well, two year olds are "all about me." I want what I want, when I want it, the way I want it, and I want it NOW! And as adults we know life doesn't work that way. Our job is to teach the little barbarians that there is more to life than their desires. And they push back, hard! They pout; they throw tantrums; they defiantly look at you and do exactly what you tell them not to do. Why? ...Because they're two! Our job as parents is to civilize them, because that kind of attitude will inevitably lead to a miserable life if they don't grow up.

What is weird is how often we revert to the same mentality when we become adults. We recognize it in our two year olds, but we deny it in ourselves. What frustrates us in our kids is the mindset we choose for our own life. You know how miserable that toddler can make life for you? You are doing the same thing for those in your world.

Our culture expects nothing less. "It's all about me! I have a right to be happy! I want it all, right now!" But God offers you a better way to live. But it's going to require some changes...

- He requires a change of our mind,
- Which leads to a change in our attitude,
- Which leads to changes in the choices we make,
- Which results in a fundamental change in the way we live.

There is a wisdom that comes from above. It is available to you. Earlier James told us, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” (1.5) It’s available for the asking. And it can change your life...and the lives of those around you. Do you want it?