

LIVING WISELY IN AN ANGRY WORLD

JAMES 3: 13-18

Introduction:

What we see and hear in the current political campaign is pretty typical of where our nation is right now. There is enough anger being expressed to destroy us all. What we see is the product of a wisdom that is of this world.

James warns about this wisdom. It is driven by “bitter envy” and “self-seeking”. Bitter envy means that you are want something that I have, and you are angry that you do not have it. Self-seeking is selfish ambition—it is all about you and what you want. The unfortunate thing is there is so much of this in the church, and even in the men who serve the churches.

Let me just recount to you some recent experiences. Labor Day weekend I preached in a church that had just forced their young pastor to resign on Wednesday night. He was a young man driven by ambition—He felt called to have the largest church in the city and was driving in that direction at all costs. The worship service on the prior Sunday had degenerated into an angry shouting match. This church is the second largest church in our city

and their angry behavior made the front page of our local paper during the week.

Two weeks ago I was in a large church in Texas where three members of the church were arrested and transported to jail just as Sunday School was about to begin. They had begun to discuss a matter on the doorstep of the church, and they became so angry that they began to shove and swing at each other—someone called the police to control the situation. This was on the doorstep of the First Baptist Church, the largest church in the city.

My oldest son David called me this week for counsel. In his search for a youth minister, he has interviewed an outstanding young man who resigned his last church because he failed in an attempt with two other staff members to unseat the pastor. As a result of their actions, the pastor did have to leave, the church was split, and the witness of the largest church in this Texas city was destroyed. My son wanted to know—should he consider a young man who had been a part of such a scheme against his pastor.

Evidently anger and conflict were present in the early church. James, the seasoned pastor, offers an alternative to the worldly, devilish wisdom that is driven by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. He turns from one to the other

with the “but” that opens verse 17. There is a wisdom that makes it possible for a person to have an effective and meaningful life and work in the midst of the swirling, ceaseless anger of the world.

I. THIS WISDOM IS HEAVENLY.

“But the wisdom that is from above” points to the source of this wisdom. It comes down to earth from heaven. This makes sense since if you remember that wisdom is seeing things from God’s perspective. It is looking at earthly situations from a heavenly position. Since we are not in heaven, how do we access this wisdom from above? This takes us back to the first chapter of this little letter.

1. It comes from heaven because God is generous.

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it shall be given him.” What a promise! I have probably quoted this verse more often to the Lord than any other verse in the Bible. Across the years I have found myself in situation after situation in which I did not know what to do, so I have turned to this promise. This verse contains one of the greatest insights into the nature of God that you will find in the Bible. He is the One “who gives to all liberally.” You could translate this—“the giving God.” It is the very nature of God to give generously to all who call upon Him. Is that not encouraging?

“Without reproach” points to the manner of God’s giving. He gives in such a way that He does not make you feel cheap or put-down. He gives without finding fault. I am sure that you have received some gifts that made you feel dirty as you received them—they did not come from a generous and caring heart. This wisdom from above comes from the liberal, giving God.

It is also encouraging to learn that he gives to “all”. That gives me hope!

2. It comes from heaven because we ask in faith.

But it comes to those who ask in faith. “Let him ask of God.” O this wisdom is available to all who ask in faith. “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.” For just a simple believing prayer you can have the insight and wisdom you need for living effectively and victoriously in this angry, ego-driven world.

II. THIS WISDOM IS RELATIONAL.

James to set forth the qualities of this wisdom that comes from above. It is the kind of wisdom that enables a person to build healthy relationships with

others. The world sometimes labels this “people skills”, but it is a spiritual quality that each of us needs.

1. It produces purity in us.

“First pure”! “First” means first in priority. All expressions of the wisdom from above begin with purity. The emphasis in this context is on moral purity. It is a purity that enables a person to relate to ladies as sisters, and men as brothers. It is the perspective that prevents the seeing of every woman as a sex object. It is just the opposite of the attitude and action of the world that sees everyone else as existing for your pleasure.

2. It produces a love for peace in us.

This quality delights in and promotes peace (C. Vaughn). Robertson calls it an old adjective that means “loving peace.” Peace in this passage means more than just the absence of hostility. It means to be for a wholesome blessing on the other person, and to seek that for each person.

3. It produces gentleness in us.

“Gentle” contains such richness that it is impossible to fully translate it into our language. It is reasonable, fair, equitable. It makes a person courteous. It brings to the life a saving gentleness, according to one Greek authority. It is such an important quality to have in an angry, hostile world.

4. It produces openness in us.

“Willing to yield” is the NKJ translation of this word. It involves a readiness to give up rights for the good of the other person, but I prefer the translation of A. T. Robertson. He understood the word to mean “approachable.” It is a quality that has been obvious in some wise men that I have known.

We use the Pastor’s Guidebook by Dr. W. A. Criswell here in the school. Most of you never heard Dr. Criswell preach—He was my hero as a young pastor. He was such an able expositor of the word, and influenced me much during my seminary years. I had the privilege of knowing Dr. Criswell in later years, and found him to be such a approachable man. He had the ability to listen to you as though you were the most important person in the world. It was a spiritual quality that had been developed from his walk with God.

Such an approachableness was obvious in the life of Jesus, as were all of these qualities.

5. It produces mercy in us.

This means to be “full of compassion and helpfulness.” This wisdom has a strong inclination to be compassionate and helpful any time a life in need is encountered. The mercy will be translated into good deeds again and again.

6. It produces impartiality in us.

“Without partiality” is probably the best translation of this quality. At least the scholars that I admire most have preferred this term. Prejudice is such an ugly and offensive thing when injected into relationships. Jesus had this in His life. He could relate to the despised Samaritan as easily as He could the Jews.

7. It produces reality in us.

“Without hypocrisy” means that you are the real thing. People will not be surprised when they get to know you. You will not be one thing at church and another a church. You will not relate to others in one way and your family in another way. You will not be one person in the pulpit and another in the Walmart. You are real! Unhypocritical!

Do you notice something about these seven qualities? Every one of these was evident in the life of the Lord Jesus. Jesus lived His human life with a wisdom that He received from above. The very wisdom that He lived by is available to you if you will ask for it in faith.

III. THIS WISDOM IS FRUITFUL

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

I guess I have struggled more with gaining an understanding of this verse

more than any verse in this letter. I still struggle with it. However I have come to understand that this verse is about the fruitfulness and effectiveness of a life that is lived by the wisdom that is from above. It stands in contrast to the fruit of the worldly wisdom driven by bitter envy and selfish ambition. They regularly lead to “confusion and every evil thing”. But the wisdom from above produces a harvest of peace and righteousness.

1. It produces a harvest of peace.

There are two sides to this peace—one is personal. It is amazing how many inner conflicts you will avoid if you live by this wisdom from above. Your heart will be under the shalom of God.

The other side of this is that you will contribute peace wherever you go. You will be the source of peace in the church, in the community, in the family, in the world.

This is a good crop!

2. It produces a harvest of righteousness.

The righteousness is viewed like the firstfruits of such a life. Righteousness means you do the right things that expresses the will of God in every situation.

Conclusion:

How do we live fruitfully in a broken and angry world like this? How do we make a difference for good? We must not look to the world for our models or guidance. Rather we look above to our generous heavenly Father and we ask for an infusion of His wisdom. Jesus promised, "If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those that ask." You do not have to do the work and live the life in the wisdom you were born with, you do not need to become a student to the gurus of the world. You have access to the Spirit of wisdom and revelation who can grant to you a fruitful and effective life in the midst of any circumstance.

Let us set our heart on the wisdom that is from above!