

Wisdom from Above

SERMON · Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life · 3 June 2018 (Students' Sunday)

James 3:13-18 (James 3:17-18 quoted)

1 Kings 3:16-28

Psalms 119:33-40

Luke 10:21-24

Today is designated as Students' Sunday, and the theme given to us for meditation is 'Wisdom from Above'. Let me begin with a caution: this theme applies equally to students, to elders, and to those who are neither, so nobody should switch off. There are two things we should be clear about before we go any further. First, we quite often use the words 'knowledge' and 'wisdom' interchangeably in conversation, yet they do not mean the same thing. Knowledge is the facts and ideas we acquire through study, research, investigation, observation, or experience; wisdom is the ability to discern and judge which parts of that knowledge are true, right, lasting, and applicable to our lives. Second, if we speak of wisdom from above, it follows that there is also a wisdom from below, though worldly wisdom need not always carry a negative connotation. The challenge before us is to bring the two together, so that our worldly wisdom is held fast within godly wisdom.

Let me offer you a progression I used to explain to young IT engineers, in the context of data mining, knowledge management, and information harvesting, subjects we hear a great deal about these days. If I give you a number, say, 9999600265, what do you make of it? Perhaps very little, beyond noticing that it is a ten-digit number, and could be a mobile telephone number. If I attach the name Peter to that number, it becomes recognisable as Peter's mobile number; if I add an address as well, you will know which Peter it belongs to. The number alone is data, and so are the name and the address, taken separately; read together, we have information. Our brains store data and information away in memory for future use, and when information stored in this way is drawn upon, in some unique combination, to meet a given circumstance, our brains are capable of producing knowledge. It is remarkable that the brain manages this at all: the adult human brain holds an estimated eighty-six billion neurons, the fastest of which can carry a signal at speeds of up to two hundred miles per hour. As we go through life, our brains build up a store of knowledge, and when that knowledge is applied to real life, what we have is wisdom. You can see the progression: from data, to information, to knowledge, to wisdom. But the reach of our own ability, and of every technological tool we have ever invented, stops there.

Let us map this same progression onto our spiritual lives. The words of the Holy Bible, some seven hundred and eighty thousand of them in the King James Version by most

estimates, are, taken alone, just data; its verses, passages, chapters, and books, thirty-one thousand one hundred and two verses in all, give us information. Applying that information, in the form of teaching, law, tradition, and so forth, is knowledge. When we draw knowledge from across the whole of Scripture, the Old Testament, the Gospels, the Epistles, in our quest to understand God's will for us, we acquire wisdom. And from God's own perspective, the progression does not end even there. Beyond wisdom lies Truth: the truth that our triune God is the Creator of all things; the truth that He is a God of infinite compassion and love, Who willingly died on the Cross to redeem us from the grip of sin; and that, in His resurrection, we have our evidence and our hope of eternal life for all who believe.

I want to argue that earthly wisdom alone is likely, in all probability, to lead us astray, while godly wisdom leads us along paths that end in life eternal; to set God's wisdom aside, or to choose to live foolishly in God's world, is to put our salvation at risk. At the same time, no human being can do without earthly wisdom altogether. What is required, then, is a careful blending of sound earthly wisdom with wisdom from above, for earthly wisdom alone is prone to inaccuracy, to bias, and to a certain lopsidedness. The lesson we learn from James 3:13-18, read to us a while ago, sets out the unchanging marks of godly wisdom.

Having warned us against a false wisdom, James goes on to give a full description of the wisdom we should seek. Let me read verses 17 and 18 of James 3: "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace." He says it all, really, in these two verses. The key words are pure, peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy, full of good fruits, without partiality, without hypocrisy. Let us take each of these marks of godly wisdom in turn.

Christlike wisdom is pure, for it is a gift from God; its opposite is impure motive. Pure wisdom is not some mixture of maxims and aims that would debase it; wisdom that is Christlike, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is careful of holiness, in heart and in life alike. When the word of God and the Holy Spirit are governing our thoughts, we think pure thoughts, and desire holiness in every part of life.

Christlike wisdom is peaceable; its opposite is inconsistency, and its counterfeit a spirit of compromise. Those enabled by the Holy Spirit and the word of God do everything they can to preserve the bond of unity that peace creates, and ask the Lord to help them live at peace

with all men, so far as it lies within them. Christians can be quick to judge, to criticise, and to demand perfection of others, all while giving too little thought to their own shortcomings.

Christlike wisdom is gentle; its opposite is harshness, and its counterfeit an unkind restraint. Heavenly wisdom helps us become the kind of men and women who are not quarrelsome by disposition. Those who fail to show gentleness of spirit become harsh, and hard-tempered, and insistent on their own way; only the Spirit of God can give us that gentle and quiet spirit which is precious in God's sight.

Christlike wisdom is easily entreated; its opposite is being unapproachable, and its counterfeit being a yes-man. Heavenly wisdom is easy to be entreated, because it is persuadable. Ask the Lord to help you become ever more teachable, willing to learn from anyone, at any time, about God's greater will for your life; there is a growing maturity in those who are forever gaining deeper insight into God's word, His will, and His ways.

Christlike wisdom is merciful; its opposite is being merciless, and its counterfeit mere indulgence. Heavenly wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits, even when our own capacity for loving-kindness seems exhausted. The wise do not need to argue, wrangle, or dispute over everything; the wisest among us are the least inclined to criticise, and are without a trace of hypocrisy.

Christlike wisdom is fruitful; its opposite is fruitlessness, and its counterfeit an obsession with results. The wise have no need to pretend to be fruitful, for their work of faith, their labour of love, and their steadfastness of hope will make plain enough how Christ is working in them, both to will and to do of His good pleasure.

Christlike wisdom is steadfast; its opposite is wavering, and its counterfeit a rigid inflexibility. Heavenly wisdom is steady, consistent, and reliable; a pretended wisdom, by contrast, is often superficial, artificial, and contrived.

Christlike wisdom is honest; its opposite is dishonesty, and its counterfeit a cruel and judgemental bluntness. Heavenly wisdom is upright, above reproach, and blameless in thought, attitude, and action alike; godly wisdom is sincere, pure, and consistent. The fruit of the Spirit will enable you to live increasingly out of His love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

Wisdom from above, then, should be the foundation on which we build our earthly wisdom, so that the sin and the attitudes of the world we live in, and the temptations set in our path, cannot corrupt the wisdom we hold. How, then, do we find such wisdom? We begin by recognising that God is the source of all wisdom, and then we ask Him for it. And how do we show that we have found it? By our good lives; by works done with the gentleness that is born of wisdom; by a purity of life, and a behaviour that is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, and full of goodness. Show that kind of behaviour, and there will be no doubt at all that you possess the wisdom that comes from above.

Let us pray.

Merciful God, Jesus Christ, You are the source, the guide, and the goal of all human knowing, and of our search for wisdom. We praise You for the mind You have given us, and for the whole enterprise of discovery and reflection that every generation inherits from the past. Enable us to seek the wisdom that is from above, so that we may lead a victorious life in this world, overcoming its evils and its trials. We believe that You are the true wisdom, and that to know You, and to have faith in You, is the ultimate goal of all wisdom. We beseech You to help us ask for, and desire, the wisdom that is from above, so that we may discern what is true, lead a victorious life, and be transformed to know You more fully. We ask this through Your Son, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.