

Heavenly Wisdom vs Earthly Wisdom (James 3:13-18)

One of my favorite Old Testament stories growing up, and really even to this day, is a story about David's son, Solomon. One night, after he had obtained the throne from King David, God appeared to Solomon in a dream and said: "Ask for whatever you want me to give you" (1 Kings 3:5). Solomon's answer to God has always fascinated me. He didn't ask for riches or long life, he asked God for wisdom, or to be precise, Solomon asked for an understanding mind to govern God's people, and to be able to discern between right and wrong" (1 Kings 3:9). He was asking this of God in part, because just prior to this dream, in Chapter 2, we see Solomon already contained a form of unenlightened wisdom, one that was mostly self-serving. Solomon came to recognize this in Chapter 3 (v.7 I am but a child), and subsequently made this request to God one based in humility instead of selfish ambition. God then granted his prayer request and Solomon became "wiser than all other men," (1 Kings 4:31), and consequently people "of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon" (1 Kings 4:34).

At the end of James 3, in a chapter almost entirely dedicated to taming the tongue, we come across this small section, which almost appears to be thrown in by James as an afterthought on wisdom. While it may seem out of place at first, James knew it was not intelligence, or great knowledge, which could tame the tongue, but wisdom, a heavenly wisdom found in "humility, grace and peace" (BKC, 828). There is just no other way to control the tongue than with a heavenly wisdom from above.

James 3:13-18 is a story of wisdom presented as two completely different sides of the same coin, one that we still see played out in our world today. On one side of the

wisdom coin, we have a heavenly wisdom from above, which is full of mercy and peace. On the other side, we have an earthly wisdom, which is characterized by jealousy, envy, pride, and selfish ambition. James says seeking after a heavenly wisdom results in an abundance of God's peace in our lives, while seeking after earthly wisdom, leads to disorder, and "every vile practice" we could possibly conceive.

We see this played out every day going all the way back to Eve in Genesis 3:6 when she acted in her own earthly wisdom and self interest instead of following after God's heavenly wisdom. Our own culture thrives on this earthly wisdom to fulfill the "American Dream" by "looking out for number one," or "climbing that corporate ladder," and in using our abilities and knowledge to gain an advantage over someone else.

Growing up I paid little attention to that heavenly wisdom found in simply living a Godly life, but I did find great earthly wisdom from my friends, classmates, and later my working colleagues. They always seemed to know the best way to be able to turn a situation around to their benefit, and I learned well from their example. As a believer, I thought I turned my desire for earthly wisdom around, into a deep longing for heavenly wisdom through seeking knowledge, specifically knowledge in our faith. For years one of my continuous prayers as a believer is one similar to Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 3, but without any attempt to remove those self-serving ambitions, which come from earthly wisdom. While I diligently prayed for wisdom, my actions would seek after earthly wisdom by trying to find more ways to get ahead, instead of seeking after God's heavenly wisdom by just living out what Scripture teaches.

Obtaining more earthly wisdom, whether it comes from our latest smart phone, music, movies, or from the most esteemed pastor we know, doesn't help to control the

tongue. Earthly wisdom might temporarily satisfy our desire to outdo our brother, but rarely will this show God's love. We probably all know people who have accumulated vast sums of knowledge, which can impress us with fancy arguments, competition, or rivalry. But I can still find this in myself as well, buried deep in my heart where many sins can reside without ever seeing the light of day.

So what is the difference between heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom? James gives us a great way to test ourselves for Heavenly wisdom, and it sounds unlike what we normally hear in many other parts of Scripture, it comes from our behavior. At some point, knowledge can turn into heavenly wisdom through proper application of living out our lives manifested in our actions. What this means is heavenly wisdom will be seen by our conduct through humility, and meekness, not by gaining vast sums of knowledge, or in our ability to outdo one another. We can ask ourselves, are we gaining in the wisdom of God? Apart from a true desire to walk in a manner pleasing to God, no one really has true wisdom, and without true wisdom, we have little hope of taming our tongue.

I sometimes have a tendency to argue my point with just about anyone who will listen. This only solidifies my understanding of how difficult it is for a tamed tongue to coincide with an earthly wisdom, which James even calls demonic. If heavenly wisdom is applying knowledge properly, according to God's will, how do we really know we have achieved wisdom from above at all? We know we have the wise answer, the response of wisdom, because it won't be argumentative, contentious, or self-seeking. It will be gentle and peacemaking, and clearly seen by others through our actions in Godly behavior.