



A WORD TO THE WISE
James 3:13-18

A few years ago our federal government decided to fund the building of an atomic particle accelerator in the state of Texas. This very expensive project would help us to discover the 'secrets of the universe.' This claim is often made when people are requesting billions of our tax dollars for research.

The particle accelerator was to be built underground, and so with the blessing of government money, construction began on a circular tunnel, which, if it had been completed, would have been several miles in circumference.

But congress recently had second thoughts about the cost of the particle accelerator and construction came to a halt. What is now left after the workers have abandoned the job site is a five-mile, slightly curved tunnel large enough to accommodate a truck. Problem: **the tunnel goes nowhere**. You don't want to know how much this part of the tunnel that was supposed to aid in discovering the 'secrets of the universe' has cost.

Now the question arises: Does this tunnel that goes nowhere have any use? Answer: **someone thinks so**. The tunnel contains the ideal growing conditions, a businessman says, for growing mushrooms. Now some of us must think about this. A multibillion dollar tunnel built to discover the 'secrets of the universe' will quite likely end up being used as a mushroom farm.¹ Now, the good people in the Kennett Square region of Pennsylvania have been doing that for years and for a whole lot less money.

This is exactly what James is teaching us in his instructional manual on the great difference between knowledge and wisdom. So James offers a word to the wise today – or at least to those who seek to be wise in the things of God.

Only in God will we ever know the secrets of life. Unless we seek to know God – all of our seemingly sophisticated knowledge will go nowhere. We will wind up with mushrooms – rather than the marvelous mind of God. Why do we say, "Jesus, you art the way," and then proceed to search for truth in other ways.

As my mentor Eugene Peterson shares: "Christ is the Way – as well as the Truth and Life. When we don't do it his way – we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life. We can't live a life more like Jesus by embracing a way of life less like Jesus."²

The respected Bible teacher, Dr. Wiersbe, helps us greatly with this insight about the importance of wisdom to our Jewish friends. The Jewish people in their journey of faith realized that it was not enough to have knowledge – you had to have wisdom to be able to use that knowledge correctly.³

In the book of Job – Job has three friends who offer him knowledge – but not wisdom about his dilemma. Wisdom rarely comes from people who sit on the bench or live in ivory towers – but those who engage all of life with a belief that there is no human circumstance in which the power and presence of God cannot be found and experienced. We are never left in the dark or helpless. Yes, “the whole range of human emotion can be used by God to fashion and shape a life of salvation in us.”⁴

The Bible is not against knowledge. It is against knowledge that does not come under the judgment of God.⁵ Much of human knowledge is valuable such as medical knowledge that led to the discovery of penicillin and other helpful drugs – and machines such as those made at Case New Holland which help in the increased production of food for the world to eat.

Most of you are aware that we presently live in the era known as the ‘Age of Information.’ The Internet allows us to tap into the information highway in a way we have never been able to do before. People and leaders can now talk between London and New York – Peking and Moscow – Washington, D. C. and Baghdad – but that doesn’t mean that we have anything of value to share with others. T. S. Eliot wrote years ago, “Where is the wisdom – we have lost in knowledge.”

Yes, when we find ourselves deficient in wisdom – it is not because the word of God has pages missing – but because we have not seen all there is on the pages we already have. It is not another book we need – but better attention to the book we have. It is not more knowledge we require – but better vision to see what has already been revealed in Jesus Christ.⁶

As our lesson unfolds today – the contrast is very clear. There is a wisdom whose very appearance is deceptive. It appears to serve God – but as time goes on it proves to be false and foolish. In **verses 13-16**, James shows what real godly wisdom is not – in **verse 17-18**, we see what real wisdom from above produces. There are some very telling trademarks of truth that can be traced.

You see, James is right on when he states that wisdom is both knowing and being. Faith in God produces more than exhortations and explanations – but an example that is worthy to be followed. Its wisdom can be held accountable. The great end of life is not knowledge, but wisdom put into responsible action. Remember the Apostle Paul – **“If I have all knowledge but have not love – I am nothing!”**

The Bible has a great deal to say about wisdom. In a great way, the Bible is God’s wisdom shared with and imparted to his people.

The Bible reveals the struggle between what wisdom is – and the consequences of what wisdom is not. Let me share one brief example. Men and women demonstrated great knowledge in the building of the Tower of Babel – but unfortunately it was a very unwise thing to do. So let us dig in today.

FIRST IN VERSES 14-16, WE SEE WHAT WISDOM IS NOT.

We see what an unwise teacher produces. They originate from a source outside of the kingdom and principles of God.

Two of the characteristics they produce are arrogance and deceit. It reminds me of a certain born again believer who was suffering from constant headaches who visited his doctor. “Doctor, I don’t know why I keep on getting these awful headaches,” he said. “I don’t drink like so many others do. I don’t smoke like so many others do. I don’t run around at night like so many others do. I don’t overeat like so many others do. I don’t . . .” The doctor interrupted at this point. “Tell me,” he said, “This pain in the head you complain of; is it a sharp, shooting kind of pain?” “Yes,” the patient replied, “that describes it perfectly. A sharp, shooting kind of pain.” The doctor then made his diagnosis: “Simple,” he said, “Your problem is that you have your halo on too tight. All you need to do is loosen it a bit.”

You see, God’s wisdom helps to provide a sense of balance to life. As Dr. Charles Hodge shares, “The Grace of God humbles a man without degrading him – and exalts him without inflating him.” When we have this wisdom and perspective from God, we can live between these two concepts.

Now, arrogance and boasting are wrong because they come from earthly origins to make us look better or to appear better than we are.

Years ago, the famous London newspaper ran an essay contest entitled, **“What is Wrong with Man.”** The winning essay was short and simple. It said, **“I am,”** signed by G. K. Chesterton. This is the beginning of wisdom; to know it does not originate from us – but yet can live in us – when it comes as a gift from above.

The reason I believe that the epistle of James contains such valuable wisdom and instruction for us in our Christian walk and witness is that it comes from one who learned it the hard way. James – who only became a believer in his brother Jesus after the resurrection – was known as a man with a violent temper. However, with the help of the Holy Spirit – he was transformed into a man of prayer and discipline. The Bible teaches that the true beginning of wisdom is the desire to learn.

I once went to a Summer Institute of Learning held at Yale University to hear Dr. Gardner C. Taylor speak on the “Role of Preaching” and to hear him preach. I was not disappointed. He was simply outstanding. However, what impressed me even more was the fact that he was present at all the lectures and presentations given by others – taking notes – and listening intently. You knew then why he was a great preacher.

SECONDLY IN VERSES 17 & 18 – JAMES DEMONSTRATES THAT THE WISDOM FROM ABOVE HAS A DIFFERENT TRADEMARK.

It has a different origin. It comes from above – not below. The fruit it produces is not sour or seductive – but rather sweet and spiritual. It is not demonic – but delightful.

James shares it is pure, peaceable, gentle and reasonable. It allows us to have a teachable spirit. It is full of mercy – and contains NO hypocrisy. Imagine if these were the trademarks of our Christian walk and witness.

I recently read of an old Arabian ruler who had three rather ungrateful, but brilliant sons. As the old man lay dying, he called the sons into his bedroom to discuss their inheritance. “You will inherit my herd of 17 camels,” he said. The oldest son was to receive half (1/2) of the herd, the middle son one third (1/3), and the youngest son, one ninth (1/9). When the old man died, the sons met and divided up the herd. But, alas, there were 17 camels. There was no way to divide up a herd of 17 camels one half, one third, and one ninth. So they did the next best thing.

The sons began quarreling with one another. The quarreling got worse. Gradually it infected the entire household, then the town, and then the Sheik’s entire region. It was like a church that had lost its focus and perspective. They were ready to hire a Philadelphia lawyer.

Finally, one day an older and wiser woman walked into town holding a rope attached to a single camel. “Here,” she said quietly, “If it will stop the quarreling, I will give you my camel. I will now divide your inheritance for you.” You should have seen her in action.

Well, of course, the problem was solved. The oldest son received nine camels; the middle son, six camels; the youngest 2 camels. Everyone seemed pleased and content. Then they thought: $9 + 6 + 2 = 17$. With just the hint of a smile on her face, the wise old woman picked up the rope from her camel and headed for home. She had wisdom that stopped a war – and was winsome. This is the trademark of truth. This comes from God.

When our actions and words agree – the message is always loud and clear. James would agree. This is why we first tame the tongue – so when it does speak – it speaks with wisdom. This is the word to the wise and those who want to be wise that James is speaking to today and forever.

James knew what we allow to take up residence in our hearts was of utmost importance. Our desires and appetites are very strong forces in our lives. We must be careful what we allow to dominate and rule our lives. This is where the difference between knowledge and wisdom can make all the difference.

Godly wisdom leads us to be always conscious of our sin and our need to turn from it. This truth is expressed so distinctively in the Charles Wesley hymn, “**I Want a Principle Within.**” Without the power of godly wisdom at work in our lives no transformation can take place.

When many of us were young and went through Sunday School and VBS, we learned a memory verse from **Psalm 119:11**, “I treasure your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” When the heart is fed God’s word – the Bread of Life – it becomes like a well-stocked cupboard – ready to provide the resources that lead to eternal life.

The next time someone claims to have the ‘secrets of the universe’ – show them the Bible and introduce them to Jesus Christ. This news is so good – you don’t have to keep it a secret. It is for all.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz, July 29, 2007, All Rights Reserved – Copyrighted 7-29-07

ENDNOTES

¹ Thanks to Gordon MacDonald for this illustration.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES**, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005, page 313.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, “**The Bible Exposition Commentary,**” **volume 2, EPHESIANS – REVELATION**, Victor Books, 1992, page 362.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE, The Wisdom Books**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 1996, page 7.

⁵ Ray C. Stedman, **ADVENTURING THROUGH THE BIBLE**, Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, page 633.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH THE PSALMS**, Harper: San Francisco, 1989, October 2 devotional.