

**Christ Community Covenant Church**  
**Street Level Christianity: Wisdom 101 - James 3:13-18; 4:13-17**  
**Pastor Dave Scherrer - November 15, 2015**

### **What do you want out of life?**

I'm going to have us take a moment and write this down, everybody take out your bulletin notes or another small piece of paper and write down what your wants out of life are. I am looking for the core things - not lots of money, a good job and a big house - those are just means to an end - what are the ends? What do you really want out of life? Core values or hopes might be another way of getting at this. You go ahead and I will make that short list as well. For some of us this will come easy for others of us less ethereal, this may be a bit more irritating. But nonetheless I want you all to engage with me.

A number of years ago a survey was taken of college students where they asked that same question. **What do you really want out of life?** The answers of the college students were interesting - the top three things they said they wanted were:

- **Love or meaningful relationships** - a sense that they were deeply cared for - that they mattered - mattered a whole lot to somebody.
- **Meaningful** - not a momentary rush of good feeling but a long term sense of satisfaction - a sense of contentment and purpose in life.
- **Peace** – especially personal peace of mind and heart.

The thing that fascinates me about that survey I think is that is how most people would answer. Most people would agree with that list - they might have a few additions. But I think those are universal goals and desires.

I realized that those three desires or wants are really the Fruit of the Spirit. When I noticed that, I began to realize the difference between those who know God and those who don't is not so much that they want different things out of life but rather the difference sometimes comes down to how one goes about getting them . . . How does one get love? How does one find meaning? How do we ever live with a sense of peace?

You see I still think we all pretty much want the same stuff out of life, regardless of age, or gender or color or class. As the only creation in the universe made in the image of God, we have certain hard wired needs and I think DNA determined desires. And this is where *the church* comes in for me. This makes me want to do a commercial for the church because the church has the stuff of life that the world cannot ever offer. They can substitute or even create dangerous imitations, but they cannot give us the answers to the deep eternal stuff of life. *So what is it that the church can offer that the world cannot?* Three things I think and they will look surprisingly like that list the college kids put together . . .

### **What can the Church offer that the world cannot?**

**A transcendent purpose to life that results in peace with ourselves and God**  
**Values and truths that define culture rather than being defined by culture**  
**Meaningful, loving relationships that pass the test of time and gives us sustained joy**

Another way of summarizing might be how 4Cs has done this;

### **Life - Light - Love**

I think most people want to live life well - to live it with skill, to make the most out of it. I really think that the struggle for all of us isn't to identify what we want - the struggle is we are not always sure how that is done. We don't know how to get started or how to get back on track if we get distracted.

James is categorized by theologians as part of something called *wisdom literature*. James chapter 3 suggests that when it comes to living life there are really two basic approaches - what James refers to as two kinds of wisdom. I want us to think about them this morning in terms of two paths. The end result goal of each path is basically the same - but the paths themselves are radically different. And in reality, end up in very different places. Proverbs tells us "The fear of the LORD is the beginnings of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (1:7).

James is a letter in form: it has a greeting, refers to its readers often as "brothers," and identifies its author by name. However, it is a letter in form only. There are no greetings to persons by name, and there is no mention of the circumstances of author or readers. James is thus a letter in form, but in essence it is another type of literature: *paraenesis*, or ethical instruction. It is similar in form to other great biblical wisdom literature collections like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon and many of the Psalms. It is a collection of brief, wise saying that help us to navigate our lives with ethical purpose – *paraenesis*. James, in our study this morning, is making the case that there are two paths towards wisdom:

One of these paths is dangerous and leads to destruction and the other path is dangerous and leads to life. On our sign outside I jokingly summarized them as smart wisdom and stupid wisdom. Either path is dangerous, but if you are going to face danger every day, you might as well get somewhere for your troubles! Let's turn to James 3 and read what James says about living life well - living it with wisdom . . .

#### **James 3:13-18**

<sup>13</sup> Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. <sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. <sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. <sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. <sup>17</sup> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

This little passage is a great example of *paraenesis*. The New Testament, specifically in 1 Cor. 2 (v14) makes mention of two paths – a natural path and a Spiritual path and there are Greek words that signify each meaning:

**Psychikos: "spiritual" (Psychology, Psychosis)**  
**Pneumatikos: "Spiritual" (Breath, wind)**

If you did a word study of wisdom you might come to understand wisdom as the ability ***to live life well, with skill and character***. James begins his discussion with a question. Who is wise and understanding among you? Good question – but how do you know? Verse three tells us you will know that person by their conduct.

I think we generally misunderstand "wisdom." We think wisdom is the ability to understand the why's of life. Like the guy sitting on the top of a mountain under a blanket with all the answers to, "Why did this happen." We tend to think of that as 'wisdom.'

You might think of this like the Subway system in New York – if you go down into a station and stand on the platform you have a very limited view of what is really going on, a very limited perspective. You see the trains come and leave and you may be able to get on a train and travel and know where I am going to go – you have a little sense of the whole but you miss out on the big picture – your perspective is so limited. But if you were privileged to be taken into the central control room of the subway system you would see on a long wall a detailed diagram of all the tracks and tunnels for miles around with little glowworm lights indicating the positions of every train on the track – some moving slowly or swiftly, some stationary. You would be able see what lines are switched and which trains are signaled to halt and where each train is and where it is headed and how the whole system worked, the reasoning for all the movements would be perfectly plain once you see the great diagram and its glowing dots.

We think that is what God does when He gives us wisdom is He gives us a deeper insight into the deep meanings of life and purpose of events going on around us. We think He tells us 'why' he has done what he has done in a specific situation. But – I do not think that is truly wisdom. At least not as the Bible teaches it.

I think true wisdom may be more like driving a car with a clutch - you need to actually do it. It isn't something you generally learn by reading or even by watching a video. This kind of understanding happens only when you get behind the wheel and fail . . . and fail . . . and fail . . . and then kind of succeed . . . and then succeed. In this example it is not how the streets are laid out and why. It's not even where north is and what direction is south - understanding the big picture isn't the key. What is more important is knowing how to accelerate and merge while engaging the clutch and shifting the gears, when to slow down, when to turn and how to turn. How to react to unexpected circumstances and situations. I think that is more like biblical wisdom. It is knowing the right thing to do and proving by life itself that you have the character and courage to choose the right thing.

Wisdom - is a word that is used to describe the practical side of knowledge. In the OT the artisans, the craftsman who were commissioned to build the temple, were referred to as wise. If you worked in stone or brass and were called wise and that meant you not only had a knowledge of the material but you also knew how to take advantage of that knowledge to make something amazing and beautiful. Thus wisdom as this notion is knowledge put to work. It is skill. It is knowledge applied.

When James asks the question: Who is wise and understanding among you? he is asking – Who among you lives life with skill and character. Who is able to take their knowledge and understanding (their expertise) and translate it into life? In a sense he is asking who among you really has their act together. Who among you really is good at living this thing called life. That means the ability to make good choices and decisions, to develop deep relationship, to give yourself to the right things and head the right direction.

Being wise does not mean we understand everything that is going on in life because of our superior knowledge, but that we do the right thing as life comes along.

If that is true – How would you measure someone's wisdom? Not by words, not by sheer knowledge or mastery of material – rather by behavior. If you want to know if someone is wise or if you are wise – look at how you live. For James there are two paths toward wisdom:

### **The two paths toward wisdom**

The first is the wisdom of the world - the God-absent self-centered life that leads to chaos that we read about in vs 14-16. It is God absent. Earthly and unspiritual and of the devil – it is a kind of continuum that moves one further and further away from God.

We see the thinking expressed in cliché's

- Eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.
- Go for all the gusto you can get – implies there is nothing else to go for
- You only go around once in life – after that it's all over.

For this way of thinking because this world is all there is the way to live life well is to get all the pleasure, power and fame you can get - the hope is that all those thing will ultimately give you the life, light and love you are longing for.

It is a nonspiritual path - *Psychikos* – It speaks of that part of a person where emotion and human reason reign. This thinking denies the supernatural in life and in us. There is nothing beyond the physical and material. There is not God, no spirits, no soul. Everything we experience can be explained by chemical reaction and physical happenings. You remember I referred to *Psychikos* as spiritual with a small 's'. That

is because the world still thinks of this behavior as having a spiritual component. It really doesn't – it is a false spirituality made of emotional and natural forces.

My Dad was like this for the first 60 years of his life. He could not even entertain the notion of the supernatural – something beyond our five senses – if you cannot see it, touch it, feel it, hear it or taste it – then it does not exist. If it cannot be measured or reproduced in the scientific lab – then it does not – in fact cannot exist. The point is that it is a God absent view of life - it is the view that says all there is in life is this physical world. And if there may be some kind of spiritual dimension it is irrelevant.

James tells us in verses 14 & 15.

“But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.  
<sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”

This way of living life is self-centered and bitter envy and selfish ambition are both results of a 'me' approach to life that says the entire world is here to rotate around me. I am at the center and everything else is secondary.

**Bitter envy** is viewing life with me at the center but always in comparison to others – I need not simply to be high up the ladder but at the top above everyone else. This and a life lived in comparison – I have nicer things, get better grades, make more money, have more influence – it is life lived in comparison to others. And it is a kind of living that not only wants to exalt oneself but bring others down. It cannot stand to see others do better than itself.

*ILL - The story is told of two men who lived in a city. Both were envious of the other, always measuring life by the progress of the other. The ruler of the city sent for them and said he wanted to grant them one wish each – with this proviso, that the one who chose first would get exactly what he asked for, while the other man would get exactly twice what the first had asked for himself. The first envious man was ordered to choose first but immediately found himself in a quandary. He wanted to choose something great for himself, but realized the if he did so the other would get twice as much. He thought for a while, and then asked that one of his eyes be put out.*

Lives lived on this path towards wisdom are as Thomas Hobbes suggested; “Nasty, brutish and short.” James says there is another path – another kind of wisdom. This other path is counter intuitive. If I want to live well and achieve my goals it seems human that I should focus on me – but this is not so.

The second path for James – the only true path of real wisdom – is of God; the Christ-centered life that leads to proven character. The God permeated life that leads to peace and righteousness - v. 17-18. This view puts God into the mix and the understanding of reality. And this changes everything.

Putting God in the picture takes you from a half view to a full view of life. From a natural view of life to a supernatural view of life. It explodes your view of the world because now there is a whole new dimension to reality. Putting God and the supernatural into life changes everything.

- **Life is not simply what I can see, feel, taste, or touch and Death is not the end**
- **People have value beyond themselves because they are ever living never dying souls**
- **We live in the midst of a spiritual conflict and Heaven and hell are real**
- **This life is just an instant of eternity and the choices and decision I make here have eternal consequences**
- **There are powers and forces beyond me and my control and Prayer goes from being a nice formality to a desperate need.**

As opposed to satisfying the selfish desires this path is focused on developing character. Worldly wisdom is focused on satisfaction - the meeting and fulfilling of desires, thus changing your circumstances.

Heavenly wisdom is focused on transformation – changing the person from the inside out. Its focus is not on circumstances but on changing you.

**This is a picture of what it means to live and love like Jesus:**

- **Pure** - moral blamelessness, clean, undefiled, free from all vices, uncontaminated – growing in obedience. Looks not just at behavior but the heart.
- **Peace loving** - ready for peace - right relationships between people and between people and God. There is always this huge relational component – we are to be growing in relationships.
- **Considerate** (gentle) - it is the thought of respect for the feelings of others, gently reasonable. It really at its heart is the ability to put the interests of others before yourself. How are you with that with your spouse or your kids or co-workers?
- **Submissive** - easy to be entreated or persuaded, willing to learn from others, opposite of stubborn. Teachable – learning.
- **Full of mercy & good fruit** - an attitude of compassion toward those in distress that leads to practical help. Am I a giver of grace and then do I show it in acts and deeds?
- **Impartial** - without variance, consistent – fair. Or better said – just.
- **Sincere** - genuine, authentic, without hypocrisy, no pretense. I am on the inside what I portray to be on the outside. No masks.

James gives us a practical example of wise living when it comes to spending our time. Wisdom is making the most out of every day (aka 'Living Intentionally').

**Wisdom is making the most out of every day (aka 'Living Intentionally')**

**James 4:13-17**

<sup>13</sup> Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— <sup>14</sup> yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. <sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." <sup>16</sup> As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. <sup>17</sup> So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

At the entrance hall of the Rockefeller Center in New York City are four large murals that depict the progress of mankind. The first painting is a picture of primitive man laboring with his hands in an attempt to survive in his alien environment. The second scene he has become the creator of tools and the comforts of his civilization are multiplying. The third mural shows man to be master and servant of the machine, and the vast forces of the material world are under his direction and control.





The last picture shows Christ teaching and up toward him is struggling masses of men, women and children.



Underneath the mural are these words:

**Man's ultimate destiny depends not on whether he can learn new lessons or make new discoveries or conquests, but on his acceptance of the lesson taught him close on 2000 years ago.**

***We show that we have wisdom by how we live*** - in other words wisdom must be proved by conduct. For James, Wisdom is a bit like faith - it has to be shown in behavior. You cannot simply say I am wise. James says show you are wise by how you live. Show it by living a Godly life. It means a life that is noble, beautiful, attractive. Winsome in daily conduct. An attractive life. A life that draws people to it by deeds done in humility. True wisdom is not dependent on how much you know or what degrees we have or how many books we have read (none of those are bad things) but wisdom is manifested in the actions of life.

Illustration of Esther Neiswender DeViney

*"Dearest Bob, I don't want an easy life because I know that tends to luke-warmness and laziness and without persecution in any degree I don't think you're really on fire for Jesus. A truly Spirit-filled Christian draws firm on themselves. I think the harder your life is, the closer you come to Jesus. I can't be obedient and not suffer; obedience and suffering cannot be separated. We're not living for a pleasant life on earth*

*but for a crown of righteousness and God's "Well done good and faithful." I pray that we will be true to Jesus all the way, not slackening the leash, but rather burning our lives out for Jesus."*  
~ Esther Neiswender DeViney, age 19

Benediction (v 18):

"And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

### **Community Group discussion questions:**

What is your definition of wisdom?

James says there are two kinds of wisdom, two paths so to speak. How would you differentiate between worldly wisdom and spiritual wisdom?

Read James 3:13-18

What does this passage make you think about practical wisdom?

The worldly path tries to negotiate life without giving consideration to spiritual things. What do you think would happen if the supernatural was taken out of the world? How would **your life** look different if there was no God?

Do you live a life in pursuit of real wisdom? How can we in this small group encourage each other to live lives of true wisdom?