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Competing Forms of Wisdom (James 3:13-4:10, ESV)

INTRO:

If the past few months have taught us anything it's that life can be difficult and often confusing.

- * Take a glance at what's trending in the news and you'll find national concern over police brutality—first in Missouri, then in New York, and now most recently in Baltimore—of course you'll also read and see disastrous effects of the rioting that has come as a response.
- * You'll also find social unrest over things like gender identity, a saga that continues to play itself out in the media, the entertainment industry, the courts, the NCAA, and churches.
- * There's global anxiety over shifting weather patterns and the implications those patterns may or may not have for our future.
- * There are ongoing and escalating conflicts in the Middle East.

And those are just a few of what you might call the “big, public issues.”

- * On a personal level, most of us are overworked, underpaid, and hyper-stressed. If we're old enough to see retirement on the horizon, we fear we haven't saved enough. If younger, we worry we'll never be able to pay off a college degree. And even if we do, we fear that degree may not land us a good job. There are concerns about affordable housing and healthcare, if not for us personally then at least for our children or our aging parents.
- * Technology has made us more connected than ever and yet we confess we're lonelier than ever. And despite certain technological advances, there's growing concern that parts of the U.S. may one day lack access to things as simple as clean drinking water, a fear inconceivable even a generation ago. There are drug problems in our own community. Debates over golf courses and roundabouts. And an unpredictable economy.

All these things just sort of pile down upon us, demanding a response. It was Isaac Newton who first noted that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. What's true in physics is also true with people. When the world squeezes in on you, you will react. *How* you react is the question. And the answer is shaped by what the Bible calls “wisdom.”

TRANSITION:

The Bible tells us there are two forms of wisdom, each diametrically opposed to the other. James is going to walk us through both forms of wisdom in chapters 3 and 4. And he's going to show us that while one will strengthen your relationship with God and in the end benefit the people around you, the other will do just the opposite.

TEXT:

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:13-18, ESV).

- * If you're the type of person who takes notes, I'd circle the verb "show" (δείκνυμι) in v. 13. It's the same verb James used earlier in 2:18 to describe faith. If a person has faith, James says, he or she will *show* it by their "works." Now he's saying if you have *wisdom*, you'll show it too. But not by your works. You don't show wisdom primarily by what you do. You show wisdom through the *manner* you do what you do. Are you tracking with me? And specifically he says that wisdom will reveal itself in meekness.
- * Jesus began his most famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount, by extolling meekness. *3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* Jesus is saying that much of what you want in life can't be found by simply plowing ahead and taking it by force. You inherit it through a spirit of meekness, a spirit that trusts God alone can supply your deepest needs. But in contrast, look at v. 14.

14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

- * James is not a man to mince words. If you're the defensive type, your guard might be starting to rise a bit, but hear him out. Aristotle used the word "ambition" to refer to the warring of political parties. It's the use of propaganda, blackmail, force, and deceit to get your way. It's a self-centered approach to life that aims to benefit you at the expense of others. It's a type of wisdom that thinks "Me first." But James is going to call us to a wisdom that thinks "We first."
- * This isn't natural for us, which is why C.S. Lewis once observed that, *"Real wisdom is to realize that you, too, have a fatal flaw that has hurt and frustrated others."* We're good at seeing other people's flaws. We can tell when they're being jealous or selfish, exhibiting some form of "earthly wisdom." But we're not so good at seeing these flaws in ourselves. That's why Lewis goes on to say, *"This is the next great step of wisdom—to realize that you also have a fatal flaw in your character. All the hopes and plans of others have again and again shipwrecked on your character just as your hopes and plans have shipwrecked on theirs. It is no good passing this over with some vague, general admission such as 'Of course, I know I have my faults.'¹ It is important to realize that there is really some fatal flaw in you: something which gives the others just that same feeling of despair which their flaws give you. And it is almost certainly something you don't know about—like what the advertisements call 'halitosis,' which everyone notices except the person who has it. But why you ask, don't the others tell me? Believe me, they have tried to tell you over and over again, and you just couldn't take it. Perhaps a good deal of what you call their 'nagging' or 'bad temper' are just their attempts to make you see the truth. And even the faults you do know you don't know fully."²*
- ✓ Take what Lewis says and consider the events of this past week in Baltimore. It's easy, from afar, to find flaws in the people or parties involved, whether it's the police or the rioters or city officials. But it's harder to see the flaws in everyone involved, including the deep-rooted flaws in the system, which boil to the surface over time and then spill over in moments like this. And as Lewis said, it's most difficult to see the flaws in ourselves—how we may have contributed, even from afar, to the scene unfolding on our TVs.
 - Don't forget what you learned in your high school science class—for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. It's a fundamental law of physics that has proven to be a fundamental law for human relationships.

¹ Like the person in a job interview who says their greatest weakness is being a perfectionist. That's a non-answer.

² As quoted in Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership* (Littleton: Lewis & Roth, 1995) 40.

- Earthly wisdom says the equal and opposite reaction to violence is more violence. It says things like, *“I don’t think justice has been served; I will seek and serve my own justice.”* Or it even says things like, *“Rioters are lashing out in their anger and frustration; I will lash out at them in my anger and frustration.”* Both are forms of earthly wisdom. However it manifests itself, **Earthly wisdom reflects a willingness to destroy what remains for the sake of what’s been lost. But godly wisdom seeks to restore what’s been lost for the sake of what remains.** Godly wisdom says the equal and opposite reaction to violence is not more violence, but peace.

- ✓ What’s often lost in the media coverage of emotional events, like Baltimore, are the number of people who *are* responding in God-honoring ways. There are families, businesses, individuals, city officials, and police officers, who will never get any limelight, serving as agents of peace and reconciliation.

- As Christians, we have an opportunity—a better word would be *responsibility*—to be an agent of positive change. One of the ways we do that is by tearing down the walls that tend to divide us. Do you realize that one of the most segregated hours of the week in our country is Sunday morning? When we allow that to be the case, we aren’t communicating the full hope of the Gospel. And if we don’t seem to think that Jesus has the power to unite us in times of calm why would anyone believe he could unite us in times of chaos?

- The Gospel calls us to consciously pursue, in our daily relationships, what James identifies as wisdom from above. Listen to how he describes it, vv. 17-18:

17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. There’s a clear contrast between wisdom from above and wisdom from below.

| Wisdom from Below | Wisdom from Above |
|--|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Selfish Jealous Contentious Unspiritual Demonic</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Impartial Open to Reason Peaceable Full of Mercy and Good Fruits Pure</p> |

These lists represent your options for responding to any given situation. The lists on the left the approach you and I are prone to take if left to ourselves. The list on the right reflects the approach God would have you take.³

ILLUSTRATION:

Sarah and I have a friend who illustrates the difference between these two approaches.

Our friend grew up in an abusive home. She was the middle of three children. By the time we met, her dad was well out of the picture but his damage had already been done. Her mom acted more like a child than a parent—she had a variety of dependencies and dysfunctions. The older sibling had learned to cope through rebellion. The younger sibling had chosen the opposite path—he caved into himself and became sort of an emotional recluse. Our friend functioned not only as a sister for each of them but in many cases also a mother—not exactly what a 20-year-old dreams for herself.

From the standpoint of earthly wisdom, she had every reason to be bitter; every reason to act out; every reason to put herself first because no one else had ever bothered to put her first. And yet, by God’s grace, I’ve never met a person with more joy; or a person more optimistic and others focused. I’ve never met a person who so strongly believes that even through her pain and brokenness God is writing a beautiful story.

And because of that faith and wisdom, demonstrated over years, the older sister has come back to a relationship with God and has started her own family. Her younger brother has finished college and is gaining self-confidence. And God has opened some remarkable doors for my friend, allowing her to speak young women, on a national stage, about true beauty and their God-given value and the importance of finding their identity in Christ.

These are results only God can accomplish!

³ Interestingly, wisdom functions a lot like the **Holy Spirit** in Galatians 5 and **Love** in 1 Corinthians 13. *22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25, ESV). And then, 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, ESV). Taken together you might say we find this so-called “wisdom from above” by following the lead of God’s Spirit through acts of God’s love.*

TRANSITION:

We all have things we want out of life. The question is how will you pursue those things, especially when you feel you've been dealt a bad hand. Will you add to the hurt around you by seeking your desires through earthly wisdom? Or will you pursue your desires through a godly wisdom that also seeks the betterment of others?

Chapter 4 speaks to this question. It's a new chapter, but a continuation of the same thought.

TEXT:

4:1 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

- * James uses murder and war in a metaphorical sense, much like we would say, "That family is at war with one another." Or "this decision is killing me."
- * He also says there are two types of people who shouldn't expect to receive anything from God. The first fight and quarrel for what they want but never bother to ask God. The second ask God for what they want but they only ask so that once they receive they can go on fighting and quarreling. James says neither person should expect to receive anything from God. In the language of chapter 1, they are a double-minded man or woman.
- ✓ Take a moment and look back with me at James 1—*5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. 6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; 8 he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways (James 1:5-8, ESV).*
- ✓ Chapter 1 and chapter 4 really don't make sense without each other. If you need wisdom, James says, "Ask God." But if you ask with an attitude that's rooted in earthly wisdom, he says, "Don't expect to receive anything." Not because God is harsh. But because that's not the type of wisdom God gives. If He gave you what you're asking for in the way you're asking for it, it wouldn't do you any good. God has something better for you.

James makes this clear in v. 4. He wants us to feel the weight of our wandering from God—**4** *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.* **5** *Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?* **6** *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”*⁴ **7** *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.* **8** *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.* **9** *Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom (James 4:4-9, ESV).*

- * This is a picture of repentance. When you come to Christ, he will change your perspective on what matters most. Anybody found this to be true? As God begins to work on your heart, your outlook on life starts to change, doesn't it? Things you once felt were important now seem less so. And things that before were not important are now more so. What before caused you to laugh will now cause you to mourn because you realize that humor isn't glorifying to God. What before brought you sort of a sinister joy—because good came your way at the expense of others—will now bring you gloom because you realize the attitude you displayed or the actions you committed break the heart of God.
- * There is an emotional component to repentance. It's the humbling of self. James mentions it in v. 10, **10** *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you (James 4:1-4:10, ESV).*⁵

TRANSITION:

The idea in these two chapters is that we won't solve the problems of the world with the wisdom of the world. They are in competition with one another.

CONCLUSION:

So here's the question—in what areas of your life are you living by the wrong wisdom?

Can you think of anything?

⁴ V. 6 is quotation of Proverbs 3:34.

⁵ This recalls James 1:9, *Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation.*

You know that it's not doing you or anyone else any good, right?

Today is the day for you to turn that over to God. To repent and ask Him to help you look at your situation with a fresh perspective. With new eyes and a new heart.

God will help you. He knows you can't do it alone. That's why He sent His Son. Jesus is the embodiment of wisdom.⁶ And he offers you a new start. He will take the old form of wisdom that you've lived from and offer to replace it with the wisdom you need. And it really will change everything.

Prayer → Invitation

⁶ There is strong theological support for this idea since the Old Testament connects "wisdom" to the creation event and the New Testament does the same for Jesus.

Resources

Dauids, Peter H., "The Epistle of James," *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1982).

Johnson, Luke Timothy, "The Letter of James," *Anchor Bible* (New Haven: Doubleday, 1995) 37A.

Strauch, Alexander, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership* (Littleton: Lewis & Roth, 1995).