

Such Wisdom

by Alistair Begg

The sermon emphasizes the importance of heavenly wisdom, which comes from God and is characterized by humility, and warns against earthly wisdom, which is self-centered and comes from the devil.

Duration: 34:46

Scripture: Exodus 16:35, James 3:13

Topics: "Wisdom"

Description

In this sermon, Alistair Begg discusses the resurgence of confession in churches and how it has been marketed as a form of self-improvement. He criticizes this approach, stating that true confession should be about recognizing our sins and seeking forgiveness from a holy God. Begg emphasizes the need for a Savior for our sins rather than just improving our circumstances. He also highlights the dangers of worldly wisdom and its roots in spiritual forces of evil.

Transcript

The following message by Alistair Begg is made available by Truth For Life. For more information, visit us online at truthforlife.org. As we turn now to the Bible, we pray that the Spirit of God will be our teacher, grant that our minds may be open to its truth, that our hearts to welcome it to the very core of our being, and our wills ready to step out on the pathway of childlike trust and obedient faith. For we pray in Jesus' name.

Well, we're in James chapter 3, and the concluding verses, those of us who've been here for a wee while know that we have almost got stuck here, but we're not stuck, we're here purposefully, and I'm tempted to tell you on the strength of a book that I began reading this week, that we're not even close to stuck. I began reading a book by John Buchan called *Witchwood*. John Buchan is the author of *39 Steps*, which some of you will have read, and he also wrote a number of other books.

He's a Scottish author in the early part of the 20th century, and the beginning of this book, the opening chapter of this book, is entitled *The Coming of the Minister*, and with the arrival of a new minister, a group of the congregation are sitting around discussing with one another how things are going to be, and one of them says, well, you know, it's certainly going to be a step forward from the previous fellow. Why is that? says one. Well, he said he preached for 70 Sabbaths.

He preached for 70 Sabbaths on the verse at the end of Exodus 16, which reads as follows, Then they came to Elam, where there were twelve wells and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water. And he preached for 70 weeks on that verse. And one of the fellows says, one for every tree.

And after a pause, the other fellow says, he wasn't strong on the intellectuals. So he was coming up with all manner of ideas. He had a tree and an idea for every tree.

Well, we haven't descended to that. We're not even close, so relax and look again at what James has to tell us concerning the contrast between two kinds of wisdom. Heavenly wisdom, which according to verse 13, as we saw last time, reveals itself in deeds done in the humility that actually comes from wisdom.

There is an inherently logical process in the words of James here. For example, the heart of Solomon's wisdom in Proverbs, he reminds us in chapter 9 and verse 10 that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That is the pathway into true wisdom.

That is, if you like, the gate through which a man or a woman enters. What then is the fear of the Lord? Charles Bridges in the 19th century answered this in such a masterful way that I'm not sure I can better it. Bridges' writing of the fear of the Lord says, it is that affectionate reverence by which the child of God bends humbly and carefully in every exercise of mind and every object of life to his father's law.

It's a wonderful picture of the child of God bending humbly and carefully, bending themselves into the contours of not only God's plans and purposes, but into the very contours of his law itself, reminding us that there is actually really no knowledge apart from godliness. Oh, there is this other kind of wisdom which we're about to consider, but when it comes to heavenly wisdom, that comes by way of God's revelation. And it is in knowing God that we gain a true and sane estimate of ourselves.

In other words, this is counterintuitive to so much contemporary thinking. Men and women today, engaging them in conversation, will often be happy to say that they are looking for themselves, they are in search of themselves, they want to come to know themselves. And they think that by looking within, they may discover this.

As Christians, with a worldview that is founded and circumscribed by the Bible, we are able to say to them, actually, that until they come to a knowledge of God, then they will not ever truly understand themselves or the reason for their existence. They need to go out under a very clear sky, as last night, and say with the psalmist, Oh Lord, my Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens, when I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have ordained. What am I? What am I? That you would be mindful of me, and the Son of Man, that you would actually come and visit me.

You see, it is here, in a transcendent view of God, in descending from who God is, in revelation, in creation, in revelation in our conscience, by his revealing of himself in his word, and finally and savingly in his Son, that we can then begin to unscramble the riddle of our own personal existence. And that, of course, is the wisdom that comes from above. It is expressed in an attitude that is humble, the opposite of arrogance.

It is the very likeness of Jesus, who, in introducing himself as somebody whose teaching may be followed and obeyed, he said, you can take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because after all I am gentle and I am lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. He is the great teacher. He is the teacher par

excellence.

He is the embodiment of the wise and the understanding. And when we search for wisdom, we ultimately find it in Christ. Now, with this rhetorical question in verse 13, James is concerned that people will not jump up too quickly and announce themselves as fitting the category of the wise and the understanding.

And it is of imperative importance that the individual that thinks they may qualify for the task of wearing the baseball hat with wisdom on the front should check to make sure that they are not falling foul of things in the area of bitter envy, verse 14, and selfish ambition. It is a very straightforward statement. If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, then do not, whatever you do, go around boasting that you are wise.

If, says James, your heart is full of self-promotion and jealousy, then you give the lie to the truth that wisdom must inevitably be associated with humility. I think that is largely the sense of verse 14. Since he has just said that a truly wise life is a good life, the good deeds emerge from a humility, a humility that comes from wisdom.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Therefore, if a man or a woman's heart is full of envy and selfish ambition, then they give the lie to the truth just declared in verse 14, and so they are denying that very truth itself. If your heart is full of rivalry, paraphrases J.B. Phillips, and bitter jealousy, then do not boast of your wisdom.

It's very straightforward. Now, it is important, too, as we come to this, to recognize that what James is describing here is something that is radically different from the wisdom that comes down from heaven. In chapter 1, remember, he said that if anyone lacked wisdom, he should ask God, and God would give it to him.

He's a faithful God, and he doesn't change like shifting shadows. And the wisdom that comes from heaven is directly in opposition to that which comes from the earth. Now, it is with this wisdom, and if you have the NIV, you will notice that the translators have put the word wisdom, the second word in the sentence there in verse 15, they've put it in quotes, such wisdom does not come down from heaven.

This wisdom that refers to itself as wisdom, but which in actual fact is no wisdom at all. What do we know of it? First of all, concerning its source, he tells us three things. Number one, it is earthly.

Number two, it is unspiritual. And number three, it is of the devil. We'll consider each in turn and briefly.

In other words, this wisdom is in direct opposition to the wisdom that comes from heaven. There is a clarity about this that comes out where you find earthly and heavenly used elsewhere in the New Testament. Perhaps nowhere clearer than in 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul, in addressing the question of the death of believers, says, if the earthly tent we live in be destroyed, we have a building from God not made with hands, we have a heavenly dwelling.

So our earthly dwelling, our body, our frame, the shell of our existence is from the dust and will return to dust. It is earthly. That which God has prepared for us is heavenly and will not be affected by all the detrimental impact of time and space and gravity and so on.

In other words, they are radically different from each other. Now, it is important that you recognize that it is that same radical difference which is being pointed out here by James' use of these adjectives. This kind

of wisdom, he says, finds its origins on the earth rather than in heaven.

I mean, if we might speak just in straightforward terms, this speaks into the whole argument of does it start in the beginning God, which is the wisdom of heaven, or in the beginning, which is earthly wisdom. Earthly wisdom begins from the earth. Heavenly wisdom begins from heaven.

It is, by very nature, earthly. It is earthbound, it is timebound, and all of the aspirations of earthly wisdom are measured by achievement in the here and now. And even our consideration of spiritual and eternal things from an earthbound perspective skews our understanding of truth as it is revealed to us.

In other words, if you use earthly wisdom to think about heavenly wisdom, one's view of heavenly wisdom will be skewed because of the absence of the wisdom necessary to understand the things of God. We are entirely dependent upon God to come and pull back the curtain and reveal himself to us. Secondly, it is unspiritual.

The Greek word is *psychikos*, from which we get psychology, as it turns out, although we don't want to read too much into that. It just so happens that that is the word. In other words, this is the kind of thinking that is devoid of the work of God's Spirit.

It's devoid of the work of God's Spirit. You don't need to think in terms of God or divinity to give expression to these ideas. It is wisdom which exists on a purely material plane.

Instead of addressing the issues of the soul as of primary importance, it encourages a preoccupation with the body and its pleasures. It's not concerned about spiritual things. And even its expression of spirituality is clearly earthbound when it is not finding its origin in heaven.

Now, I don't go looking for illustrations during the week. They just come and find me. And as I was preparing for this, I was reading the newspaper as usual, and on Friday, around lunchtime, I picked up at Heinen's, the weekend journal for the Wall Street.

And if you read it, you know that in the weekend section of it, there's a big article, Confession is Making a Comeback. And it's a quite fascinating article about everybody confessing their sins and doing it online and on MySpace and YouTube and every other thing. And then they fire it up on the screen, and congregations can watch all the sordid, dirty details of people from all around the United States.

It seems to me, in some cases, to be phenomenally perverse. But the thing that struck me about it was just this statement. Several factors are feeding this resurgence, this resurgence in the desire to confess.

Aggressive marketing by churches has helped reinvent confession as a form of self-improvement. As a form of self-improvement. That is earthly thinking.

Come here and improve yourself. Come here and fix yourself. As opposed to, come here and bow down before a holy God against whom you have offended and whose wrath you have incurred.

Where do you get wisdom from that? Like that, from heaven, from the Bible. In an article in the New York Times, Thursday's article, about a lady, a self-styled prophetess, on the first page, which goes on to page A20, in describing many things in this, it describes this lady as a powerful trailblazer, and a sociologist at Tulane University who closely follows what has become known as the Neopentecostal movement, says the key to this is that it emphasizes self-improvement and prosperity. Self-improvement and prosperity.

It's completely earthbound. You don't need spiritual things. Because the wisdom of God is what? To those who are perishing.

Foolishness. 1 Corinthians 2. God's wisdom, the natural man says, is Tommy Rot. And the natural man, 1 Corinthians 2.14, does not receive the things of the Spirit because they're foolishness to him.

So when you have 35,000 people listening to self-help stories with self-improvement notions, with a sprinkling of Bible verses, you have to be discerning enough to say, either this is a magnificent movement of revival by the Spirit of God, or else it is, what I may suspect, simply that men and women, whose hearts fail them because of fear, like to be encouraged, like to be told they're doing okay, and definitely want to improve themselves, and so on, and they're prepared to go to just about any length at all in order to be so improved. That is not heavenly wisdom. What kind of self-improvement story would the thief on the cross have benefited from? Well, I think I can improve your circumstances for you.

I don't need my circumstances improved. I'm about to die. I need a Savior for my sin.

And just when I was in the middle of all of this, I was at Starbucks early in the morning, and surrounded by a crowd of people, and the lady who knows me behind the counter said, as I took my place in line, she said, Oh, Alistair will be able to answer this one for us. And now I had my congregation. And she said to me, And so, what do you think about Joel Osteen? And I said, and I said, I said, I think he has a great smile.

And may I please have a tall, skimmed latte, and let me out of here. Earthly, unspiritual, devilish. It gets worse.

James doesn't pull any punches. This worldly wisdom, he says, is ultimately rooted in the spiritual forces of evil. He said in verse 6, back early up in chapter 3, that the tongue is set on fire by hell.

In verse 7 of chapter 4, he's going to come to the whole issue of the devil, and resisting the devil. The God of this age, says Paul, is the God who blinds the minds of men and women. And the only safeguard against the blinding of our minds by the evil one, who blinds us and says, you know, you should succumb to temptation, it will be so enjoyable, and nothing will happen to you at all.

How are we going to respond to that? You should engage in this. It's really not a problem. You should enjoy this.

It won't offend you or do anything bad to you. How do we respond to that? The only way we can respond is the way that Jesus responded to the same kind of insinuations, and that is by taking the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, which is the clarifying, uncompromised truth of Scripture. Otherwise, the devil, in his hypocritical stance, using his forces and his fiends.

Read Screwtape Letters, if you haven't recently, and you'll get a picture of this. Paul says, The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. So we are not to be surprised.

Jude 19 describes those who fight against the faith once delivered to the saints as the men who divide you and who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit, who follow mere natural instincts, who are earthly, psychikos, and that is rooted in the evil one himself. Well, that's the source. Let's go to the characteristics as described in verse 16a.

Where you have what? Number one, envy. Where you have envy. This is the same word that is translated elsewhere in the New Testament as jealousy.

And it's often difficult to distinguish between envy and jealousy. He's already mentioned this, giving it an adjective, pikron, bitter, verse 14. Now he says, If you find that this earthly, unspiritual, devilish perspective on things is to the fore, then you will bump into envy.

Envy is essentially to be resentful of the advantages that are enjoyed by other people. Envy is to resent the advantages enjoyed by others. We may simply resent them because they have them, even though we don't want them.

Or we may resent them because they have them and we actually do want them, which is, of course, to fall foul of covetousness as well. Jealousy, if you like, the close cousin of envy, is usually defined as intolerance of rivalry. So there is a godly jealousy, that God is jealous for his children and wants to protect them and preserve them from every evil influence.

The same that a parent would have for their own children and a spouse for their spouse. But in its sinful expressions, jealousy is afraid of someone becoming equal to us or worse still, superior to us. And to engage in envy is to run counter to heavenly wisdom.

Why? Because it means that we're looking at things from down here. We're looking at things from an earthly perspective, not from a heavenly perspective. When we look at things from a heavenly perspective, we go to the Bible, when we're tempted to envy and to jealousy.

And we go, for example, to Paul, in the context of 1 Corinthians, where he is addressing some of the chaos there as a result of people making little lines behind various of their favorite preachers. There's a novel idea, isn't it? And in the course of that, he says to them, verse 7 of chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians, who makes you different from anyone else? What's the answer to that question? Well, you see, from an earthly perspective, you can't answer God, can you? Because you don't know if there is a God, and if there is a God, you don't know who He is, and you don't know if He made you, and you don't know how you got your DNA. You're just a collection of molecules held in suspension.

You really got no answer for that question. Except, I suppose, I made myself different from someone else. Wrong.

Who makes you different from someone else? What do you have that you did not receive? I'm a self-made man. I did it all. That's earthly.

No. Everything you have, including your mental capacities, God gave you. There's nothing you have you didn't receive.

If you have an ability to make money, He gave you the ability to make money. If you have a peculiar gift, He gave you the peculiar gift. And if He gave someone else a similar gift, and made them more proficient in the use of that gift, that is because of who He is, not because of who they are.

Who made you different from anybody else? God. What do you have that you didn't receive? Nothing. Then, here's the question.

Why, then, do you boast as though this isn't the case? Do not boast and deny the truth. Jerry Bridges has just written a new book entitled *Respectable Sins*. It is as painful as it is necessary to read it.

I wrote to him this week upon receipt of it, telling him, why would he write such a dreadful book so convicting? And in it, he points out that we tend to envy those with whom we most closely identify, and we tend to envy them in the areas we regard as most significant. Just think about that for just a moment, because this is important. We tend to envy those with whom we most closely identify, and we tend to envy them in the areas we value most.

For example, if you don't give a rat for gardening, you're not going to envy somebody who has the most beautiful garden, because you don't want one. But if you do want one, and you've got two gladioli sticking up out of a bunch of dandelions, then you might have great difficulty driving out of your driveway. You're probably not going to envy, I don't envy surgeons.

I admire them. I can't be a surgeon. They're so far from me.

It would be silly to envy them. I don't envy Tiger Woods. How could you envy Tiger Woods? He's in a realm of his own.

No, I just envy people that are like me and do the same things as me and might be doing better than me, and that really can tick me off. If you're a car salesman, you're probably not going to envy somebody who has 17 dealerships. But you may envy the person in the next cubicle to you who seems somehow or another always to finish with the figures ahead of you every month.

You identify with them. You care about the same things. And as a result, envy can begin to rob you of relationships and enjoyment.

The accompaniment to that, says James, is selfish ambition. What is selfish ambition? Selfish ambition we might describe in terms of the inclination to use divisive means, unworthy means, for promoting myself. Selfish ambition is the inclination to use unworthy and divisive means to exalt myself.

And James says, this kind of wisdom, earthly, unspiritual, devilish wisdom, is the precursor to both of these characteristics. You will find these things present. Indeed, if you work back the way, when you find envy and selfish ambition, if you work your way through the underbrush, you will eventually come to that which is there in glowing technicolor that says this wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, and devilish.

Aristotle in an earlier era described this as the narrow partisan zeal of factional greedy politicians. So you can go back a long way and find that politicians were held in such high regard then as they are now. The sneaking suspicion that perhaps this individual has got a huge ego and fancies this for themselves despite all they say about the desire to be a public servant.

It is not ours to judge motivation or heart. It is ours to use discrimination and discernment to see whether lip and life meet one another in a way that is compatible with godly wisdom. No, it's just as true of pastors as it is of politicians.

And it is just as true of people in the pews. Because each one of us may be constantly seeking to promote our own opinion, to establish our own position, and that at the exclusion of others. It is the very antithesis of the servanthood of Jesus.

Source? Earthly, unspiritual, devilish. Characteristics? Envy and selfish ambition. Results? Two.

Number one, disorder. Disorder or confusion. If you have the King James Version, confusion.

What James is describing here is a form of anarchy. Confused thinking. Disruptive decision making.

Disharmony. Restlessness. Unsettledness.

If you come in on this, in a family, in a business, in a church, then you will be able to trace it back to its source. Completely counter to the nature of God. Remember Paul writes to the Corinthians after all of his stuff on spiritual gifts, and he says to them in 1 Corinthians 14, God is not a God of disorder, but a God of peace.

But a God of peace. So when you find disorder, then you're not dealing in the realm of heavenly wisdom. And this disorder just leads on to all kinds of dreadful stuff.

You'll find disorder, he says, and eventually, if it is unchecked, you'll find every evil practice. Why? Because the umbilical cord has been cut between God and his revelation, and God and his people. The people have now begun to think earthly, unspiritual, devilishly.

They've tolerated and baptized into orthodoxy the existence of envy and selfish ambition. They give it other names and tolerate it. As a result of that, disorder ensues.

And before you know where you are, all of the beautiful garden is completely overgrown with weeds that when they were first identified might have been dealt with. But now, it's virtually impossible. Or, to make the metaphor more graphic, the cancer was not dealt with immediately, swiftly, ruthlessly.

But instead, it was tolerated. It began to spread. The whole body was invaded.

And disruption and decay set in. You see how wonderful it is that we have a Bible? That we're able to turn to the Bible, and the Bible speaks with such clarity to things that are of such pressing importance to all of us in relationship to these things. Let me finish in this way.

Let's suppose that we were able to zip back in time and sneak up on the disciple band, just as they were coming out of Jerusalem, on their way to Jericho, and unbeknownst to them, they were about to bump into blind Bartimaeus. And as they were sitting, having a cup of water at the well, we went up and sat on the well as well, and we listened to them talk. And as we listened to them talk, we said, excuse me, you don't happen to be the disciples of Jesus, of Nazareth, do you? And, oh yes, they said, yes we are.

We said, oh, I've often wondered what you were like. And then we just sat in silence, and they talked a little more. And the tone was not what you would call encouraging.

It didn't sound as though they were all having a really nice time. Indeed, there were little snippets of conversation that sounded like jealousy or rivalry or the potential for embitterment. And so, because of the way we are, we interrupted again, and we said, you know, excuse me, but I'm forced to say that from what I've heard about Jesus of Nazareth, you folks really don't sound like you are his disciples.

You don't sound like a united band of followers. Well, what has happened to you? And then ten heads all turn, and they look at two heads. And the two heads have faces that are beginning to light up like a traffic light at stop.

Two red faces. And so we say to the two red faces, who are you? One says, I'm James. The other says, I'm John.

I said, are you responsible for this disruption here and all this envy and the thing that started? Yeah. What did you do? Well, we asked Jesus if we could sit next to him when he comes into his kingdom. We thought for all kinds of reasons that, I mean, he's going to have to have somebody sit next to him.

So James and I, says John, we thought it would be nice one could go on the right and the other could go on the left. And when the ten found out that we'd asked, it just went wild from there. What did Jesus say to you? Well, actually, Mark wrote it down in his gospel.

You can read it. This is what he said. Jesus called them together and said, You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. And whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom. Source? Earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. Characteristics? Envy, selfish ambition.

Results? Disorder. And eventually, every evil. The Bible comes both to warn and to encourage.

And always to turn us again to the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our only and all of our hope of salvation. Father, we thank you for the Bible. And we thank you for its clarity.

And we pray that its truth may so invade our thinking that we might think wise thoughts after you, that you will forgive us when we tolerate that which is so clearly a matter for our confession and repentance. And we pray that since it has been your purpose from all of eternity to make your children like Jesus, that you will make us increasingly like he who is gentle and lowly in heart. For we pray in his name.

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