

Wisdom and Worldliness

DAVE BAST

James addressed his letter to the whole Christian Church throughout the world – what he metaphorically called the twelve tribes in the dispersion; but his message is not just a vague set of aphorisms and exhortations. James must have had some very real congregations in mind, because examples of Christians behaving badly abound in these five brief chapters. Well, today on Groundwork we want to look at James' diagnosis of the problem. In a word, the problem is worldliness, and there is only one antidote to that, which James will also prescribe for us. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So, here we are, deep into James. We are coming up on the end of Chapter 3 and the beginning of Chapter 4. We have worked our way through in order. We have heard a lot of practical kinds of messages – lessons for life – for the Christian life. A lot of talk about faith; trials versus temptations; faith versus works; favoritism. A lot of stuff about worship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; James, as we mentioned before, comes across like a drill sergeant; very preachy in the worst sense of the word – there are good senses of the word preach, I say as a preacher.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, in the worst sense of the word, he can sound scolding; he can sound kind of hard-nosed – no holds barred – not afraid to use hyperbole if that helps him make his point; but what he is after again and again and again, and we must assume that this was a problem in the early Church – and I think we can safely assume it is still a problem today – what he really is against is what we might call sham religion – cheap grace, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer talked about it; people who talk the talk but they do not walk the talk. They are all talk; they are all show; but when push comes to shove, they are selfish; they are enamored with fame and power, after all. They walk past homeless people and sidle up to rich people, and James is saying: Look, we have been grafted onto Jesus. He is our savior. The Holy Spirit lives in us. He has to flow through us, and that has to affect how we do everything, and if it doesn't, then it just looks as hollow as an empty rain barrel. It does not add up for James for religion to be only talk. If you really knew what you were talking about, you could not just talk about; you would sing about it and you would shout about it and you would do something about it every day of your life.

DAVE BAST

Yes; if your faith is just words or opinions or intellectual ideas, that is useless, says James. It is like snow skis in the Sahara. It is dead. It is like a corpse with no breath. So, let's get real, and the great theme of James is wisdom – practical wisdom in the biblical tradition. We pointed out how James connects with some of the

themes of the prophets – the great prophets – the preaching prophets of the Old Testament – about justice and mercy and acting or living out... I quoted Spurgeon's great line: Faith that does not change your behavior will never change your destiny. So we are watching out, James says, for easy believism. I do not know if that is a phrase or not, but I have sometimes used that: Easy believism. All I have to do is say I believe this and I am fine; I am tight with God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is something about James that connects him to the wisdom tradition. You think about Proverbs or Ecclesiastes – some of the wisdom books – very practical stuff, right? And here, in James Chapter 3 – 3:13 – he says:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life; by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. So here he is, he is invoking a major theme of the Bible, and in scripture, there are two ways of knowing: there is knowledge, which is important, and knowledge today we would define as book learning. Knowledge is knowing your multiplication tables, key dates in history, and the periodic table of elements. That is knowledge. You learn it in school. It is book learning. Wisdom, though, in scripture comes from observing what works in life and what doesn't. Wisdom does not come in school, it comes from the school of hard knocks, where you observe life by the Holy Spirit and say: What works in human life? What makes for flourishing and what makes for shalom, and on the other hand, what makes for a vandalism of shalom? What brings people down? What works in life? So, the wise one is always observing, observing, observing, and James says that comes from God. And there is a worldly wisdom, the way that things go, but there is also God's wisdom.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, today's program is really going to focus on what James has to say about wisdom, and we have a wonderful passage beginning toward the end of Chapter 3, and carrying on through most of Chapter 4; but it starts with this invitation to us to ask: Who is really wise? Who is the truly wise person? And maybe your tendency immediately in responding to that is: Well, it must be the smartest person. It must be the person with the most knowledge. The wise person is the person with a PhD in philosophy, or maybe even better, a PhD in math or physics; you know, this tremendously educated person; but a little bit of reflection shows us that that is not the case because we can all think of people who are highly educated, but not very good; and to take one clear example from recent history: The Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, who is spending the rest of his life in federal prison had a PhD in math from the University of Michigan, and people who were there and fellow students said he was one of the most brilliant mathematicians they ever heard of or met, and yet, this kind of twisted, misanthropic human being. So, it is not about how much you know that makes you wise, or how highly educated you are, it is about how you live.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and we have all seen it in the politicians; we have seen it with celebrities; we have seen it, yes indeed, with brilliant scientists. Sometimes you will say: How can somebody who is so smart make such bad choices? I mean, how could you think that was a good idea? So, there is absolutely, as C. S. Lewis said, there is no contradiction between a man being a master of arts and a fool. You can still be a fool because you are not really paying attention to what works in life. You do not really have the knack for getting along in life; and in the Christian context, what the Spirit does, James is saying, is it leads us to that which makes for life – that which makes for shalom – that which builds people up instead of speech that tears them down, to refer back to the previous program. So, the wise person does not take cues from the world, where there is this folly abounding, the wise one takes cues from God's way of having set up the world in the first place, and takes wisdom from that.

DAVE BAST

I remember something my Old Testament professor, Bob Coughenour said about wisdom. The biblical word for wisdom in the New Testament is *kubernesis*, from which we get the word cybernetics, which is the study, I think – I think I am right about this – of guidance systems. It originally referred to the helmsman of a ship, that was the person who charted the course. In the biblical view, that is what true wisdom is. It is knowing

and finding the right course through life – making the right choices that please God. It has to do with... Well, James says, “Who is wise in understanding? Let them show it by their good life; by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. So, the wisest person is not going to necessarily be the highest or the greatest; it is going to be that humble, simple person who makes the right choices; whose path is guided through life; and the Bible says famously throughout the Old Testament: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But there is also worldly wisdom, and it is opposed to what James will call the wisdom that comes from heaven, and what he means by that and what the implications are is what we will look at next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, and today we are digging into James’ understanding of wisdom; and I said just a moment ago, in the first segment, that the great word of the Bible – of the Old Testament in particular – which James certainly knew, is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; so, if we could think of wisdom, not just as knowledge, or even know-how, but know-who; that is where wisdom starts. If you know God, if you know the Lord – the God of the Bible – that is going to start you on the path that will lead to true wisdom; and now James wants to make sure we understand the difference between these two kinds of wisdom. There is a true wisdom and there is a false one. There is a heavenly wisdom, he says, but there is also a worldly wisdom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And he says in James 3:14-18, he says some things that at first do not sound like he is talking about wisdom, but he is. Listen, here is James 3, at the 14th verse:

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure and then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere; ¹⁸peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

So, when we think about wisdom and what is wise, we think of Proverbs, and we think of somebody who is just very discerning and makes wise choices.

DAVE BAST

Or philosophy, maybe.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Philosophers, right. But also, he is talking about bitter envy and selfish ambition. We think, well, yes, those are not very nice things, but what does that have to do with wisdom? Well, James is saying that is how the world works. The world tells you: Look, be envious, be hard-driven, be a mover and a shaker.

DAVE BAST

Be selfish.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and that will get you ahead; well, that is wisdom according to the world; but James says if you are paying attention to God – if you are paying attention to the Holy Spirit who is in you – then you know that those are dead ends. They are nonstarters. You want to have a good life? Envy is going to give you a miserable life. You want to be well thought of by others? Be selfish and you will not be well thought of by anybody. Nobody likes a selfish, arrogant, hard-driving person.

DAVE BAST

Well, the passage that you just read talks specifically about these two contrasting – two different kinds of wisdom, and actually, in the version that we read from, the word *wisdom* is in quotes in that first instance; the earthly wisdom...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Hard to do on the radio, but that is what it is, yes.

DAVE BAST

Yes, how do you do quotes? I am doing the finger wags for quote marks.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, air quotes.

DAVE BAST

But it is a wisdom, James says, that is earthly – or we might say worldly, to use an older Christian term; it is unspiritual; it is in contrast to the life of the Holy Spirit – the life of God – it is even demonic; but it is the way the world operates, as you said, and it is, frankly, good business to be self centered, to be aggressive, to put yourself forward, to do in your competitor. I think of the filmmaker, Michael Moore, who has done a number of documentaries. His first well-known film was called *Roger and Me*, and it was the account of his attempts to get an interview on camera with Roger Smith, who at the time was the chairman of General Motors. Michael Moore was from Flint, and he came from kind of a blue-collar family, and so he felt very keenly what happened when one year GM decided to give out more than one-hundred-million dollars in bonuses to its executives, back in the 1980s, the same year that they laid off thirty five thousand factory workers. So, you know... But, that is good business. That is worldly wisdom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is a way to get ahead, but look at all the damage it does. That was Michael Moore's point, too. Flint is devastated. Thirty-five thousand people laid off – how many thousands and thousands of children does that affect? And meanwhile, the rich get richer. So, there is a way to operate in the world, James says; but boy, when that creeps into the Church – when that is how the Church operates – we have lost the ballgame, James says. We have lost Jesus; we have lost our faith showing itself in deeds; and of course, unfortunately, we know that to a certain degree, this does happen; and there have been, and you have probably read these, too, Dave, there have been some surveys – some sociological studies done in recent years, at least in the United States here, which have demonstrated that there has not been an appreciable difference, statistically, of the Church over against the world when it comes to divorce rates, when it comes to being very materialistic – how many cars do people own, how many televisions do people own, how do they spend their money, how much money do they give to charity, to the church; and recent surveys have shown... You would hope that there would be a huge difference: Boy, Christian people... Boy, the divorce rates are lower and giving is up and materialism is down, and their kids live simpler lives, and you know what? Turns out, not true. They are almost identical – church going and non-church going people on a whole bunch of different markers, including consumerism and materialism and the like; and James would say: Well, I guess worldly wisdom is in the driver's seat, and not the wisdom from heaven.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I think he is talking about the Church. When he contrasts worldly wisdom with heavenly wisdom, or God's wisdom, we could say, which is what he means, he is not thinking so much about how the world operates; he is thinking about what is happening in the churches; and clearly, when he is speaking about envy and rivalry and slander and all this other stuff, he has, I think, got in mind the way church leaders are behaving. In Chapter 3:1, he says: Not many of you should presume to be teachers. It is almost like he is saying: Do not go into the ministry because there are bad things happening, and you are going to be judged for that, and once again James comes back: Watch out – watch out because your behavior is what you are

going to be held accountable for.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I should say, too, that of course James is not saying that only when the Church is perfect – only when there are no problems – are we living from the wisdom of heaven; and of course, I mentioned divorce a minute ago, there are divorces that happen among Christians in the churches that are unavoidable and that are tragic, and I did not mean to single anybody out. It is not that we are perfect, but James is saying where do we draw our inspiration from, first of all; business as usual? The rough and tumble world of politics and Monday through Saturday stuff, or from Jesus and from sacrifice and from humility, and from, as he said, what happens when the wisdom of heaven is in the driver's seat? Well, we are peace loving and we are considerate. Isn't that something? We are just considerate of each other. We are full of mercy. We are submissive to each other. We want to serve each other, not feather our own nests and get ahead, and you know, keep up with the Joneses.

DAVE BAST

It sounds like what Paul means by “the mind of Christ” in Philippians 2...

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think that is exactly it, yes.

DAVE BAST

James is hitting the same thing. Well, okay, so there are two kinds of wisdom, James says, but there are also two kinds of friendship. You can be a friend of God or you can be a friend of the world, and that is where we are going next.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we are finishing up this program, where we have been digging into the final part of James 3 and the first few verses of James Chapter 4, and we have been talking, Dave, about wisdom and where do we take our cues from? Do we take our cues from the wisdom of the world, which is me first; look out for number one; drive hard, get ahead; envy and selfish ambition and greed work; or do we look to the wisdom of heaven, and of course, James wants us to look to the wisdom of heaven; but then he also, as we finish up this program, he also, as we move into Chapter 4, is going to talk about our overall relationship to the world; and as usual, he has some pretty hard things to say.

DAVE BAST

Right; he is going to talk about friendship and – nice topic – but again, James has a little twist to it. There is a negative side as well as a positive side, and it makes me think of the old saying: You cannot have your cake and eat it too. What does that mean, really? What is that saying? Well, you cannot enjoy the pleasure of consuming your cake – whatever your cake might be – whatever that pleasure is – and then still hang onto it and have it for the future. It is like you cannot buy a luxury car without spending anything down from your bank account. It does not work that way. What James is going to tell us is you cannot be a friend of God and a friend with the world at the same time, and here is how he says that. James 4:4:

You adulterous people! Wow, there is another tough opening line.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; he does not pull punches.

DAVE BAST

You adulterous people – spiritually adulterous, he means – metaphorically. Don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you think scripture says without reason that He jealously longs for the Spirit He has

caused to dwell in us; ⁶but He gives us more grace. That is why scripture says God opposes the proud, but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, all of us who are not Amish or Mennonite, who have not withdrawn in very overt ways from the world – all of us who are not esthetics who live out in desert caves, as some Christians in the tradition have done...

DAVE BAST

Or monks or nuns in a monastery.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Monks in a monastery or a convent – if we are not that, then we live in the world every day, and we go to work and we get paychecks and we have bank accounts and we go to grocery stores and we go to restaurants and we go to movies and we go to the mall – does that make us a friend of the world? Because if it does, James says: Uh oh; I guess you are an enemy of God after all. He is blunt as a spoon.

DAVE BAST

You cannot have your cake and eat it too. You cannot have it both ways.

Scott Hoezee: But what does it mean, finally? So, in some parts of Protestantism and in the Reformed tradition we have long had something called the *antithesis*, where we do see that there is an over-againstness of the Church over against the world. We live sort of the Puritan tradition. We live in the world, but we are not of the world; being of the world, I guess, would be what James would call being a friend of the world; but what is that? What does that mean?

DAVE BAST

What does it look like, really?

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you go to a movie and enjoy it, if you go to a restaurant and pay money for food, more than some people in the world could afford for a whole week of food, does that make you a friend of the world?

DAVE BAST

Worldly, yes; worldly. Well, the very word *worldliness*, much beloved by former generations – our forbearers in the faith – they had a pretty clear idea, I think, what constituted worldliness or being on too friendly of terms with the world. It was things like gambling or smoking or drinking alcohol or going to dances or going to the movies...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Worldly amusements.

DAVE BAST

Yes; playing cards – devil cards, the older generation called them; but there is a much deeper and more insidious and more dangerous kind of thing that James is talking about when he talks about friendship with the world; and it gets at what we were talking about earlier, the worldly wisdom that is unspiritual and even demonic, and it has to do with the world's values finding their way into our hearts, deep into our souls, and driving the way we behave; driving how we set our priorities; driving how we spend our money.

SCOTT HOEZEE

How we treat other people, I think James would say.

DAVE BAST

Driving how we treat other people, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is a huge concern for James: How do you speak to each other? How do you treat the poor person as opposed to the rich person who wanders into your church? What are you doing with your life? And therefore, what is the most valuable to you? You are right; that is a disposition of the heart. Where worldliness takes root is in the heart, where the values of the world, how we size up people... Do we say, first of all, everybody I meet is made in the image of God and is potentially my sister or brother in Christ; or does every person we meet say: Well, what could he do for me? I mean, it is all about profit. It is all about getting ahead, so can this person do something to feather my nest? NO? Well, then, I have no use for them. That would be a very worldly way of assessing other people.

DAVE BAST

But real quickly, here, just at the end, James has a bunch of verbs again. You said I think in an earlier program, Scott, that something like 50...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Fifty-six percent of James' verses are in the imperative.

DAVE BAST

Are commands, yes; so, here it is submit to God, humble yourself before God, resist the devil and he will flee from you. Satan's mostly bluster and bluff, so just stand up to him. Come near to God – draw near to God. The great antidote to worldliness is intimacy with God; and repent; wash your hands; purify your hearts; be sincere; avoid hypocrisy; these are the things James counsels us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And at the very least for all of us who live in the world, but do not want to be of the world – for all of us who still participate in commerce and recreation and entertainment in the world, again, James is calling us to thoughtfulness. This, too, is a spiritual category and people of faith will and must think about it, and think about it prayerfully before God, and on a regular basis.

DAVE BAST

Right. Well, thanks for joining today's Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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