

Becoming Wise

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[0 : 00] Let me ask you, are you a wise person? Well, before you answer that, what does it mean to be wise? You know, anybody can probably fix their own, coin their own definition and make them to be wise.

But let's look at it. The word wise in the dictionary says this. To be wise means having the power of discerning and judging correctly as to what is true or right.

Wisdom. It's not about just being smart. Just having a high IQ. Even what you would call a secular dictionary definition says that wisdom involves the power of discerning and judging correctly as to what is true or right.

Being wise is not the same as being intelligent or academically inclined. You know people that are highly intelligent, but they aren't wise.

They don't demonstrate good judgment. You might even say they don't have any common sense. On the other hand, you know some people that you really respect because they are wise and give wise advice.

[1 : 29] But they're not highly educated. They're not intellectually gifted. Look on the screen at an example of someone who was obviously not very smart, but he sometimes demonstrated real wisdom.

Go see. I ain't bees coming with the uniforms. I promised I'd get her another sewing machine. Take charge here. Okay, Gummer. You heard what Andy said. I'm in charge. Let's get cutting.

You crawl in under there and I'll go get the jack. Right. Okay. Stamp under there. Could be spiders. Now what makes you think there's spiders under there?

Call a spider spider. That's where I'd go. Gummer, there's no spiders under there. Now let's get moving. I don't know. Sure looks spidery to me.

There's no spiders under there. Now we establish. You would never list Gummer Pyle as one of the smartest or wisest people you know, would you?

[2 : 38] But even Gummer Pyle knew that a dark and damp place like that was a good place for a spider. And he was wise enough, he wasn't going to crawl up under there no matter what Barney told him.

Many people in this world possess that kind of wisdom. It's not something just reserved for Christians. It's really a part of us being created in the image of God.

I'm beginning a new series this morning called Becoming Wise. We're going to begin in James chapter 3, verses 13 through 18, and just really get started there today and come back and finish it next week.

And then we're going to move to the book of Proverbs, the most well-known book of wisdom in the Bible. As I go wherever I go, talk to whoever, I can't find anyone who is not discouraged about the present condition of our country right now.

Especially the political chaos that we call a presidential election process. I mean, people of whatever political persuasion, people of all walks of life, it seems, are discouraged, are pessimistic about what we see happening around about us, not just in the political world, but there too.

[4 : 26] What I want us to understand is what we see happening and not happening before us is really just a symptom of the deeper moral and spiritual crisis that exists in our country.

We desperately need God's wisdom in every possible way. And I want us to start seeking it by looking at God's Word today in James chapter 3.

Let's look at it. James 3, 13. Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

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

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

[5 : 51] And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. I want us to look at verse 13 in particular and the question that James begins by asking.

Who is wise and understanding among you? And then you look at what's said next, you know, he's not looking for an answer in words. He's looking for an answer in people's works.

James is not saying, define wisdom. He's not telling us even to describe it. He's telling us to show it by the way that we live.

He then describes characteristics of two different kinds of wisdom, earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom. Now, you notice that everything James says about earthly wisdom or just human wisdom is negative.

The reason he does that in this context is because he is comparing it with the wisdom that comes from God. There is a huge difference between the wisdom that God gives to his people and what we might call the natural human wisdom that anyone may possess.

[7 : 17] But we also need to be clear that neither James nor any other Bible writers deny the reality of human wisdom.

You just stop and think about it. You can think of somebody that you have really learned some important things from, lessons of life.

You consider them to be wise. Maybe they were a relative, a coach, a teacher, or a good friend. But they were not Christians. But as you think back or just as you know them now, you know that there's some wisdom coming from them.

You know, throughout the history of our country, we as a nation have been blessed with wisdom from leaders who were not Christians.

in the founding of our country, we've read about non-Christians, deists, and others who, they were wise men who helped this country get started and get started in a good way.

[8 : 30] We've had wise, non-believing, non-Christian leaders in government, in the military, in educational institutions, and in industry.

So we know there's wisdom out there in people who are not Christians. There is such a thing as human wisdom that has positive benefits.

But James' focus is on the superiority of the wisdom that God gives to His people. And the reason His wisdom is superior is because God's wisdom is what enables us to know Him and know His will and know how He intends for life to be lived in this world in a way that will please Him and satisfy us.

That's why God's wisdom is so important. And that's going to be the focus of our teaching throughout this study. But it's also important that we understand that basic human wisdom is real and it is a gift of God to all people.

So let's get started. Number one, human wisdom is possible. Human wisdom, natural wisdom we'll say, is possible for two reasons.

[9 : 58] Number one, we're created in the image of God. The Scripture says in Genesis 1, Then God said, Let us make man in our image after our likeness.

So God created man in His own image. In the image of God, He created him. Male and female, He created them. The theologian Wayne Grudem points out that the words image and likeness refer to something that is similar but not identical to the thing it represents.

You may have a child who is like you in many ways. There's a resemblance.

There's things that they do that is a lot like you but they're not the same as you. Well, we're created in the image of God and that means we are like Him in many ways.

Not always, obviously. we're not God but being created in His image, in His likeness means that we are like Him in some ways.

[11 : 07] Now, in the context of us talking about wisdom, one of the ways that we're like God is our ability to think, reason logically, learn from experience and then make wise decisions.

I mean, you think about it yourself how you have been able to think through problems things, think through situations, reason logically about it, maybe learn from trial and error, learn from somebody else's experience and then you were able to make a wise decision.

It may have been about building something. It may have been about figuring out something. It may have been about relating to people but you know what we're talking about here. being able to have such wisdom is what's helped human beings move from, say, living in caves thousands of years ago to living in the kind of homes we have today where we're cooled in the summer, warm in the winter.

I mean, we've come a long way since early man. We've come a long way people my age from when I was young. But no other creature has done this.

Think about it. Birds are still building nests in trees with little twigs just like they've always done it. Unless you have built a bird house for a bird.

[12:38] A bird would never think about building a bird house. He couldn't think about it. He couldn't do it. Because birds are not created in God's image. We are.

That means we are people who are able to be wise in many ways. Now, after Adam and Eve sinned, everything in creation was corrupted.

The ability of human beings to use their God-like qualities was greatly distorted but it was not lost. Since the fall, since Genesis 3, since everybody after Adam and Eve has been born into this world, everybody has still been born created in the image and likeness of God.

We still have those God-like qualities. We are able to understand morality, to reason, to use logic, to create things, to be wise.

James even points out in chapter 3, look up a few verses back in verse 9, refers to people who are made in the likeness of God. This is how he uses it.

[13:57] James is condemning people who use their tongue to curse people who have been created in the image of God. Being created in the image of God makes you, makes all people, someone of worth, of value, of dignity.

That's really the basis of self-esteem and the only basis that we're created in the image of God, the likeness of God. That's one reason why we can be wise.

A second reason is because of God's common grace. You understand God's saving grace. You're familiar with that passage in Ephesians chapter 2 that says, for by grace are you saved through faith.

We understand God's saving grace. He shows us His undeserved favor through faith in Jesus.

Well, God's common grace is also His undeserved favor, but it's shown to all people as He blesses them with the talents, abilities, and resources to do all the things that it's possible for us to do in this world.

Jesus talked about this in the Sermon on the Mount. He gave this example of God's common grace. Look at it in Matthew 5. Jesus said, for He, that is God, makes His Son rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

[15:25] I mean, Jesus is just talking about a simple, the simple way God just blesses people. You've got some godly farmers over here. You've got some ungodly farmers over there.

Well, God sends rain on both of them. God gives favorable weather conditions to both. Both can have good crops. Both can be blessed in this kind of way.

The Apostle Paul said something very similar in Acts 14. He's writing to, or he's talking to pagans, unbelievers, and he's trying to help them understand how God's always been involved in your life. God is real. You just haven't known Him. But Paul was making Him known. Look at what he said. Yet he, that is God, did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

See, God's common grace has always been in this world. He's always shown His undeserved favor to people in general just by sending good weather, enabling us to do the kind of things that we can do and discover.

[16:40] Tim Keller, influential pastor in New York City, Redeemer of Presbyterian Church. He does an excellent job of explaining how all people, all of us, are beneficiaries of God's common grace.

Look at what he says. God gives out gifts of wisdom, talent, beauty, and skill according to His grace. that is, in a completely unmerited way.

He casts them across the human race like seed in order to enrich, brighten, and preserve the world. By rights, sin should be making life on earth here much more unbearable than it is.

And in fact, all of creation and culture should have fallen apart by now. The reason that it is not worse is because of the gift of common grace.

Without an understanding of common grace, Christians will have trouble understanding why non-Christians so often exceed Christians morally and in wisdom.

[17:50] I've always heard people talk about and trying to argue against how we're all born as sinners and in need of a Savior.

I've always heard people say, but I know these people who are not Christians and they're more morally upright than most church members.

That's true. But the truth is, as Keller points out, it's because of God's common grace.

He's just used some people in some good and helpful ways because that's how he accomplished his purpose. Such common grace wisdom that we're talking about here is how all cultures throughout history have had wise men and the Bible talks about that.

The Bible refers to wise men. The wise men of Israel's pagan, unbelieving neighbors. The Bible refers to them as having a certain kind of wisdom.

[18:59] Look at it from 1 Kings chapter 4. And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all of the wisdom of Egypt.

Now, this description of Solomon's wisdom exceeding the wisdom of everyone else meant that everyone else did have wisdom.

You can't exceed other people's wisdom if they don't have any. So the Bible's acknowledging unbelieving people can be wise.

Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner explains how this is taught throughout the Old Testament. He says, The Old Testament clearly implies that a man can still think validly and talk wisely within a limited field without special revelation.

So what we're doing here, we're beginning a study of wisdom. As we do this, honesty requires that we acknowledge that God created all human beings with a capacity for wisdom.

[20:13] and God has so worked in some people by His common grace that we see it. We see wise people benefit from their wisdom, but they're not Christians.

We've got to be very careful now about thinking too highly of our capacity for wisdom. Point number two, human wisdom is limited.

Only God's wisdom is without limitation. Even if sin had not entered the world, human wisdom would never be equal with God's because we're not God.

We're not all-knowing, all-powerful, everywhere present. But since everything has been corrupted by sin, we know for a fact that our wisdom is not only limited, our wisdom is flawed.

I want us to look at two examples of imperfect wisdom. First, we don't always know the facts in a given situation. Lisa and I a while back were going to a place in Anderson on Highway 81.

[21:28] Well, I knew that we could get there quicker and avoid a lot of traffic at that time of day by going through easily and some back roads and weaving our way to Highway 81.

I've done it before and you could do it and we took off. But we got down one of those back roads and all of a sudden the road was blocked.

There was a sign, Road Closed. So we had to turn around. We had to turn around and find another way and we wound up taking more time getting there than I intended for us to take.

It took a lot longer going that way. I made an unwise decision to take those back roads but it was not a foolish decision because I didn't know the road was closed.

For us, we don't always act wisely because we don't know all the facts. But God always acts wisely because He knows all the facts.

[22:40] Another reason why we act unwisely sometimes is because we're incapable of understanding all the facts. Let's think, if we went over to the preschool area right now, and I walked up to one of the three-year-olds and I said, here is a dime, here is a nickel.

You can have whichever one you want and I put them in my hand where they can see the dime and the nickel. That three-year-old most likely will pick the nickel because it's bigger.

That does not mean that three-year-old is foolish. It just means that that three-year-old hasn't learned the value of coins yet.

That three-year-old is incapable of understanding the dime is worth more than the nickel because he thinks bigger is better. We don't always act wisely because sometimes we're not capable of

understanding all the facts in a given situation.

But God always acts wisely because he not only knows the facts, he understands and he also knows how he is going to work to bring about his purpose in our lives and in the situation.

[24 : 12] Human wisdom is always limited because there's things that we do not know and we're not capable of knowing. that's why we need the special gift of wisdom that God gives to his children.

But there's one more aspect of human wisdom that we must look at because it is the major emphasis of the Bible's teaching on wisdom. Number three, human wisdom is defective.

Human wisdom has been corrupted by sin as I pointed out earlier. when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, it corrupted everything that God had created including human wisdom.

Now one of the most devastating aspects of human wisdom, one of the things that makes it so defective is that it cannot enable us to understand God or understand or understand the things of God.

Paul pointed out the inferiority of human wisdom in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and chapter 2. Paul goes to great lengths in those two chapters to say wise people in this world could never figure out that God's way of salvation was through sending his son to die a criminal's death on the cross and that we could be forgiven by trusting in him.

[25 : 46] Look at what he says in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 20 to start with. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom.

It pleased God through the folly of what was preached to save those who believe. nobody could ever figure out God God's ways.

God had to make it known and he made it known in ways that caused wise people to think that's just crazy. The Greeks they thought it was foolishness.

They laughed. God's it takes God's wisdom God's opening our minds to be able to believe the gospel to know it's real to trust Jesus that way.

He also goes on in 1 Corinthians 2 the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God for they are folly to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

[26 : 54] What Paul is saying here is why Solomon was greater Solomon's wisdom was greater than all the wisdom of the pagan wise men in his day.

Solomon's wisdom was greater because God had given him a special gift. God had given him his wisdom wisdom from above wisdom from heaven.

Now going back to James James tells us that there are two kinds of wisdom at work in people's lives. Wisdom of the world or human wisdom that's in verses 13 through 16 than the wisdom of God.

That's in verses 13 and 17 and 18. We're going to look at that in detail next week. What I want us to understand on this first Sunday of seeking to find out what it means to be wise, I want us to understand human wisdom is real and it does have many positive benefits.

That's because we're created in the image of God and God by his common grace continues to work and bless people's lives. The wisdom of someone not very bright like Gomer Powell and technological geniuses like Steve Jobs are good examples of this human earthly kind of wisdom.

[28 : 32] But as we're going to see in James next week and as we've already read this morning and we're going to see throughout the book of Proverbs in the coming weeks, human wisdom is inferior to the wisdom that God gives to his people.

The reason that our country's in the mess that we're in today is because most people function with only human wisdom, worldly wisdom.

We know that's true by reading what James says about it. This is what we see every day all around us, isn't it? Look in verse 16. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile or evil practice all around us today.

People can't appreciate what other people have and do. We're jealous. We're all about ourselves. We're selfish.

We have selfish ambition. And so the result is just about everywhere you look, there's disorder and every vile practice.

[29 : 55] I have no political motive behind this, but I think you could describe the democratic situation, Hillary Clinton's campaign, and the Republican, Donald Trump's campaign, both

campaigns of disorder and every vile practice.

Think about what you read, what you hear, what you see. I want to encourage you to make a commitment to be a part of these studies with a prayer that God will help you to truly understand His wisdom, why you need it, and how you can come to possess it and experience it.

I want to encourage you to go ahead and start reading in the book of Proverbs. We'll start two weeks from today, Proverbs 1-1, and we're going to move through most of that book.

But in this crazy and chaotic world that we're in, we know we desperately need what we don't have. we desperately need the special wisdom that God gives to His people. But get this now, God's only going to give this wisdom, His wisdom, to us, His people, if, number one, we value it, we want it, and if, number two, we put forth the effort to seek it and acquire it.

[31 : 48] Let's pray together. Father, Father, help us to see that while we may display some good qualities of human wisdom as we see in this world, help us, Father, to see that it is inadequate.

It will not help us to truly know You and Your ways and Your will so that we can do Your will and please You. It won't help us to live life in a way that serves Your purpose, helps truly other people, and brings joy to our own lives.

Help us to see, Father, that it's human wisdom only. It's got us to where we are today. So help us, dear God, to desire and to be willing to seek wisdom from You.

Wisdom that brings about peace, gentleness, reasonableness, mercy, impartiality, sincerity, and all kinds of good fruits.

Show us, Father, how we should respond to You this morning, the kind of commitment we should make. Help us to do that now. In an attitude of prayer, listen to the Lord, do what He's telling you to do.

[33 : 37] If I could pray with you during this time, I'd be happy to do that. I'll be here at the front. I'll be here at the front. I'll be here at the front.