

# Sermon on The Wise Are Those Who Lead Godly Lives

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## Text:

**James 3:13-17** <sup>13</sup> Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

<sup>14</sup> But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. <sup>15</sup> Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. <sup>16</sup> For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

<sup>17</sup> But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

# **RADIO PART 1 – Wisdom is proven by good character and godly choices**

How can you tell whether someone is wise?

How do you know whether you are making wise decisions?

Why is being wise important?

What are the consequences of not being wise?

## **Introduction**

My late father was schooled much more, read the philosophers, traveled to other parts of the world, was successful in business and in politics. He was respected among his contemporaries and was feted in his family. Yet he chose to ignore God and lived an ungodly life.

My mother was forced to stop going to school after the sixth grade because she was a girl. She never read or knew of Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle. She never studied science, social science or the humanities. Yet she chose to live for Christ.

*Who do you think is wise? Is it my late father or my mother? Let's see what James has to say about it in our main text found in James 3:13-17.*

We learn from this text that James says that the wise are those who show Godly character traits. They are the ones who live a life that is holy and acceptable unto the Lord.

## **If you are wise your actions will prove it**

James specifically says that you are wise if you are “pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

- Being pure means you have Godly morals and your motives.
- Peace-Loving means you conduct yourself in such a way as to foster peace and harmony in relationships.

- You are considerate if you are kind, gentle, and courteous to others and do not think of yourself alone.
- You are submissive if you are open to reason and willing to yield to others.
- You are full of mercy if the affliction of others arouses in you an emotion of their plight and an attitude to help them.
- You are full of good fruit if you do good to others.
- You are impartial if you are not prejudiced and play no favoritism in dealing with others.
- You are sincere if your actions and words are genuine, authentic, there is no hypocrisy, and there are no pretenses when you deal with others.

So James is saying that if you are wise your actions must show these Godly traits.

James' approach to life resonates with me. He does not believe in just talk but he wants action to validate the talk. I used to be on the board of the alumni association of my college. At board meetings everyone expressed their views eloquently on the agenda items. Most of the time, the meeting ended without any specific actions taken. After a while it occurred to me that the board meeting was like a reunion for the group and they came together to fraternize two weekends a year. Talking just for the sake of talk was unsettling for me as an engineer because I was trained to implement things and not just talk about them; I always want to figure out what we are going to do now. James has this same attitude of "what are you going to do now." He wants action to follow the talk. In other words, he wants you to walk the talk. This principle underlies James' messages in his epistle to the twelve tribes as he makes statements like: praying without faith is useless, faith without works is dead, word without action is insane, religion without self-control is worthless, and wisdom without Godliness is devilish. To walk the talk

then, James is saying in this passage that those who are wise will lead Godly lives. The wise show their wisdom through their good character.

*But why does leading a Godly life mean you are wise? Is it really true?*

## **The Godly choices you make are wise choices**

We all know people who are not godly but who we consider to be wise. So, James' proposition appears to contradict our intuitive understanding of who is wise. But the standard definition of a person who is wise is the one who discerns and makes right choices. To discern means you have some insight into a situation and you are able to weigh the options to make the right choice. **Cicero**, a Roman philosopher and politician in the century preceding Christ's birth, said, "The function of wisdom is to discriminate between good and evil." So, we see that Cicero also defines a wise person as a person who discerns to make the right choice. **J.I. Packer** explains this definition further when he said, "Wisdom is the power to see and the inclination to choose the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it."<sup>1</sup>

Of all the choices you face in your life, there is one that is of eternal consequence. It is a choice to know God or ignore God. I submit to you that the choice to know God is a right choice. Any person who exercises this choice has made a right choice and hence by the standard definition of wisdom, he is a wise person. That is why the Bible says in **Job 28:28**, "The fear of the Lord-- that is wisdom." But anyone who chooses to ignore God has made a wrong choice and hence he is not wise; that is, he is foolish as stated in **Psalms 14:1**, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good." So, the fool is the person who is not wise because he chose to ignore God. His foolish choice invariably leads him to corrupt and vile deeds.

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<sup>1</sup> J.I. Packer, Knowing God, p. 80.

If you choose to know God then you will chose to fear and obey him as he has commanded. In doing so Romans tells us that we are at peace with God. The choice we make to know God brings us peace instead of war with God. You will all agree that war is not the right choice when there is a clear path to peace. Anyone who chooses war with God then is not wise. So, if you choose to know God then you are wise and because of that you will lead a life that is holy and acceptable to God.

- If you choose to live a moral life, that is a right choice:
- If you choose to be peace-loving, it is a right choice.
- If you choose to be considerate, it is a right choice.
- If you choose to be submissive, it is a right choice.
- If you choose to be full of mercy, it is a right choice.
- If you choose to bear good fruit, it is a right choice.
- If you choose to be impartial, it is a right choice.
- If you choose to be sincere, it is a right choice.

So the wise are those who choose to do the right things by God. The Wise are those who display Christian behavior.

## **RADIO PART 2 – Wisdom of great philosophers and Kwaku**

### **Ananse is earthly wisdom**

The great philosophers of the world are considered wise. What is the Bible's opinion?

Kwaku Ananse in the famous Ghanaian folk story is considered wise. What is the Bible's opinion?

What is the Bible's opinion of great scientists and intellectuals?

*But you may ask, "What about the great philosophers and sages of the world? Are they not wise?"*

### **Ungodly choices invalidates the wisdom of the world**

To answer this question, James introduces the concept of earthly wisdom as distinguished from heavenly wisdom. Heavenly wisdom is what we discussed earlier, which is choosing to know God and choosing to live a godly life. Earthly wisdom, on the other hand, is choosing to ignore God. Such earthly wisdom is no wisdom at all; in fact, it is a false wisdom.

False wisdom, which is essentially foolishness, will make you choose to ignore God and hence live a life that gratifies the desires of the sinful nature. According to James, Earthly wisdom is worldly and demon-like and bears fruits of jealousy, strife, disorderliness, evil, boastfulness and untruthfulness (3:14-16). **Plato** himself a Philosopher concedes that the earthly wisdom which Philosophers possess bears bad fruit when he says, "And of all the virtues, is not

wisdom the one to which people in general lay claim, thereby filling themselves with strife and false conceit of wisdom?”<sup>2</sup>

### **Kwaku Ananse’s purported wisdom was to deceive the unsuspecting – this is earthly wisdom**

In the Ghanaian folk stories called Ananse stories, Ananse was considered to be wise. One of the stories I often told to my kids because they loved it goes like this. One day there was a famine in Ananse’s village and so he packed up his family and traveled through the forest till he arrived at a village that abounded in food. When he and his family arrived they looked famished and skeletal. And so the village people fed them and continued to feed them for awhile. After awhile the village people expected that Ananse will work on a farm and not continue to subsist on them. Ananse was lazy and did not want to work and so he hatched a plan. He told his family that he was going to die and when he died they should bury him with kitchen utensils.

So, one day he faked his death. And they buried him with the kitchen utensils. Then in the night he would get out of his grave, steal from the nearby farm, and use the kitchen utensils to make food and eat. This continued for several weeks and the farm owner could not find the thief. So the farm owner hatched a plan. He put a scare crow covered with tar glue in the middle of the farm.

That night when Ananse got out of his grave and went to the farm he saw someone standing there and he accosted the person but there was no response. After repeatedly challenging the person he slapped him in the face and his hand got stuck. He slapped him with his other hand and it got stuck. Then he kicked him and his feet got stuck. He stayed stuck throughout the night until the farmer came and found him. The farmer called the villagers to witness the crime

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, Philebus 49A (428/27 – 349/48 BCE) in Eugene M. Boring; Klaus Berger; and Carsten Colpe, ed., Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 528

scene and they released Ananse. Filled with shame he fled and hid in the corner of a ceiling. And that is why it is common to see Ananse, meaning spider, in the cobwebs of a ceiling. Was Ananse wise? He thought he was wise but his works did not show he was wise. He chose to deceive, which is a wrong choice. His wisdom, if we may call it that, is earthly wisdom. According to our text the wise person will not do what Ananse did. In fact, in all their dealings with others those who are wise display Godly Character traits. Those who are wise prove it by their exemplary behavior.

## **Conclusion**

### **RADIO PART 1 CONCLUSION**

*So now that you understand what it means to be wise according to James, who do you think is wise? Is it my late father or my mother?*

My father was exposed to God but he chose to ignore God. He had extra-marital affairs, drunk a bit too much at times, was contentious in personality, and boastful. Even when he was told there were people out to destroy him, he did not surrender to God and lost his life early. Any great learning and knowledge he acquired was just earthly wisdom, which is no wisdom at all. My father was not wise. My mother chose God when she was a teenager and persisted in the faith even during the trying times following my father's death. My siblings and I always say if there is one gift that my mother gave us that we appreciate the most, it is the gift of taking us to God. By choosing God, my mother made the right choice. That makes my mother wise even though she can barely read.

### **RADIO PART 2 CONCLUSION**

So what does James say about who is wise and understanding? He says it is the person who lives a Godly life. This is because wisdom is discerning and making right choices, and the person who chooses to live a Godly life has made the most critical eternally significant right choice. For the same reason, the person who chooses to live an ungodly life is foolish, and his foolishness has dire eternal consequences.

Beloved, make the right choice; lead Godly lives as evidence of your wisdom. For you see, those who are wise show their wisdom by being "pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." That is, those who are wise prove it by their exemplary behavior. The wise are those who lead Godly lives.