

Sermon: *Rhetorical Questions*
Scripture: James 3:13 - 4:10
Speaker: Pastor Dan Curnutt
Date: Sunday, July 13, 2008

This summer we have been working our way through James. For the past few weeks we have been learning from James about trials and tribulations, favoritism and its danger in regards to discrimination, the difference between faith and works, and then last week Josh taught on the dangers of the tongue.

This week we are going to look at the topic of wisdom. As James approaches this topic, we are going to discover how he differentiates between *Godly wisdom* and *worldly wisdom*. The two are very much opposed. We, the church, are left with a dilemma. Do we attach ourselves to the world or do we attach ourselves to God?

As we work through the passage today, I hope that you will come to see that God desires for us to allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives to bring wisdom, power, strength, and a harvest of righteousness to everything that we do. But to accomplish this we must first humble ourselves before the Lord.

Let's start by looking at the two kinds of wisdom.

There is *Godly wisdom* and there is *worldly wisdom*. There are a couple of examples that I think can help us to start thinking this through. First, in the Old Testament we had the example of Moses vs. Pharaoh.

Moses had a God encounter in the wilderness when he came upon the burning bush. Through that encounter he came to yield his life to the wishes of God and committed himself to go back to Egypt and do what God wanted done.

Pharaoh, on the other hand, was the leader of a worldly nation. He knew the ways of the world and followed their dictates exceedingly well. We might even think that because of his power and influence, he may have set up some of the worldly standards that formed his worldview.

Moses brings God's message and Pharaoh ignores it. Moses continually talks with God about what is to happen next; Pharaoh continually talks to his advisors about how to respond to Moses. God uses Moses and Aaron to bring plagues upon the court of Pharaoh, yet Pharaoh listens to his advisors and responds with worldly responses.

I'm pretty sure we all remember how this ended. Moses is able to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt and to the Promised Land, while Pharaoh loses his first born son and then his army is devastated by the Lord at the Red Sea.

Here is a more modern day example. William Wilberforce was a God-fearing man who took on the establishment of the British Parliament to fight against the tyranny of slavery. It was a long fight that cost Wilberforce his health, but as he followed the leading of God, he was able to withstand the barbs of society that others hurled at him and eventually succeed in getting slavery abolished. The Biblical worldview was able to overcome the secular worldview.

In both of these examples God received honor and glory and the Godly men involved were exalted by God for their efforts.

There is an assumption or premise, if you will, that I would like you to keep in mind as we continue on with our discussion of wisdom today. Josh Black brought this distinction to my attention and I think it is fitting to mention it here before we delve into the Scriptures.

That premise is this – wisdom is the application of your knowledge.

Your knowledge base will be that of either a Biblical worldview or a secular worldview.

Depending on which worldview you base your actions on will determine whether you are following God or following the world.

Having worked with students for so much of my life, I was drawn to the fact that this section of James seems almost like a Mid-Term Exam for us, the church. So, I have structured this sermon on the concept of following the four rhetorical questions that James poses to us in this section. So, let's start with your mid-term exam and see how you do on the test.

Our 1st question is “Who is wise and understanding among you?”

Last week in the first half of James chapter three we were told by James, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment.” I believe that this question really follows on the heels of that statement. Many of those reading this letter from James were teachers who were teaching from their personal knowledge base and not necessarily from a Biblical knowledge base. Thus they were in danger of judgment and James wanted to point that out to them.

So here James is asking, “who is wise and understanding among you?” In other words, who has wisdom?

What do you think the answer is?

The correct answer is it is the person who seeks out Godly wisdom and applies it to the everyday tasks that they encounter. Since we brought up the topic of wisdom, I am sure that many of you turned your attention to thoughts of Solomon. He certainly was a man who sought out God's wisdom. In I Kings 3:6-9 we have recorded for us Solomon's prayer upon being King of Israel after the death of David. In that prayer, according to verse 6, Solomon prayed, “So give your servant an understanding heart to judge your people, to discern between good and evil.” We are told then in verse 10, “and it was pleasing in the sight of the Lord that Solomon had asked this thing.” And God responded to Solomon in verses 11-14, “Because you have asked this thing and have not asked for yourself long life, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself discernment to understand justice, behold, I have done according to your words. Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you. And I have also given you what you have not asked, both riches and honor, so that there will not be any among the kings like you all your days, and if you walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and commandments, as your father David walked then, I will prolong your days.”

Note here that Solomon asked for wisdom and God was pleased. God responded by given him a wise and discerning heart. But God also responded by giving him riches and honor. Note how that corresponds with our text here. In James 4:10, we find that if we humble ourselves in the sight of the Lord, he will exalt us. Now, let's be careful here to understand, our motive for being humble is not so that we will be exalted. Our motive is to submit ourselves to the Lord so that we can accomplish His will. A by-product of our actions is that God desires to honor and exalt us because that, in turn, brings honor and glory to Himself. Also keep in

mind that God's honor and exaltation may not appear how our world views honor and exaltation; it is a Godly thing that might look different.

But we are ahead of ourselves.

The correct answer further states three things that distinguish a person who uses Godly wisdom. The first is they will conduct their life based on Biblical principles.

The second item is that their good deeds done in humility give evidence of the Godly wisdom that they are exercising.

And finally, they are peacemakers who show peace in every circumstance and raise a harvest of righteousness.

This wisdom is from God, and notice we state it is evidence by our good deeds done in humility. That is an important aspect of how God's wisdom works its way out in our lives. Our deeds are done in humility, not out of arrogance or pride or selfish ambition. Instead it works out through our humble submission to the Lord.

So, what is the wrong answer?

The wrong answer is that it is best to use worldly wisdom to accomplish our daily tasks.

It wrongly supposes to use the ways of the world to gain advancement at work, school, or in our community. These are ways that are influenced by the devil.

Note that James gives us some characteristics of a life that uses worldly wisdom. Their deeds are done out of selfish ambition.

And their character will show signs of bitter envy, selfishness, and pride. Our society tells us to look out for ourselves, for number 1, and not worry about the next person. But the Bible continually tells us to look out for others before ourselves. In Philippians 2:3, Paul states, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

Finally, the wrong answer states that the person using worldly wisdom denies the truth. You don't have to look far to see the application of this view. Our school systems from Kindergarten through the Universities and graduate programs are teaching that there is no absolute truth, to question everything, believe nothing. It's amazing to me that James, writing 2,000 years ago, would so correctly define our culture today; we deny the truth. But then it shouldn't surprise us since that has been true of cultures all the way back to the time of Christ. People have always sought to deny the truth.

Well, I have dwelled on the first question fairly long, so I will not take as much time with the final three questions.

The second question addressed at the beginning of chapter 4 is "What causes fights and quarrels among you?"

This is a question that Pastor Mike addressed last Fall during his series on Peacemaking so I won't dwell long on this. If you want a full sermon on this section, check out our web site and reference Pastor Mike's sermon from September 16, 2007, on Understanding Conflict.

The answer to this question is two-fold.

First it happens because our desires are out of control. We covet or lust after things that we can't have and it drives us crazy.

Second, our motives are not centered on a God directed lifestyle. James tells us in verse 2 that we want things but we don't get them and that causes strife. Why don't we get what we want?

We don't get them because we don't ask God for them with proper motives. Our prayers go unanswered because we ask with the wrong motive. We want our pleasures satisfied. Several years ago Philip Yancy wrote a book, "Reaching for the Invisible God." In this book he states, "The difference between the church in poorer countries and the church in the West is this; Christians in the church in the West, when they face trials and tribulations pray, 'God please take this trial away from me,' but the Christians in the church in the third world pray, 'God please give me the strength and wisdom to endure this trial.'"

Do you see the difference? We aren't told Biblically that prayer is a cosmic device by which to seek God's help in removing a trial. Instead, prayer is our way to ask God to give us wisdom and strength and the ability to live with the trials that we face. To walk through the trials with God by our side and to come out on the other side having accomplished the things that God wants us to accomplish and also by giving him the honor and glory He so richly deserves. We are to be like Job in that we face a trial and we offer prayers up to God but in our doing so we do not sin.

How is your prayer life? Is it filled with the request, 'God take this trial from me?' Or is it filled with the request, 'God give me the wisdom and strength to walk through this trial with you?'

Be sure to examine your motives when you enter into a season of prayer.

The third question is a yes or no question. "Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?"

It is pretty straight forward. The question pretty much answers itself by the way that it is asked. I personally have not studied Greek, but Pastor Josh is presently knee deep in the study of Greek. This week I asked him to look over my outline and offer suggestions. One thing he came and told me about was really cool. He told me that the way the Greek language was used in asking rhetorical questions gave the answer through the word usage. The beginning nuance of the word used would tell you whether the rhetorical question or was true or false. It made it impossible to answer the question wrong. How cool is that. You can't flunk a Greek rhetorical question quiz.

But that also tells us that James is trying to drive home a point here and also with the next question. The point here is this: Friendship with the world is hatred towards God. You can't be a friend of both. You have to choose one or the other.

I will make this even simpler for our discussion today. You have to choose between Godly wisdom or worldly wisdom. Which is it that you want? As a Christian, the answer is obvious – we want Godly wisdom. That means we have to examine our motives and allow the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and work in us to bring about Godly character.

That brings us to the final question. "Do you think that Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely?" (James 4:5)

This sounds like a mind bender question at first. We ask, ‘What does James mean? What is the point? Can God really be jealous or envy? Didn’t Scripture in chapter 3 say that bitter envy is bad?’

Yes it did, but notice it says “bitter” envy. The envy here that James is talking about is that jealous envy that a lover has for his beloved. He wants the best for the person he loves. He desires to lavish gifts and honor upon the object of his love. But he can only do that if the person being loved returns the affection and lives in a manner worthy of the love.

Further, for the Holy Spirit, who resides in the life of the Christian, to be able to work out Godly wisdom, the Christian must yield his life up to God. The Christian must submit himself to God and seek Godly wisdom so that they can be used effectively by God in the everyday tasks that they face.

James, in this section of scripture, wants us to understand that God desires to use the Holy Spirit in our lives to bring wisdom, power, strength, and a harvest of righteousness, but to do that we need to humble ourselves before Him.

So, the overall answer to the mid-term exam today comes in James 4:10 where James states, “Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.”

Jesus himself gave us the same answer and it is recorded for us by Matthew in his gospel. He quotes Jesus in Matthew 23:12 as saying, “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

As you go back over this section of scripture this week, there are several application points that I would like you to consider. They are these:

First, James tells us in chapter 4 verse 7 that we need to resist the devil. In other words, we need to resist the world’s way of looking at things. We need submit ourselves to God and set aside the wisdom of the world, instead we embrace the wisdom of God.

Second, in James 4:8 we are told to purify our hearts. We are to come near to God, and seek His forgiveness for our sins. We are to allow him to wash us white as snow so that we have the pure hearts needed to be able to apply the wisdom of God to the situations we face. This purifying allows the Holy Spirit to work in and through us to accomplish God’s purposes.

We need to commit ourselves to spending a daily time with God, reading his word, meditating on what we read, praying and asking for Him to change our hearts, and help us to apply what we have read. We need to look for God in everything that we do on a daily basis.

Finally, although we haven’t really taught on it today, one of the points of this section is that we are to become peacemakers through our actions; through allowing the Holy Spirit to work in and through us.

Please go back and review Pastor Mike’s sermon from last September. Then I want you to think about whether or not you have had a flight or quarrel with someone in our church family, or maybe your own family or the community. Take time this week to review that conflict and as God to prepare your heart to deal with the conflict by humbly approaching the other person and asking their forgiveness. Then next week, go to that person, after having prepared your heart and ask for their forgiveness and seek to restore your relationship.