

“Beautiful People”
James 3:13-18
August 13, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

The title of this sermon comes from a word found in verse 13, where James speaks of “*good* conduct.” The original language of the New Testament, Greek, has two different words for “good.” One of them has the connotation of loveliness or beauty, and that is the one used in our passage. One commentator suggests that an accurate way to think about the good conduct James commends is to think of it as a “beautiful lifestyle.”

Our world has an idea of who the beautiful people are. We could probably all draw up the list. They are young, physically attractive, intelligent, well-educated, and possessing enough money so that affordability is rarely an issue. They are more likely than not to live in a large city and know their way around a wine list and restaurants featuring exotic items on the menu. They have a good sense of humor and always get a lot of “likes” on their Facebook page. When they get married, their spouse, of course, is their equal in these measures of beauty. And when they have children, they too seem to have a place reserved for them in the beautiful people club. They are the envy of many around them.

While there is nothing wrong with anything in that list, it has absolutely nothing to do with the beautiful lifestyle James is commanding. That lifestyle is all about wisdom. Every element in the world’s list of beauty can and will be lost eventually. But the wisdom given by God will give a permanent beauty that will endure into eternity. If you give your life in pursuit of the world’s beauty, it will end badly. If you give yourself in pursuit of wisdom, there will be no regret. The book of Proverbs is all about this commendation of the beauty of wisdom. **“Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold...Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace”** (Proverbs 3:13-14, 17). Let’s look at what James says about the beauty of wisdom.

I. Wisdom’s Qualities

The opening verse of our passage is the key to understanding the whole thing. **“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom”** (v. 13). Meekness is the first quality of wisdom James mentions, and it guides everything else he says. How do you recognize a wise person? Remember that James’ purpose in writing

this letter is to address the problem of cheap grace or easy-believism. This error views faith merely as one's ticket into heaven. There is no self-denial, no giving of oneself to Jesus, and, in the words of this passage, no wisdom. But people can fool you about wisdom. It is possible to appear learned and wise when that is not at all the case. So James asks, "Who is in fact wise and understanding among you?" How can you spot a truly wise person? He answers with this quality of meekness. Those who are truly wise as opposed to those who merely think of themselves as wise are meek.

What is meekness? This virtue has always had to battle the misconception that it is the same as weakness. The exact opposite is the case. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* says that "The key to understanding the virtue of meekness is that it is not a quality of weakness but rather of strength" (p. 545). In classical Greek, this word was used to describe tame animals. The horse, with its immense power is rightly considered meek when that power is brought under control. A meek person, therefore, is someone who possesses strength that is put to a proper use. As we're going to see in verse 17, that proper use is always expressed in one's relationship with God and with others.

James often explains things by speaking of their opposite. So after saying that the chief feature of wisdom is meekness, he states the opposite. **"But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth"** (v. 14). Jealousy and selfish ambition have this in common. Both involve the misuse of one's strengths. Jealousy is not being content with the strengths God has chosen to give you and instead coveting the strengths others have been given. Selfish ambition is using one's strengths for one's own glory rather than for God and others.

I think this will be clearer as we apply it. Do you want a beautiful lifestyle, one marked by true wisdom and its biblical quality of meekness? Start by recognizing what your strengths are. Some of you are physically attractive. That is a God-given strength. How are you choosing to use that strength? The path of selfish ambition would be to use it to feel better about yourself by wanting others to desire you or envy you in some way. Some of you are verbally strong. You have good instincts about people and are able to verbalize clearly and powerfully what you want to say. Will you use that strength to love others well or will you use it to win every argument and be seen as right? Will you use it selfishly in an attempt to control others and get them to do what you want? Some of you have been blessed of God with an ability to make money. Again, will you use that selfishly to control your life to the point that you don't think you need God, or to support some notion of superiority to others simply because you have more money than they do? Or will you use that strength with meekness to love God and bless others created in his image? The latter is the path of wisdom. Some of you have a great sense of humor. Will you use that selfishly to be liked by others or to love others?

We could give many other examples, but if you would have a beautiful lifestyle marked by meekness and wisdom, you must begin by knowing what your strengths are. Do you know what yours are? Perhaps it is one that we have already mentioned. Or perhaps you are musically, athletically or intellectually gifted. Most of you have multiple strengths, and I want you right now to acknowledge silently what those are. As James tells us at the end of verse 14, don't boast in that strength or be false to the truth. If God has given you a strength, acknowledge it. It is not a violation of humility to do so.

So do you have at least one strength in mind? I want you to do two things with that strength. First of all, I want you to accept it as God's strength given to you by his wisdom and goodness. One way we fail to accept the strengths God gives is by envying the strengths he has given to others. Do you envy someone else's salary, good looks, spouse, children or job? The second thing I want you to do with that strength you have identified is to commit yourself anew to using it for God and for others.

James expands on this second point of using our strengths for God and others down in verse 17 by giving an itemized list of some of the features of this wisdom. **“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”** Purity speaks of our commitment to God, a commitment that is single-minded. Have you ever seen that 1991 movie *City Slickers*, starring Billy Crystal? There is an old cowboy in that movie by the name of Curly, and at one point in the movie he tells the character played by Billy Crystal the secret of life. He says it's one thing. Find the one thing and be faithful to it. That's really what purity is all about. God is to be our “one thing,” and purity is that commitment to him. The other features he mentions in this verse are all what meekness looks like in our relationships with others. It is peaceable, overlooking offenses rather than retaliating. It is open to reason, which requires that we listen to others. This is what a beautiful lifestyle looks like.

II. Wisdom's Origin

Where does such a beautiful lifestyle come from? James is quite clear on this. There is a wisdom, or what passes for it, that is of the earth. That is, its origin is earthly. It is the wisdom that is sometimes called “conventional wisdom” and is nothing more than what makes some sense to fallen human beings. There is an even worse origin to this earthly wisdom. It is spirit-inspired, but the problem is that the spirit is demonic. But the wisdom James is commending has its origin in heaven. It **“comes down from above”** (v. 15).

In order to understand what James means by his statement that this wisdom comes down from above, we need to appreciate what the Bible says about this broader topic of wisdom. The book of Proverbs is all about wisdom.

Its beginning statement is that this wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. That is, it is relational in its origin. You become a wise person not so much by acquiring information but through a relationship with the Lord. Wisdom is personified in Proverbs, and in the New Testament through the person of Jesus. Jesus is our wisdom. Jesus **“became to us wisdom from God”** (1 Cor. 1:30).

How is it that a relationship with God through Jesus gives us wisdom? I think it happens in two ways. First, through Jesus we learn to trust God. In his book *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer has two chapters on wisdom. He uses an analogy to counter a common misconception of what wisdom is. Imagine yourself standing in a busy British railway station, with trains constantly going in and out. It's difficult to make sense of it all because all you really see is a bustle of activity. What relationship do these trains have to one another? Is there some master plan about it all? Of course there is, and it can be seen in the control room of the station, where the movements of all the trains are displayed on a giant electronic board. Packer then says this.

Now the mistake that is commonly made is to suppose that this is an illustration of what God does when He bestows wisdom: to suppose, in other words, that the gift of wisdom consists in a deepened insight into the meaning and purpose of events going on around us, an ability to see why God has done what He has done in a particular case, and what He is going to do next.

Wisdom is not having the full picture so we can make the right decision. Rather, it is trusting God even without the full picture. Packer chooses another analogy to better describe what the Bible means by wisdom. It's more like driving a car, where you are making decisions constantly as you respond to situations that develop, even while having little control over the situations as they develop. So wisdom is impossible apart from coming to know that God is trustworthy.

How can we come to know that he is trustworthy? The Bible repeatedly urges us to look to the cross for the demonstration of God's love for us. We know that we can trust the love of God for us because Jesus has died for us. Jesus' life is marked by meekness because he has used his strength and power not for himself but for us. I was talking to someone this week who told me about a golf tournament he once entered. It was a two-man scramble format. In case you are not familiar with that, it means that two people form a team and both play off the best shot between them. Such a format usually seeks to pair people in such a way as to make it competitive. Since my friend, by his own admission, was the worst golfer there, he was paired with the best golfer. And his team won. He told me how many shots of his the team played because his was the best shot. Not a single one. He won the golf tournament though he played terrible golf, on the strength of play of his teammate. That's exactly the way it is with Jesus. We get credit for the strength of his righteousness, though

we have none of our own. His strength is used for our benefit. So we trust him and find in such trust that our lives are beautified with wisdom.

III. Wisdom's Outcome

The outcome of lives of marked by the beauty of wisdom is a **“harvest of righteousness.”** It is widely recognized today that Christians are losing the culture war. Biblical morality is on the decline and those who still stand for it are accused of being narrow-minded, intolerant, and in some cases even guilty of hatred. We cannot abandon the culture war because lives are being hurt by the abandonment of God's rule of our lives. But how should we go about the fight? James helps us here. The harvest of righteousness comes through the meekness of wisdom, as our conduct is beautified through using our strengths for God and for others, not for self.

We need to tell the stories of the beautiful Christians whose lives are marked by such meekness. I mentioned a few weeks ago the quote from Willie James Jennings that the most powerful people in the world are the storytellers. And we have good stories to tell. We have stories of the Christian husband who was faithful to his wife through a decade of debilitating illness, tenderly loving and caring for her. We have the stories of the young man with homosexual tendencies who boldly says that his identity is in Christ, not in his sexual desires. So this young man decides to live a celibate lifestyle, joyfully giving of himself to befriend others.

And we have the best story of all. It is the story of the God who had everything and gave it up for love of a bride. And though his bride became unfaithful to him, he was faithful to her, even dying that she might live. And she has, and we are that bride, rescued from bondage and condemnation by the great love of our Savior.

CONCLUSION:

Our Savior is the most beautiful human ever to live. And he is at work beautifying us as well. May he do so in your life as he gives you the meekness of wisdom!