

THE CONTEXT OF GODLY WISDOM

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I. Introduction

Story of the glass of water.

One most baffling expression of grace is that the sovereign God of heaven chooses to use fallible, weak, fallen human beings to receive and deliver His revelation. His message is the most amazing news ever proclaimed. Jude refers to it as the faith once delivered to the saints. This divine revelation was specifically communicated directly to the apostles and prophets, and then recorded and preserved in the Holy Scriptures. As the church of Jesus Christ, we have been entrusted with this revelation of the God of heaven and commissioned to take it to the world. The same God that revealed and preserved His Word calls, equips and empowers His people to fulfill that commission. This is a daunting, sobering and fearful responsibility. We are called to communicate the wisdom and counsel of the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The content of our message is perfect. It is the Scriptures. The context for the delivery of that content is imperfect. It's you and me.

This morning, I am the glass that is bringing the water to you. The water is perfect, pure and clean. The danger is that I can contaminate that water. To bring you godly wisdom, I need to be cleansed by the same message that I am bringing to you. As sinners, we are all dirty glasses and are blind to our own goop and spots. We need a bright light and mirror so that we can see our true condition. God's Word is that light and that mirror. Our God will not only show us our uncleanness, but He has also provided the means to be washed and clean. Our goal this morning is to get a clear picture of our true condition. God's Word has the power to uncover the very thoughts and intent of the heart. It will reveal our sin, humble us, and compel us to turn to God to do what He alone can do; cleanse us and prepare us so that we are ready to take this same life giving Word to others. This morning, if we will recognize and confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

For our communication to be godly wisdom, it must be delivered in a clean vessel.

There are many places we could go in the Scripture to address how to be prepared to use our tongues to deliver godly wisdom. James is one such place. It has been called the Proverbs of the

New Testament. Specifically, we are going to look at chapters 3 and 4. Let's begin at verse 1 of chapter 3:

II. A Warning to Those Who Desire To Bring God's Wisdom to Others

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

James wanted his readers to know that the business of teaching and instructing in God's Word brings a very high accountability and judgment. This warning certainly applies to preachers and teachers of the Word. But it also applies to anyone who offers counsel and advice to others. Are you a parent or grandparent? You are offering counsel. How about your other friends and family? Do you offer counsel and advice to them? People need God's wisdom, and the Lord certainly wants us to communicate His Word to others. The exhortation before us is that for our communication to be truly godly, the Lord must prepare and cleanse us. I urge you to ask for the discernment to recognize the full condition of your counsel. It's not just what you are saying, it's how you are saying it. It is not just our words, but our actions that speak. I urge you to be humble, teachable and open to correction this morning. It is for your blessing and for the glory of our Savior. Each of us will face the judgment seat of Christ and give an account for every word that has come from our mouths. Accuracy alone is not sufficient. Our attitude, demeanor and actions must be godly as well.

III. The Amazing Power and Impossible Challenge of the Human Tongue

²We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. ³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹²My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Consider the central verse in this section, verse 8. No human being can tame the tongue. It is unruly. It is uncontrollable. It's not the physical organ in our mouths. Jesus said that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. It is our heart. Within our hearts dwell many offensive motives, desires, and ambitions. What we say just reveals our heart. That's why James says that if our words are pure, it indicates our hearts are pure, and our lives are mature.

But be warned! If the heart is contaminated, then the speech will be tainted and poisoned. Allow the seriousness and heaviness of this dilemma to lay upon you. This little tiny bit of flesh called the tongue has immense power. Just like a bit in a horse's mouth, or the rudder on a ship, one small word can lead a person down the path of righteousness, or to their destruction and death. Words create fire. A controlled fire can cook food and keep us warm. An uncontrolled fire can destroy a forest. Your tongue either produces life, or death. Imagine a three year old with a loaded revolver. That's a scary thought. But that's you whenever you open your mouth to speak to others. If you are proud, or worldly, or selfish, or ambitious, that poison will pollute your words and bring destruction to others. Lovely and beautiful things can flow from our lips. We bless and extol the wonders of our God and Savior. We sing to him great words of worship and adoration. And in that same Sunday morning service, we can gossip or complain or whine and defile our brother or sister. Verse 10 says these things ought not to be. It only takes a small amount of contamination to make sweet water bitter. You might have the right verse of scripture but contaminate it with your judgmental attitude or insensitive demeanor. It's not just the words we use. It's the attitude and way it is conveyed as well. It's also timing. Job's friends said a lot of right things at the wrong time.

A careless sarcastic remark can ruin a relationship. An unguarded moment of gossip can split a church. A thoughtless half-truth about another person can defame a character or ruin a reputation. We must understand the great power that resides in our mouth. We must respect the beast that is within. This is a prime consideration if we want to help others. We must diligently guard our words and our hearts so that we build up and don't tear down others.

Whenever we communicate God's Word with others, we run a huge risk of harm. Godly counsel by its very nature will sometimes cause HURT. But it will never cause HARM. Hebrews 12 tells us that the Scripture is a sharp sword that can cut to the very thoughts and intents of a man's heart. We are not called to butcher people with a hatchet, but carefully perform surgery with a scalpel. We are cutting, and excising, and exposing, and sometimes even causing pain. We must be skilled, and precise, and cautious, and humble. We dare not be a sloppy, harmful, and careless.

What James wants us to see is that as ministers of God's Word we are in a dangerous and precarious position. Though we are forgiven and released from the condemnation of our sins, we are still sinners. We are not yet complete and not fully mature. The residual problems in our heart and soul will contaminate the message from our lips. This is the danger of inherent in ministry to others. And my friend, you are a minister. You serve your spouse, your coworkers, your children, and your family. You are either speaking words of life, or words of death to everyone that you converse with. And James tells us that no man can tame the tongue. Do you see the need? Do you sense the problem? Do you feel the dilemma? Do you agree with James's assessment of our condition? We must see it and agree with this diagnosis if there is to be a cure. Let's take an even closer look at the problem. To win this battle, we must understand the distinction between Worldly Wisdom and Godly Wisdom.

IV. The Contrast of Worldly Wisdom vs Godly Wisdom

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

James brings another reality check to our attention. Do you think that you have wisdom and knowledge and are ready to help others? If you really ready, it will first show in your own actions and attitudes. If you truly have God’s wisdom, it will show up in deeds done in humility.

What is humility, and what does it have to do with godly ministry? The Greek word for humility is not just referring to outward behavior or a mere mellow disposition towards people. Rather, it is an inwrought grace of the soul, and its expression is primarily toward God. It is that attitude of submission whereby we accept God’s dealings with us as good and do not dispute or resist. This word was used in Greek literature. According to Aristotle, humility is the middle standing between two extremes, getting angry without reason and not getting angry at all. Therefore, a humble person gets angry at the right time, in the right measure, and for the right reason. Often we interpret the word humble as a form of passivity or weakness. The true meaning is that humility is a condition of mind and heart which demonstrates a great power expressed under control. Gentle for sure, but not weak. A humble person is a powerful person that shows appropriate restraint and self-control.

Beloved, for our wisdom to qualify as godly, it must be delivered with a balance of power and gentleness. A godly minister will express strong, firm, unchanging principles in a gentle, kind attitude. This is the fruit of the Spirit. Our natural attitude is stubbornness, striving, arguing, debating, and dominating. We want to win. We want to defeat the opponent. We want to be recognized as wise, and intelligent, and one worthy of appreciation and respect. Such motive and desire comes from our ego and fallen nature, not the Spirit of God. Such selfish and prideful attitudes look more like the accuser of the brethren; the devil, the one that craves praise and attention. This earthly, worldly context of counseling results in confusion and the propagation of further unrighteousness and is devoid of the power of the grace of God that brings true and lasting change.

In stark contrast, the context of wisdom from above is described in verse 17.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Let's use this list of attributes to determine if our communication is godly:

Pure –Free from defilement or impurity. Godly wisdom is not brash and common and riddled with worldly uncleanness and moral impurity. Do you speak the truth to people – clear Biblical counsel?

Peace-loving - Healthful, wholesome; peaceful, disposed to peace; the peace that we have in Christ. He is our peace and is a reconciler. Are your conversations with others peaceful or hostile?

Considerate - fair, equitable, fitting, appropriate, suitable, proper, lenient, yielding, unassertive; Is your communication with others characterized by listening, understanding, fairness, and a desire to work with vs work against?

Submissive - denoting easiness, easily persuaded, compliant; How easy is it for you to be persuaded by others on non-essentials? Would others say you are stubborn or easy to be with?

Full of mercy - Compassion, active pity; a passing over deserved punishment. God's mercy is extended for the alleviation of the consequences of sin. Mercy is the application of grace, we are rescued from the pathetic condition of our sinfulness. Do you express the same attitude of mercy and comfort towards others that you have received from God?

Full of good fruit - good deeds, works, and conduct; Would your conversation be characterized as full of goodness?

Impartial - Indistinguishable, making no partial distinctions, free from partial regards; Are you objective and free of prejudice and judgment when listening to and talking with others? Do you carry a critical or accepting attitude toward others?

Sincere - Without hypocrisy without pretense, or play-acting; genuine, real, true; Do you hide your true feelings in your conversations, or are you an open book? Are you real about your own weakness and need for grace, or do others find it difficult to relate to you?

Fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace. True righteousness is a fruit of seeds that are sown in peace in a context of peace. Peace refers first to our declared freedom from the condemnation of sin and reconciliation to God. It is a fact that we are no longer God's enemies but His children, and it results in our experience; we are freed from the feelings of guilt and hostility in our hearts toward God. Do people experience this kind of peace when you talk with them? Are they freed from condemnation, or brought under condemnation? Are your interactions with other people characterized by peace, and leave others in a state of peace? Do you actively pursue peace in relationships with others?

V. How to Receive the Grace We Desperately Need

4 What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁴ You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us?

James identifies the source of the lack of peace in our relationships and communication. It is the desires, motives, and ambitions of our heart. When our conversations deteriorate into intellectual debates, then you can be sure that the fleshly desire to win an argument is likely involved. When you are arguing and debating, and finding that you are emotionally upset and have a tension in your voice, there is a worldly desire that's taking the reins. It matters not that you are right. Just because your "content" (theological position) may be spot on, the lack of peace and peacemaking in the interchange (the "context") indicates that this is not wisdom from above, but is from the flesh and fueled by the devil himself. Remember, he is the accuser and destroyer.

At this point you may be coming to the conclusion that you should never open your mouth again! That would be a mistake. The answer is not silence, but rather the control of the Spirit that comes through the grace of Christ.

So is there hope? Is there a remedy? Is there an escape from these desires that rule the human heart? There is! Christ has come. He lived a perfect life as a perfect counselor. He had a perfect record of always speaking and living godliness. And He offered that perfect life on Calvary to set sinners free from these ruling desires. He is the prince of peace. As our Shepherd, He can lead us beside still waters, into a place of mercy, love, kindness, gentleness, meekness, and self-control. So what must we do when we recognize this problem of irritation, aggravation, and selfish desire to have my own way?

⁶ But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." ⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

We need to heed this counsel from James. Our God and Savior gives more grace. I want you to soak in that promise. Though our situation is treacherous, though we are weak and failing, there is a resource of power and strength and victory. It is the grace of God. Grace greater than our sin. It is divine help that flows from the throne of God to His children that will lift us above our

weakness and failure. So how can you receive this help? Submit yourself to God. Submit to God and resist this ungodly communication. Cry out to God, and ask Him to help you. Confess your sins and shortcomings. Mourn and weep and cry and fully admit where you have blown it. Stop justifying your contentious spirit. Drop the hypocrisy and facade of self-righteousness so that you can receive His grace. Give up trying to win arguments and proving your point, and instead choose mercy and kindness and longsuffering and love. That is the nature and demeanor of our Savior. That is the context of godly wisdom. This is the attitude that God desires. We desperately need the ultimate Counselor to come along side us and help us. He promises that if you will humble yourself, God will lift you up. He is so kind. He is so gracious. He is so long suffering, and He is so amazing.

Recognize and understand the context of godly wisdom. It is gentle. This gentleness is a fruit that is not inherently in us. It can only come from God through us. We must choose to put off selfish ambition and see it as poison. When I add my selfish ambition to God's Word, the mixture becomes worldly, devilish, and devoid of the Holy Spirit. Such counsel creates confusion and unrighteousness. Godly counsel is free of a critical, destructive spirit. As we walk in the Spirit, we will be people of grace. We will treat others as we have been treated, with long-suffering, and kindness, and with mercy and great unconditional love. Godly ministry displays the beauty, kindness, and love of our Savior.

Beloved, we are called to impart and bring the truth of God's Word to others. But that is only half of the task. As our Lord appeared in grace and truth, we must do the same. The content we bring is the inerrant, God-breathed truth of the Scripture. But for it to qualify as godly counsel, we must also bring it in a context of grace. We speak as one sinner to another, pointing to the One and Only Savior, for He is the only hope for the problems of life. We are subject to the same temptations and weaknesses as those we counsel. There is no room for pride and self-righteous judgment in this business of directing others. We all stand in daily need of the grace, mercy, and sustaining power of the Lord. The great news is that as our advocate, He stands ready to help us. He has not left us as orphans, but has sent the Holy Spirit to help us. The only thing that stands between us and that help is our pride. We must humble ourselves, and be honest about our need, weakness and shortcomings. If we will do so, then He promises that He will give us abundant grace. Our Lord is worthy. God forbid that we would obscure His greatness and contaminate His truth with our human pride.

VI. RESPONSE

- 1. BE AWARE: Be aware that when you speak, you are either ministering life or death. Godly wisdom is the right words, and is also delivered in the right context.**
- 2. PRAY FOR GRACE: Ask God to give you the grace to see the context of your communication. Be teachable and open for correction.**
- 3. SEEK COUNSEL AND INSTRUCTION from mature brothers and sisters to help you with your communication. Observe how others use their words to encourage, admonish, and share wisdom in a way that brings life and blessing.**