

Recognizing True Wisdom

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What do you think about trash talking?

Scholars from UPenn's Wharton School of Business studied trash talking and its effects.¹

For those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, they defined "trash talking" as: ... boastful comments about the self or insulting comments about an opponent that are delivered by a competitor typically before or during a competition.

Simply put, it's "competitive incivility".

The Wharton study found that trash talking can be useful. At times. It can also do harm.

Trash talking has made its way to the Olympic swimming pool.

The United States and Australia are swimming rivals.

Last year, an Australian swimmer went on television talking about the rivalry. She said that the Australians love nothing more than beating the Americans because it means that they don't have to listen to the "Star Spangled Banner."

Apparently, she also hates the sound of cow bells. When American swimmers leave the warm-up pool for a race, their teammates ring cowbells to cheer them on. The Australians hate that.²

The comments didn't go down too well with the American team. The swimming GOAT himself, Michael Phelps, was shown the clip and asked what he thought. He responded that if he were still swimming, he would watch it every day. It would fuel his desire to win. Trash talking can do that. It can make your competition more determined to win!

Trash talking is everywhere.

Wherever there is competition, trash talk is rarely far behind.

Trash talking is a big part of sports, business, and even politics.

But trash talking is just one kind of incivility that has become ubiquitous in our society.

Bragging, insults, and harsh ways of speaking are everywhere.

The result is damaging. There is a pervasive sense of frustration, hostility, and anxiousness.

Who's to blame?

We all want to blame someone for it.

Some of us blame the traditional media. Others of us blame social media and tech companies for capitalizing on our fascination with ugliness and our love of competitiveness.

¹ Yip, Schweitzer, Nurmohamed, "Trash-talking: Competitive incivility motivates rivalry, performance, and unethical behavior" accessed <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2017.06.002> on 2024-07-31.

² <https://www.nbclosangeles.com/paris-2024-summer-olympics/us-swimmers-fueled-by-aussie-legends-smack-talk/3471025/>

Let's be honest. Trash talking is entertaining to watch.

But if you're watching trash talking, pretty soon you're talking trash, then we're all talking trash.

Someone has to be at fault. What if WE are to blame? At least partly?

James suggests that we may have chosen the wrong "wisdom."

Today, we will find that not all wisdom is equal. In fact, some wisdom isn't really wisdom at all.

James tells us how to recognize true wisdom from false wisdom.

That's critical for us to know. And it's one more reminder that our faith gives us better ways to think, speak, and live. Christian faith works.

Wisdom is demonstrated by its fruit.

James 3:13-14 tells us that wisdom is demonstrated by its fruit:

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.

James asks, "Who is wise?" Why does he need to ask that question?

You would think that we all know who is wise and understanding among us.

The smart people and the opinionated people are the wise and understanding among us.

Except that we all know that's not always the case.

Who is wise and understanding among us? Who is wise and understanding in our family? Who is wise and understanding in our church? Who is wise and understanding on TV? Online? In our country? It's not always the person who is quick to speak and full of opinions.

Who is wise and understanding among us? It's not an easy question to answer.

James' question is good because lots of apparently wise messages compete for our attention.

We have messages, opinions, and what looks like knowledge flying at us constantly.

Social media has democratized messages. Anyone can post a comment on social media or start a blog. Anyone can share what they call "news" or "facts." No vetting is happening. There is no filtering. So, we're inundated with so-called wisdom.

It can be confusing! It can be frustrating!

We have to do the filtering and the vetting. We have to do it ourselves.

To do that, we have to ask WHO is wise and understanding among us. Where do we start?

James tells us to look at the outcomes!

Earlier, James told us that faith comes out in works. Our works reveal the character of our faith.

Now James also tells us that wisdom comes out in works. It comes out in our conduct.

James is not making an "ends justify the means" argument. Just because something seems to work doesn't mean that it is automatically wise.

What he is saying, though, is that we have to look at the outcomes of something that says it's wisdom to see if it is really wise.

Sometimes we have to look a lot farther ahead than we like to see the wisdom (or lack of wisdom) in a message coming at us.

Consider the Cane Toad in Australia.

The cane toad's story in Australia started with a big problem and a good-sounding idea.

The big problem was that Australian farmers in the 19th century wanted to grow sugar cane.

But there was a problem. Beetle larvae kept eating the roots of the sugar cane plants.

Farmers needed a good way to control the beetles. Around 1900, a government agency was set up to look for a solution.

In the 1930s, a government scientist travelled to Puerto Rico and found a wonder-cure. There was a toad that seemed to eat the cane beetles and their larvae.

Then a government scientist came back with a breeding pair of the cane toads.

Pretty soon, there were thousands of toads, and they released them into the wild.

No one thought to ask two big questions: First, did the toads ACTUALLY eat the beetles? Second, what did the toads do to the environment?

It turns out that cane toads don't do much to the beetles in question.

But they do reproduce wildly, they are poisonous, and they do ruin native habitats. Today, the cane toad is a destructive, invasive pest spreading across the country.³

The cane toad LOOKED and SOUNDED like a great idea, but it wasn't wisdom.

James is saying, *If the fruit is bad, the root is bad!*

If the product of wisdom is bad, then the things that purports to be wisdom is bad.

No matter how good it sounds and no matter how wise it seems, it's something else.

Wisdom (so-called) is not always wise.

James 3:15-16 warns us that there is stuff that purports to be wisdom but is not:

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.

Warning Sign #1: Bitter Jealousy

This phrase starts with the word for zeal.

The word for zeal can obviously be positive. We're zealous for all kinds of good things. We may be zealous for justice or zealous for good food.

Zeal can also be a bad thing. We can be zealous for things that are mixed. Or less important. We can even become zealous for things that are bad or destructive.

James makes clear that he has this kind of zeal in mind by adding the word for bitterness. It's pointed. It's sharp. It's biting. It does damage.

³ <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/introduction-of-cane-toads>

This is a zeal for things that leads to bitterness and damage. James says that bitterness and damage are warning signs. If so-called wisdom leads you to a zeal that produces bitterness and damage, then that's not really wisdom.

Warning Sign #2: Selfish Ambition

This phrase has an interesting history.

The word that is translated here as "selfish ambition" was originally the word for day laborer.

This is the person who is hustling every day because they need the money from today's work to make life work. It's the laborer who is working just to earn a paycheck.

The word quickly got applied to politicians and leaders who were doing what they do for their own interests, their own egos, and their own power, rather than for the common good.

Here in the New Testament, the word comes to mean anyone who is ambitious, but just for selfish reasons. Selfish ambition is a warning sign that so-called wisdom is not really wisdom.

Warning Sign #3: Disorder

James is again looking at the product of so-called wisdom.

If so-called wisdom leads to conflict that ends up disrupting society, then that is not wisdom.

This isn't just the natural conflict between good and evil. It's the kind of conflict that makes society feel generally unsettled and chaotic. Like we have right now. James says that the heart of that kind of thinking may look like wisdom, but it's not. So-called wisdom that leads to disorder is not actually wisdom.

Warning Sign #4: Every vile practice

When you give in to so-called wisdom that is not really wise, it is another slippery slope.

So-called wisdom is based on bitter zeal or jealousy, it is selfishly ambitious at its core, it leads to chaotic divisions, and it embraces an ends-justify-the-means mentality.

Once you embrace jealousy, selfishness, chaos, and evil means, you may think you are embracing righteousness and wisdom, but you are embracing evil. And when you embrace one evil, you embrace them all.

So-called wisdom leads to every vile, evil practice. It's not godly wisdom.

Wisdom from below is more dangerous than it sounds. Look again at verse 14.

Wisdom from below is of the world. It is of the kingdoms of this world and everything apart from and opposed to God.

Wisdom from below is unspiritual. That means it is not of God.

Wisdom from below is demonic. It is of Satan and his demons who are opposed to God and, therefore, seeking to hurt God by hurting us.

Wisdom from below is not neutral. It will destroy you if you embrace it.

Wisdom from God yields righteousness and peace.

James 3:17-18 counters that wisdom from God yields righteousness and peace:

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Wisdom from above is wisdom from God.

Above is the direction that we associate with heaven and with God.

James picks up this idea when he says in **James 1:17**:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights ...

We associate heaven and God with above, and from God and from heaven come raining down good gifts.

One of the good gifts God gives is wisdom. **James 1:5** says:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

There is a godly wisdom that comes down from God, from above. That's the wisdom we want.

Wisdom from above yields righteousness.

That's the opposite of worldly wisdom that leads to every evil or vile practice.

The wisdom from above (the wisdom of God) leads to righteousness. James strings lots of words together here. The wisdom of God leads to purity, mercy, and good fruits. It's like the list Paul makes when he describes the fruit of the Spirit.

What does it mean? It means that wisdom from above yields righteousness. It leads to a right relationship with God, which leads to right thoughts, right character, and right actions.

Wisdom from above also yields peace.

Look at how wisdom from above changes our attitude toward and approach to other people.

Wisdom from above makes us peace-loving, gentle, and open to reason.

Wisdom from above means that we aren't partial and are never hypocritical.

Wisdom from above makes us right with God, and when we are right with God, we have to be right with one another.

Wisdom ALWAYS involves sowing and harvesting.

When we sow, we scatter or plant seed. The seed we plant then germinates, and up comes a crop. The crop that we harvest is the seed grown up; grains of wheat grow up to make wheat plants, which produce more grains of wheat.

So, wisdom ALWAYS involves sowing and harvesting. Wisdom tells us that USUALLY (not always, but usually), we get back what we sow. We sow wheat, and we get wheat; we don't sow wheat and harvest avocados. Plus, sowing magnifies the decision we made in sowing; we sowed a little bit of wheat, and we harvested a crop of wheat.

James says that if we sow peace and righteousness, then we will usually get a harvest of peace and righteousness.

This truth should lead you to ask yourself some questions.

What are you harvesting? Are you harvesting peace and righteousness? Or are you harvesting frustration, conflict, disorder, and every vile practice? What are you harvesting?

That leads to a second question: What are you sowing? Are you sowing peace and righteousness? Or are you sowing selfish ambition, bitter jealousy, and the like?

Don't rush to a conclusion here. The two questions are linked. Don't just blindly assume the best about yourself and your intentions. Don't just say, "My intentions are righteous, and my ends are righteous, so I must be righteous!" Look at the harvest; look at the produce. It tells you something about what you're really sowing.

If you want to harvest righteousness and peace, then be sure to sow righteousness, peace, and godly wisdom from above, true wisdom.

Be careful about the wisdom you follow!

Select your inputs wisely.

We may feel inundated with inputs every day. We're bombarded with emails, social media posts, television, blogs, articles, and online videos.

We may feel that the inputs we're receiving are out of control.

But we are actually in control. We decide which inputs we let in and which we block out.

We actually have the choice, the ability to decide. This is critically important!

If the media are putting dangerous, false, worldly wisdom into your head, then you can turn it off. Don't be afraid to turn it off.

If someone else is putting dangerous, false, worldly wisdom into your head, then you can turn it off or at least set it on "mute."

If someone else is putting dangerous, false, worldly wisdom into the heads of your children, then, at a bare minimum, you have the responsibility to help them process what they are hearing. You do have the ability and the right to turn it off.

We are in control of the inputs we receive. Let's exercise that control.

Edit your zeal wisely.

Our zeal is our passion. Sometimes zeal is clearly unrighteous and not of God. This is zeal that is clearly selfish. It's easy to spot.

Sometimes, though, there is a fine line between a zeal that is righteous and one that has become unhealthy, unrighteous.

James says that the line is bitterness. If the zeal produces bitterness, then it is out of control.

God himself is supposed to be our consuming zeal. He doesn't share us with anyone or anything else easily. Make sure that your zeal is truly from God. Edit out any unrighteous zeal.

Filter your words wisely.

James tells us this over and over again.

Sometimes we devalue our words. We say that they're just words. Words never killed anyone.

But our words are powerful.

What we're thinking turns into our words. Then our words turn into our actions.

Our words impact others.

Choose your words in person and online. Filter your words wisely.

Jesus represents a wisdom that doesn't seem to make sense at first.

Jesus' wisdom is very different from the wisdom from below, the world's wisdom.

Jesus' wisdom is from God, from above.

Jesus' wisdom involves coming to us, taking on our flesh, teaching us, and serving us.

Jesus' wisdom is the wisdom of the cross. It is the wisdom of sacrifice. It is the wisdom that came to take on our sin and die in our place, at our hands, so that we could be forgiven.

Jesus' wisdom is also the wisdom of the empty tomb. It is the wisdom of resurrection, forgiveness, new life, and eternal life.

Jesus' wisdom leads to life.

Choose Jesus' wisdom.

Reject the so-called wisdom of the world and everything it leads to.

Embrace faith in Jesus Christ and wisdom from above for they lead to righteousness and peace.

That's how faith works.