

Be Wise and Understanding.

¹³ **Who among you is wise and understanding? By his good conduct he should show that his works are done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom.** ¹⁴ **But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast and deny the truth.** ¹⁵ **Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.** ¹⁶ **For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice.** ¹⁷ **But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense.** ¹⁸ **And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.**

How do you measure intelligence? There are several tests you can take. There is the basic IQ test. I remember taking the Iowa Assessments in grade school. I think they are still around. I remember taking the PSAT and SATs in high school and then the ACT test. If you searched on the internet you will find dozens of different tests.

We have one today in our epistle reading. **"Who among you is wise and understanding?"** This is not an intelligence test. It is a wisdom test. And it will not really tell you how well you are at mathematics or if you should go to college and what classes you should take. Nor will it tell you if you have wisdom. All people have wisdom. The question is what kind of wisdom. There are only two kinds. Earthly wisdom and wisdom from above.

I. Earthly wisdom.

"¹³ Who among you is wise and understanding? By his good conduct he should show that his works are done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom." We sometimes think that intelligence and wisdom are synonymous and mean the same thing. They really don't. Intelligence is more head knowledge and what you know. Wisdom is more what you do or how you use your knowledge. I knew a man, Harvey, who was very wise. He never went to college. He served in the Seabees and then blue collar jobs all his life, so he may not know as much as the next guy, but boy, he had the common sense of Will Rogers, but there wasn't anything he couldn't fix. He was one of the wisest me I ever knew.

The world is wise, very wise. Let's listen to its wisdom. **"¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast and deny the truth.** ¹⁵ **Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.** ¹⁶ **For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice."** Someone may suggest that a little envy and ambition is a good thing. It might drive someone to work harder and achieve more. But note the kind of ambition described here. It is bitter envy and selfish ambition. And note what it does. ¹⁶ **For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice."** I imagine when the first automobiles were introduced over a hundred years ago, there were few if any traffic laws. But what do we have today? Traffic signs, lights, laws, limits, and so on. Why? To bring some sort of order. Imagine the chaos if people drove as fast as they want. Imagine the crashes if people didn't slow down for others. If you want to see how selfish people can be, abolish all traffic laws.

We don't have to imagine what bitter envy and selfish ambition does to things like marriage, work, the neighborhood, society, politics. Evidence of this surrounds us. If the three most people in your life are me, myself and I, then what will happen if someone or something gets in the way?

We saw that already in the Garden of Eden. When Eve decided to eat the forbidden fruit, was she trying to praise God and glorify him? She was envious of God, wishing to be god herself. She was selfishly ambitious. The temptation the devil put in her ear and heart was that God was mean and withholding something from her. So it not only causes chaos and division on earth, it causes division with God, and not just for the moment. It separates us permanently.

Such wisdom is not heavenward. It's not of God, but of the devil. It is not promoted by the Spirit, but is unspiritual. It not only destroys, it is deadly to our faith and dangerous to our eternal souls. It is destructive. The Lord gives us two commandments about this sin: The Ninth and Tenth Commandments on coveting. And such wisdom does damage. I think of King Ahab. He couldn't take no for an answer. He so much wanted Naboth's vineyard, he pouted like a baby and his wife issued orders in his name. Soon a man was lied about in court, sin against the Eighth Commandment, he was unjustly executed, a sin against the Fifth Commandment, and eventually Ahab got the vineyard, an act of stealing against the Seventh Commandment. And it all reflects humans who cared for themselves and not for others, including God, a sin against the First Commandment.

So, two kids fighting and tugging a toy isn't merely annoying. It is the sign of a much worse condition. Politics as usual just shows how use we are to this sin. An overloaded court system just shows what envy and ambition can destroy just about everything. And we people in the world dare to call this wisdom.

II. Wisdom from above.

Thank God there is another kind of wisdom out there. You will not find it in the universities. You will not discover it in the lab or gain it by observing nature. Nor will you gain it from the experience of a lifetime. It is completely foreign to the way we normally think and behave. That is because it comes from above.

We can see this wisdom in the life of Christ. It is described in Philippians chapter 2, **“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”**

Jesus shows that such wisdom is not envious or selfish. Though Jesus created the universe, he humbled himself to become a baby that had to learn how to walk. Though the universe cannot contain him, he humbled himself within the womb of the virgin. Though heavenly mansions are his home, he had no place to lay his head at night. Though the master of the universe, he washed the feet of his disciples.

If worldly wisdom says it is about me, myself and I, this wisdom from above is about you and you and them. It is not ambitious to the point that it will use everyone to achieve its goals. It does not envy, it does not boast. It does not keep a record of wrongs. Again, we see this in Jesus and his attitude toward sinners. We see it when he submitted to his enemies in the Garden and let them arrest him. We see it in his patience with his disciples. We see it at the cross. Earthly wisdom would avoid the cross. The wisdom from above would welcome it. Jesus could have saved himself at any time, but he wasn't there to save himself. He was there to save us and give his life as the ransom price for us. Because he laid down his life, he keeps no record of wrongs. He forgives us.

Wisdom from above begins and ends with Christ. If we focus on ourselves, we will see we fall far short of God's glory. We see there is nothing good that lives in us, that is, in our sinful natures. This wisdom from above says that this is all true, if we focus on ourselves. So it focuses us on Christ and his Sacraments. There the sinner experiences the loving embrace of God, not his judgment. The sinner doesn't get what he or she deserves. The sinner receives mercy. Instead of punishment, there is forgiveness.

The world's wisdom teaches you that it is about you. This wisdom from above teaches you it is about God and Jesus. The world's wisdom teaches you how to get ahead. This wisdom from above teaches you how to be saved.

As the psalms and Proverbs teach us, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It is not a book you put back on the shelf or a bit of trivia you drag out once in a while. We see ourselves, the world, everyone, in a whole new way. We start to develop a Christ centered worldview, a whole new attitude toward God, ourselves, the world. ¹⁷ **“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense.”** ¹⁸ **“And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.”** It is first of all pure. There is nothing added to it. It is what wisdom is supposed to be. It always puts others first. It does not need or want to cuss out that driver on the freeway. It doesn't grumble when the boss gives you a tough job. It is in the student who refuses to put down another student in a foolish attempt to look big in the eyes of others.

Remember how I mentioned how there are tests to measure intelligence. There is a test to see what kind of wisdom you have. Go back to our gospel reading. Here is yet another example of Jesus disciples comparing themselves with one another and who should be the alpha male. They knew it was wrong because they didn't want to tell Jesus when he asked. We are surrounded by earthbound wisdom. It is still in our nature. That is why Jesus needs to test us and expose this kind of wisdom. If anyone wants to be the alpha in the room, he teaches, he must be the last and servant of them all. He exposed the earthbound wisdom they had adopted. You want to be great? Be the least. You want to be first? Then be the last. You want to lead? Then serve. You want to follow Jesus? Take up your cross.

Then he took a child and placed him in front of them. He told them that anyone who welcomes a little child in his name welcomes Jesus. And anyone who welcomes Jesus welcomes him who sent Jesus. In the name of Jesus. This wisdom from above does not focus on ourselves. Nor does it in a sense focus on the others. It first focuses on Christ. As it does, it sees everyone else between us and Christ, and looks for ways to serve Christ by serving them. You will find yourself even welcoming a little child in the name of Christ. ¹⁸ **“And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.”** And don't be surprised if you find a little bit of peace amidst the chaos in this envious world. Amen.