

Sandcastles Before Tide

A Word to the Wise- Part 2

James 3:14-16

Every summer the *U.S. Open Sandcastle Competition* is held to determine who can create the best and most elaborate sandcastle.

I had no idea until recently that there was such a thing as professional sand carvers. They all compete for the title of Masters Champion and \$21,000 dollars is given away in prizes.



Trained representatives for this annual competition are prepared to judge all the different categories. I saw pictures of cars, animals, people, but the most captivating category is the sandcastle.

Each contestant and his team begin building at exactly 9:00 am and conclude at 3:00 pm. They have only 6 hours to carve their creation.



People come from all around to see these amazing works of art made with water, mud, and

shells. The stipulation is that you have to work with only what you find there at the ocean or sea-side.

The idea of sand carving or sand sculptors has become so popular that competitions are now being held from New England to Japan.



There is a contest taking place somewhere in the world almost every month of the year.

What you might have done as a little boy or girl at the ocean's side or out in your sand box when you were growing up has become a professional sport.

There's something fascinating and mythical at what someone is able to carve out of sand.



The grand prize usually goes to something so detailed and so beautifully crafted that you can hardly imagine what a team of skilled artists can create out of sand and in just a few hours.

After all the planning, the designing, the photographs, the awards, and all the amazed

spectators at around 4:00 pm another visitor shows up right on schedule. This visitor hasn't come to take pictures either.

This spectator comes by every evening, and then leaves every morning around the same time. It's called "the tide".

It never fails. No matter how elaborate or beautifully carved the sand castle is the tide comes in and washes it all away.

In the Sermon on the Mount, recorded by Matthew's Gospel beginning at chapter 5, the Lord used sand to illustrate wisdom, and He introduced us to two custom home builders.

The wise man built his house upon the rock. And the rain fell, and the flood waters – literally, the river came, and the winds blew against the house; and yet it did not fall . . . the foolish man built his house on the sand. The rains fell, and flood waters came, and the winds blew against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall. (Matthew 7:24-27)

Both of these men built real homes by the way. From the outside, everything looked the same. The difference was in their foundation.

One man built on rock and the other man might as well have built a sandcastle.

Jesus Christ made the application as clear as He possibly could to his audience. He said, ***“Everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them may be compared to the wise man . . . everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like the foolish man.***

The critical issue was not just hearing His words but applying them to life.

With that one illustration, Jesus Christ defined wisdom—it is truth applied to life.

A few years later, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, the Apostle James will expand on that definition as he contrasts the wisdom of God with the wisdom of man.

He began in chapter 3 of his letter and at verse 13 by asking, “Is there anybody out there who considers themselves to be wise?”

He expected all of us to say, “Sure . . . count me in . . . I'm not as wise as I'd like to be, but I'm a lot smarter than some of these people sitting around me.”

James says, “Well, if you're growing in wisdom, let me tell you how that will be demonstrated: two mannerisms will mark you—***verse 13, “Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him***

show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.”

In our last discussion, we talked about what James meant by the words “goodness” and “gentleness.”

These are two visible mannerisms of people who are growing wiser—good behavior and humble character.

Now James goes on to add a warning. Not only are there two visible mannerisms of wisdom, there are two invisible obstacles to wisdom.

Notice verse 14. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.”

The truth about wisdom is that it is good and gentle. If instead of goodness and gentleness you are hiding these two invisible characteristics, just know, James says, they will stunt your growth in godly wisdom. These are two dangerous things to be hiding.

Before we look at these two obstacles to wisdom, would you notice *where* they're hiding—***in your heart.***

People can't see them yet, but there they are blocking the way to genuine growth in wisdom. They are hiding in the heart.

In Biblical language, the heart is the place where unbelief lives or belief for that matter. The heart is the origin of sin and godliness that affects the entire life.

Jesus Christ rebuked the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, when He said to them, ***“O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all the prophets have spoken.” (Luke 24:25).***

The Apostle Paul wrote, ***“If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9)***

In other words, the heart is the hidden reservoir of genuine faith.

This Biblical concept gives us the terminology we use when we talk to others, including our children, about asking Jesus Christ to come into our hearts. We're not talking about that muscle pumping inside our chests.

In Biblical terminology, the heart is the place that represents the essence of who we are. So in order to be saved, we ask Jesus Christ to come into our hearts, which is tantamount to asking Him to reside in us as Savior and Lord over who we truly are.

Now the heart is not only the place where faith resides, it is also the place where sin originates. Jesus Christ said, *for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.*” (Matthew 15:19) The heart is the place where, one author wrote, idols are manufactured.

Now here in the words of James, the heart is the place where ambitions grow and sins are cloaked and kept hidden until we’re ready to make them known.

James writes. . . *you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart* . . . That’s the opposite of wisdom!

And every one of us could say, “I guess that means I’ll never grow up in wisdom because, truth be known, I struggle with jealousy and ambition. I want my own way and my own things and my own plans to succeed.”

D. L. Moody once said that if someone had a business that was able to photograph the spiritual condition of our hearts, he’d go bankrupt. No one would hire him.

The condition of all our hearts is reflected here in James 3, but a key to understanding what James is referring to here is the verb—to have—“*you have . . . in your hearts.*” That verb – *echete* (εχετε) means to harbor . . . to foster.ⁱ

In other words, the person whose growth in wisdom is stunted doesn’t just struggle with self-centeredness, he welcomes it.

He isn’t confessing it; he’s nursing it.

He keeps it on the stove like my wife keeps that big stainless steel pot on the stove filled with the best hot chocolate recipe on the planet. It’s kept hot and ready throughout a cold wintery afternoon.

That’s the idea here. Like a pot on a stove filled with his own ambition and his own jealousies, he keeps it simmering away.

It’s hot and ready and not just for a wintery afternoon; every day he walks by the stove and stirs the pot and savors the aroma and says, “My ambitions are so sweet . . . my jealousies are justified . . . yea, you just simmer away.”

The phrase James uses here translated, *bitter jealousy*, refers to a person whose hands are full, but they are easily threatened by the thought of losing what they possess.

So then an obstacle to growing in wisdom is a person whose life focuses on him, his possessions, and his plans and nobody better get in their way.

The next phrase James describes as *selfish ambition* is the desire to be seen. It is the drive that makes someone push their way to the top of the food chain.ⁱⁱ

In fact, the word came to be used for a politician running for office and the competition that came out in the process.

Do Christians do that kind of thing?

- Do Christians compete with each another?
- Do Christians compare business cards and job titles?
- Do Christians take note of neighborhoods and automobiles and designer labels?
- Do Christians compete at parenting and grand parenting?
- Are there rivalries in the church for position and prominence?
- Do Christians try to get their own way?

Not at Colonial! Thank God . . . it’s those other churches out there!

What James is saying here is that godly wisdom is developing in a person who lives without scheming.

James goes on in *verse 14 to announce that the unwise person not only schemes but grows more and more arrogant and he lies against the truth.*

That is, he justifies himself. These are the invisible obstacles to wisdom—jealousy and self-centered ambition— here’s the warning: they will eventually come out of the heart and into the life and ultimately hurt the believer who nursed them all along.

Like the Greek legend of the athlete who was jealous of his rival’s success. The town even commissioned a marble sculptor of his rival, and it was unveiled in the town square. The bitter man who lost in the games against this now renowned athlete began slipping out at night to the town square where he chiseled away at the base of that statue . . . secretly. He was quietly nursing along his bitter jealousy and his own selfish ambition. Until one night he chiseled too much, too carelessly and that tall marble statue fell over before he could get away. He was found dead, the next morning, there in the town square lying underneath the toppled statue of his bitter rival.

James is telling us how we actually hurt ourselves and the ones we love along with the larger church family. This is how you hinder the progress of wisdom:

- harbor jealousy within

- secretly nurse along ambition
- foster a “me-first” attitude
- compare yourself with other Christians and make sure you always end up looking better
- scheme up ways to be seen and heard
- simmer on the stove of your heart the offenses of people who get in your way
- and put into the pot some bitter herbs like, God hasn’t given me a fair shake . . . I should have been chosen for that . . . I deserve better than this.

Then wisdom’s growth is pushed aside.

Let me give you a summary and a paraphrase of what **James** is saying in **chapter 3, verses 13-14**.

James is saying, “I want you to grow up in wisdom and understanding . . . I want you to apply and focus God’s truth to life. That kind of wisdom will be demonstrated by good character and gentle humility toward others. But be warned, the opposite of wise development and behavior is bitter jealousy and selfish ambition where you have to be first—you have to be right—you have to be the best—you have to be applauded; and anybody who comes along and tries to tell you the truth about yourself gets a reaction of arrogance and self-justification.”

Now James goes even further to make sure we understand the difference between the wisdom of heaven and the wisdom of earth.

Look at **verse 15**. ***This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural and demonic.***

In fact, what James has actually been doing before arriving at **verse 15** is giving us 5 characteristics of worldly wisdom.

Let’s use that as an outline.

1. **Self-promoting** – *it is arrogant -verse 14*
2. **Self-deceived**– *it lies against the truth*
3. **Short-sighted**–*it is earthly*

He writes in **verse 15**, ***the wisdom of the world is earthly.***

Earthly simply means that the wisdom of the world shuts out God and limits its focus to things on earth.

In other words, the wisdom of the world is earthbound. It views everything horizontally. It never looks up, so to speak.

And by the way, it might surprise you to know that James is not saying the world doesn’t have

wisdom. He says something almost as surprising as when he said earlier that demons have faith in **chapter 2, verse 19**.

Demons have faith, and the world has wisdom. The problem is, God isn’t the *object* of demonic faith, and God is not the *origin* of worldly wisdom because of that they are both doomed to fail.

That worldly wise man knew how to build a house; he understood the principles of construction: engineering and masonry and woodworking.

The problem wasn’t that he didn’t know *how* to build a house; the problem was he didn’t know *where* and upon *what* to build his house.

His house looked great . . . it was beautiful and modern and well built. Everyone in the neighborhood said, “If only my house was as nice as yours.” But he had the wrong foundation all along.

Listen, don’t ever confuse the wisdom of the majority with the wisdom of God.

The wisdom of the world might sound good and seem right but just remember, ***there is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof is the way of death (Proverbs 14:12)***.

Earth looks everywhere but out there . . . into the future revealed for us in the word of God.

The tide is coming! The sandcastles of earth will not last! The safe house is the wise life—built upon the rock of God’s wisdom.

James says that the world’s wisdom is not only self-centered and self-deceived and short sighted; it’s also...

4. Spiritually blinded

James writes in **verse 15**, ***this wisdom is natural.***

The word James uses for natural is the Greek word, *psuchikos* (ψυχικός), which gives us our word psychology or the study of the psyche.ⁱⁱⁱ

The study of the human condition—the natural condition of man—and depending upon your Psychology professor, he may or may not take into account the supernatural creation of mankind by God. You are more than a psyche; you are a spirit.

In other words, God’s wisdom is not according to the psyche of man—the nature of man. God’s wisdom is not human . . . it’s heavenly.

In fact, the Apostle Paul uses the same word to describe ***the natural man who considers the things of the Spirit of God to be foolishness and he can’t understand them because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14)***.

The natural man knows there's something else out there, and he'll even talk about spiritual things and spiritual experiences and spirituality, but he remains blinded to the reality of spiritual truth in Christ because his spirit has not been *made alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:5)*.

The unbeliever you meet on the street or you work with will be happy to talk about spiritual feelings; he's fine talking about spiritual experiences . . . just don't tell him the origin and standard of genuine spirituality is the person of Jesus Christ. That's when he'll walk away.

You see, *the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4)*.

I'll give you an example.

Paul writes, but *we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Gentiles, foolishness. (1 Corinthians 1:23)*

In other words, the Jews can't get past the crucifixion because their Messiah isn't supposed to die. The Gentiles can't get past the crucifixion because to them, that's just a ridiculous thought.

God's don't come and die at the hands of men; men die at the hands of gods.

A suffering, abused, rejected God doesn't make sense. You've got to be out of your mind.

Celsus was a 2nd century Greek philosopher who attacked Christianity throughout his life. He wrote what happens to be the earliest known comprehensive attack on Christianity.

Celsus lived just after the Apostle James wrote this letter, and Celsus wrote that Mary had committed adultery with a Roman soldier named Panthera. He went on to say that Mary then named the boy, Jesus and moved to Egypt where she raised him. Egypt is where Jesus learned sorcery and the dark arts. Then as a young man he returned to his homeland where he presented himself as a god by performing miracles enabled by cultic powers.

In other words, Jesus was an Egyptian sorcerer who got carried away with his claims to be god-like and ended up dead.

What kind of God would allow Himself to be crucified? Celsus wrote, "These Christians worship a dead man."

Listen, nothing is more absurd to the natural man than the belief that the blood of a crucified God could actually atone for and remove sin and secure salvation and give everlasting life.^{iv}

No wonder Paul wrote, *the preaching of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Corinthians 1:18)*.

What is the church doing today? It is taking out the parts of the gospel relating to the atonement of Christ who was crucified for payment of sin and the satisfaction of the wrath of God and the salvation of sinners who believe.

The church is removing the gospel from the gospel.

This was illustrated well in something I read this past week. A church was made of beautiful stone facing with arches and pillars. Over the arch that led to the front doors of the chapel were these words carved into the stone—we Preach Christ Crucified, and everyone who entered that church building knew how they were saved and why they needed to be. They built their lives upon the rock of that confession in Christ crucified.

But times changed and ivy grew up along that archway and it eventually covered the last word. Now all you could see were the words, "We Preach Christ" and like that engraving, so they did. They preached Christ the moral man; Christ the ideal teacher; Christ the positive thinker; Christ the one who will give you all you want and make you comfortable in this life if you tap into His power with enough faith; Christ the good example and so on.

Eventually the ivy grew until it covered the next word and now the engraving simply read, "We Preach" so they did. They preached economics, book reviews, social issues, and humanitarianism.^v

They preached, but their preaching had long since ignored the cross of Jesus Christ until they finally decided, "Why preach anything about Jesus Christ at all?"

Their churches are nothing more than sandcastles . . . the wisdom upon which they are built will not stand against the tide . . . and the tide is coming.

The hosts of heaven will one day say to Christ—***You are worthy for You were slain, and You purchased us . . . with your blood.*** Evidently Christ crucified is a theme of heaven's glory. They go on say, ***and you have made them—the believers—to be a kingdom and priests to our God and they will reign upon the earth. (Revelation 5:9)***

Listen, after the judgment of God has swept away the wisdom of the world, those whose lives have been built upon the wisdom of God will rule the world in His coming kingdom.

How is the wisdom of this world identified?

It is self-centered, self-deceived, short-sighted, spiritually blinded to the truth of Christ's gospel and, one more – James adds

5. Self-exalting-it is demonic

Just as the father of demons attempted to exalt himself, so the opposite of wisdom is the self-exaltation of ourselves.

Demonic can be translated *demon inspired*.^{vi}

It's the only time this form appears in the New Testament. This wisdom is devilish rather than divine.^{vii}

Listen, if your wisdom is demon inspired, it leads you:

- to exalt yourself;
- to justify your sin;
- to reject the cross;
- to trust in yourself;
- to lead away from repentance and away from Christ;

It leads you into self sufficiency and self-promotion and self-centeredness and self-deception and short-sightedness and spiritual blindness.

No matter how smart or beautiful or modern or clever it is.

Has it ever occurred to you that the first time the word *wise* appears in scripture, was the Garden of Eden where Satan had successfully deceived Eve into believing that the forbidden fruit would actually make her *wise*? (**Genesis 3:6**).^{viii}

And what followed: lying, hiding, fear, treachery, and murder.

James writes here ***in verse 16*** that when you exalt yourself and follow your own way—your own ambition—here's what follows . . . ***disorder and every evil thing***.

Disorder speaks of confusion . . . ***every evil thing*** refers to corruption.

Confusion and corruption are the result of earth's wisdom.

Every wicked and sinful thing becomes possible and even acceptable when the wisdom of God is abandoned, rejected, and ignored.

I think of our own culture which is abandoning God's wisdom as quickly as it can.

- 8th grade boys are playing violent video games an average of 23 hours a week and you wonder, where is the wisdom of their parents;

- Maybe the more telling statistic is that for the first time in American history, less than one-half of U.S. households consist of married couples (in other words, more couples are now cohabiting and raising children than those who are marrying;
- No wonder then that this next statistic appeared recently in a Christian magazine; this year, nearly 3 million teenagers will become infected with a sexually transmitted disease.
- Compare that to the international panic caused by the flu virus, H1N— people were wearing masks and gloves—I read one CNN Health Report that less than 150 people died from this specific flu virus in this country. Don't misunderstand; the warnings were appropriate. One life is worth the effort.
- But consider the fact that syphilis will infect 12 million new people this year worldwide. It will take the lives of thousands of people worldwide. In fact, 1 person will die of syphilis every 2 weeks in America.
- Chlamydia will infect 90 million people this year worldwide.
- Gonorrhea will infect 30 million people this year worldwide.

Many of these sexually transmitted diseases, though treatable, are incurable and will set the stage for cancer, infertility, blindness, heart disease and death and you will more than likely never hear one warning posted on CNN or anywhere else, because it is a moral issue so you cannot touch it without being labeled a closed-minded, intolerant, and prude.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the tide is coming in.

At the same time, the wisdom and person and followers of Jesus Christ are being denigrated like never before.

- One recent movie likened Christians to Islamic jihadists bent on world domination;
- The fastest growing religion (in terms of percentages) in the United States is WICCA—a new-pagan religion that is sometimes referred to as Witchcraft;
- Anti-Christian attitudes continue to escalate. This past year a woman in Houston, Texas, was ordered by local

police to stop handing out gospel tracts to children who knocked at her door on Halloween at the door of her own home.

There is growing confusion and corruption as our own culture abandons the truth of heaven's wisdom and follows the wisdom of earth.

The tide is coming in!

Let me share an incident with you that I've shared with my GreenHouse class of new members over the years.

My father and mother bought a few acres of land out in the country and built a small one story home. My father had hired a home builder who was a believer – and in order to save money, my dad was doing everything he could to save money. I came home after my freshman year of college in time to help my father insulate the house – I can remember wearing long sleeve shirts that summer, crawling under the house on our backs unrolling that insulation.

It was a special time of bonding between my Dad and me! (that was supposed to be a joke)

When the flooring was in, the crew came in and laid the hearth and began to build the fireplace. That night we came over to see the progress – it was built up about halfway to the ceiling – and we stood there in the kitchen, looking into the family room where the fireplace was – we just stood there and stared – and leaned to one side . . . it was crooked!

My Dad called the contractor who came over, looked at it and said, "It's crooked all right." He had his crew the next day tear it down to the hearth and start over.

We came back that evening and walked immediately into the family room and stared at that fireplace – built back up just a little higher than it was the day before. And we leaned to the other side – it was crooked again!

The contractor came over and said, "I can't believe it—it's crooked!" He called his crew and had them tear it down. This time they even tore out the hearth and started from the floor up.

A couple days later we went back and immediately walked in to inspect the fireplace. It was finished and it was perfectly straight.

I'll never forget hearing my father talking to the contractor – he asked him, "What made the difference?" The contractor said, "Well, you know, we're trying to save every penny we can – so I had a young, inexperienced crew setting the brick." Well," my father said, "What made them get it right this time?" The contractor said, "Oh, well this time, I stayed and worked with them myself."

Beloved, try as you might you will never build your life straight and true on your own. That's why God in His grace has given us an inspired contractor called His word and a Helper—His Spirit—to help us get it right.

His wisdom is the only way to build and the only foundation upon which to build your life straight and true.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the tide will eventually come in. The only place to stand and the only place to build your life is upon the written word—this Book—and the Living Word, Jesus Christ.

Everything else is sinking sand.

Apart from the wisdom of heaven, anything else is like building a sandcastle before the coming of the tide.

I commend to you who do not believe the wisdom of God through Jesus Christ and His cross-work on your behalf.

For those of you who've accepted Christ's claims, the letter of James challenges us to distinctively differ from the self-centered, self-deceived, short-sighted, spiritually-blinded and self-exalting wisdom of this world.

This is his challenge! These are his words, to the wise!

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- i D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 206
- ii Charles R. Swindoll, James: Practical and Authentic Living (Insight for Living, 1991), p. 120
- iii Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 735
- iv John MacArthur, The Foolishness of God (gty.org/Resources/Print/Sermons/1814).
- v Ibid
- vi Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Zondervan, 2008), p. 174
- vii William Barclay, The Letters of James and Peter (Westminster Press, 1976), p. 94
- viii John Phillips, Exploring the Epistle of James (Kregel, 2004), p. 116