

**FAITH THAT WORKS, PART 7: “WISDOM FROM ABOVE”**  
**JAMES 3:13-18**

**Personal Introduction**

Hi everyone! If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor at HMCC of Jakarta, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God to us today.

**Sermon Series Introduction**

We're currently in Part 7 of our sermon series called “Faith That Works,” where we're going through the Books of James together.

And today's sermon is titled: “Wisdom from Above.”

So let's get right into it.

**Sermon Introduction**

Picture a wise person in your mind. What do you see?

- An older man with a long white beard in a long robe, carrying a staff?
- Someone who speaks in riddles or proverbs, and sounds like Yoda?
- Someone who is really smart and knows a lot of things?
- Someone who is really accomplished and respected in their field or industry?

I think, for most us, we probably think about physical attributes that show age and experience, or words of counsel that show intellectual prowess, or a track record of success in their careers.

But interestingly, according to God's Word, those are not necessarily things that we should look for.

No, according to God's Word, we identify a wise person the same way we identify a fruit tree—by the fruit it produces. Or by the life it produces.

Or in other words, true wisdom is proven by the life it produces.

**The One Thing**

True wisdom is proven by the life it produces.

**Scripture Introduction**

Turn your Bibles to James 3:13-18.

Just want to give a bit of context before jumping into today's passage.

James, the brother of Jesus, is writing this letter to his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ scattered throughout the Roman empire in the first century.

We're in the middle of James chapter 3.

And so far in the chapter, he's been warning them to watch their tongue. Though small, the tongue has the power to direct our whole lives. But we all stumble in many ways, and especially in what we say.

He gives special warning to those who aspire to be teachers of God's Word that they will be judged with greater strictness, but in general, he leaves everyone with the sentiment that our tongue is “a restless evil” that cannot be tamed, but that's not how it's supposed to be.

And that's where we are in today's passage as we continue James chapter 3.

**Scripture Reading**

Let's read James 3:13-18.

<sup>13</sup> Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. <sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. <sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. <sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. <sup>17</sup> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

This is God's Word.

### Overview

We'll look at this passage in three parts.

- I. Wisdom proven in life (v. 13)
- II. "Wisdom" from below (vv. 14-16)
- III. Wisdom from above (vv. 17-18)

### I. Wisdom proven in life (v. 13)

In the first half of chapter 3, James presents the problem of our tongues. And so, the natural question for the listener is then, "So what can we do? What's the solution to this restless problem of our tongues?" And the answer that James will give in the rest of the chapter—is that we need wisdom from above. But first, he asks a question.

Look at verse 13.

[<sup>13</sup> Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.]

He asks, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" You can imagine some of the aspiring teachers he mentioned in verse 1 of the chapter raising their hands—or at least doing so in their hearts. "Oh, that's me! I am wise and understanding."

But it's probably not just aspiring teachers, but as Scripture often says, most people are prone to be "wise in [their] own eyes" (Prov. 3:7; Rom. 1:22; 12:6; cf. 1 Cor. 3:18-20).

There are really only two options: a person is either wise or they are foolish, and nobody naturally thinks that they are foolish.

Now, we may not raise our hands if we were asked this question, but in our heart of hearts, we all probably to some degree think that we're wise—or at least wiser than some other people.

But James then issues a *challenge* for the believers of his time and for all of us listening today. For all those who think of themselves as wise, then "[b]y his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom."

Notice, James doesn't point to age, knowledge and education, or good counsel or advice to prove someone's wisdom. Rather, he says, "If you think that you're wise, show me through your *life*."

The phrase "good conduct" is not just in reference to good behavior here and there, but it refers to "a manner of life" (cf. Eph. 4:22; Gal. 1:13; Heb. 13:7). It's not just occasional good works, but it's in reference to "a lifestyle of goodness that defines everything you do."<sup>1</sup>

In short, it's the witness of your *whole life*.

But what shows that you're wise is not just your *manner* of life, but it's also your *meekness* (or humility).

<sup>1</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *James Verse by Verse*, ONTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

The phrase “in the meekness of wisdom” can also be translated as “in the humility *that comes from wisdom*” (NIV, NLT), so meekness (or humility) is *produced* by wisdom.

If you ever meet a *proud* person, then you can be sure that they are not *wise*. Why? Because as the book of Proverbs tells us, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10).

Wisdom begins with acknowledging who *God* is and being in *awe* of him, and acknowledging who *you* are in relation to him and being *humbled* by that.

So wisdom and humility are tightly related, so that someone who is *wise* will necessarily be *humble*.

So, if you want to identify a wise person, James says in verse 13 that you should look at a person’s whole manner of life and whether or not they are humble. There’s much more that he’ll say later in the verses 17 and 18, but he starts with these two identifiers.

And, of course, these two things—meekness and our manner of life—are related as well. When we give much thought to who God is and who we are in relation to him (when we fear God), that will humble us AND that will inevitably affect how we live in our day-to-day (our whole manner of life).

You could say that James’ whole letter can be summarized in two words: “Show me.”

- You say you have *faith*, show me through your life.
- You say you have *wisdom*, show me through your life.

And that has *huge* implications for how we think about wisdom.

Wisdom is not merely about gaining knowledge, but it is about putting that knowledge into practice in appropriate ways in life.

This should be an *encouragement* to those who are young, or those who feel like they don’t know enough or are not as smart as other people—you can still be wise.

And this should be a *warning* to those who are older or those who are more educated or feel like they know more than other people—you can still be foolish.

Because it’s not so much what you know or even your capacity to know, but it is what you do with what you know. The wise put knowledge into practice; the foolish are just satisfied to simply know.

So, what you do or don’t do after you hear today’s sermon will more or less reveal if you are wise or foolish.

In fact, to hear a sermon and to do nothing in response is not only foolish but it is *condemning*. I know that sounds strong, but regarding unbelieving Jews in his day, Jesus said, “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin [that is, not as guilty], but now they have no excuse for their sin” (John 15:22).

The more knowledge of God’s Word you have, the more accountable to you are to respond to it.

The preacher doesn’t need to be our preferred preacher; he doesn’t need to give some deep insight or new information; he doesn’t need to share a lot of interesting stories and illustrations that capture your attention. All the preacher is responsible for is faithfully communicating God’s Word.

Once that is done—as long as the preacher is faithful to explain God’s Word—the responsibility then lies with the listener to respond to God’s Word.

So as you think back on all the sermons you may have listened to, ask yourself: “How much of it have I applied in my life?” Even today, after hearing the sermon, we ought to ask ourselves, “How do I need to respond to God’s Word today in light of what I just heard?”

<pause>

I know that we can all easily go online and binge on sermons from your favorite preacher to gain much insight and feel convicted by what God's Word says. And in many ways, that's a really good thing.

But according to what James writes here, there's one huge missing piece in doing that—you don't know their lives. You don't know how they treat their spouse and kids, their church members, their neighbors. You don't really know anything about their lives—and so, you don't know if they themselves are putting into practice what they're teaching, whether or not they are really wise as James describes here.

So, even though your local church pastors may not be as gifted as preachers you may find online around the world, you *know* our lives. If you've appointed us as elders, it's because you know enough about our lives to be able to affirm that we meet the biblical qualifications of being an elder.

It's not without reason that God's Word says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Heb. 13:7). You can only do that with the leaders that you know in your local church, because it is God's good design for church members to know the lives of one another, to affirm the life and teaching of their leaders, and to imitate their faith as they see it lived out in front of them.

This also means that we should be careful about who we turn to for wisdom. Don't just pay attention to how much they know, how eloquent they are, or how respected they are by others. But actually *consider* (or think about) their way of life.

They may not be perfect, but are they humble? Do they have a lifestyle of godliness? Are they striving to be faithful and obedient to God in all areas of their lives? Do they have a faith that you would want to imitate? Are they intentionally doing spiritual good to others?

And I hope that as you're looking for these things in others, these are the very things that you're hoping to be personally as well.

One of the great benefits of church history is that we don't just have to look around us to gain wisdom, but we can also look at saints that have finished the race well and gain wisdom from them.

I'm currently reading *The Life of Martyn-Lloyd Jones* by Iain Murray. He was an accomplished doctor and later a faithful pastor in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when many around him had lost confidence in the sufficiency of God's Word. When many had given up on expositional preaching and even the inerrancy of God's Word, and thought the future of the church was in quoting contemporary writers and doing a lot of mercy ministry in the community, he was convinced of the power and sufficiency of God's Word and that the greatest need for the church and for the world was the faithful preaching of God's Word.

He is someone I am gaining much encouragement and wisdom from even though he already passed onto glory nearly 44 years ago.

If you want a short, free book to just whet your appetite for historical missionary biography, I'd recommend reading *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ* by John Piper, which is about the lives of William Tyndale, John G. Paton, and Adoniram Judson. It's less than 120 pages, it's an easy and inspiring read, and it's available for free as a PDF on the Desiring God website.

And if you want to read a short book of wisdom by a man who proved his wisdom in his life and death, I'd recommend *Thoughts for Young Men* by J. C. Ryle. He wrote the book as an old man to young men, but it could just as easily be called *Thoughts for Young People*, and it's just as relevant for those who are teenagers as those in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, or 60s. It's less than 100 pages and it's worth the read.

There's much wisdom to be gained from 2000 years of faithful saints who have already proven themselves to be wise through their lives and deaths, so we would be wise to learn from them as well.

<pause>

So first, wisdom proven in life; and second...

## II. “Wisdom” from below (vv. 14-16)

Look at verse 14.

[<sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. <sup>15</sup> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. <sup>16</sup> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.]

So in the previous verse, James asked, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” And you can imagine people raising their hands, at least in their hearts, thinking, “Oh, I’m wise and understanding.”

And then, James basically says, “Show me your wisdom through your manner of life and your meekness (or humility).”

And you can imagine that there are still some people who have their hands raised, at least in their hearts, because they think they’re good people and are humble.

And so, James challenges these folks, “If you think you’re wise but you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, then do not boast about your so-called ‘wisdom’ and so be false to the truth about what wisdom really is.”

Or to put it more frankly, James is saying, “If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, put your hand down.”

Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are *incompatible* with the humility that true wisdom produces.

Humility is produced when a person is focused on *God*, but bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are produced when a person is focused on *themselves*.

“Jealousy” is the desire for what someone else has—whether their possessions, their job, their status, their abilities, their spouse, their kids, their family... it could be anything.

And James modifies the word “jealousy” with “bitter” because jealousy always leads to this kind of bitter discontentment. When someone is jealous, and they allow that jealousy to consume their thoughts, they can never be content with what they have, but they inevitably become bitter by what they do not have.

“Selfish ambition” is “a prideful inner desire to promote oneself or one’s personal concerns without reference to God or the genuine needs of others.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, this is *not* the kind of *godly* ambition that the apostle Paul talks about when he says that we should make it our ambition to lead a quiet life (1 Thess. 4:11) and to please the Lord (2 Cor. 5:9), or when he said that he makes it his ambition to preach the gospel where the name of Christ was not yet known (Rom. 15:20).

Such godly ambitions are centered on *God*, but selfish ambitions are centered on *ourselves*.

<pause>

Now, look at verse 15.

“This is not the wisdom that comes down from above,” so we might call it “wisdom” from below.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Plummer, “James,” in *Hebrews-Revelation*, ESVEC (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

And what is the *nature* of this “wisdom” from below? It is “earthly [or worldly], unspiritual [or fleshly], demonic” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6-16).

These are the three classic ways of speaking about the sources of evil—the world, the flesh, and the devil.<sup>3</sup>

We may not be surprised to hear that “bitter jealousy” and “selfish ambition” are worldly and fleshly, but demonic? Isn’t that taking it a bit too far?

But what do all three of these things have in common? They are all in *rebellion* against God, which is the pinnacle of foolishness (cf. Ps. 2).

But there is a certain logic that accompanies bitter jealousy and selfish ambition that seems to *appear* wise, and the logic goes like this: “I need to take care of myself. I need to look out for my own interests. I deserve what other people have. I must get what I deserve. I will get what I want.”

Now, if there is no God, and we are all left to ourselves, then perhaps that sounds wise. If there is no God, then it’s survival of the fittest, it’s a dog-eat-dog world of ruthless competition, it’s a world of winners and losers, and none of us want to be the losers, so we’ll do whatever it takes to come out on top.

But what is the eventual *end* of the so-called “wisdom” from below?

Look at verse 16.

Over time, such “wisdom” from below will lead to “disorder” and “every vile [or evil] practice.”

In verse 14, James refers to “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition *in your hearts*” and here in verse 16, he describes how what is in your heart inevitably flows out in your life (cf. Luke 6:45; Matt. 12:34).

Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition eventually lead to grasping for what others have, criticizing others, boasting in ourselves, and fighting with each other.

- When others go through sorrows, rather than weeping with them, we think, “At least it didn’t happen to me.”
- When others rejoice, rather than rejoicing with them, we think, “Why don’t I have what they have?”

It creates a bottomless pit of restlessness that is never satisfied. And it creates disorder among our relationships, as me-centeredness doesn’t translate well for good, healthy relationships.

This so-called “wisdom” from below also tends to rationalize the breaking of God’s law.

- “I’m lying to protect my family’s reputation.”
- “I’m bribing because that’s just the way that it is here, and if I want to be on equal ground with others, that’s just what I need to do.”
- “I’m engaging in sexual immorality because I have certain needs, and didn’t God create me with these needs to be met in the first place?”

It’s constantly looking for loopholes and pushing the boundaries of the law to basically ease (or burn) our consciences even as we blatantly sin.

It leads to “every vile practice,” even as we feel self-justified in all those practices.

That is the so-called “wisdom” from below, and James rightly calls it for what it is—earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. It only makes sense if there is no God, but if there *is* God (and there is), then it is the greatest foolishness, for God’s Word says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Ps. 14:1).

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<sup>3</sup> In the very next chapter, James will unpack this a bit more, describing how our conflicts are caused by our own fleshly passions within us (4:1), how friendship with the world is enmity with God (4:4), and how we are to resist the devil (4:7).

Now, there are a few important notes we should make regarding wisdom.

First, wisdom is more a matter of the *heart* than the head. It has less to do with *knowledge* as it has to do with your *heart* orientation that determines what you *do* with that knowledge.

This is important to realize because there are such things as “common grace insights.” And the book of Proverbs shows us that it is legitimate and expected that we would look out in the world and make good and right insights.

For example, it says to “go to the ant” and “consider her ways, and be wise” (Prov. 6:6-8). And so, anyone can and should consider the ways of the ant and learn wise diligence.

But what one *does* with diligence will be a matter of whether their heart is oriented towards God or themselves—and *that* will ultimately determine whether a life was lived wisely or foolishly.

Very practically, be careful who you follow—whether that’s social media influencers, business leaders, or others who are well-accomplished in their field or industry.

Of course, there may be some common grace insights to gain from them, but it’s difficult not to adopt their heart disposition as you try to learn from and imitate their practices.

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Second, it can be difficult to discern what true wisdom is. You would think that, if something is worldly, fleshly, and even demonic, that it would be very obvious to us. But that’s not always the case.

Why? Because we are constantly inundated by the world’s messages, and the fundamental message is basically, “It’s about you.” And not only that, but that resonates with our sinful flesh; it feels natural and right to filter everything through the lens of ourselves rather than God. And Satan will constantly whisper affirmations in our ears of how we should feel right and justified in our self-centered viewpoints.

Just think of the apostle Peter. When Jesus began sharing with his disciples about how he must suffer and be killed and on the third day be raised, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked him.

I mean, Peter loved Jesus. He was surely looking out for Jesus’ best interests, right?

But what does Jesus say? “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Matt. 16:23).

How many of us, in that scenario, would have sided with Peter on his assessment of things? And that just comes to show that this so-called “wisdom” from below is more natural for us than true wisdom from above.

It’s called “wisdom from above” for a reason. It is *not* wisdom that we naturally have or that the world naturally has. It is so counter-intuitive to how we typically think.

Just think about some of the things that God’s Word says that are so different than how we naturally think:

- If you want to find your life, you must lose it (Matt. 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33; John 12:25);
- If you want to be first, you must be last (Matt. 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31, Luke 13:30);

And who would have thought that God would save rebellious sinners through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of God the Son? The cross is folly to the world “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

And that’s why we need to be in God’s Word to discern what is true wisdom and what is false wisdom. We are going against the tide of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and so we need to be regularly in God’s Word to reorient how we understand what true wisdom is.

For parents, this is also why it's so important that you're helping your kids understand God's world through his Word. Your kids are being disciplined by the world whether you realize it or not, just as you are, and the onus is on you to help them discern true wisdom from God's Word. If you're not sure where to start with that, talk to any of the pastors and other parents here, and we'd love to help you get started with that.

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Third, it's not about you. I know this has been said many times now in different ways, but we need to take this to heart. We live in a me-centered, consumeristic world where we're constantly told that it's about us—our desires, our comforts, our feelings, our bodies, our future, our success.

And what's so insidious is that we can make things about us even while being convinced that it's really not about us. We can mask *selfish* ambitions as *godly* ambitions.

For example, we make it a regular practice in our church to pray for other churches in our city and around the world, because as a church, we don't want to have any sense of tribalism as if God only cares about our local church but we long for God to work in all his churches.

But, as a pastor, let's say that I pray for revival in our city, and a revival starts breaking out in someone *else's* church in our city, where many lost people are coming to know Christ and joining *their* church rather than *ours*, can I still rejoice?

If I can rejoice, then praying for revival was a godly ambition; if I cannot rejoice, then praying for revival was just a way to mask my own selfish ambition to grow my *own* church.

Now, "[t]he opposite of selfish ambition is *not* passivity but *selfless* ambition. The antidote to striving for your *own* glory is *not* no striving at all, but striving for *God's* glory."<sup>4</sup> And where is the glory of God to be found? According to Ephesians 3:21, God's glory is most manifest in Christ and in his church—not just in you as an individual Christian and all that you can do as an individual follower of Christ.

And if that's the case, then that should serve as a powerful antidote (or remedy) to our tendency to make things about ourselves as individuals rather than as part of Christ's church. Carl Trueman, author of the article "An Unmessianic Sense of Non-Destiny," writes this:

[F]ar too many Christians have senses of destiny which verge on the messianic. The confidence that the Lord has a special plan and purpose just for them shapes the way they act and move. Now, just for the record, I am a good Calvinist, and I certainly believe each individual has a destiny; what concerns me is the way in which our tendency to think of ourselves as special and unique (which we all are in some ways—D.N.A., etc.) bleeds over into a sense of special destiny whereby the future, or at least the future of myself, comes to be the priority and to trump all else.

Put bluntly, when I read the Bible it seems to me that the church is the meaning of human history; but it is the church, a corporate body, not the distinct individuals who make up her membership. Of course, all of us individuals have our gifts and our roles to play: the Lord calls us each by name and numbers the very hairs of our heads; but, to borrow Paul's analogy of the body, we have no special destiny in ourselves taken as isolated units, any more than bits of our own bodies do in isolation from each other. When I act, I act as a whole person; my hand has no special role of its own; it acts only in the context of being part of my overall body. With the church, the destiny of the whole is greater than the sum of the destinies of individual Christians.

This is an important insight which should profoundly shape our thinking and, indeed, our praying. My special destiny as a believer is to be part of the church; and it is the church that is the big player in God's wider plan, not me. That puts me, my uniqueness, my importance, my

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<sup>4</sup> Bobby Jamieson, *The Path to Being a Pastor* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 160.



role, in definite perspective. The problem today is that too many have the idea that God's primary plan is for them, and the church is secondary, the instrument to the realization of their individual significance.<sup>5</sup>

All that to say, it's not about you. It's about God's glory in Christ and in his church, and we should strive to that end. In the larger scheme of redemptive history, you and I are quite insignificant, and that is okay. If our faith is in Christ, then our names are written in the book of life, we will be included in the great multitude of worshippers when Christ returns, and on that day, we will sing with all the heavenly assembly that "The Lamb is all the glory / Of Immanuel's land" (Anne Ross Cousin, "The Sands of Time Are Sinking").

<pause>

So wisdom proven in life, "wisdom" from below, and third...

### III. Wisdom from above (vv. 17-18)

So if the so-called "wisdom" from below is characterized by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, how is wisdom from above—true wisdom—characterized?

Look at verse 17.

[<sup>17</sup> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.]

"Wisdom from above is first *pure*."

Earlier in James 1:27, he said that to be "pure" is "to keep oneself unstained from the world." And later in James 4:8, he will say that to be "pure" is *not* to be "double-minded."

So, according to James, to be "pure" is to keep oneself unstained from the world and to not be double-minded; or to say it positively, it is to be fully devoted to God.

It's this heart disposition that is whole-heartedly, single-mindedly devoted to God.

Notice, James says that "wisdom from above is *first* pure," meaning that this is the fountainhead of true wisdom. Everything else he will say about what characterizes true wisdom flows from this because everything ultimately flows from our hearts.

So "wisdom from above is *first* pure, *then* peaceable."

For believers in Jesus Christ, he is himself our peace (Eph. 2:14). It is not a mere feeling, but through faith in Christ, we as sinners are legally declared forgiven by God and are now at peace with him.

And because we have this peace with God, we can now have peace with ourselves and with others. There is no more "bitter jealousy" and "selfish ambition," but in Christ, we are "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3), we "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom. 14:19), and "If possible, so far as it depends on [us], [we] live peaceable with all" (Rom. 12:18).

Next, "wisdom from above is... *gentle*."

To be "gentle" is to be like Jesus in that "a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench" (Matt. 12:20; cf. Isa. 42:3). It is to be restrained in our words and tone, so as not to crush others, even though we very well could. It "makes allowances for the weaknesses and

<sup>5</sup> Carl Trueman, "An Unmessianic Sense of Non-Destiny," Reformation21, April 20, 2010, <https://www.reformation21.org/articles/an-unmessianic-sense-of-nondestiny.php>.

ignorance of others and takes the kindest perspective whenever possible.”<sup>6</sup> It is a willingness to yield, not being quick to demand from others.<sup>7</sup>

And because gentleness characterizes Christ (2 Cor. 10:1), it is to characterize all Christians and especially pastors in the church (1 Tim. 3:3).

Now, we would be wise to ask ourselves at this point, “Would my family members say that I’m gentle? Would my co-workers and subordinates at work say that I’m gentle? Would my fellow church members say that I’m gentle?”

There is a way to speak the truth in gentleness, in careful consideration *not* to crush the other person, and there is a way to speak the truth with little thought to how it will affect the other person—and just saying what you think needs to be said. And if you routinely do the latter, you may be efficient and clear but *not* gentle and *not* like your Savior—and James says, that is ultimately more characteristic of the demonic so-called “wisdom” from below.

Next, “wisdom from above is... *open to reason*.”

To be “open to reason” means that you’re willing to submit to persuasion.<sup>8</sup> You’re willing to change your opinion if someone shows you your error. You’re not hard-headed, always thinking that you’re right and everyone else is wrong. This is a product of the meekness (or humility) that true wisdom produces that we saw earlier in verse 13. You know that you’re not infallible, and you need people in your life who will reason with you and show you ways that you may be going astray.

Now, most of us probably think we’re “open to reason,” but when was the last time you changed your mind about something because someone else persuaded you that you were wrong about something? And when people bring things up with you, does your response to them *discourage* them from doing it again?

Next, “wisdom from above is... *full of mercy and good fruits*.”

Here, James uses the modifier “full of” for both “mercy” and “good fruits” because they’re closely related. Earlier in James 2:8-13, he describes “mercy” as “love for neighbor that shows itself in action.”<sup>9</sup> So, “mercy” refers to *acts of mercy*, which are part of the “good fruits” that true wisdom produces.

Next, “wisdom from above is... *impartial*.”

James already spoke extensively about this in James 2:1-13 as well. True wisdom shows no partiality (or favoritism or bias or prejudice or discrimination) based on outward appearances.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever the circumstances, there is a consistency in how others are treated regardless of who they are and who is watching.

Next, “wisdom from above is... *sincere*.”

The word for “sincere” here literally means “without hypocrisy.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James*, PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James*, PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Daniel M. Doriani (*James* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007]) notes: “There is uncertainty about the best translation of the next term. Leading scholars and some translators believe the word translated ‘impartial’ in the NIV and ESV is better translated as ‘unwavering’ (NASB) or ‘undoubting’ (cf. RSV). The disagreement has two sources. First, the Greek term *adiakritos* appears only here in the New Testament, so we have little data to go on. Second, the common verb *diakrinō*, which is the root of our word, can mean either ‘doubt, waver’ or ‘make a distinction.’ Complicating matters, *diakrinō* appears twice in James, where it means ‘doubt’ the first time (1:6) and seems to mean ‘make a [false] distinction’ the second (2:4). Given that the letter ‘a’ at the beginning of *adiakritos* functions like ‘un’ in English, we must decide if *adiakritos* means impartial or unwavering.” However, regardless of which is specifically meant, there is a general overlap of meaning regarding consistency.

<sup>11</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *James*, PTW (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015); and Grant R. Osborne, *James Verse by Verse*, ONTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019).

It means that there is no discrepancy between who you are in public and who you are in private. There's no pretending to be somebody you're not. There's no hiding behind a mask of what you think others expect you to be. But what you see is what you get (so to speak).

<pause>

Notice how, aside from "pure," everything in this list is *interpersonal* in nature; that is, they describe how you carry yourself in relation to *other* people.

That means that the idea of a wise hermit living by himself somewhere by himself is fiction. You cannot be wise by yourself because wisdom is proven in *life*—and life is lived out in relation to *other* people.

Interestingly, by God's design, he has given numerous "one another" commands to us as followers of Christ that he expects us to live out in the context of local churches. We are commanded to:

- love one another (John 13:34),
- forgive one another (Eph. 4:32),
- be devoted to one another (Rom. 12:10),
- live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16),
- do not neglect to meet together (Heb. 10:25),
- see to it that none of you have a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God, but encourage one another daily, as long as it's called Today (Heb. 3:12-13).

And if we're going to be faithful to these "one another" commands, then there needs to be committed relationships with a defined body of believers, where you give them permission to speak hard truths into your life.

And when you piece all these "one another" commands together, what it adds up to is what Christians through the centuries have referred to as "church membership."

Why is this important? Because God has designed Christians to grow in wisdom in the context of committed relationships in local churches. Therefore, if you're not a meaningful member of a local church, then you have cut yourself off from the primary context that God means to grow you in wisdom.

But of course, whenever we rub shoulders and get into the lives of those who are not only different than us but also fellow sinners like us, there's going to be lots of opportunities for conflict.

As painful as they are at times, these truly are opportunities—opportunities for us to grow in the characteristics of wisdom from above that we see in verse 17 and opportunities for us to showcase the glory of the gospel in Christ's church.

If we love those who are easy to love, that does not allow us to grow in being peaceable, gentle, open to reason, and so forth; and that does not require the supernatural power of the gospel.

That means that if you're going through conflict right now with other members, that doesn't necessarily mean that there's something wrong going on in the church. This may be God's providence in your life to grow you in true wisdom and to show off the power of the gospel in his church by how you respond to and work through that conflict with your fellow brother or sister in Christ.

So if that's you, don't throw your hands up in resignation, and don't avoid the hard conversations. In a sense, conflict is a regular part of the mission of the church to display the beauty of Christ and the gospel-revealing community he established. It's part of loving one another in such a way that all people will know that we are his disciples (John 13:35).

<pause>

Now, even as you see this list of characteristics of wisdom from above, you may be thinking, "Well, you don't need to be a follower of Christ to be peaceable, gentle, open to reason, and so forth."

And in a sense, that may be true. But *why* are they that way? What's their rationale? Perhaps it's...

- "Because I want to avoid conflict," or
- "Because I want to be a better version of me," or
- "Because I want to feel good about myself," or
- "Because that's how I would want others to treat me," or
- "Because I'm just being authentic to myself."

There may be a multitude of reasons why a person may be peaceable, gentle, open to reason, and so forth. But James points to only *one* proper reason that accords with wisdom from above. He says that "wisdom from above is *first* pure, *then* peaceable...."

It's this heart disposition that is whole-heartedly, single-mindedly devoted to God. Wisdom from above—*true* wisdom—always flows from a heart oriented towards God rather than self.

And what is the eventual *result* of such wisdom from above?

Look at verse 18.

[<sup>18</sup> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.]

Here, James picks the first interpersonal characteristic of wisdom from above—peaceable—and describes what happens when a wise person sows in peace (or strives for peacemaking) in all his relationships.

He says that the result will be a "harvest of righteousness." That is, "an abundance of righteous behavior in the peacemaker and in those whom he influences."<sup>12</sup>

Notice that a harvest does not come right away after seeds are sown, but it comes *over time*. There may not be immediate results, but when seeds are sown, the harvest will come *eventually*.

And just like "disorder" is not just experienced personally but interpersonally, this "harvest of righteousness" is also not just experienced personally but also interpersonally. That is, it has effects on the entire community.

Think for a moment a husband or a wife who is peaceable, gentle, and open to reason with their spouse. Over time, that creates an environment in the home where conflicts don't explode but both husband and wife are able to grow in their wisdom and intimacy with one another as they work through conflicts. And so, they don't avoid conflicts. The kids see that their parents truly love one another, and it creates an environment of security where they feel like they can share openly with their parents. "A harvest of righteousness."

But imagine if a husband or a wife was not peaceable but contentious, not gentle but harsh, not open to reason but hard-headed with their spouse. Over time, that creates an environment in the home where conflicts explode and so conflicts are avoided, and so there are more landmines in the relationship. Their character only begins to worsen because issues cannot be addressed. The kids don't feel secure and feel like they need to protect themselves from being collateral damage in their parents' fights, and they leave their homes having a distorted view of love, marriage, and commitment. "A harvest of disorder."

This doesn't play out just in the home but also within friendships, in the workplace, and in the church. Any place where there are interpersonal relationships.

<pause>

Now, when we think of sowing in peace, that's not *just* in the midst of conflicts, but we can sow in peace at all times.

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<sup>12</sup> Robert L. Plummer, "James," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, ESVEC (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

What would it be like if what was sown in the church was a kind of “good gossip,” where we share how we’re thankful for God in the lives of fellow members?

- I’m thankful for how God used Roger to encourage me with his Word and prayed with me when I was going through a really difficult time at work.
- I’m thankful for how God used Rebecca to point out sin in my life in such a firm but gentle way, and how she’s continuing to walk with me even now as I fight to kill this sin in my life.
- I’m thankful for how God is working in our community in such a way where Roy told me recently that when he first stepped into our church, he felt a kind of love and kindness among the members that he hadn’t experienced before in any other community that he’s been in before.

You know, these aren’t made up. I can honestly say that these things are going on in our church, and I thank God for these things because I know that, apart from his supernatural work in us, we would naturally disintegrate into all kinds of disorder.

If we want to see “a harvest of righteousness” in our church, if we want to see this kind of peace and unity that reveals the gospel in our church, then we must sow in the things that we hope to see—and then wait for God to bring the harvest that will eventually come.

### **Conclusion**

Now, perhaps at this point, you’re feeling a bit discouraged. If you’re honest with yourself, you know you cannot be accurately described as pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

Perhaps you’ve tried so many times before to be those things, but you only keep falling short.

If that’s you, then you’re only experiencing what this passage is saying. In our sinful flesh, we all naturally follow the “wisdom” from below. But in Christ, pure wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24, 30) came down from above to an earthly, unspiritual, demonic world to not just share his wisdom but to give his life as our substitute.

Jesus lived the perfectly wise life that none of us could ever live and he died on the cross to take the punishment of our foolish sinful living that we deserved, so that all who repent of their sins and believe in him alone as Lord and Savior can be *saved*—and can also now be truly *wise*.

For us who believe, we were *saved* by wisdom from above, and we now have *access* to wisdom from above *in Christ*. Though we still struggle to be wise, we are not left in the dark, but we have the light of Christ.

And so, the only proper response is to continually *ask* him for wisdom from above, knowing that he delights in answering such prayers—for he generously gives his wisdom to those who ask (James 1:5) and he is glorified in showing off his manifold wisdom in his church (Eph. 3:10).

Let’s pray.