

The Peaceable Effect of True Wisdom (James 3:13-18)

Matthew Williams

If I asked you, “What is it that makes someone wise?” What would you say? Is it a person who’s really smart and knows all kinds of history or aced calculus? Is it a person who has a lot of life experience or navigated all kinds of challenges? Is it a person who is suave and well-groomed, like “The World’s Most Interesting Man,” and knows how to play it cool in whatever social situation they find themselves? Maybe you think a wise person is someone who gives really good advice.

Most cultures have some sort of working definition of wisdom, even if it’s not spoken aloud. The American Dream, for example, traffics in wisdom as self-improvement typically understood as economic advancement. A wise person is someone who works hard to make something of themselves, someone who builds a business, climbs the corporate ladder, or goes from rags to riches. Wisdom is being smart with their money and knowing how to get ahead in life.

It’s the question James sets out to answer in the passage we just read. James 3:13, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” James isn’t the only biblical author who answers that question. In fact, every book of the Bible, not just the traditional “wisdom” books of Job, Proverbs, or Ecclesiastes, has an answer and their answers are remarkably consistent.

But there’s something I really love about James’ answer. Like the rest of his book, it’s eminently practical. There’s nothing theoretical or abstract about the test of true wisdom he identifies in vv. 13-18. In fact, his answer to the question, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” is as gritty as they come. It’s an in-the-trenches-of-life sort of answer. **True wisdom is humility in action that leads to peace.**

The second half of v. 1 summarizes the whole section. “Who is wise and understanding among you? *By his good conduct let him show his works* in the meekness of wisdom.” Notice two really important things in what James is saying.

First, wisdom is known by her actions. It’s not hidden or esoteric. It’s not something that flies under the radar or is difficult to spot. Am I wise? Are you wise? Hmm...I’m not sure. No, it is by definition wisdom is active and visible. It shows itself in a particular sort of activity. It has a distinctively behavioral calling card, so to speak. Wisdom isn’t about what you know. It’s about how you live. It’s the visible character of your conduct. That’s the first thing James says.



Here's the second. Wisdom isn't any old sort of visible activity. It's a very specific sort of behavior – the kind of attitudes and actions that flow from a heart of humility. "By his good conduct let him show his works *in the meekness of wisdom.*"

We don't use the word "meek" very often today and when we do, it often conjures up images of someone who is quiet and non-confrontational, an introvert who is happy to mind their own business and let other people tell them what to do. That is not at all how James or the rest of the Bible use the word. When you read meekness, think a spiritually strong and life-governing attitude of humility.

It's how Moses, the guy who coordinated a massive migration of over a half-million people in the book of Exodus, is described in Numbers 12:3. "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth." It's how the Apostle Paul, the guy who started churches across much of the known world in the midst of intense persecution, related to the Christians under his care in 2 Corinthians 10:1. Most importantly, it's how Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, describes himself in Matthew 11:29, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart..."

Gentle, humble, meek, they're all good translations of a Greek word referring in the 1st century to the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one's self-importance. Why is that the essence of wisdom? Because true wisdom is built on the foundational conviction that the Lord is God and I am not.

He is the Creator. I am not. He is supreme in majesty. I am not. He is the King of Glory. I am not. He is worthy of all worship and praise. I am not. He is perfect in holiness, blinding in splendor, and awesome in purity. I am not. That essential distinction between the Creator and the creature – not just recognized but gladly and joyfully embraced – is where true wisdom begins. Skip that, miss that, and your pursuit of "wisdom" is a lost cause. Why? Because it's the nature of reality. The difference between who God is and who we are demands humility. Proverbs 1:7 is right. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

Humility isn't some kind of Christian mind game where we think we're a pretty awesome person but don't say so in polite company. Humility is the moral requirement of our existence. No other attitude of heart passes muster in the sight of the Righteous Judge to whom we are accountable.



Isaiah 66:1-2, "Thus says the LORD: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: *he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.*"

And where humility toward God is present, humility toward our fellow man will be present. When you're consumed with God's glory and not your own, you'll stop trying to impress other people with a sense of your self-importance. Your supreme concern in all your various relationships will be helping people see and respond to just how glorious God really is. By transforming the way we relate to God, humility transforms the way we relate to one another.

Think of it this way: humility isn't one of many expressions of wisdom. It is the biblical measure of wisdom. It's the heart attitude out of which wisdom exclusively and necessarily proceeds. James 3:13 teaches us wisdom is visible, it's tested by our actions, and wisdom is humble, it begins with a right attitude of heart toward God, which is why I said true wisdom is humility in action.

But that kind of God-centered definition of wisdom isn't what the world, our own flesh, or the Satan himself commends as wise. In fact, that kind of humility and the actions that flow from it is the exact opposite of what we are naturally inclined to pursue. And even if we know in our minds what biblical wisdom really is, that doesn't mean we know how to spot it or live it out in the trenches of real life.

And here's where James is especially helpful. He establishes the definition of wisdom in v. 1 (humility in action) and immediately proceeds to contrast false wisdom with true wisdom, worldly wisdom with godly wisdom. Both are demonstrated in our actions, but the relational fruit they produce couldn't be more different.

1) WORLDLY WISDOM PRODUCES DIVISION (vv. 14-16)

In vv. 14-16, James identifies the nature, the source, and the fruit of worldly wisdom. At a heart level, at the level of our will and desires, what does worldly wisdom consist of? What's its nature? V. 14, "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth." He's saying you can't answer the question in v. 1, "Who is wise and understanding among you?"



with an "I am!" if two attitudes are present within you – bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

What is "bitter jealousy?" It's the sinful craving for what someone else has, and you don't have, that causes you to feel bitterness toward them. Bitter jealousy traffics in personal comparison. It assesses what I think I deserve relative to what I think you deserve and concludes, "I am just as if not more deserving of _____ than you are, but because you got the promotion, you got the praise, you got mom and dad's approval, or you got the lifestyle, the Christmas present, the boyfriend, the spiritual gifts, and the vacation I wanted, I don't think I like you very much right now.

What is "selfish ambition?" It's a driving hunger and thirst for achievement for the sake of my satisfaction, my reputation, my glory, my identity, or my esteem. The work you're engaged in might be entirely good – raising your kids, starting a business, serving in the church, etc. – but the reason you're doing it has more to do with securing the status you want or the position you think you deserve, than it does with loving God or loving other people. You might not be against those things. But when push comes to shove, you're not laboring for God's glory or to make much of Jesus.

Wherever you discern a spirit of bitter jealousy or selfish ambition in your heart (both of which are consumed with what I think I deserve or what I think I've earned) you're living according to the wisdom of this world which says your life is all about you – so do whatever it takes to get other people to respect you accordingly.

To boast or consider yourself "wise" under such circumstances is to deny or "be false to the truth." Why? Because in both cases the hallmark of true wisdom (humility) is strikingly absent. Bitter jealousy isn't humble. It says, "I'm great and I'm not getting what I deserve so I'm going to have an attitude about it." Selfish ambition isn't humble. It says, "I'm great and my mission in life is to prove to myself and others how great I really am." Both attitudes are classic expressions of pride.

Worldly wisdom is a self-exalting, self-promoting sort of wisdom. As such, it doesn't come down, as v. 15 says, "from above." It doesn't find its source in God because it isn't rooted in the humility God's self-revelation of his glory demands. It's an earthly sort of "wisdom." It's an "unspiritual" sort of wisdom. It isn't the work of the Holy Spirit. It's the work of the kingdom of darkness. Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are expressions of the very sort of pride Satan embraced when he rebelled against the Lord. It's the pride he lured Adam and Eve into embracing when he whispered



in Genesis 3:5, “Why bother with worshipping God when you could become like God?”

Worldly wisdom, wisdom of that arrogant nature, with that evil source, invariably produces a certain kind of fruit in our relationships with one another. Look at v. 16. “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exists, there will be disorder and every vile practice.” In other words, worldly wisdom doesn’t make our relationships work. It doesn’t strengthen them. It destroys them. It creates conflict, division, and all manner of life-destroying behaviors. Why? Because worldly wisdom acts as if other people or things are god (bitter jealousy) or pretends that I am god (selfish ambition).

The Bible reminds us that is a complete and total lie. No wonder it results in disorder. We’re living in denial of reality. We’re opposing the moral fabric of the universe. There is only one true God and it’s not you or them. It’s the Lord. And he rightly refuses to bless our relationships when animating principle driving all our actions is spiritual idolatry.

As long as God isn’t seated on the throne of our hearts, our personal relationships will remain a mess. We’ll never live in the good of reconciliation with man until we experience the gift of reconciliation with God. We need the Holy Spirit to intervene in our hearts and help us to first relate to God rightly if we are to have any hope of relating to one another rightly.

I think most of us would want to say, “Yeah, I think I’m pretty wise. I mean, maybe not as wise as the next person, but I’m certainly not a fool.” Well, my friend, examine the fruit of your relationships. That’s the test. If most of your relationships with other people are a mess, characterized by disorder, rarely at peace, you can safely assume you’re not practicing godly wisdom. The folly of bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are in play in some way.

That doesn’t mean your life is hopeless. The Lord is eager to help you repent. He delights to give grace, forgiveness, and power to change to all who ask him for deliverance from evil, starting with the arrogance in our own hearts. But we have to acknowledge the root of the issue – the distinct absence of humility before God. Worldly wisdom lacks humility, which is why it invariably produces conflict and division.

2) GODLY WISDOM PRODUCES PEACE (vv. 17-18)



Did you notice James says not once, but twice, once in v. 15 and again in v. 17, that true wisdom is “from above”? That’s really important. He’s reminding us wisdom is not in the eye of the beholder. It’s not subjectively determined by the shifting and contradictory judgment of men. It’s defined and objectively revealed by the unchangeable God. It doesn’t originate within us. It originates outside of us. It’s not something we create for ourselves. It’s something we receive from God.

And both the character and fruit of godly wisdom couldn’t be more different than the relational fallout in v. 16. Look at v. 17. All of these attributes of godly wisdom are expressions of humility, the heart that recognizes the Lord is God, I am not, you are not, and relates to other people accordingly.

Godly wisdom “is first pure.” It’s not corrupted by sinful desires. It’s holy. It’s like God himself, reflecting his own thoughts, feelings, and actions. It’s also peaceable. Godly wisdom isn’t quick to anger. It’s patient and forbearing. It doesn’t insist on being recognized as “right.” It doesn’t create a conflict out of every point of disagreement.

It’s also gentle. There’s a distinctive approachability to wisdom. It gives thought to not just what should be said, but how to say it in a way that makes it as easy as possible for others to hear without compromising the truth. Wisdom is gentle in that it’s sensitive to the potential for conflict or disunity and works hard to avoid it.

Godly wisdom is open to reason. There’s an entreatable, compliant, and willing to yield character to it. It’s not stubborn or defensive. A wise person is easy to engage and willing to change their mind. They know some issues are more important than others and don’t treat every issue with a “my way or the highway” attitude. It doesn’t mean they’re soft or lack conviction. But they’re not harsh or militant even when the dictates of conscience require sticking to their guns.

Perhaps my favorite description of all comes next. True wisdom is “full of mercy.” It makes sense given what God has told us about himself. He is what? “Merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” When you’re around a wise person, you don’t feel like you’re walking on eggshells. They’re not a bomb waiting to explode at the slightest provocation. Even when they’re sinned against, even when their constitutional rights are violated, they don’t blow a gasket. Wisdom remains exceedingly compassionate and merciful. They both take sin very seriously and are quick to forgive.



Finally, godly wisdom is “impartial and sincere.” It doesn’t play favorites or practice prejudice. It treats other people, no matter who they are or what they’ve done, with dignity, honor, and justice worthy of an image-bearer of God. Wisdom doesn’t cling to a superior or self-righteous attitude that looks down on “fools,” even as it recognizes the presence and consequences of folly. It doesn’t play the judge, try to do God’s job for him. It refuses hypocrisy and embraces integrity. It practices what it preaches.

And notice what all of those actions, what that sort of godly behavior, invariably produces in v. 18. It’s the exact opposite fruit of v. 16. “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” Worldly wisdom produces division. Godly wisdom produces peace. It’s a trademark or signature of true wisdom. It’s the best test of whether you’re walking in wisdom or not. Are your actions, so far as it depends upon you, creating peace in your relationships?

There are times I will hear someone say, “I don’t care what effect my actions are having on other people. I’m doing the right thing and they will just have to deal with it.” When you hear that voice, whenever you have that thought and are tempted to dig in, charge head, or hit send, remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

That doesn’t mean unity is our functional god. There are times doing what’s right in a relationship will cause enmity to rise, not dissipate. But that’s not the issue James is concerned with here. His concern, and my concern as your pastor, is that we remember godly wisdom is always rooted in something (humility) and it’s always working toward something (peace). And if our actions are not rooted in humility or resulting in peace, we should be very skeptical that we are actually walking the path of wisdom.

CONCLUSION

True wisdom is humility in action that leads to peace. As Solomon observed in Proverbs 11:2, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.” So ask yourself, friend, am I wise or understanding, not in your eyes or the eyes of the world, but in the sight of God? Test your heart. Are you humble and contrite in spirit? And test the fruit of your life. Do your actions sow seeds of division or produce peace?



The good news of the gospel and the only reason a sermon like this need not be an exercise in condemnation, is that Jesus is all the attributes of wisdom in v. 17 and perfectly so. He is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, fully of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. He came to bring peace between you and God through his life, death, and resurrection. And as a result, to bring peace between you and your fellow man.

Walking in biblical wisdom isn't a matter of trying to change our behavior on our own. Walking in biblical wisdom is about repeatedly running to our wise Savior and King, crying out to him for mercy, and holding fast to him as he forgives, leads, and empowers us to follow his example. You can't make yourself wise, friend. But Jesus can and Jesus will if you're willing to humble yourself and ask him.

Remember, he's full of mercy. So don't hold back. Don't hide in fear. Don't run away ashamed. He already knows. He already sees. He is already more aware than you are of the character and fruit of your life. He is eager to make you wise. Let's go to him right now in prayer and humbly ask for his help, for we serve a God who gives grace to the humble.