

Heavenly Wisdom

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere (James 3:17).

Devotional

As we examine our own society, it becomes clear that we have an infatuation with celebrities. Newspapers and television stations are quick to report on the issues and opinions of famous people, even if these people have no discernible expertise on the positions that they espouse. All too often, the society at large equates fame with knowledge and celebrity with wisdom.

While at times it certainly may be true that wisdom has led a person to fame or fortune, this wisdom is not necessarily a gift from God. Rather, it could be that the use of earthly wisdom has led to such temporal success. As we saw [last week], this earthly wisdom is characterized by ungodly jealousy and selfish ambition, and it ultimately results in “every vile practice” (James 3:14–16).

In contrast to this “earthly” wisdom, James tells us that we must look for the “wisdom from above” (v. 17). Several things are noteworthy about this wisdom. First of all, it results from true faith. James told us in 1:5–8 that if we lack such wisdom we must ask God for it in faith without doubting His promise to give it to us.

Secondly, like true faith, heavenly wisdom demonstrates itself by means of good works. Authentic faith responds to the trials of life with obedience to the “royal law” (2:14–26). Likewise, true faith does good works in the “meekness of wisdom” (3:13).

Thus we can see how faith and wisdom are intimately connected. Today’s passage makes this even clearer in its description of heavenly wisdom. True faith and heavenly wisdom are both pure (1:27; 3:17). Verse 17 also tells us that heavenly wisdom is marked by peace, gentleness, reasonableness, mercy, impartiality, sincerity, and other good fruits. These things are also characteristics of authentic faith (see 1:19; 2:1; 2:13; 2:26; 3:10).

These connections make it clear that if we have true faith we will also have godly wisdom. Like faith, this wisdom may be immature at first but it will grow over time. Our wisdom will inform our faith, and

our faith will move us to always seek heavenly wisdom so that we may live rightly and peaceably before the face of God (v. 18).

CORAM DEO (In the Presence of God)

Even those with great faith sometimes feel like they are not very wise. However, we have seen that if true faith must manifest itself in good works then so too must godly wisdom be present even if this wisdom is immature. Today's passage lists some things that characterize godly wisdom. Does your life exhibit these traits? Ask God to help you grow in them and then do what you can to bring peace to those around you.¹

Open it

1. What is your favorite fruit? Which is your least favorite?

Read it

JAMES 3:13–18

Explore it

2. How do we determine whether someone is wise?
3. What two things show that our faith is not from above?
4. What comes from earthly wisdom?
5. What does pure wisdom look like?
6. What comes from pure wisdom?

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/heavenly-wisdom/>

Apply it

Both Scripture and ancient philosophers placed a premium on wisdom, which, broadly defined, is not simply a matter of possessing factual knowledge but of properly and effectively applying truth to everyday life. The Hebrews especially understood that true wisdom is not intellectual, but behavioral. Thus the biggest fool was one who knew truth and failed to apply it. To the Jews, wisdom was skill in living righteously.

In 3:13, James makes a transition from discussing teachers and the tongue to dealing with wisdom's impact on everyone's life. He supports the truth of Old Testament wisdom literature (Job to Song of Solomon) that wisdom is divided into two realms—man's and God's. James offers wisdom as still another test of living faith. The kind of wisdom a person possesses will be revealed by the kind of life he lives (v. 13). Those who possess the wisdom of man, the wisdom from below, will demonstrate by their lives that they have no saving relationship with Jesus Christ and no desire to worship, serve, or obey Him (vv. 14–16). Those, on the other hand, who possess genuine saving faith will manifest the wisdom of God, the wisdom from above (vv. 17–18).²

7. How is wisdom defined and described by the world today?

8. Read the following passages. How does the Bible define wisdom?
 - Job 12:12

 - Proverbs 13:1

 - 1 Corinthians 1:25

 - 1 Corinthians 1:30

 - Proverbs 29:11

 - Proverbs 19:20

 - Ecclesiastes 2:26

² MacArthur, John. James (MacArthur Bible Studies) (Kindle Locations 991–1000). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

9. What causes some in our world to have such a bloated estimation of their own wisdom and understanding? Are they really fooling anyone?

Let's stop at that word "wisdom." That is the Hebrew word, *chokmah* (pronounced hok'ma). Chokmah is not what we would think wisdom would be. This word *chokmah* in the Hebrew language didn't mean "head knowledge," or even "heart knowledge" as we would describe wisdom. **It referred to the idea of skill.** This word would be used when someone would show prowess in what they were doing. If a musician was especially talented, others would describe that musician as having chokmah. If a craftsman, or an artisan, or a student was doing exceedingly well at his craft, that person was someone who was wise, who was skilled in his area of work. Chokmah would be the word that was used. So now move back to this idea of bringing wisdom to life. What James is saying is, **"God wants to give us this chokmah, this wisdom that allows us to skillfully live life according to His ways."**³

10. Based on the Hebrew definition above, who in your life has exemplified and imparted godly wisdom? What characteristics mark his or her life?

11. As it is with faith, wisdom is something that is unseen without external evidences. What skills or "good conduct" in one's life allow for us to see their wisdom?

The word "understanding" in the Greek, the word itself is used only here in the New Testament and it refers to a specialist or a professional who is highly skilled in some area of knowing and doing. The word for "wisdom," *sophia* is a general word. The Greeks used it to mean speculative knowledge, theory and philosophy. But the Hebrews infused it with a much deeper meaning than that and it had to do with the ability to apply knowledge to the matter of living life. To a Greek it was sheer speculation. To a Hebrew it was a matter of practical living with skill and understanding.⁴

³ Sermon by Tim Badal entitled **God Wants You To Be A Wise Guy** found @ http://bfccb5f2f6f74f7b9d89-412e0d40d170d085879e1123d6ebba41.r5.cf2.rackcdn.com/uploaded/t/0e3502475_1406854677_transcript-proverbs-1-wise-guy.pdf

⁴ Sermon by John MacArthur entitled **Earthly And Heavenly Wisdom** found @ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/59-19>

12. What's the difference between knowing facts and possessing godly wisdom?

13. How is one's good conduct a better barometer for wisdom than simply head knowledge or a quick wit?

14. According to our text, why can't someone whose life is marked by sin be considered wise?

In verse 14 he negatively argues that bitter jealousy and selfish ambition show that a man's claim to wisdom is false. Look at what he says: "*If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.*" He's saying that a man's character can belie his claim to have true wisdom. There may be a teacher, there may be an apparently spiritual, godly religious Christian person whose heart is characterized by jealousy and selfish ambition and that jealousy and selfish ambition show that the man really doesn't have wisdom. Because James is saying that wisdom is self-subduing and other-centered, it's good behavior that leads to deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. So wisdom is not only the God-given ability to see how in all our ways we may acknowledge God, **it is actually acknowledging God in all our ways.** You see, the person who is jealous and selfishly ambitious is insecure, envies other, is not thinking of their best interests, is self-focused, is self-preoccupied, and perhaps even teaches for selfish purposes.⁵

The phrase "envy and selfish ambition" is repeated twice in these verses. Too often positions of leadership in the church are sought for reasons of pride or profit. Individuals and groups compete for prominence, and Christ is denied glory that belongs to Him. Devilish wisdom produces worthless and wicked shepherds.⁶

⁵ Sermon by Ligon Duncan entitled **Heavenly Wisdom for Christian Living** <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/heavenly-wisdom-for-christian-living>

⁶ Sermon by Steve Zeisler entitled The Gentleness Of Wisdom found @ http://www.pbc.org/system/message_files/117314/110130_WEB_Format.pdf

15. James's exhortation in verses 14–15 harkens back to his caution to Bible teachers in James 3:1. How can selfish ambition and jealousy impact a teacher's delivery of godly wisdom to others?
16. To what level should wisdom count during our selection of leaders/teachers? What other things can distract us in our selection process?
17. How does a Christian know if the wisdom he/she is receiving is man's or God's?

Earthly, sensual, demonic: Adam Clarke defined each term:

Earthly: "Having this life only in view."

Sensual: "Animal—having for its object the gratification of the passions and animal propensities."

Demonic: "Demonic—inspired by demons, and maintained in the soul by their indwelling influence."

This is the fruit of human, earthly wisdom. The wisdom of the world, the flesh, and the devil may be able to accomplish things, but always with the ultimate fruit of **confusion and every evil thing**.⁷

18. How does the wisdom of the world create strife and confusion?

Finally, the expression of true wisdom in the church is presented with the characteristic attitudes and resulting actions listed in 3:17–18. Three emphases stand out in the way James states this contrast with false wisdom.

⁷ <https://enduringword.com/commentary/james-3>

First, in 3:17, James is deliberate to state a foremost characteristic of the wisdom from above: it is first of all pure and only then the other qualities. His term pure speaks of holiness and provides the immediate contrast to every evil practice. It reflects the high moral sensibility that we have found in James all along; he does not descend from it now. It is never a sentimental humanitarianism or an amoral pragmatism that motivates James; it isn't just that bitter envy hurts people or that selfish ambition does not work. The first and foremost reason for valuing wisdom is that it will lead people to do what is morally right...

Second, in 3:17, James lists other attitudes and behavior of the wisdom from above. Peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere fill out a picture of humility put into practice. The first three of these traits are terms that James uses only here in his letter; they describe people who can yield status, who care for others and who are willing to submit and learn from others—all in contrast to the bitterness, envy and selfish ambition of false spirituality. The remaining traits weave some of James's earlier instruction into this picture.

19. Which of the evidences of worldly wisdom would you like to see less of in your life? Which of the evidences of wisdom from above would you like to see more of in your life?

The English Standard Version translates the verse: “*And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*” His point is simple: You reap what you sow. If a farmer sows corn, he reaps corn, not beans. If you sow peace, you will reap peace. If you sow selfishness and strife, you will reap conflict. But also implicit in the verse is the fact that a harvest is not accidental or serendipitous. No farmer sits around doing nothing all year, then goes out into the field and says, “Whoa, look at that bountiful harvest!” If there is a harvest, it's in part because he has worked hard to cultivate that harvest. If you see a church or a home where there is peace, it is because the members have worked to cultivate peace. They have listened to one another, respected one another, judged their own selfishness and pride, and sought to live in accordance with godly wisdom, not worldly “wisdom.”⁸

20. In what ways can you become more passionate about pursuing God's wisdom? What activities are necessary for such a pursuit?

⁸ Sermon by Pastor Steve Cole entitled **Wisdom For Harmonious Relationships** found @ <http://www.fcfoonline.org/content/1/sermons/080705M.pdf>