



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Real Faith. Real Life.

Part 9: Who Is Wise Among You?

James 3:13-18 | Tim Badal | March 12, 2017

We're continuing in our series in James, looking at what it means to live out a real faith in real life. James challenges his readers to examine their hearts, and as we study these passages, we should examine our hearts and our faith as well. We need to ask ourselves, "What kind of faith do I have? Is it all talk, or does the walk of my faith match the talk coming out of my mouth?"



Last week we learned about the power of the tongue. Pastor Steve spoke of the power our words have in every aspect of our lives. Our tongue can boast many things, and sometimes we can boast that our walk with Christ is stronger and deeper than it really is. In this first-century letter, James asks over and over again, "Are you truly walking with God in the way you say you are? Is the way you're living truly in line with what you're advertising to a watching world?"

Each week as we enter James' classroom it's time for a test. Last week we took a test on our tongue, asking the question, "How is my tongue advertising the faith God has given me?" This week we'll address the issue of wisdom. We'll ask ourselves, "Am I living according to God's wisdom, or am I living according to my own?" James' question is one for all of us: "Who is wise in understanding among you?"

In order to do this, we must humble ourselves as we listen to God's Word read and taught, and hopefully when we leave we'll apply it to our lives. Let's look now at James 3:13-18:

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

Back in the day, when you sought some answers, you would turn to someone older than you—maybe Mom or Dad or a grandparent. Maybe it would be an aged neighbor who had lived longer than you. But now, with the advent of technology, that's all changed. Young people still have questions. "What should I do in this situation? Where should I go to college? Whom should I date or marry? How should I manage my money? How can I grow in my walk with God?" With the entry of the internet some 30 years ago, instead of turning to others who are older and wiser, we now turn to our iPads and iPhones. We go to Yahoo or Google, and we begin to rely on machines instead of people.

You may have noticed that when a question comes up in a group of people that no one can answer, someone inevitably grabs their phone, hits the microphone button and asks the question. And in the space of a nanosecond, the answer to the perplexing question is given. Google loves this. Their goal is to be able to answer every question you might have. About 15 years ago, Google boasted a 50% accuracy rate regarding the answers they give. That means that one out of every two times it was asked a question, it would get the answer right. Now, 15 years later, they boast having over a 90% accuracy rate. And they're not done. That's not good enough for them.

Not too long ago I was watching a CNBC interview of a representative from Google. He talked about something you techies might be aware of that they have been working on for years—the “knowledge graph.” This is a system that stores all kinds of information on literally acres of servers. It is designed to pool all of our combined information, so when it is asked any question, it will be able to answer it accurately. As soon as you type in an answer, it will scour the “cloud” and have an answer for you. The rep said, “We’re looking forward to the day when we will be able to answer every question that anyone could ever ask.” Google wants to be God. They want to be able to address every issue and concern. Even though that is their goal, they have not yet reached it.

Not too long ago I had a terrible headache behind my right eye. I was really worried about it, as I don’t get headaches that often. But this headache was blistering. So I went to Google and asked, “What causes a major headache behind the right eye?” I got two answers. First, it could be a slightly inflamed sinus. Or, it could be a watermelon-sized tumor, and by the time I would finish reading the symptoms I would be dead. As you know, it probably was an inflamed sinus, because I’m still here.

It’s risky to go to man-made systems, because at the end of the day, men don’t fully know what they’re talking about. Yet in our culture, instead of turning to the greatest Expert ever known to men, we turn to ourselves and our technology—or we turn to our friends—for the answers we seek.

Last summer I was reading a magazine and noticed an ad from Gillette, the shaving company. The tag line for the month of June—which includes Father’s Day—was a simple statement that had nothing to do with shaving. Yet I had to applaud what I thought was a home run regarding an issue we’re facing in our culture today. The Gillette tag line was, “Ask Dad, not the internet.” Their goal was to promote communication between children and their fathers. As imperfect as dads are, they can dispense knowledge and wisdom with love and sincerity to their children.

Not too long ago I found a video that I think brings this message home, illustrating the human side. [Watch this...](#)

We long for information and wisdom and are lost without it. But as Christ-followers, what God desires most is that we would run to Him, that we would seek His wisdom. He wants us to go to Him and ask, “Dad, would You help me with this? Would You share Your infinite wisdom with me regarding this question? I don’t know where to go or what to do, so I’m turning to You.”

Remember what James says in James 1:5? We are to ask God when we lack wisdom, and He will give it generously without finding fault. We serve and worship a God Who is infinite in His wisdom and knowledge. He wants to share that wisdom and knowledge with us. But are we ready to receive it? He knows us better than anyone does—even better than we know ourselves—and He longs to give us His wisdom. James tells us what that wisdom looks like and what our lives will look like when we’re following the wisdom of God rather than the wisdom of man.

The people in James’ day lived in a world full of conflict and strife. Their faith was often challenged, and at times they didn’t know where to turn or what to do. In those days, people were filled with anxiety and fear. They wanted to know God’s commands and His will for them, but at times they didn’t know what to do. In this letter we’ve been studying, James gives them and us a gift, so that we can know how to live life to its fullest. What it requires is that we buy into the wisdom of God. To live out the desires of God’s heart, we must humble ourselves, giving ourselves wholly over to His wisdom and knowledge. Today we’ll look at three requirements for living out God’s wisdom.

1. We must determine what wisdom is.

Verse 13 says, *“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.”* James asks simply, “Are you wise?” Let that question sink in. “Are you wise? Do people come to you seeking advice and wisdom? Do people look at your life and see the kind of life they too want to have?”

Some of my greatest mentors have been men who weren’t rich or especially educated, but as I watched their lives I could see that was how I too wanted to live. I wanted to make decisions the way they did. I don’t want to be fearful or filled with anxiety when hardship comes. I love the solid foundation they have, and want that for myself.

So we ask, “Am I wise?” No one wants to be foolish or unwise. We all want to be perceived as intelligent, as being people “in the know.” That’s a biblical goal. In Proverbs 2:4 we’re reminded that we are to seek wisdom as a hidden treasure. It’s something worth finding. But the deeper question is this: how can we put true godly wisdom into practice?

This involves asking what wisdom means.

We first have to define our terms. What does wisdom mean? It's important that we do not confuse wisdom and knowledge. U.S. Army General Omar Bradley once commented, "The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom." He knew there was a vast difference between the two. Knowledge alone isn't enough.

Let me give you an example that might help you in your next game of Trivial Pursuit or the next time you're on Jeopardy. Here are a few things you might not know:

- Did you know there are only two people in Saudi Arabia who subscribe to *Surfer Magazine*? Only two.
- Did you know that from space the brightest city is Las Vegas?
- Did you know that the most often stolen items in a grocery store are batteries, cosmetics, sunglasses...and Preparation H?
- Did you know that "Weird Al" Yankovic was the valedictorian of his high school class and he holds a master's degree in architecture? [Some of you don't even know who "Weird Al" is.]

You probably didn't know any of that, so now you have a little more information—you're a little bit smarter. But the problem is that even though your store of knowledge has advanced, you're not any wiser. You have a lot of useless information and useless facts, but the distinction between wisdom and knowledge is something that our modern world doesn't often make. They tend to equate wisdom with intelligence, titles and degrees. But knowledge is simply the accumulation of facts. We have at our disposal more knowledge than we'll ever know what to do with, more than was ever available throughout history. In fact, every four years our information doubles. So in four years, your access to all sorts of information will double. There will be more at your fingertips, on your cell phone, than the information needed to send a man to the moon. We are blessed with all kinds of knowledge.

Yet knowledge at our fingertips is not enough. We need wisdom. We need to know how to apply the plentiful knowledge we have, and we need the experience that tells us how to live in light of that knowledge. This wisdom can be seen in some fairly uneducated people. Take some school-aged children, for example, who have greater wisdom than we give them credit for:

- Patrick, who was ten, said, "Never trust a dog to watch your food." That's wisdom.
- Michael, age 14, said, "When your dad is mad at you and asks the question, 'Do I look stupid?' don't answer him."
- Michael also said, "Never tell your mom that her diet is not working." Smart guy!
- Randy, age nine, said, "Stay away from prunes." Let that sink in a little bit. Don't you wonder how Randy gained the information?
- Lauren, age nine, said, "Permanent markers aren't a good substitute for lipstick."
- Joel, age ten, said, "Do not pick on your sister when she's holding a baseball bat."
- Dilene, age eight—the little theologian that she is—said, "You never want to try to baptize a cat."

Uneducated people with not a lot of information can be wise beyond their years. Yet we still don't fully understand what the Bible means when it says we are to be wise. "*Who is wise and understanding among you?*" An entire book of the Old Testament, the book of Proverbs, is dedicated to the subject of wisdom. In that book, the Hebrew word for wisdom is *chokmah*. Saying the word involves a lot of phlegm. It's a word that means something different from what we normally think of as wisdom. It's not information. It's not a matter of intellect, or head knowledge. It's not even heart knowledge. Rather, it encompasses the idea of living life skillfully. When it was used to describe someone, that person had a prowess in what they were doing. If you were listening to a wonderful musician who could play better than anyone else you've heard, you might say, "That musician has *chokmah*—skill." Or perhaps it might be applied to a craftsman, artisan or athlete. They would be someone who rose above the others in their field. And again you could describe them as having *chokmah*. James is now telling us that Christians, above all others, should be able to live lives filled with *chokmah*, with wisdom. God has already promised that He will give this *chokmah* to all without finding fault. He is generously willing to grant this to anyone who is willing to receive it.

Chokmah is the ability to live life in a way that conforms to God's will and Word. Christians should be viewed by the unbelieving world as the best practitioners of living life. Your neighbors and family members may not understand your love for Jesus, or your habits of prayer and church attendance, or the books you read, or why you say no to things they say yes to. But they should be able to look at your lives as Christians and acknowledge that you live life well. Do your friends and neighbors say that about you?

Or do your unbelieving neighbors say, "Man, that guy next door who says he loves Jesus and goes to church all the time—he's struggling through life just like I am"? According to verse 13, our lifestyle will be the leading indicator of the level of wisdom we

have. Wisdom is not measured by degrees acquired, but by spiritual deeds accomplished. Some of us lack wisdom because we're trying to live life through our own reasoning and judgments instead of leaning on the God Who gives wisdom generously to all.

This involves asking why wisdom matters.

At the end of the day, does it really matter whether I'm wise? The Bible says wisdom is of great value. Proverbs tells us that finding wisdom is like finding hidden treasure. When we have wisdom, we have a treasure that keeps on giving and giving. Proverbs 3:13–15 tells us that wisdom is greater than monetary power:

¹³ Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding, ¹⁴ for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. ¹⁵ She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.

Second, wisdom is greater than military power and weapons of war. Ecclesiastes 9:16–18 says this:

¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. ¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Finally, wisdom is better than mental power—what we can think through with our human minds. Again Proverbs speaks to this, in Proverbs 4:5–13:

⁵ Get wisdom; get insight; do not forget, and do not turn away from the words of my mouth. ⁶ Do not forsake her, and she will keep you; love her, and she will guard you. ⁷ The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight. ⁸ Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her. ⁹ She will place on your head a graceful garland; she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.

¹⁰ Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. ¹¹ I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. ¹² When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble. ¹³ Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.

We need wisdom, and all of us are seeking after wisdom. However, herein lies the problem: wisdom is not a high priority in our world. For example, as a parent, wisdom is the thing I least think about in raising my kids. You would think because God calls it a hidden treasure that we would be doing everything in our power to pour into our kids the wisdom, the *chokmah*, of God. But we don't.

Many of us who are parents are more concerned that our kid becomes the greatest student in the classroom, or the greatest athlete on the field, or the greatest musician in the choir or band. We want to be sure our kids are good citizens in our community, that they're desirable to attend a dance with, so we raise our kids with all sorts of ideals. And while none of these are inherently bad, they are secondary to their need to be taught the wisdom of God.

You see, at some point your child will become an adult. And when they're 25 years old, are they going to have the *chokmah*, the skill, to address the issues of adult life? Are they going to be able to take on all that comes their way, knowing how to walk in accordance with the wisdom of God? If we've taught them only the things outside of wisdom, they'll be stunted in their ability to choose the wise ways of God.

2. We must decide between two competing types of wisdom.

Wisdom is not a priority for us as a people, and God says that needs to change. James says, "Now that we understand that wisdom is the skill for living that God alone can give, we have a decision to make. We must choose between two competing kinds of wisdom."

Look at the text, beginning in verse 14:

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

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

Let's stop there. James contrasts two kinds of wisdom. The question is not are you seeking wisdom? The question is as you're seeking wisdom, is it God's or your own? Is it the wisdom from above, from heaven, or the wisdom that comes from below, from hell? We each must ask ourselves these questions.

Before us stands true wisdom from heaven built on theology.

If you want wisdom from God, that means having a theological foundation. What does theology have to do with having godly wisdom? The first aspect of theology which you must know is that there is a God. What can we know about Him? The Bible tells us He is all-powerful and all-knowing. He is the all-wise God Whose ways and plans are higher than our ways and plans.

He is the One Who knows the end from the beginning and the beginning from the end. He is the One Who brings all things to pass. He is the One Who will see every detail of life brought together just as He has planned. He's the God Who offers us wisdom. He wants to share with us the secret to abundant life in Christ. He is the One Who sent His Son Jesus to die so we might be given the gift of wisdom. We have a God Who is awesome all the time.

That's point one of your theology. There is a God, and He is greater than our minds could ever comprehend. That brings us to point two of theology. There is a God, and you are not Him. So let's consider what the Bible says about you. You and I are not the great and wise and powerful being that God is. Rather, the Bible describes us as finite, flawed, broken and sinful. We are small and short-lived.

While God has no problems, our lives are filled with problems. While God cannot be tempted, we are tempted at every turn. While God has no questions, we're full of questions. While God never wonders about what's going to happen tomorrow, we're always worried about what will happen tomorrow. While God knows what's going to happen a hundred light-years away from us, we don't know what's going to happen right in front of us.

You see, our totally awesome God gives wisdom generously to men and women who are totally helpless. There is a God and He is infinitely wiser and more understanding than we are. We stupid people don't know what to do or where to go, yet we fool ourselves into thinking we can do life on our own.

You would think with this theology—that God is awesome and we are helpless—that we would run to Him, seeking His wisdom each and every moment, bowing our knee to Jesus. This theology should give us a love for the gospel that shows the grace and mercy of our omnipotent God through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus was willing to die on the cross for our sins, so helpless and filthy people such as ourselves could become new through Him and be given His wisdom to live our lives for His glory and our good. But we don't.

Before us stands false wisdom from hell based on anarchy.

Many of us choose to build our lives not on good, godly theology, but on a competing false wisdom based on anarchy. Instead of acknowledging that God is wiser than us and that He is in control, and choosing to live His way even when it contradicts our own desires or purposes, we go our own way.

Notice verses 15 and 16: *"This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice."* This is the second kind of wisdom. Solomon describes it in Proverbs 14:12: *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."* This wisdom leads to destruction.

Where does this wisdom come from? It comes from the pit of hell. James calls it demonic. Now, does that mean that everyone who shuns true wisdom is a demon? Not exactly. But this is the type of wisdom that the demons had in heaven before their fall. Scripture says that before the fall, demons were angels. Before their rebellion, they worshipped and served God throughout eternity past. They saw God in His greatness and goodness. They worshipped Him day and night, because they knew there was no one greater than He. They rested in His wisdom and their lives were filled with every blessing.

But at some point—we don't exactly know when—rebellion began in the heart of the chief cherub, Lucifer. Along with him, one-third of the angels in heaven rebelled against God. Instead of seeing His greatness or experiencing His goodness, they decided to "go it alone" without God. I want you to know that the same sin of the demons is alive and well, even in the hearts of some of the people here today.

When we look outside, we see the greatness and majesty of God's creation. In the last couple weeks NASA has told us about galaxies, solar systems and planets they'd never known about before. How can you not believe there's a God or believe in the majesty and power of that God? When you woke up this morning, there was oxygen in your lungs. You had enough equilibrium to move your carcass from the bedroom to the bathroom to get cleaned up. Our planet is positioned in precisely the right place in our solar system to prevent us from freezing to death or being burned alive.

Beyond this, God has given us the ability to love, work, have fun and have relationships. Each person on the face of this earth has experienced the greatness and goodness of God. But like the demons, we decide—in spite of the reality of God’s greatness and goodness—to live life on our own. But James says our desire to live apart from God is demonic wisdom, which does not throw itself at the feet of God in worship and service, but instead it walks away thinking, “I can do it better on my own.”

What comes with this choice? All kinds of evil and sorrow. We watch the local news on TV and we see murder, rape, hostile robbery, racism and hatred. People always ask, “Where did this come from?” It comes from lives that are lived apart from the wisdom of God. Even as followers of Jesus Christ, we can find ourselves falling into selfish ambition and envy.

Why? Because while we all know there is a God, we don’t all know Who He is. Even unbelievers acknowledge there’s a God of some sort, but all too often they think it’s themselves. So when they get angry on the expressway, it’s because when someone cuts them off they take it personally. “How could someone cut God off?” And they feel wrath and judgment. When their spouse doesn’t do what they think they should, they unleash a hellish response against that spouse. When we think we’re God, we won’t forgive. When we think we’re God, we wreak havoc in others’ lives. But when we recognize that there’s a God to Whom we’re accountable, we realize that when we’re wronged, we’re actually not that important—but God is. Our response then to that injustice will either glorify the true God, or it will tell the world we really don’t know Him.

The question is which wisdom will we pursue—true wisdom or false wisdom? All the crimes and misdemeanors are evidence of a world that has chosen false wisdom over true wisdom. God has created each of us to live in light of Him and to tap into His wisdom, so that we might have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Do you have that relationship today? *“Who is wise and understanding among you?”*

3. We must depend daily on God.

James writes in verse 17, *“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”* These are not hard characteristics to understand. So my question is this: do these eight characteristics describe your life? Would your friends and coworkers, even if they know nothing about the Bible, describe you this way?

And remember, this description needs to apply during times when things aren’t going well. When the world is caving in around you, would people still say these things about you—and about me? James says they should. We need to realize that God has gifted us with wisdom, something we could never produce on our own. We must go to Him, asking Him for this wisdom.

Godly wisdom can overcome a life of mistakes.

Why do we need His wisdom? First, it can allow us to overcome a life of mistakes. The eight characteristics of God’s wisdom are His blessings—and are qualities we can never achieve on our own. In fact, this exchange actually reflects the gospel itself. It takes what we have and in turn gives us something new from God. Consider James’ qualities of wisdom:

1. We come to Jesus with our sin, and He replaces it with purity.
2. We come to Jesus wrought with strife, and He replaces it with peace. We can’t get along with people on our own, but the Prince of Peace exchanges our strife for His peace.
3. We come to Jesus with our stubbornness. It’s our way or the highway. Our preferences are really convictions and if others don’t live according to our convictions, they will feel our pain. We are a stiff-necked people. But God’s wisdom moves us from stubbornness to gentleness and openness to reason.
4. We come to Jesus with our selfishness. But Jesus models for us great mercy and by His blood He allows us to be filled with mercy and fruits of goodness.
5. We come to Jesus with our snobbishness. We’re better than everyone else. At the heart of snobbishness is the thought, “I’m God and you’re not. So you need to live life like me, and if you don’t recognize my greatness, I’m going to shun you.” But through the gospel, Jesus brings impartiality. We’re all the same. Godly theology tells us you and I are broken in the same way. We’re hurting and in need in the same way.
6. Finally, we come as a sham. Oh, we boast that we’re walking with God and doing great things—but the gospel allows us to be sincere and transparent. We can rest and rely on what the gospel brings us through the work of Jesus.

So maybe today you've never received godly wisdom, which can never be separated from a relationship with Jesus Christ. If you don't have that relationship, you're in trouble. You're on your own. Don't you want the God of the universe to be for you? Don't you want His protection and His good gifts? If you have never bowed the knee to Jesus, please don't leave today without knowing what true godly wisdom in the gospel is all about.

Godly wisdom can open the door to ministry.

Verse 18: *"And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."* God has created us to live for Him, to serve and worship Him—because He's God and we're not. When we receive the full wisdom of God, you and I are going to fall in love with that wisdom. It's going to change our lives. It will be something we want to share with the world.

You see, it is then and only then that we have something to give to our neighbors, friends and family members who don't know Jesus. We have the *chokmah* of God—the wisdom of God—which allows us to be a city on the hill that can't be hidden, a light in a world of darkness, to be salt in a world that needs that salty preservation (Matthew 5:13–16).

Yet in order to do that, we must live out wisdom each day. So every day, our prayer needs to be this: "God, I lack wisdom. Lord, will You give me wisdom today. I need wisdom on how to raise my family, to love my spouse and to work with that difficult boss. I need wisdom to understand why I have cancer. I need wisdom for this unresolved conflict. I need wisdom to know whether or not to buy this item. I need wisdom regarding what I need to do next year. I need wisdom in all my ways, so I might honor You in every way."

When we live out this kind of wisdom, James says we will change lives through a harvest of righteousness. So turn to God for wisdom. Confess that you have leaned on your own understanding. Fear God, because that is the beginning of wisdom. Respect Him for all He is and all that He has done. Humbly ask God each day for wisdom, and He says, "I'll give it to you without finding fault." It's then and only then that we'll truly understand, when Jesus says He came to give us life, what abundant life really is (John 10:10).

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