

# Wisdom from Above

James 3:13-18

Worldly wisdom tries to get ahead by pushing others down and generates conflict that leads to chaos and death. But biblical wisdom, wisdom from above, brings peace, mercy, and good fruit. James tells the church, especially teachers, how to live and work together under the blessing of God.

## Summary of the Text

As these scattered Christians form new churches and communities, everyone has ideas, plans, opportunities, and ambitions. The one who is wise and understanding should demonstrate it by a consistent way of life where obedience to the Lord is done in the meekness of wisdom (v. 13). But if you are driven by bitter envy and selfish ambition, don't boast and lie about the truth (v. 14). The "wisdom" isn't from God but is earthly, natural, and demonic (v. 15). Envy and selfish ambition breed chaos and all kinds of evil (v. 16). In contrast, true wisdom from above is first pure with unclouded motivations, then peaceful, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and unhypocritical (v. 17). The results of righteousness come peacefully by those who seek and make peace (v. 18). James leaves no room to think that blessings can come in contentious rivalry or violence.

## The Meekness of Wisdom

Wisdom acts a certain way, and so does faux wisdom. In chapter two James shows that true faith lives, obeys, and takes action, as Abraham and Rahab did (2:14-26). Then in chapter three he warns of the dangers of an uncontrolled and cursing tongue (3:1-12). If a church has hotheaded leaders, the whole body will be defiled, and everything set on fire (3:6). Now he sketches the character and way of life of those who have true wisdom from God versus those who are clever but wicked. Jesus taught that wisdom is justified by her children (Lk. 7:35). This does not mean everything always goes well for the wise. In fact, He said this about John the Baptizer, who unlike Jesus, didn't come eating and drinking freely and was therefore slandered as having a demon. Jesus ate normally and drank wine in moderation, so they called Him a glutton and a drunk. But you could look at the disciples of John and Jesus. What do the children of wisdom look like? Drunks and demoniacs? Maybe *repentant* gluttons and drunks, but there you go. As people want to teach and lead in the early church, James says to demonstrate their insight and understanding by a life conducted in the meekness of wisdom. People confuse meekness with mousiness but remember that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3). He left the comforts of the palace in Egypt, stared down Pharaoh through ten plagues, and led Israel through the Red Sea. Meekness before God is might before men. But might before men is not the same as bluster, dishonesty, and selfish rivalry. Meekness takes God and His law seriously but not yourself seriously. For someone to see good conduct done in the meekness of wisdom, it takes time. This doesn't present a problem because the wise don't show up demanding authority or influence now. Practice a long obedience in the same direction, and God will bless your faithfulness. This is what wisdom does and how you recognize it. Wisdom is not memorizing a catalogue of facts, like knowing the map in comprehensive detail. Rather, it's learning how to drive so you can handle whatever lies around the next curve.

## The Chaos of Selfish Ambition

James contrasts meekness of wisdom with bitter jealousy (*zelon*) and selfish ambition (*eritheian*; v. 14). "Jealousy" can also be translated "zeal", and zeal can be righteous or unrighteous, depending on the object and motivation. God is a jealous God and therefore forbids us from bowing down to or serving images (Ex. 20:5). You can want to advance in your career in a healthy way by hard work, or in a twisted way by tearing down your colleagues. You can work hard or only want to look like you are. Jesus tells the disciples to become great in the kingdom of heaven by becoming the servant of all (Mk. 9:35, 10:44). Figuring out how to serve everyone is an exhausting endeavor, the opposite of passivity. It's much easier to fight for a position of authority and power with ungodly means. This is why people lie, cheat, and steal for money rather than work

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hard and be disciplined. This is why people falsely accuse faithful people in power of doing wrong, sometimes even convincing themselves of the lies they tell. Miriam and Aaron attack Moses because of the Ethiopian woman he married, but that's not the reason they give. "So they said, 'Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?' And the Lord heard it. (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:2-3). They don't like a foreign woman coming into the priestly family, but their stated complaint is that Moses hoards all that power to himself. Isn't he alone at the top?). Meek Moses doesn't give an inch because he fears God who forbids him to lie, including the lie of false humility and giving in to evil accusers. God disciplines Miriam by making her skin really white (Num. 12:10). Paul forbids Timothy from receiving an accusation against an elder, except by the mouth of two or three witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19). Any church and any leader in it who threatens unbelief will be slandered, including from the inside of the church which is what James is talking about. He says this "wisdom" isn't from above but below—earthly, sensual/natural, and demonic (v. 15). Paul uses the word "natural" (*psukike*) when he says "the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Aristotle taught that the natural man is at his uncorrupted finest. Paul and James say the natural man, dead in his sins or giving in to his flesh, instinctively looks at his neighbor and covets his position, stuff, ability, wife, husband, and influence and so on. It's possible that Satan fell in the garden of Eden when he realized that mankind, made of dust, made a little lower than the angels, would be one day be crowned with glory and honor, and would judge angels (Heb. 2:7-9; 1 Cor. 6:3). The name "Satan" means accuser, one who tears others down. Sinners outside of Christ grasp for meaning and self-worth apart from God's love and free offer of grace, for which you must recognize your utter sinfulness and hopelessness without His mercy. So they naturally accuse and fight and twist the truth to "succeed." This "wisdom" gets them places within companies, political parties, in relationships and so on, at least for a time. When this self-seeking prevails in the church, demonic accusation reigns and every evil thing follows, a rats' nest of sin (vv. 16-17). Jesus uses the same word "confusion" (*akatastasia*) to describe the "commotions" that will take place before the temple in Jerusalem is destroyed in A.D. 70 (Lk. 21:9). The Jews tried to throw off the political yoke of the Romans and were massacred as a result. Christians must not engage in political violence inside or outside the church: "For where zealotry and political ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice" (v. 16).

## The Harvest of Righteousness

Wisdom from above doesn't have mixed motives, some for personal power and some for God's kingdom. That's how demonic wisdom justifies itself. Rather, it's peaceful, gentle, reasonable and willing to yield. It doesn't shout down opponents and lose sight of winning the person and the church for the sake of being right. There's a deeper right than being right. If you are right on the truth of an issue but argue like a jerk, you are more wrong than ever, neglecting the first and second greatest commandments. The more you talk in this state—in sin and out of fellowship with God—the worse it gets. Wisdom from above is full mercy and good fruits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). It does not want the other person to be stunned by your cleverness and correctness, but to receive the same mercy God has shown to you. The call to come to and walk with Christ is to put down striving, insisting, and accusing, and instead receive grace and peace. In peace sow the fruit of righteousness. The method is peace and the result is peace, and nothing can stop the power of the gospel. Paul meets selfish ambition (*eritheia*) when in prison as other believers shared the gospel to add to his affliction. Still he rejoices anyway and sows more righteousness (Phil. 1:17), following Jesus who went to His death so that we would live.