

Faith Works: The Book of James

Wise Words vs. Wicked Words

James 3:13-18

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Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 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. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:13–18).

It was one year ago last week when I thought, “Uh-oh. This COVID thing is going to be bad.”

I was scrolling through social media when I saw a tweet about the NBA canceling a game just before tipoff with a stadium full of fans. A player tested positive, and the NBA suspended all games for thirty days. That was March 11, 2020. Of course, that was just the beginning of a long, hard year.

I won't recount all the challenges. I'm sure you remember them well. But I do want you to consider another thought with me. When did you think, “Man, this global pandemic is revealing a lot in me and the people around me?”

Over the last two weeks, I've spent some time with other lead pastors from around the country talking about what we're seeing in the culture, in the church, and in our own lives. We all have stories of God's grace, provision, and help. But we also have stories of how this season of life and ministry tested us and revealed some growth areas.

Isn't that what testing does? It reveals both the good and the bad. Why is that? Why is suffering so revealing? It's because hardship forces us to really live out what we believe. Difficulties test whether or not we can make our faith work.

That can be discouraging as we see things in ourselves or in others where Christianity isn't working. But it can also be amazingly attractive as we see God give us the strength to endure, to respond in a Christlike manner, or to see spiritual growth that only comes through testing.

Hardship is revealing. It tests how we apply what we say that we believe.

One word the Bible often uses for real-world-living is wisdom. You can think of wisdom as the application of what you know to how you live. Usually, the concept is positive as it connects biblical truth to where we live. But I also trust that you know that some people can be wise in wickedness. They know how to apply the “dark arts” to how they live and how they get things done.

Hardship invites us to consider what kind of wisdom we are living by.

James 3:13-18 is the closing section of what we've called "Faith Works." Next week we'll start our final leg of the journey which we'll call "Warnings and Wisdom."

Let's explore this text today to see what we can learn about how to live wisely when the pressure is on. We'll see how wisdom is valuable, how it can be wicked, and how it can reflect heaven—the heart of God.

Revealing Wisdom (v. 13)

This section in James is an extension of the previous verses about the tongue with a particular nuance. In 3:1-12, James would desire for us to consider our words in a general sense. He implored us to realize the significant power of the tongue, and he cautioned us about how our words can be tragically inconsistent—even hypocritical. Remember that we can use our tongues to bless God and curse someone made in the image of God.

Now James presses this further with the issue of wisdom. Verse one starts with a question: "Who is wise and understanding among you?"

Why does he raise this here? Some think that he's referring back to the teachers in 3:1. Teachers are generally marked by their wisdom and understanding. But it seems that his audience is much more general and broader. Chapter three wasn't limited in application to just teachers.

It seems that James wants to address the kind of speaking that would characterize someone who is an intellectual, someone who is smart, or someone who others might consider wise.

When we consider the issue of our words, we might think of the person who blows up easily, drops curse words, or speaks with aggression. Our minds could quickly go to someone who is filled with road rage, someone who is yelling at other people, or a person who curses others. Those actions would certainly be wrong.

But James seems to have a more respectable person in mind. This person still needs to be mindful of the power of the tongue, but in a different way. This kind of person can hide their sinful words with their intellect, but the effect is just as deadly. "Foolish" doesn't always mean "unintelligent." Really smart people can be really wicked.

That's why the second half of verse 13 says this: "By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom" (James 3:13b). Typically, we see wisdom as a positive word, and it is. But this text also makes a distinction between a wisdom that reflects God's righteousness and a wisdom that reflects wicked rebelliousness. James will contrast heavenly and hellish wisdom.

Remember, wisdom is merely the application of what you know to how you live. The exhortation toward godly wisdom is connected to "good conduct" and "works." So, wisdom—how you apply what you know

or believe—is telling. You can use your knowledge and your intellect for either good or bad. James highlights the connection between a believer’s faith and the application of wisdom.

That’s why the word “meekness” is used here. My favorite definition of meekness is “power under control.” Meekness or humility come from understanding who we are in light of who God is. Therefore, knowledge should be connected to the heart of God and lived out in a godly way.

In James 2:17 we read that faith without works is dead. One of the “works” relates to how we handle the application of what we know to how we live. Wisdom is really important. Godly wisdom is incredibly valuable.

Let me ask you a few questions:

- How do you treat people when you clearly know more about a particular subject?
- What happens in your heart when people treat you like an expert or defer to your expertise?
- What happens when your expertise is challenged or questioned?
- Do you use your knowledge for self-protection or to help others?
- Have you found yourself using information as leverage or as a status symbol?

How you apply what you know to how you live is revealing. When it comes to faith and works, knowledge and actions also apply.

Wicked Wisdom (vv. 14-16)

After establishing the revealing nature of wisdom, James turns to how wicked wisdom can be expressed in our lives. It’s easy to find creative ways to express our sinfulness, especially through the words we use.

In verse 14, James addresses two sinister motivations and two ways we hide those motivations.

The sinister motivations are bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. James suggests that sometimes underneath our lives are these two issues. I’m sure you are familiar with them at some level.

The word for “bitter jealousy” is the Greek word “zelos.” You might hear the English word “zealous” or “zealot.” This isn’t always used in a bad or negative sense. For example, Jesus was filled with zeal when he drove out the money-changers from the temple (John 2:17). Zeal for the right thing is commendable. But that’s not the sense here. This is a jealousy that strives after what belongs to another. You could think of this as sinful rivalry. Throughout the New Testament, this issue is regularly condemned (Rom. 13:13; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20). One commentator describes it as “selfish motivation, harsh, and violent fanaticism.”¹ It’s the motivation that asks, “What about me?” and then acts accordingly. It’s a word characterized by competition, winners and losers, self-protection, and a “do-whatever-it-takes” mindset.

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 169.

The next words, “selfish ambition” is equally instructive. The word means “unrestrained drive for personal success.” Sometimes the word is associated with strife, hostility, or contentiousness (see 2 Cor 12:20; Gal 5:20). It’s fascinating and instructive that it is a rare word prior to the New Testament, but it is found in the writings of Aristotle to refer to “the narrow partisan zeal of factional, greedy politicians.”² Sound familiar?

James says that people should not boast about their wisdom and their knowledge when underneath their actions are selfish ambition and bitter jealousy.

Some commentators think that James may have the temptation in the Garden of Eden in mind. At that moment, we find Eve being tempted by the possibility of being like God; we find Adam being tempted not only by that but also with his wife’s new knowledge.

James wants us to see this for what it really is. The main concern here is when the people who claim to be followers of Jesus begin acting in a manner that looks exactly like the world when it comes to their selfish ambition and jealousy. It’s far too easy to take our cues from the behavior of those in the world, or to start playing along with the office politics, back-biting, and information withholding. Sadly, that can easily make its way into the church. And when it does, the uniqueness of the church’s witness is severely hindered.

The strong warning here is about the possibility of presenting yourself as if you have advanced knowledge or greater insight when the real issue is jealousy or selfish ambition.

Words like these sound really wise and even correct. But they’re a long way from true obedience. In verse 15, James makes it abundantly clear that this kind of wisdom does not come from God. Instead, it’s described as:

- **Earthly:** Reflecting the wrong priorities associated with a godless world (see Phil. 3:18-19)
- **Unspiritual:** A perspective that is not interested in spiritual implications and is flesh-oriented
- **Demonic:** The actions of human beings that end up serving the priorities of the devil

In other words, everything about the orientation of this way of thinking and behaving is contrary to the heart of God. This kind of “wisdom” sounds smart. It’s initially impressive. And the actions associated with it actually work. People can get what they want through sinful actions. Divisiveness, slander, back-biting, grumbling, gossip, posturing, flattery, gamesmanship, and partisan behavior are pretty effective. And it’s so tempting to play in the “dark arts.”

But notice the tragic effects: “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (3:16). Sin is never static. This kind of “wisdom” doesn’t create good fruit. In fact, James describes it like a poison—something that leads to other issues.

² Ibid.

Where this kind of “wisdom” prevails, there will be trouble. A form of the word “disorder” is used in 1:8 to describe the double-minded man, and in 3:8 it is used for the restless tongue. When jealousy or selfish ambition prevail, it leads to on-going conflict, tension, unhealthy competition. It creates an exhausting culture of chaos and instability. In a broader application, New Testament scholar Kurt Richardson describes the word as “unruliness, a riot, or an insurrection.”³

But that’s not all. It leads to every kind of evil! At one level this means that jealousy and selfish ambition lead to other sins. They create a blinding self-deception that can lead us into sinful actions that we would have never thought possible in another situation.

I’ve lived long enough to see how this plays out in relationships, families, workplaces, schools, churches, and denominations. I’m sure you’ve seen the same thing. And I would guess that you can look back on your life and see how you’ve actually been part of the problem rather than the solution.

Maybe you are right in the middle of a conflict or controversy, and it’s so tempting to be like everyone else. Sadly, much of the world operates through jealousy and selfish ambition. And much of the Christian world looks just like it.

So, if you are a Christian, let me remind you about two things here. First, the gospel means that God treated you graciously—in a way that you didn’t deserve. Jesus paid the atonement for your sins; you have a new identity and an inheritance in heaven. Why would you be jealous of someone when you’ve been given so much grace?

When the apostle Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for being “puffed up against one another,” he says, “What do you have that you did not receive? Why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” Oh, let’s be careful with how we talk about things with words like “my” or “me.” “What about me?” can lead you into a bad place.

Secondly, let me caution you about the temptation to assimilate into a culture marked by selfish ambition and bitter jealousy. Be careful who you look up to. Be careful whose content you read and watch. Be careful to whom you listen. Be careful to whom you model your behavior after. Jealousy and selfish ambition are popular. They work. You can be successful from a worldly perspective and have a bankrupted soul.

Watch out for a wisdom—skills, knowledge, action—that is rooted in jealousy and selfish ambition. Be mindful of the real possibility of acting in a way that doesn’t fit with the gospel. Instead, look to Jesus, whom Peter describes this way:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

³ Kurt A. Richardson, [James](#), vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 167–168.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:21–23).

Heavenly Wisdom (vv. 17-18)

It's really important to understand the "dark side" of wisdom. But what does the application of truth to life practically look like when it comes from God? James intends to lay a great contrast for us between wicked wisdom and heavenly wisdom, between wicked words and wise words.

Verse 17 calls this wisdom something that comes "from above." It's not something natural or typical. It's supernatural. You could think of this in the same way that Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Paul talks about the Spirit and James talks about heavenly wisdom. In both cases, this is something outside of ourselves and is a work of God's grace.

Some of us need to embrace the fact that hardship creates difficulty, but it also creates an opportunity for the grace of Christ to shine through us. When there are conflict and controversy in the air, that's when godliness really matters. Rather than bemoaning the difficulty, try to see it as a moment to live what you believe.

What follows is list of the characteristics of heavenly wisdom:

Pure – This word is connected to what it means to be holy. It's a wisdom that reflects the heart and character of God. Like "from above," there's a quality about a person's words and actions that points to another world.

Peaceable – The idea is someone who loves peace and does their best to make peace. This doesn't mean peace-at-any-price or some kind of conviction-less living. It means that you do your best "as far as it depends on you, to live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18). In a world marked by rivalries and factions, heavenly wisdom strives for peace.

Gentle – You could think of this as being considerate and kind. The opposite would be harsh and angry. It has a perspective that has concern for other people, especially in conflict.

Reasonable – A willingness to be persuaded as opposed to a willful, arrogant disposition. This doesn't mean being wishy-washy. But it humbly considers both the possibility of being wrong and a desire to learn.

Full of mercy and good fruits – The orientation of these words seems to point toward the treatment of others. Heavenly wisdom reflects a concern for others and a love for neighbor that reflects that heart of God.

Impartial and sincere – These words should be taken together. Heavenly wisdom is consistent with people regardless of their background, group, or history. It's a wisdom that is applied without pretense or positioning.

That's quite a list! Do you feel the pull toward that kind of behavior? Do you realize how amazing it would be to have those words characterize our conversations? Do you long to see that more consistently lived out in your life? I sure do.

Our text ends with a proverb of sorts: "A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (3:18). Instead of "disorder and every vile practice," we find a beautiful harvest of righteousness that is created by those who do their part to make deposits of peace. Instead of anger, sinful conflict, selfish ambition, and jealousy; there's a striving for peace that fits with heavenly wisdom.

James wants us to consider how wisdom can be revealing, how it can be wicked, and how it can reflect the glorious reality of heaven.

Every day there's an opportunity for applying these concepts and ideas. But that's especially true for the moments and seasons where conflict and tension are prominent.

James appeals to Christians here. He invites us to be a different kind of people in our words and actions. When the pressure is on, it's an opportunity for Christians to demonstrate that faith works.

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