

James 3:13-18

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[0 : 00] Go ahead and take a copy of God's Word and open to James chapter 3, verse 13, picking right up where we left off from last week.! And we'll say again, James is laying out a series of tests that aid the church in discerning true faith apart from false faith.

And in one word, the difference between these faiths, the false faith and the true faith, is fruit. True faith produces good fruit and false faith produces bad fruit.

This week, James is going to give us a wisdom test to discern true faith apart from false faith. He's going to contrast the wisdom of God and his kingdom with the wisdom of the kingdom of darkness. So looking at James chapter 3, verse 13, James writes, Who is wise in 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, and demonic.

[1 : 42] For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder in 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. So the first part of our outline is to recognize that true wisdom is doing.

And all I mean by that is that true wisdom is found in action or in doing something. And we'll see what wisdom is doing momentarily. But for now, true wisdom is doing.

Verse 13, he starts off with a question. Who is wise in understanding among you? Right at the outset of this new train of thought, James is concerned with knowing and doing.

The Greek word for understanding carries the idea of one who is knowledgeable, skilled in an area. Right? This person knows his X's and his O's. Part of what James is asking then is, who among you knows his stuff?

[2 : 58] And I think it is obvious he's referring to true knowledge of God. You might say theology. Who knows God and knows his word? Who has understanding among you?

But the other part of the question is this. Who is wise among you? The Greek word for wisdom is sophos. This word does not necessarily refer to one who is knowledgeable, but rather it refers to one who acts according to knowledge.

Okay? So a simple example would be this. If you know that sleeping in today will cost you your job, so you get up and go to work, you've acted wisely in light of your knowledge. But if you sleep in and lose your job with the same knowledge, well, that's not very wise.

So the knowledge is the same, but the action is different. The one is wise. The one is unwise. So today we often think of knowledge and wisdom as synonymous, but not so with James or the Greco-Roman world.

In many ways, he is basically reiterating that idea of one who hears and does from chapter 1, verse 22. The one who hears is understanding, and the one who does is wise.

[4 : 13] In fact, because James has hit this idea in so many ways already in his epistle, he gives a perfect illustration of the importance of acting in wisdom upon having knowledge.

He mocks the unwise among his audience by saying in chapter 2, verse 19, he says, You believe that God is one, you do well.

You believe in monotheism, a big idea, a big unique idea for Judaism. You believe God is one, you do well. So James is acknowledging that they have arrived at truth.

There is something they know and understand that is true and necessary to know, good to know. But James goes on in verse 19 and says, Even the demons believe and shudder.

So even these demons have this knowledge. The demons know God is one, and yet look at how they live is the point. They are unwise.

[5 : 14] And that is why they shudder. They are hearers, but they are not doers. So as believers, we need to be wise and act in light of our knowledge.

So what does that look like according to James? Well, we are going to answer that question more in depth with our third point. But James gives us a foretaste in the second half of verse 13.

He is referring to the wise among his audience. And he says, By his, so by the wise man's, right? By the wise man's good conduct. Let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

So in English, this might sound like a helpful encouragement or a gentle nod in the right direction for someone to start. But in Greek, this is a commandment.

It's in the imperative. There's no option. He's telling you, if you are wise, then do this. So if there are truly any wise among us, then those people will show their wisdom in two things according to verse 13.

[6 : 19] First being good works. And the second is in humility or meekness. So the word for good in our text could also be translated as beautiful.

And I love that picture. It would read like this. Let him show out of his beautiful way of life could be another translation. It sounds like that idea of wholeness that we've been talking about throughout the book of James.

I've asked you all to do this before and I'll ask again. Just imagine what it would look like for your way of life to be described as beautiful. Only those who have understanding and wisdom can live this life, the truly good life.

Our good works then are known by the church. They are beautiful and good in the sight of the church. They are not something we produce on Sunday mornings alone, but it is something we are doing 24-7.

It is a characteristic of our life. We don't do it perfectly, but by grace and always growing more and more in this way, by grace. And the other area that wisdom would reveal itself in is in meekness or humility.

[7 : 34] Okay, so we show it in good works and now we show it in meekness and humility. What then is meekness? Well, it carries the idea of one who is gentle.

We might be tempted to see this as a potential weakness, but the term specifically denotes one who is in power but has no need to demonstrate that power in every instance.

It's getting against the idea of one who likes to lord over their power. This person is meek. Moses was described as meek throughout the Old Testament and as was Jesus throughout the Gospels. So we definitely would not consider Moses or Jesus to be weak, but meek. In fact, Dr. John MacArthur, who pastors in California, notes in his commentary that this word was often used as an adjective to describe a wild horse that was broken and made useful to its owner.

So you get that imagery of a powerful animal, right? A bigger animal than you, and yet it's controlled. It's tamed. It doesn't need to use all its energy, all its strength at all times.

[8 : 39] Meekness. I like to think a modern equivalent is a gentle giant, if you have heard that expression. Meekness would be somewhere in that ballpark.

So this word also, with it, carries the idea of humility, and this is especially true in the book of James. We saw in chapter 1, verse 21, where James says, Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

This is a common Old Testament teaching that the Lord teaches and saves the humble or the meek. Psalm 25, verse 9 says, God leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way.

Proverbs 11, 2, When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom. In Proverbs 22, 4, Humility is the fear of the Lord.

Its wages are riches and honor and life. So wisdom is doing. What is it doing? It is doing good and beautiful deeds in the sight of the Lord.

[9 : 52] Not things that you and I deem to be good and beautiful, but what God deems good and beautiful. And more than that, it is doing these things in a spirit of humility and meekness.

Not being boastful of your good works, but being humbled by the fact that God's grace is at work in your life. Now, James is going to tell us more concretely what that specifically looks like at the end

of our text.

But before we get there, he is warning the church of false wisdom. We are going to see this wisdom described, right? We're going to see its effects. We're going to see where it comes from.

And this is not a random rant in the middle of what James is saying. Rather, this is a warning we need to heed because there is false wisdom all around us.

In the world, it's in churches, it's being taught everywhere. And we need to be wise and discerning so as to not fall prey to that evil. So the next part of our outline this morning, we're going to see the nature of false wisdom.

[10:56] The nature of false wisdom. So looking back at verses 14 through 15, James writes, 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, and demonic. So James' description of this false wisdom is that it innately has bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. Not only this, but the person who is this way will deny it. This person is in denial of his jealousy and ambition. And notice how self-serving these descriptions are.

This person has jealousy, meaning he wants something or someone that he does not have. This jealousy is so strong that it has embittered him. He's angry with others, and he's angry in general over what he does not have.

This person has selfish ambitions. Notice that James intentionally does not say what the ambitions are. All he tells us is that they are self-serving, which frankly could be anything.

[12:09] This person could want to become a missionary or operate an orphanage, which would be wonderful things. Except that the motivation for this person would not be the gospel going forth or caring for the vulnerable or the glory of God.

But rather, his motivation is selfish. He wants the glory, the power, the respect, to be viewed a certain way, a certain thrill or whatever.

But the point is that it is all about him. And once again, we are reminded that it is an issue of the heart. We see that in verse 14.

This person's heart remains in sin and shows no evidence of the wisdom from above. Further, notice how these qualities of false wisdom are totally contrary to the humility or meekness of true wisdom that we just read about.

They're talking about an unwise person who lacks meekness and humility. Which, according to the text I read from Proverbs and Psalms, this person is without the teaching, without the leading, or without the salvation that God alone can grant.

[13:23] So this is another instance where I think James is again addressing false believers in the church by way of a litmus test to see if they have true wisdom.

The source of this false wisdom will further clarify the issue. James says bluntly that the source for this false wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

In verse 15. The idea here being that it is everything evil and comes from anywhere but God in heaven. And if you recall from last week, the tongue is set on fire by the very same source.

Demonic activity, unspiritual and earthly things. This is all connected in James' mind. Everything we have read thus far. Evil speaking, false wisdom, hearing but not doing, partiality, and so on.

Pastor scholar Douglas J. Moo notes that for these three terms, you can practically substitute them with earth, the flesh, and Satan. To just drive that point home.

[14:31] Now something that is important to consider in light of this text is the universal acceptance of this false wisdom by the world. If this wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic, then that means it is embraced, approved, and celebrated by the earth, the unregenerate, and the demons.

This means whenever we speak foolishly, we will be celebrated by the ungodly. But God has warned the so-called wise of this world throughout his word.

Jeremiah 8, 9. He says, sarcastically, the wise men, that's sarcasm, the wise men are put to shame. They are dismayed and caught.

Behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord. And what kind of wisdom do they have? They have a false wisdom in Jeremiah's day. It was also in James' day, and so it is in our day.

Isaiah dealt with the same thing in Isaiah 29, 14. It records the word of the Lord, and he says, Therefore, behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people.

[15 : 42] Wondrously marvelous. Referring to believers. But then he says, And the wisdom of their wise men, again, there's that sarcasm. And the wisdom of their wise men will perish.

And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed. Isaiah earlier recorded in Isaiah 5, 21. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.

Meaning judgment awaits those who are wise in their own eyes. All right, so the constant biblical warning is that living in this false wisdom will kill you.

Embracing this wisdom is to be cut off from God. But even before judgment day, there are effects of living in this false wisdom. James continues on in verse 16.

He says, For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder in every vile practice.

[16 : 50] So the word for disorder could also be translated as rebellion or riot. James is getting at the point that living in this false wisdom in this life will lead to division and aggression.

It does not build up the church, but seeks to destroy it. And this Greek word has already appeared twice in James. In chapter 1, verse 8, he uses it to describe the double-minded man.

And your ESV translates it as unstable. We also saw this word last week in chapter 3, verse 8, describing the tongue as a restless evil.

It's the same word. Again, James seems to be personifying this double-minded man by referencing the word in this context. This type of person will cause chaos and division everywhere he goes.

The Apostle John makes a similar point in a similar circumstance where he's addressing false teachers who have split up the church. He says in 1 John 2, 18-19, John goes on, And John goes on, So again, he's saying, Had they truly been of Christ, Had they truly been in the faith, They would have stuck with us in unity.

[18 : 45] They would have continued on with the church, But rather they caused division. They split the gang up. And James also says this leads to every vile practice.

It's not as if they go off and just play cute church on their own. No, it leads to every vile practice.

And we can all imagine the various and numerous specifics that he has in mind, right?

Anger, murder, lust, adultery, hatred, partiality, In racial, social, economic ways, abuse, pride, drunkenness, You name it, this false wisdom will endorse it and rationalize it as normative.

It's normal. So we've looked at the source, the description, And the effects of false wisdom that James has laid out for us. But before we continue on to see James teaching on true wisdom, I want you all to turn to Proverbs chapter 1 with me just for a moment.

Lengthier text, but I think it is so prevalent to what James is saying That it's worth taking the time to read. This text is straightforward and will describe the end result of living this unwise life.

[20 : 01] And in this text, God is personified as wisdom. So in Proverbs chapter 1, starting in verse 20, We're going to read through the end of the chapter. God says, Wisdom cries aloud in the street.

In the markets, she raises her voice. At the head of the noisy street, she cries out. At the entrance of the city gates, she speaks. How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?

How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing? And fools hate knowledge. If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you.

I'll make my words known to you. Because I have called and you refuse to listen, I have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded. Because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I will also laugh at your calamity.

I will mock when terror strikes you. When terror strikes you like a storm and your calamity comes like a whirlwind. When distress and anguish come upon you, Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer.

[21 : 13] They will seek me diligently, but will not find me, Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord.

Would not have my counsel and despise all my reproof. Therefore, they shall eat the fruit of their way and have their fill of their own devices.

For the simple are killed by their turning away, And the complacency of fools destroys them. But whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread of disaster.

Whoever lives wisely will be at ease. Whoever acts according to knowledge is what he's saying. So the end result of living unwisely is eternal death and punishment.

And if any of you today feel as though this describes your life, Hear the gospel invitation to have your sins wiped away in verse 33. He says, Whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease without dread of disaster.

[22 : 22] As long as Christ tarries, there is an opportunity right now to begin listening to him, to wisdom. And that process starts by repenting of your foolish way of living your sin.

And by beginning to live obediently by placing faith in Jesus Christ. Now what does that life look like?

So let's return to James 3, picking back up in verse 17. You can flip there now. Just like James' treatment of false wisdom, We are going to see his treatment of true wisdom.

We're going to see its source, its end results, And descriptions of what it looks like more concretely and more specifically than we saw in verse 13.

So the last part of our outline, the nature of true wisdom. The nature of true wisdom. So looking at verse 17, James goes on, But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

[23 : 37] So talk about 180 degree difference. We see the source for true wisdom immediately. It comes from above. The obvious implication is that true wisdom comes from God in heaven.

That is the source. James' Jewish audience would not have been scratching their heads about this one. It's all over the Old Testament as we have seen already. And we know that nothing evil comes from our good and heavenly Father.

A truth that James established in chapter 1, verse 17 through 18, which says, Every good gift and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. So there you have it. Every good and perfect gift comes from above.

This wisdom, true wisdom, is of good and perfect wisdom from above, where our heavenly Father dwells. And this wisdom is described as pure.

[24 : 51] This word means this wisdom is not diluted. It is of one substance. There are no irregularities with it. This wisdom is without evil or sin.

And yet, again, James alludes to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, 8. Jesus says, Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

So the way of life that true wisdom leads to carries with it the promise that we shall see God. This implies salvation, right? We are not cut off from God.

Next, he describes true wisdom as peaceable. I cannot even begin to explain to you fully the significance of this term, but I'll try to very briefly.

The Greek word behind peaceable is used throughout the New Testament, and it's the equivalent to the Hebrew term shalom. Typically, when describing someone as peaceable in the Bible, it is understood in a holistic way.

[25 : 54] There's that word again, whole. And here's why. This word carries the idea of one who has peace with his situation in life in general. It connotes one who has peace about the end times because he or she feels secure in Christ.

A peaceable person is one who has peace characteristically with others. Sometimes it's the other person at fault for there being no peace, but a peaceable person always pursues peace so far as he is able.

And a peaceable person has peace with God. We are once his enemies, but through Christ we have peace with God. Our relationship has been reconciled.

So this kind of peace should permeate our entire life. Not one aspect of our life should be without peace. And the Sermon on the Mount is in view again, Matthew 5, 9.

Jesus said, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. We'll get to see God and we'll be sons of God as peaceable and as pure.

[27 : 06] The next description is true wisdom is gentle, tough to translate and retain the full meaning, but essentially it is one who is considerate, fair, one who seeks the betterment of others even at the cost of personal mistreatment.

This person is gentle. And true wisdom is open to reason. Now this might give you the impression primarily of someone who handles debates well and humbly or something like that.

But the Greek term carries more the idea of one who accepts instruction and obeys. In other words, true wisdom is not stubborn, arrogant, nor does it continue in ignorance, but is teachable and reachable.

True wisdom is full. And true wisdom is full of mercy. So notice that totality language again. True wisdom is full of mercy.

As sinners who have been forgiven a great debt that we can never repay, we ought to express our thanksgiving by forgiving others and being merciful to them as God has been to us.

[28 : 13] And mercy is more than merely forgiving. It also speaks to one who seeks to help others with their needs. If somebody can't carry their groceries, then be merciful to that person who carry their groceries for them.

So again, we see it's an action. It's doing something. This is true wisdom from above. And again, this alludes to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, 7.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. And the next description we get is true wisdom is full of good fruits.

Full. This is a catch-all statement. James is saying that if we have any wisdom from above, then that wisdom will reveal itself in all manner of good works.

We will bear fruit just as Jesus taught in Matthew 7, which we saw last week, so I won't quote it now for sake of time. But I will point out that totality language here again.

[29 : 16] Our lives as true believers is to be full of good fruit. Abundant. This is a characteristic of true faith.

As James has said in chapter 2, verse 18, he says, I will show you my faith by my words. Right? There is a direct link. My faith is shown in works.

That's good fruit language. And then finally, true wisdom is impartial and sincere. I preached on partiality in the book of James, which you can find a line for a more in-depth look at what he is referring to.

But essentially, we are to treat people the same and fairly, right? Without partiality. This is not rocket science. Though very hard to actually faithfully do.

But true wisdom is sincere as well. The Greek here literally means without hypocrisy. James is saying true wisdom does not mentally and vocally affirm the way of life that true wisdom admonishes, while not also practicing that very way of life.

[30 : 29] Right? Who's not going to say murder is evil? Right? But then to not be a murderer, that's the next step. That's a drastic example, but that applies with anything. Right? James is saying, or excuse me, he's saying, don't exhort honesty and be a liar.

Don't exhort fidelity and be an adulterer. Don't exhort love and be a hater of your neighbor. Be without hypocrisy. Be genuine, sincere.

So these things summarize what true wisdom looks like in the way of life for the believer. And in verse 18, we will see the result of this way of life and its virtues.

This true wisdom from above. James wraps up in verse 18. He says, and a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

So there it is. The result of this life, abiding by wisdom from above, will harvest righteousness in peace. I can already hear the cages rattling.

[31 : 39] Right? We reform people know what righteousness means. And we want to read that doctrine of justification by faith alone into this text. And listen carefully.

Right? I love and affirm the doctrine of justification by faith alone. I have every biblical reason to confidently assert that our righteousness is an alien righteousness that was imputed to us entirely by God's grace.

Right? This is the heart of the gospel. No doubts about that. But that is not what James is talking about in this text. And if you were thinking what I just described, you have the right doctrine but the wrong text.

James' use of righteousness is referring to actual, practical, day-to-day, living out, fruit-abiding, fruit-producing righteousness. In other words, he is saying that living according to wisdom from above will reap the reward of fruitfulness.

That we will actually grow in obedience by practicing obedience. Isn't that a novel thought? And more than that, it will be done in peace.

[32 : 51] That doesn't mean we won't face persecution, trials, or other difficulties, which he made clear in chapter 1. But we will have real peace when we consider our reconciled relationship with God and that he will make all things anew.

Now, think about that. We are so blessed as believers that we get to live life growing in righteousness. Can you imagine the horror we would all be if God saved us from our sin but left us to grow in practicing our sin?

The reality for us is that day-to-day we are given evidence of God's presence in our lives by growing obedience, by growing wisdom.

That obedience is a witness to the world, to be sure, but as I've said before, is also a witness to encourage ourselves. That truly, we do have peace with God by his Son.

You cannot account for that righteousness apart from God's work in your life. And that is what is so reassuring, which causes peace to ensue in our souls.

[34 : 03] We who are peacemakers are called sons of God. We who are pure in heart will see God. We who are meek will inherit the earth. It's just a matter of time.

And what's most amazing about all this is that it is entirely of grace. It's nothing we merit at all, yet we have it all the same. Praise God.

So in light of these truths, just a few simple closing applications for us all. Application number one. Know your Bible. Right?

Who is understanding among us? Know your Bible. And there are a number of ways to accomplish this. Hearing it taught as you all are now. Right?

Reading Scripture daily. Memorizing Scripture. Meditating on Scripture. Reading books about Scripture that help you better read Scripture on your own. Right? There's a theme here.

[35 : 01] Psalm 119, 130. The unfolding of your words gives light. It gives understanding to the simple. The point is that before we can even attempt to live wisely, we have to know certain things.

And this is one reason why God has graciously revealed so much in his word with lots of truth claims, with lots of theology. Right?

So that we can know it and obey it. Which leads to the next application. Application number two. Live wisely. We just saw in great detail what that looks like.

But if you go throughout these next few weeks and realize, hey, I'm not really growing in this. I'm not seeing more gentleness. I'm not being a peacemaker. Meekness does not describe my life nor mercy.

And I would just offer this advice from earlier in James. He says in chapter 1, verse 5. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach.

[36 : 07] And it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith. If you are in the faith and you ask God for these things, he will grant it day by day, growing in this way.

And application number three. Be humble. As made clear earlier in some of the references to Proverbs and Psalms, the Lord only teaches and embraces the humble.

You will have nothing to do with the arrogant or proud without first humbling them. But by living humbly, we are remaining teachable and useful to God.

And by virtue of being humble, we could not possibly fall into the snares of false wisdom. Only when we are proud are we susceptible to such a trap.

So be humble and be thankful that God has humbled us and will continually, faithfully humble us. Pray for that humility. That you would be wise.

[37 : 11] That you would be knowledgeable. That you would be growing in these things. So we have much to be thankful for considering that the wisdom of God is not the wisdom of man.

The wisdom of God has counseled God to save sinners like us. This wisdom comes from God's very heart in that he is gentle. That he is merciful.

And that he is a peacemaker. That he is impartial and sincere. And he is all these things perfectly. So by grace we will be conformed more and more to that image day by day.

Let's pray. Let's pray.