

Living Wisely
James 3:13-18
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Let's read the passage in James 3:13-18. James says, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But..."—here's the contrast—"...if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But..."—again, the contrast—"...the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

My question to you today is: Does your Christianity work? By that I mean, in the book of James, does it make you rejoice in trials, does it help you to resist temptation, does it make you a doer of the Word and does it help you tame your tongue?

James is the epistle of applied Christianity. It is Christianity in shoe leather. It is Christianity 101. James has as its theme faith that works. If we have a genuine faith, if we have an authentic faith, if we have a real faith, then our faith is going to manifest itself in our works. Now James says that if we have wisdom that comes from above, it's going to show itself by the way that we live. All that we cover today is so important about human relationships, how we wisely learn to relate to and get along with one another.

Notice in verse 13, James says, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" The passage starts with a question: "Who thinks they're wise?" The context here is still the tongue. In chapter 3, verse 1, he says, "Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment." He's talking to those who want to be teachers, want to be instructors by using their speech to tell other people how to live. You normally would think of a teacher as being wise. So James is saying "you wise guys," "you wise men," "you wise women," "you who want to instruct others or teach others." He's saying these people need to show by the way that they live that they are really, truly wise. The Bible tells us that "Wisdom is better than rubies, and all the things one may desire cannot be compared with her." The Scripture says, "With all your getting, get understanding."

There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is the accumulation of facts; it's having information. We live in an age of knowledge. Everyone has knowledge. You have in your hand a smart phone. We're dumb people with smart phones. You can ask your phone anything and you can get the information immediately.

So we have all this knowledge, but we don't know how to relate to people. Have you ever met someone who is really smart, has a high IQ, but they make stupid life decisions? They don't know how to relate to people. They don't know how to get along with others. Their life is a mess. Knowledge doesn't necessarily help you live out in your daily life the things that you

need in relationships. So knowledge is information.

Wisdom is knowing how to apply knowledge. Someone said, "Wisdom is living in a proper sense of values. It is living in light of what is true, what is right and what is lasting." I believe that true knowledge is living in the light of eternal values. The Hebrew idea of wisdom is practical; it is the ability to make right choices in life. Again, Proverbs 4:7 says, "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom."

The first place to start with wisdom is Psalm 111:10. It says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." We know that verse. It is so very fundamental and so very important. I'm going to break down the passage that is before us, but this is foundational: the first thing to living wisely is to have a reverence and a respect for God. The Bible says, "The fool says in his heart there is no God." Living like there is no God is a foolish way to live. But the wise man or woman is a person who has reverence and a respect for God. We need this kind of wisdom in our homes, in our churches, in our communities and in our nations.

In verse 13, James gives us a question, and then he issues a command. "Let him show by good conduct..."—or "the good way that he lives"—"...that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom." Notice the command: "Let him show." Someone said that James was from the state of Missouri, the Show-Me state. James is actually saying, "Show me by the way that you live."

And how should you show the way you live? By two things: meekness and wisdom. That's the mark of a wise person. A wise person fears the Lord, walks in humility and is meek like Jesus Christ. So James issues this command: Show your life by meekness and wisdom. It's showing me your faith by the way that you live.

James points out, with a contrast, the difference between false wisdom and true wisdom. This is a very simple passage, but it is often overlooked in human relationships. He contrasts two kinds of wisdom: false wisdom and true wisdom. He does it in three areas in both false wisdom and in true wisdom: their origin, their operation and their outcome.

Let's look first of all at false wisdom. This is the kind of wisdom we don't want to live in or operate in. In verses 14-16, he says, "But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there." I want you to notice the origin of this false wisdom. It's not from above. He puts it in the negative. Not from above basically indicates that it is not from God; it's not spiritual, it's not Biblical, it's not divine wisdom. It's human wisdom. It's like living foolishly without God.

James gives us three sources of this false wisdom. He first of all describes it as "earthly." That means that it is of this world; its motives, its methods and its aims are earthly or temporal. The movies people watch, the magazines they read, the music they listen to—everything that is

without God and is part of the world's system. The Bible says, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in this world." All that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life—is not of God but is of the world.

I think of the rich fool. Jesus told the parable of the farmer who had a bumper crop. Instead of thinking about others and God and eternity, he said, "What am I going to do with all this that I have? I know. I'll build bigger barns. I'll tear down my barns. I'll build bigger barns. I'll store all these goods for me." Then he went to bed that night and said, "Take thine ease. Eat, drink and be merry, for you have much goods laid up for many, many years." But telling the story, Jesus said that the farmer was a fool, because he went to bed that night not knowing God. He was rich in this world but not rich in knowing God. Then God said, "This night shall your soul be required of you. Then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?" So the man died and went to hell. The richest man in hell—what good is that? Jesus said, "If you gain the whole world but lose your own soul, it profits you nothing." So living without God, living as though God doesn't exist, is foolish.

By the way, a lot of people who believe in God live like He doesn't exist. That's what you call "practical atheism." You believe in God, but you can't tell by the way you live. There's no God anywhere in your life. You don't seek God. You don't desire to obey God. You don't try to honor God. You don't want God's will and purpose in your life. You disregard God in every aspect of your life. But the wise person fears God and has God at the center of their life. So this first kind of false wisdom is earthly.

The second kind of false wisdom is "sensual" or "of the flesh," verse 15. The NASB translates that as "natural," meaning it's your natural, physical life; it's your soul. We get from the Greek word translated here "sensual." We get our word "psychology" from it. It means "that which is physical" or "that which is of the senses." 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." He can't understand the things of the Spirit; he is like a blind man in an art gallery or a deaf man in a symphony. He can't receive it; there is no receptivity. He doesn't understand the things of God. So these people are operating and functioning in the arena of the world or the cosmos apart from God in the area of the flesh.

Notice the third kind of false wisdom is in the arena of the devil. It is "devilish," "demonic" or "of the devil." That doesn't mean that it directly has Satan's influence, but it means that it is under the dominion and the sphere of Satan's domain.

By the way, notice that these categories cover the world, the flesh and the devil, which are the three enemies of the believer. We need to be careful that we don't let the world press us into its mold; that we don't live by the dictates of the carnal, sinful nature. We need to be careful that we don't live according to the dictates of the devil. The unsaved person lives for the world's approval, he or she lives to satisfy their flesh and they live under Satan's dominion or Satan's control. Lust of the eyes is your passion. Your possession and your pride of life is your position.

I want you to know its operation. How does it operate? This is the way it manifests itself. Verse 14 says it operates with “bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts.” Bitter envy is a discontent with the good fortune of others. We use the word “jealousy.” James says that if you’re operating out of the will of God in the flesh, you don’t know God, you just have worldly wisdom that comes not from above but from below, and then you’ll have bitter envy or jealousy and strife in your relationships.

It’s pictured in Cain, who was jealous of his brother, Abel, when Abel offered a sacrifice that was acceptable to God. Cain’s countenance dropped and he killed his brother. It is also exemplified in Joseph’s brothers. When Joseph got his coat of many colors, his brothers were jealous of him. They conspired against him, and they sold him as a slave. The Bible says that being moved with envy, the Jewish leaders had Jesus Christ crucified. It’s that discontent that we feel at the good fortune of someone else.

It’s like when a friend calls and says, “You won’t believe what happened to me today. Someone gave me a brand new car!”

You go, “Praise the Lord [gritting your teeth]. I’m happy for you.” But when you hang up the phone you say, “God, why did they get the car and I didn’t? I’m more spiritual. I go to church on Sunday. I read my Bible. That’s just not right!” When something good happens to someone else, does it bum you out? That’s the kind of wisdom that doesn’t come from God. It’s earthly and sensual. It is devilish.

Notice that this results in strife. Verse 14 starts with “bitter envy” and then it moves to strife, which is selfish ambition. It is used of politicians seeking an office. We get our concept of politics from this. It is politicking or manipulating to try to get an office. In Philippians 2:3-4, Paul says, “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” That’s the Word that we need to obey. The wisdom that comes from beneath is self-centered and self-promoting and jealous and envious. Notice that it’s in our hearts, verse 14. We’re lying against the truth. Our lying is a contradiction to the Gospel that we proclaim.

Thirdly, let’s look at its outcome in verse 16. It results in “confusion and every evil thing.” You might find that when you read verses 14-16, they’re describing your marriage. Or maybe they’re describing your relationships. Or maybe they’re describing the atmosphere on the job. Or maybe they’re describing even some of the people you know in church. Some of this wisdom can come into the church, but it ought not to be. We shouldn’t be thinking of ourselves and jockeying for position and contending and striving in the church. We should come with humility and wisdom from God. But many times this comes into our human relationships.

“Confusion,” verse 16, means disorder. The same word is used in James 1:8, where it is translated “unstable.” It is also used in James 3:8 where it is translated “unruly” or “disorder.” Many times our marriages are in turmoil because we are operating in or functioning in the

wisdom that is not of God but is of this world.

It results in, verse 16, “every evil thing.” Some translations have “anarchy.” Many times marriages end in divorce. It’s sad and tragic when two professing Christians end their marriage in divorce. It’s because they’re operating in and functioning under that which is earthly, sensual and devilish. They’re operating in a wisdom that doesn’t come from God, but it comes from beneath.

In Romans 12:1, the Bible says, “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world.” I love one translation that renders that “Don’t let the world press you into its mold.” Now you’re in the world, but you’re not to be like the world. You’re “in the world, but not of the world.” It’s like a boat on the water. That’s fine until the water gets in the boat and it starts to sink. So the Christian is in the world, but when the world is in the Christian, they start to sink. We then become worldly in our philosophy and worldly in our thinking and worldly in our motives and in our intentions. This then brings confusion, strife and anarchy into our marriages and into our human relationships. So we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds through the Spirit of God and through the Word of God.

Refreshingly, let’s now look at real wisdom or true wisdom in verses 17-18. It is a blessing to turn from that which is false, in verses 14-16 to that which is true. James says, “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

Notice these three categories: first of all, the origin. He says, “the wisdom that is from above.” The first wisdom is from beneath—earthly, sensual and devilish. This is how the unbeliever operates, and Christians shouldn’t operate in that realm. The wisdom we want to function in comes from above, meaning it’s from God; it’s heavenly wisdom. It’s not of the world. It’s not of the flesh. It’s not of the devil. It’s God’s wisdom. God’s wisdom is found in the Bible.

The B-i-b-l-e.

Yes, that’s the book for me.

We stand alone on the Word of God.

The B-i-b-l-e.

In Psalm 19:7 it says, “The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.” That’s so good. The word “simple” means a simpleton. It’s a simple person. It’s a person who is not very smart, who is not very wise. They make foolish decisions. God takes this foolish person and makes them wise through His precepts and through His testimonies and through His statutes. Everything we need for life and godliness is found in the Bible, God’s Word. The Bible is God’s instruction manual for life.

Have you ever gotten some item in the mail and you have to assemble it. There are instructions. Usually when I follow instructions to assemble something, I lose my sanctification. Like, "Who made these instructions? Don't they know what they're doing?!" I start talking about them and talking to the instructions and all kinds of stuff. Then I have to repent. Sometimes you just abandon the instructions and just look at the picture on the box and try to put it together. It doesn't work very well.

But the Bible is God's instruction manual, and God knows what He's talking about. God made you, so God can fix you. For best results, follow the manufacturer's instructions. If your marriage is in a mess, God gives you instructions in His Word. If you need to know how to parent your children, God gives you instructions in His Word. If you need to know how to relate to people, God gives you instructions in His Word. All that we need for life and godliness is in His Word. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Bible is all we need.

I believe not only in the inerrancy and reliability, but I also believe in the sufficiency of Scripture. The Bible is still all we need for life and godliness. The Bible is our roadmap. It is our instruction manual. True wisdom comes from God; we need to look to Him. True wisdom starts with God; we need to reverence Him, to fear Him.

I want you to notice its operation in verse 17. In this verse we're going to see seven marks of a truly wise person. First of all, it starts with purity. It says, "But the wisdom that is from above..."—that's its origin—"...is first pure." Purity is its first operation. I can't emphasize enough the importance of this first quality. First, pure. The writer, James, could have said, "pure," but instead he used the word "first." The word that he used translated "first" means "of first importance" or "the first and most important thing." In other words, if you don't first have purity, then you're not wise. If you're not living a pure life, you're a fool. I don't care how smart you think you are or how clever you think you are or how wise you think you are. No one who allows immorality or sin in their life is a smart person. We know people who have ruined their lives because of sin or disobedience or rebellion that has come into their lives. There is nothing wise about being disobedient to God or living a sinful life.

So James is talking about purity in all areas of our life. Wisdom's primary and most fundamental quality above everything is purity. A wise person is a pure person. I've often said—and I believe it's true—that holiness leads to happiness, and sin leads to sadness. Sin = sadness; holiness = happiness. You want to be a happy person? Then live a pure life.

In His Beatitudes, in Matthew 5:8, Jesus said it like this: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Almost every one of these qualities has a beatitude to confirm it. Jesus said "blessed." The word "blessed" means "O how happy." "O how happy and to be envied" is the person. It's the person who has the smile of God upon them. It's God applauding you, because you are pure in heart and you will one day see God. So everything starts with purity.

The second quality of a wise life is that it's peaceable, verse 17. It starts with purity and it leads to peace or peace loving. Purity always comes before peace. In the Bible, it's always in that divine order. It's never peace at any price. We never lie to keep the peace. We never do dishonest things to keep the peace. We never compromise truth for the sake of peace. Purity always come first, and then it results in peace. If we don't have peace when we have purity, so be it; we need to stand for what is true. Jesus said in Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

The third quality of a truly wise person is that they are gentle or considerate. It's making allowance for the feelings of others. It's not insisting on one's own rights. Have you ever lived with a person who always wants their way? Always have it the way they want it? They don't think about anyone else. They're difficult to live with. That's what it's talking about. But not Jesus; He gave up His rights for the sake of others. That's why in Philippians 2:5 Paul says, "Let this mind..."—or "attitude"—"...be in you which was also in Christ Jesus," Who didn't think of Himself but gave of Himself for the sake of others.

The fourth quality in verse 17 is "easy to be intreated" in the King James Bible. It could be translated "submissive" or "willing to yield." It is the opposite of stubborn. Again, do you live with someone who is stubborn, bull headed or inflexible? "Submissive" means they're easy to live with and they're reasonable.

I think of Abigail in the Old Testament, who interceded for her husband before King David. Her husband's name was Nabal, which means "fool." Can you imagine? "I'd like you to meet my husband, 'Fool.'" I feel sorry for him the first day of Kindergarten. He had a little name tag on that said "Fool." Abigail was a wise woman. She knew how to intercede for her husband. Her husband was a fool; he wouldn't stand on reason and wasn't submissive. He was unreasonable.

Notice the fifth quality in verse 17: "full of mercy and good fruits." Jesus again said in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." "Blessed are the pure in heart... blessed are the peacemakers...blessed are the merciful." Pastor Chuck Smith said that when he was in college and had a test, he would put that verse at the top of the paper before he handed it in to the teacher. If you empty your cup of mercy, God will actually refill it. If you show mercy to others, God will show mercy to you.

Notice the sixth quality in verse 17: "without partiality." This is an interesting phrase that actually has the idea of being unwavering. It's a person who stands on their principles or who does not vacillate. They deal with others equitably and fairly. They don't put people in categories or classes—rich people, poor people. Rather they treat everyone equally, fairly and justly. They stand on principles and don't vacillate. They're unwavering.

Then the seventh and last quality in verse 17 is "without hypocrisy." "Sincere" would be the word we would use. In the ancient world there were actors on the stage who acted parts and roles by putting on different masks. The mask they put on would depict the role they were playing—happy, sad, angry, etc. Then they would take off that mask and put another one on to

depict a different role. They spoke from under a mask on the Greek stage, so they were called "hupokrites." We get our word "hypocrite" from it. So basically it means to not be a phony but to be real. Be sincere means that there is no duplicity or hypocrisy. You are genuine; what you see is what you get. They are without show. There is no pretense. They are straight forward; they're not wearing a mask. It's foolish to put on a show and be something you're really not. Godly wisdom acts in humility and honesty and integrity.

Finally I want you to notice the outcome, in verse 18. What is the outcome of true, heavenly wisdom? It says, "Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." I want to point this out: Verse 18 is the counterpart to verse 16. What I mean by that is that verse 16 is the outcome of false wisdom. Verse 16 says, "For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there." So if you're functioning in the arena of false wisdom, you have confusion and evil work. The contrast to that in verse 18 is "the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

The grammar of this verse is very hard to translate into English; it's hard to render in the Bible. It's a word picture. It's an image of sowing. It's a picture of a farmer. What we're sowing here is peace, and what we're reaping is righteousness. The seed that we plant is "peace by those who make peace," and the fruit that we reap is "righteousness." So if you're functioning in the realm of heavenly wisdom, you're sowing peace. If you're sowing this kind of peace from God, you're going to reap the righteousness of God. So if you have peace with God, you'll have peace with others. It's hard to be in harmony with other people when you are out of sync with God.

The Bible says, "Whatsoever you sow, that shall you also reap." Whatever you plant is what grows. If you put tomato seeds in the ground, you get a tomato plant. If you put strawberry seeds in the ground, you get a strawberry plant. If you plant zucchini seed, you get zucchini. So if you sow to the flesh, you'll of the flesh reap corruption. But if you sow to the Spirit, you'll reap of the Spirit life everlasting. Basically, we get what we sow. We reap what we sow. If we sow to the flesh, we reap corruption. If we sow to the Sprit, we reap life everlasting.

By way of conclusion, I want to tell you four simple steps to living wisely. Number one, you need to know Christ personally. No one can be considered wise if they reject Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. If you are saying to God, "I don't want Christ. I don't want You. I can live my own life," then you're a fool. You may have a high IQ. You may have good knowledge of things, but you don't understand the things of God. You are rejecting the God Who made you, and the God Who made you to be able to relate to Him and others you are rejecting in your life.

1 Corinthians 1:30 says that "...Christ Jesus, Who became for us wisdom from God..." Do you know that Christians have "the mind of Christ"? Walking with and knowing Christ, we begin to think like Christ, we begin to feel like Christ, we begin to see like Christ and we begin to live the way Jesus would live. So you need to know Christ personally.

The second step to take in order to be wise is that you need to read the Bible obediently. You

might add “daily” in there, as well. I don’t mean just reading the Bible and then forgetting what you read, but rather putting into practice, putting into shoe leather what God says in His Word. Too many times, as Christians, we know what the Bible says, but we don’t do it. That’s what James is all about: being “doers of the Word and not hearers only.”

Thirdly, we need to pray to God humbly. Another place to get wisdom is on your knees. James 1:5 already said that: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God”—prayer. Do you need to know how to relate in your marriage? Do you need to know how to deal with a problem in your marriage? Get on your knees. Don’t go to Hollywood for answers; that’s for sure. Get on your knees and seek God. Bring God into the equation. Bring God into your life. Start with a fear of God and humbly, dependently pray. Ask God to fill you with His Holy Spirit. Ask God to give you wisdom from above.

Then fourthly and lastly, fear the Lord reverently. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” the Bible says. Know Christ personally, read the Bible obediently, pray to God humbly and fear the Lord reverently.

As I think about my children—all of them married, all of them out of the home, all of them doing good—my heart’s desire is that they fear the Lord; that they reverence God and fear God, they humbly pray and obey God’s Word and know Christ personally. That’s the wise walk. Without those elements in your life, you can’t be considered a wise person.