

Living Wisely
James 3:13-18
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In James 3:13-18, James says, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Notice this opens with a question. Then he says, “Let him...”—that is, “a man who thinks he’s wise”—“... show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. 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. 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.”

Now I want to ask this question of you: “Does your Christianity work?” By that, in light of the book of James, I mean, “Does it help you rejoice in trials, does it help you resist temptation, does it help you be a ‘doer of the Word and not a hearer only,’ does it help to tame your tongue?”

James is the epistle of applied Christianity. In our text today, the Christian life means living wisely. If you include what we’ve studied so far with today’s text, you know that the mature believer rejoices in trials, resists temptation, is a doer of God’s Word, has tamed the tongue through the power of the Holy Spirit and is living his life wisely.

The key verse of our text today is verse 13, which opens with a question and then has a command. “Who is wise and understanding among you?” So the subject is wisdom. In context, James has been talking about the tongue and taming the tongue. He said in verse 1, “Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” If you think you’re wise and smart and want to teach others, then you should be living in wisdom from above. So the subject of the tongue is continuing into our text today. And it’s talking about living wisely. If you think you’re wise and want to instruct others, then you should be living wisely.

Note the question in verse 13: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” We live in a world full of knowledge, but we lack wisdom. We have so much information in our world today—on your phone, on the computer, on the Internet. You can get information instantly. We have all this knowledge, but we lack wisdom. We have all this knowledge, but morally and socially, man has not changed.

In Proverbs 8:11, it says, “Wisdom is better than rubies. And all the things one may desire cannot be compared with her.” Of all that we should desire, wisdom should be number one.

Now what is wisdom by comparison to knowledge? Knowledge is the accumulation of information, whereas wisdom is to know what to do with that information. Have you ever known anyone who is really smart but dumb? They have this high IQ, but they don’t know how to live

their life. They make stupid moral decisions. Their marriage is failing, and they don't know how to raise their family or interact with other people. They don't have a proper lifestyle. They can have the intellect without having the moral or spiritual discernment, which is wisdom. We've all known people who are smart, but they make wrong choices and their lives are ruined.

A lot of what I'll cover in our text is a word study or looking at the meaning of every word of phrase. I like this definition of a wise person: "one who has spiritual discernment and discretion, who has the ability to see clearly what is right and to act accordingly." Also, wisdom is living with the proper sense of values and is living in light of what is true, right and lasting. In the Hebrew concept, wisdom is practical; it's the ability to make right choices in life.

Proverbs 4:7 says, "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom." So of all the things we should desire and pursue, it's not just knowledge, but wisdom, knowing what to do with that knowledge.

And where do we get wisdom? Psalm 111:10 tells us: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." If you want to be wise, you must have a fear of the Lord. What does that mean? It means having a reverential respect for God.

This is what we need today in our homes, in our marriages, in our families, in our churches, in our communities and in our nation. We need "the fear of the Lord." One of the reasons America is in big trouble right now is not because we need more knowledge but because we need more wisdom, which comes from God. But we've rejected God. You cannot reject God, reject His Word and expect to prosper. You cannot live without God. You cannot live without His Word.

So the reason America is in trouble morally and socially today is because we've rejected God and His Word. As a result, there is no fear of God before our eyes. Why wouldn't we think we have all this crime and all this violence?

I looked up the statistics on crime this week. There are 2.5 million violent crimes annually in America. And it's rapidly increasing. So we have all this knowledge but have morally decayed, because we've rejected God and His Word, which is where we find His will and can live in wisdom. We have reaped what we have sown.

So James issues a command in verse 13: "Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom." That individual, who thinks he is wise, let him show by the way he lives that he is wise. The test of wisdom is that your life shows by "meekness of wisdom" your good works.

The phrase "Let him show" is consistent with the book of James. James was the one apostle who was from Missouri. It's the "show me" state. He says, "Show me your faith by your works." If you have genuine, authentic faith, it will be manifested by the way you live. It's so very important.

And notice you are to do it with meekness and wisdom, verse 13. All the qualities we see that are a result of heavenly wisdom are found in Jesus Christ. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus said, "I am meek and lowly in heart," in the King James translation. Jesus describes Himself as meek.

In our text, James paints a contrast between false wisdom and true wisdom, in three areas. We'll see the origin, the operations and the outcomes of false wisdom. Then we'll see the origin, the operations and the outcomes of true wisdom.

First, James deals with false wisdom, in verses 14-16. "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."

James puts false wisdom in the negative, in verse 15: It is not from above. That means it's not from God. Living a life without God is foolish. The Bible says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" To reject God, to reject the existence of God is a foolish thing. You have a moral responsibility to God as your Creator. So this wisdom does not come from God.

But in describing this false wisdom, James says three things. He says it is "earthly, sensual, demonic." Let's look at each one. "Earthly" means it's not from God; it's from this world. Its motives, its methods, its aims are earthly and temporal. Its movies, music and magazines are all of this world.

The concept in the Bible of "the world" is found in 1 John 2:15. "Do not love the world or the things in the world." "The world" is the Greek word "cosmos." But it's not talking about the material universe in its order; it's talking about the evil, world system—its way of thinking and living apart from God. We refer to it as "worldly thinking" or "worldly behavior" or "worldly living." It's not submitted to God or living in "the fear of God"; rather it's patterned after the things, the motives, the methods of the world apart from God.

In the parable of the foolish farmer, the rich fool is an illustration of this. The farmer had a bumper crop, and he said, "What am I going to do with all this crop?" He could have answered by saying, "I'll pray about it and seek God's wisdom of what to do. Maybe God wants me to use it to bless other people." Instead, he said like the worldly man, "I'll build bigger barns to store it all for me. Then I'll go to bed and say, 'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" That's the worldly mindset.

Now there is nothing wrong in saving for your future, but if you do it without God's wisdom and counsel in His Word, and disregard the things of eternity, that's not good.

When the man went to bed that night, with his big barns and crop, thinking that he had a whole life of plenty ahead of him, God said that he was a fool. That very night the man died.

The statistics on death are quite impressive: 10 out of every 10 people living will die. The Bible says in Psalm 89:48, "What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the

power of the grave?" That's why the Bible also says, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom," Psalm 90:12.

Every time I do a funeral, I think of that verse. Every time I stand by a casket in a cemetery, I think of that verse. "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

This rich fool says, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." But God says that you've disregarded Him in your soul. He says, "Fool! This night your soul will be required of you." Jesus also said in Matthew 16:26, "What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" If you lose your soul, it profits you nothing. It's so sad. This is living for the world.

1 John 2:15-17 says, "Do not love the world..."—or "the cosmos, the evil world system"—"...or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life..."—that's your "passion, possessions, position"—"...is not of the Father..."—they don't come from above—"...but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever." So under the category of "earthly" is "the world."

The second category of false wisdom is that it is "sensual" or "of the flesh." We have the world and we have the flesh. The NASB translates this as "natural," which means "our life" or "our soul, our inner person." From the Greek word for "sensual" we get our word "psychology." In 1 Corinthians 2:14, it says the wisdom of this world is the wisdom of "the natural man." And "the things of the Spirit of God" are "foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

So if you have not been born again, the things of the Bible, the things of God, the truths of Christianity and of the Christian life may seem foolish to you. It's not your wisdom. It's what I call "fool's wisdom." Christians are fools in the sight of the world but wise toward God. You can either be wise in this world and fools toward God or fools in this world and wise toward God.

When I was younger, one of the things that kept me from coming to Christ was because I didn't want to be put down as a fool in the world's eyes. Now I realize how foolish I was living according to the world and living according to my senses in the flesh.

It's like a blind man in an art gallery. Not everyone likes art galleries, but I can stand for hours looking at paintings and pictures and appreciate their beauty. Now can you imagine someone who is blind going through an art gallery? They would have no comprehension of what is there. Or how about someone who is deaf listening to a symphonic orchestra?

So the natural man cannot understand the wisdom from God. They operate and function in the wisdom that is of the world around them.

The third category of false wisdom is that it is "demonic." There is only one devil, but false wisdom is influenced by Satan and his demons.

So we have three things: the world, the flesh and the devil. These three categories are the enemies of the soul of the believer. The unsaved man lives for the world's approval, he lives to satisfy his flesh and he lives under Satan's control. It's "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." This is what we call "earthly wisdom."

Now notice the operation of earthly wisdom or how it's manifested in our lives. This may describe your life or your marriage or maybe your family or household. Verse 14 says, "But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth." So the operation of this worldly wisdom is "bitter envy."

Note the words "bitter envy." It means "resentful attitudes." It originates in bitter, resentful feelings, and it manifests itself in bitter, resentful actions. So you have this jealous bitterness and hatred toward someone, and it displays itself in resentful or bitter actions. Its discontent with the good fortune of others.

Someone calls you on the phone and says, "Guess what! Someone just gave me a brand, new car!" And through clenched teeth you say, "Praise the Lord. I'm happy for you, brother." You slam the phone down and say, "God! I'm more spiritual than they are! I carry a bigger Bible! I go to church more than they do! Why didn't they give the car to me?! I'm a better person!!" We're resentful for the good fortune of others. Can you rejoice when someone else is blessed? If not, you're not functioning in heavenly wisdom.

It's like Cain, who slew his brother, Abel. The first murder in the Bible was domestic violence. Brother killed brother. Cain's offering wasn't acceptable to God, but Abel's sacrifice was acceptable. So in jealousy, Cain killed his brother, Abel. I think of the brothers of Joseph, who sold him as a slave, because they were jealous of their father's favoritism of Joseph. I think of Saul, who became jealous of the popularity of David, when he heard the women singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." So he got angry and jealous of David.

In Proverbs 14:30, it says, "Envy is rottenness to the bones." So envy is something we need to avoid. It is earthly, sensual and devilish.

Then there is "strife," verse 14 in the King James translation. It is a reference to what is selfish ambition or "self-seeking." It is used of politicians who are seeking a political office. Self-seeking should never be true of a Christian in the church. In Philippians 2:3-4, it says, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition..."—or "strife"—"...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." So strife is the opposite of meekness.

And notice where it is found, verse 14: "in your hearts" and that you "lie against the truth." You boast of your foolish behavior. You're lying in your heart against the truth. So your life contradicts the truth.

So earthly wisdom is manifested by resentment, jealousy and selfish ambition. That is a clear sign you're living by worldly wisdom.

Now notice the outcome of this worldly wisdom, in verse 16. “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.” This has the idea of disorder. The same word is translated in chapter 1, verse 8: “unstable.” It’s also translated in chapter 3, verse 8, as “unruly.” So the description of it is unstable, unruly, disorder.

Does that perhaps describe your marriage? Is it unstable? Is it in disorder? Does it describe your home or family life? Your social life? Your private life? Your work life? Maybe you are living without the wisdom from God. A marriage and family without God lacks heavenly wisdom.

And notice that it results in “every evil thing.” Some translations say “anarchy.” This is a description of the United States of America today. They systematically got rid of God. We teach evolution in the public-school system. They say there is no God; we’re here by accident. We’re just highly evolved animals. We systematically got rid of God’s Word. We’re against the Bible in public schools. And sadly the blame must also be placed on the church. It has neglected the Bible, failed to preach the Bible, failed to stand on the Bible, the Word of God. I believe that ultimately the problems we’re having in America today lie with the church.

And I don’t think I’m oversimplifying the fact that it leads to the pulpits of our churches in America; that they are weak in preaching the Word of God. You can’t have liberal churches that deny Biblical authority, inerrancy and infallibility and expect to have a nation that follows the wisdom that comes from above. Christians aren’t being “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” We have anarchy in our world today.

So Romans 12:2 says, “Do not be conformed to this world.” Another translation says, “Don’t let the world press you into its mold.” Don’t think like the world, don’t act like the world and don’t live like the world. Then verse 2 continues, “But be transformed by the renewing of your mind,” by the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

Now let’s take a refreshing look at true wisdom, which is from God, verses 17-18. “But the wisdom that is from above...”—meaning “from God”—“...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.”

Let’s look at this wisdom from above. Its origin is God. There is a wisdom that is not from above, not from God, and there is the wisdom that is from above, from God. Which would you rather have? Wisdom from God or wisdom from the devil? There are two kinds of wisdom to function in. The true wisdom is from God, it’s heavenly. It’s not of the world and it’s not of the flesh and it’s not of the devil.

And God’s wisdom is found in the Bible.

“The B-i-b-l-e;

Yes, that’s the book for me.

I stand alone on the Word of God,

The B-i-b-l-e."

Thank God for His Word. Where would we be without the Bible? We'd be like a ship in a storm on the sea without a rudder. Without His Word, we'd be like a blind man on a dark night looking for a black cat. The Word is "a light to our path." What a marvelous book the Bible is!

Everything we need for "life and godliness" is found in the Bible. The Bible is God's instruction manual for life. True wisdom starts with God, the "fear of God." True wisdom comes from God as found in His Word, the Bible. I believe that the Bible is given "by inspiration of God," which literally means "God breathed." I believe that it is inerrant, infallible and that it is relevant, sufficient, clear and understandable for our lives.

If we want to save America, there is only one way to do it: get back to the Bible. Without that, we're lost.

Now I want you to notice this true wisdom's origin is "wisdom that is from above." It's found in God's Word, but its operations are sevenfold as described in our text. "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."

Let's look at each of them, in verse 17. First of all, it's "pure." It's undefiled and free from self-interest. And notice an important key: it's the word "first." James could have said that this wisdom is "pure," but he said, "first pure." He's trying to convey that this means purity is wisdom's primary and most fundamental quality above all else. So if you're wise, you'll first live a pure life. If you don't live a pure life, you are not wise. You might be shrewd in a worldly sense, you might have a high IQ in a worldly sense, but you're not wise as far as God's concerned. Purity is top of the list. A wise person lives a pure life.

For each of these qualities of true wisdom there is a Beatitude. Jesus said in Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." So if you want to be wise, live a pure life. Say "No" to sin and "Yes" to God. Purity leads to happiness; sin leads to sadness.

Second, true wisdom is "peaceable" or "peace loving." But notice that "purity" comes before "peaceable." Always, in the Bible. We never compromise purity for peace. Some say, "I just want to get along, so I'll lie. I don't want to speak the truth, because I don't want to cause problems. I don't want to take a stand for what is right. I want to be liked. I want to be accepted."

Never, ever compromise purity for peace when it comes to truth in God's Word. Doctrine should never be compromised for unity or peace in the church. "Can't we just get along? Can't we set doctrine aside? Set truth aside? Do we have to take a dogmatic stand on the inerrancy of the Bible? Can't we just like one another and get along?" No! We must "contend earnestly for the faith..."—or "the truth—"...which was once for all delivered to the saints," Jude 3. We should

never, ever compromise truth for unity.

Actually, unity is the outgrowth of purity. The only true purity is found in the unity of God's truth, found in the Bible.

So first "pure" then, secondly, "peaceable." Jesus said in Matthew 5:10, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God."

Number three is "gentle" or "considerate" or "forbearing." I like those descriptions. The word "gentle" means that you're making allowance for the feelings of others. You just don't run roughshod over other people. You have concern for their feelings. Someone said, "'Gentle' denotes the description which does not insist upon its own rights." It means not insisting on one's own rights, which is what Jesus did.

Have you ever lived with someone who always insists on their rights? Never on their responsibilities? Another one of the problems we're having in the world today is that we're demanding our rights, but we forget our responsibilities.

Number four is "willing to yield" or "easy to be intreated" in the King James translation. It's the concept of submission. This is not just a wife to her husband; this is Christians one to another and to other people. It's the opposite of stubborn. It means you're willing to yield. It means easy to live with and reasonable.

Have you ever lived with someone who is hard to live with? They're miserable, hard to get along with, stubborn. I think of Abigail, whose husband was unreasonable and foolish. And his name was Nabal, which meant "fool." What a sad story of Nabal, the fool. Don't be a Nabal.

Number five, in verse 17, is "full of mercy and good fruits." I like that description of "full." Fill your cup with mercy, pour it on someone else and God will refill it. Jesus said in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Chuck Smith said that when he was in college, he used to write at the top of all his test papers when he handed them in to the teacher, "Matthew 5:7, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.'" Isn't it funny that we want God to be merciful to us, but we don't want to be merciful to someone else? "God, smoke 'em right now! Lord, just fry 'em on the spot, in Jesus' name! But Lord, have mercy on me." So if we want to have mercy, we should show mercy to others.

Number six is "without partiality." If you're functioning in the wisdom of God, you're "without partiality," you don't show "respect of persons." It's also the idea of "unwavering." I like this idea, because it's a person who stands on principles and does not vacillate. When you are functioning in God's wisdom, you function by principles, and you don't waver from them. Someone said,

"Methods are many,

Principles are few.

Methods always change,

Principles never do."

I learned that years ago when I was just starting my pastoral ministry. It has been something to help me through a long life of preaching and teaching and pastoring. Methods are always changing, but principles never change. Live by principles, not by the current tides and fashions of our culture around us today. Be unwavering. Don't change the truth or vacillate to accommodate a lie.

Number seven, lastly, is "without hypocrisy." It's also known as "duplicity." The opposite would be "sincerity." The word "sincere" comes from a Latin word which means "without wax" or "clean." In those days, when sculptures were made, a statue was carved, and they might accidentally knock the nose off. They would then take the powder from the stone, mix it with wax, form it into a nose and place it on the statue. You wouldn't be able to tell it's fake, it's phony or it's not "sincere." It would be fine until you brought it home, put it on your patio in the sun and then the nose would melt and drip down the face. It's because it wasn't "sincere."

The Greek word for "hypocrisy" is "hupokrisis," which was used for actors on the stage. They used masks over their face to depict different roles. So the word "hupokrite," one who "speaks from under." So it was used of the Greek actors, who spoke from under a mask.

"Hypocrisy" is okay on the stage using a mask, but not in our lives. Too many Christians are wearing masks. They're always changing their masks; you don't know who they really are. But when you function in heavenly wisdom, you are a person without hypocrisy, and you practice sincerity. Jesus was sincere.

Now notice, thirdly and lastly, in verse 18, the outcome of true, godly, heavenly wisdom. How does it work its way out? It says, "Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." The picture here is that of farming and sowing. This verse is the counterpart of verse 16. Verse 16 is the outcome of false wisdom: envy, strife, confusion and evil works.

Does this describe your life and your home? Its counterpart is verse 18: true, godly wisdom is "the fruit of righteousness." It's "sown in peace by those who make peace." So the picture is of sowing and reaping. If we sow peace, we will reap righteousness. Living by God's wisdom brings peace and righteousness.

Now if you compare these contrasts, it's easy to say, "God, I want wisdom from above."

Proverbs 3:13-18 says, "Happy..."—or "O how blessed"—"...is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding; for her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She..."—that is, "wisdom"—"...is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her. Length of days is in her right hand, in her left

hand riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who retain her."

Now the question I want to close with is, "How do we get ahold of and retain, in the words of the writer of Proverbs, 'wisdom'?" Let me give you four bullet points, by way of application, on how to live a wise life."

Number one, you must know Christ personally. The Bible says, "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him," 1 Corinthians 2:14. You must be born again. Not just religious, not just believing in God with your head. You must be—in the theological term—regenerated. You must have a new, spiritual life, the life of God in your soul. Being a Christian means you're born from above. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says, "Christ Jesus...became for us wisdom from God."

So true wisdom starts with knowing Christ personally. Do you know Him personally? If you're just coming to church, but you haven't been born again, Christianity is foolishness to you. Once you're born again, you see the wisdom that is found in Christ.

The second thing you need to do to live wisely is read the Bible obediently. James says in James 1:22, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only." If you don't read your Bible, you're not wise. You may know a lot about sports and cars, science and computers, but if you don't read the Bible and you don't practice the Bible, you're not wise. Psalm 1:1-3 says, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper."

All you have to do to have a blessed, wonderful, happy, successful life is to get the Bible hidden in your heart. Psalm 119:11 says, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You."

Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, said that we should read the Bible until our blood is "bibleing." I've added to that—until you're "burping" Scripture. That's hiding God's Word in your heart.

So you know Christ personally, you read the Bible obediently, and number three, pray to God humbly. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

If you are married and raising children today, you should get on your knees and pray. If you're trying to raise a family in this wicked world today, pray, pray, pray. Pray for your marriage, pray for your children, pray for your grandchildren. Pray for the children in our church. Pray. The Bible says, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much," James 5:16.

And number four, fear the Lord reverently. Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the

beginning of wisdom.” What does it mean to “fear” the Lord? It means that you respect God more than anything else.

So how do we get and retain wisdom? Know Christ personally, read His Word obediently, pray to God humbly and fear the Lord reverently.