

In the Gentleness of Wisdom

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[0 : 00] James chapter 3, and let's begin at verse number 13. 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, and 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. Father, would you again please bless to us the reading and the preaching of your word.

[1 : 27] Help us to be hearers, to be doers. Give us wisdom that we can understand and discern. Make us like the Bereans who were committed to testing and evaluating and seeing whether these things were so.

Father, would you please help us. Holy Spirit, please do work among us today. And please start that work in me, as I have the privilege of serving your people this morning by preaching.

In Jesus' name, amen. It is not hard to tell the difference between light and darkness. And it is not hard to tell the difference between kindness and cruelty.

We can spot these contrasts right away. It's not difficult to see the difference between a \$1 bill and a \$20 bill, is it?

But if I held up for you a real \$20 bill and a counterfeit \$20 bill, you wouldn't notice the difference at first glance.

[2 : 41] And even after closer inspection, you'd probably struggle to determine which one can buy you a large pizza and which one is going to get you a visit from the Secret Service.

James has already shown us the danger of counterfeits. He's talked about a counterfeit kind of love.

A love that claims to love God without loving their neighbors. He's also talked about a counterfeit kind of faith.

Faith that does not work compared to faith with works. True faith.

In today's text, James exposes a counterfeit wisdom. Wisdom that sounds spiritual and it looks very confident and it appears so very effective.

[3 : 43] But this wisdom does not come from God. It's difficult to tell the difference between wisdom in air quotes and true wisdom.

As difficult as it is to tell the difference between a counterfeit and a real \$20. But if we compare the fruit of so-called wisdom with true wisdom, we're going to see that the differences could not be more obvious.

And that's because wisdom isn't measured by what you know. It is measured by what you grow. Look at your Bible in verse number 13.

And notice that our text begins with a question. Do you see that? That question reminds us that beginning back in chapter 3 in verse 1, 12 verses earlier, and continuing on down through verse 12 of chapter 4, James is especially addressing the teachers within the believing community.

Who is wise and understanding among you. He's speaking first, especially to the teachers. Who is wise and understanding among you.

[5 : 18] By his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. Just because you know more does not mean that you are a good teacher.

And being theologically sound, holding the right doctrine, doesn't qualify you for leadership of God's people.

And catch this. James doesn't tell the teachers, look, I want you to be wise. What is his expectation?

His expectation is that the leaders model a way of life. A way of life that yields good works. That arise from the meekness of wisdom. We don't need to wonder what James means by works.

[6 : 27] He means be doers of the word and not hearers only. He means show kindness and compassion towards the poor and the powerless.

He means care for the orphans and widows. Meet practical needs with more than thoughts and prayers. Be quick to hear. Slow to speak. Slow to anger.

You should have a well-bridled tongue. Good works, James. Good works are his expectation. Good works that arise from the meekness of wisdom.

Please don't confuse meekness with weakness. Meekness is not cowardice. It's not timidity.

It's not passivity or indecision. Meekness is deeply tied with gentleness. Gentleness. Gentleness.

Gentleness is strength that refuses to exploit weakness.

[7 : 34] It is authority that will not take advantage of others. It is power. It is power. It is power.

Given over to God's will.

Guided by the words and ways of Jesus. And governed by the Holy Spirit. This is meekness.

This is meekness. James expects leaders to have a way of life that yields good works that arise from the meekness, the gentleness of wisdom.

Gentleness, then. Is wisdom made visible? Sadly. Leaders in the believing community are setting a different kind of example.

Teachers of God's people are devastating the church with their galloping mouths. Stirring up tension and division.

[8 : 42] They are modeling a counterfeit wisdom. Look at verse 14. 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 kind of vile practice.

This other wisdom, wisdom in air quotes, this other wisdom is worldly. It is unspiritual.

It is demonic. A leader whose works and words arise from this pseudo wisdom is a messenger of the devil.

[9 : 52] We understand this because James says so in verse 15, but also because of the fruit this so-called wisdom produces.

Look at verse 14. First, James says, bitter jealousy. Bitter jealousy. This is emotional outrage that identifies and confronts those who are not like us.

Those we consider less faithful. Those we think are too cowardly to stand up for what's right. Those who are out of alignment with our party values.

Another translation for bitter jealousy is harsh zeal. I think that's helpful. Second, counterfeit wisdom produces selfish ambition.

Scott McKnight describes this as the unscrupulous determination to get one's way. And another scholar writes this.

[11 : 14] This is the vice of a leader of a party created for his own pride. It is party ambition. Party rivalry. Selfish ambition.

The result of this type of leadership is both reckless and destructive. Counterfeit wisdom leads to disorder and wickedness.

It's verse number 16. Like a rabid dog that lunges and breaks free from its chain.

Leaders who are driven by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. They break all moral anchors. After all, when you believe that you are being zealous for the right cause, then the ends will always justify the means.

I don't think we should be surprised that the unchecked verbal fanaticism of these leaders results in violence. Look at chapter 4 in verse 1.

[12 : 33] What causes quarrels? And what causes fights among you? Is it not this?

That your passions are at war within you? You desire and you do not have? So you murder?

You covet and you cannot obtain? So you fight and quarrel? You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

Chaos in the community is the result of unrestrained passions for power and authority. It is the partisanship that leads to disputes and rivalries.

And when you don't get your way, but you are utterly convinced that you're right, you are willing to fight and you may even murder, James says.

[13 : 49] Verse number 2. And if you wonder, does James literally mean taking an opponent's life? Let me remind you that this is the second time he has mentioned murder and he's going to mention it again in chapter 5 and verse 6.

And James is not the only apostle concerned about violence. Peter also, first epistle, chapter 4, verse 15, warns against murder.

You wouldn't think you would need to warn God's people about this. And yet here we are. When we follow leaders motivated by selfish ambition.

Look at the middle of verse 2. What could these leaders have if only they asked for it? What could they have if only they asked for it?

Well, James told us back in chapter 1 and verse 5, you can have wisdom. You can have real, true wisdom.

[15 : 08] If only you would ask for it. If any of you lacks wisdom, James wrote, let him ask God who gives generously.

They could have God's wisdom. But they don't ask for it. Why not? Because they want something other than what God wants to give.

They want power. They want authority. They want control. And even when they do pray, and I suspect we need to put that into air quotes as well, even when they do pray, James says, you're not getting what you ask for.

Why not? Because your motives are corrupt. you're praying for more zeal and greater ambition for yourself and your followers so that you can achieve your own goals.

Do you remember the song, I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart? Remember that song? Oh, maybe I'll share it this afternoon.

[16 : 23] Classic, classic Sunday school kids song. Look at verse 14. Counterfeit wisdom produces bitter jealousy and selfish ambition down in your heart.

And when you live by this wisdom, I promise you, you won't be happy. you will be arrogant and false to the truth.

Your behavior will deny the gospel that you claim to be defending. Defending. true wisdom is as different from counterfeit wisdom as light is from darkness.

True wisdom is pure. It does not dabble in wickedness for the sake of the cause. a leader guided by this wisdom is peaceable and not pugnacious.

That's a great King James version word. they abstain from reckless rhetoric that stirs others up. They're not looking for reasons to be offended.

[17 : 56] They're not eager to engage in conflict, even for the sake of being correct. And that's because true wisdom is gentle.

And gentleness tempers zeal and ambition. temptation. It makes you willing to be wronged. It invites you to forego your rights, to choose not to get even, or demand the opportunity to defend your reputation.

temptation. This wisdom is open to reason. It is teachable rather than obstinate, reasonable rather than irritable, gracious in disagreement rather than fighting for its way.

Because it is full of mercy and good fruits, this wisdom does good works. It moves followers towards loving their neighbors and caring for orphans and widows, meeting practical needs of immigrants and outcasts.

True wisdom does not tow the party line because it's the party line. It is impartial. It resists partiality and partisanship.

[19 : 23] The things that fracture friendships and communities and churches and countries. Finally, true wisdom is sincere.

It doesn't rationalize sinful behaviors for the sake of the mission. It doesn't claim to be Christian while betraying the character of Christ.

it produces holistic consistency, a healthy wholeness in spirit and soul and mind and body.

verse 17. 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.

we've already observed in this letter when James speaks of righteousness he is not referring to justification by faith he's using an Old Testament sense of justice or the kind of community that God intends for his people to both experience and embody.

[21 : 17] And so teachers and leaders who are marked by this true wisdom they understand that while public outrage and verbal attacks may rally followers to an agenda that kind of anger does not lead to God's justice instead of harsh words that attack those who are unlike us godly leaders God's leaders can be identified by peaceableness that produces more peace and in this culture of peace that surrounds them peacemakers reap a harvest of God's righteousness happiness they enjoy and they help establish and they embody the kind of community that

God intends for his people just like a counterfeit 20 so called wisdom can look convincing in the moment especially when it has so many followers and especially when they use religious words and especially when it seems to achieve certain specific results that the leaders want but eventually counterfeit wisdom is betrayed by its fruit like the pen that tests the \$20 bill at the convenience store now is the time to hold wisdom up to the light not to the light of worldly success not to the light of tribal applause but to the light the pure light the glorious light of

Christ likeness and so we should ask what kind of wisdom is growing in me and we should ask who is shaping my vision of wisdom and verse 13 should help us evaluate our teachers our influencers our leaders we should ask are the voices that I follow modeling good works that flow from the meekness the gentleness of wisdom if gentleness is wisdom made visible!

then its good works may mean being reasonable rather than irritable and it may mean choosing peace when a word of sarcasm or snarkiness could really win the argument it may mean silencing the voices that stir outrage even if they claim to share your theology or worldview it may mean speaking patiently to your spouse or your sibling instead of raising your voice to get your way it may mean being full of mercy and serving those in need it may mean scrolling past that post that is just fueling outrage rather than sharing it to get the approval of others it may mean that we need to stop rationalizing the selfish ambition of our leaders and carefully test the works of those that we follow and evaluate whether they are motivated by harsh zeal or by gentle wisdom it may mean creating space between yourself and leaders or parties that don't look like

Jesus because Jesus says Matthew chapter 5 blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth and Jesus said blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy and Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God and when Jesus invites us to himself listen to how he describes his heart come to me Matthew chapter 11 come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest take my yoke upon you and learn from me why would

[27 : 15] I want to learn from you because I am gentle and I am lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls wisdom from below says win by power James says wisdom wins by peace worldly wisdom sows self and it reaps strife gentleness is wisdom made visible and it harvests peace as it creates space for weary troubled souls to find rest steadfastness through suffering results in the delightful gift of becoming wiser with

Jesus and this wisdom is shaping us isn't it this wisdom is shaping us in humble holiness and gentle reasonableness and merciful goodness and every word we speak and every choice we make and every single need we encounter is an opportunity to make our faith visible to testify to our father's goodness and to offer hope and healing through lives changed by the implanted word the gospel of our lord Jesus Christ and so my brothers and sisters my beloved brothers and sisters may our faith not be alone may we be trained in the gentle wisdom of Jesus that produces good works may we be known by our peaceableness and reap the harvest of God's justice by God's grace let's be doers of the word and not hearers only let's pray father we are grateful to receive your word holy spirit would you be so kind as to work right now in our hearts and just purge away anything that was me anything that was empty unhelpful emotion anything that was just rhetoric for the sake of being clever would you take this away from our minds and cause us to receive your word plant your word deep down inside of us father we so desperately want to be hearers and doers of your word and yet we confess how easy it is to be swayed and led away by the kind of wisdom that James describes as earthly and unspiritual and demonic because it seems to get results and it seems popular and the people who claim to have it seem like they're getting things done oh father we want to be more and more and more like

Jesus Lord Jesus thank you for calling us to yourself with these words of comfort and peace and so we come to you with hearts and souls that are weary weary of the noise of the world weary of the noise of rivalries and divisions and parties and factions and dissensions and disunity and division we are weary of all of this so we come to you asking that you would give us rest for our souls and we receive again the forgiveness that we need for being tempted to follow these kind of leaders with so-called wisdom that we now understand is a counterfeit kind of wisdom please help us help us your word tells us that you will give us wisdom if we ask we want this kind of wisdom the gentleness of wisdom so that we produce the good works and that we are known by these good works and that our brothers and sisters in the faith even those who we may not perfectly align with that they would recognize that there is something about that person that is compelling and it is Christ in them father we ask that you would help us and we pray in Jesus name amen holy