

James: sermon #7
The Wisdom of God!
(James 3:13-18)

Introduction

In the first part of chapter 3 James **had exhorted his readers to get control of their tongues**. But “*no man can tame the tongue*” he says (James 3:8). Is it then hopeless? No, **God is able**. And this leads James to contrast **the wisdom of God**, which leads to **right living** (*and a controlled tongue*) in contrast to **man’s wisdom**, which leads to all kinds of **bad fruit**.

Godly wisdom is a primary biblical theme: “*Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom...*” says (Prov. 4:7a). We then learn in Scripture that **this wisdom is** not a “what” but a “who” namely **Jesus Christ**. And so we learn that **our need for God’s wisdom in this life is filled by sharing actively in Jesus’ love and life**.

James opens this section on wisdom with a challenging question: “**Who is wise and understanding among you?** (James 3:13). The behavior of some Christians had him wondering! The **spiritually mature** were **practicing God’s wisdom**. But the **spiritually immature** (*who were running at the mouth!*) were **practicing man’s wisdom—worldly wisdom**. James compares these two kinds of wisdom according to three contrasting results: **Origins, Operations** and **Outcomes**. May God help us learn and live. May we all *wise up!*

1. Contrast in origins (3:15, 17a)

a. *Man’s wisdom*

15 *Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil...*

James begins with the **origin of man’s wisdom**. It’s **earthly, unspiritual and grounded ultimately in the mind of Satan**. It is **not from God and is thus out of sync with reality and truth**. It thus **leads ultimately to failure**, no matter how ‘wise’ it may appear at first.

The Bible gives many examples of the folly of man’s wisdom. The building of the **Tower of Babel** seemed like a wise enterprise, but it ended in failure and confusion (**Gen. 11:1–9**). It seemed wise for Abraham to go to Egypt when famine came to Canaan, but the results proved otherwise (**Gen. 12:10–20**). King Saul thought it was wise to put his armor on young David for the lad’s battle with Goliath, but God’s plan was otherwise (**1 Sam. 17:38ff**). The disciples thought it was wise to dismiss the great crowd and let them find their own food; but Jesus took a few loaves and fishes and fed them. The Roman “*experts*” in **Acts 27** thought it was wise to leave port and set sail for Rome, even though Paul disagreed with a warning; and the storm that followed proved that Paul’s wisdom was better than their expert counsel.

James characterizes man’s flawed wisdom as **earthly, unspiritual [sensual], and of the devil** (James 3:15). It is formed by these three downward influences: **the**

world, the flesh, and the devil (Eph. 2:1–3). All three war against the true wisdom of God.

1) The world

There is a “*wisdom of the world*” (1 Cor. 1:20–21). But don’t confuse it with the world’s knowledge. Certainly, there is a great deal of knowledge in this world, and we all benefit from it; but, sadly, there is not much wisdom. Mankind unlocks the secrets of the universe, but does not know what to do with them.

The world in its flawed wisdom does not know God and rejects the Gospel of God: “*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...*” (1 Cor. 1:18a). **Man’s wisdom is foolishness to God (1 Cor. 1:20), and God’s wisdom is foolishness to man (1 Cor. 2:14). Man’s wisdom comes from flawed human reason, while God’s wisdom comes *from revelation and is grounded in perfect Love.* Man’s worldly wisdom will come to nothing (1 Cor. 1:19), while God’s perfect wisdom *will endure forever.***

Walking in darkness, the world is oblivious to God’s wisdom. And every increase in man’s knowledge magnifies the problem. “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding*” (Prov. 9:10). “*There is no fear of God before their eyes*” (Rom. 3:18).

2) The flesh

Man’s wisdom is “*unspiritual*” or “*sensual*”—that is, it is “*natural.*” The Greek word is *psukikos*, which comes from the Greek word *psuke* meaning “*life,*” or “*soul.*” The idea seems to be **of man’s fallen nature as opposed to the true and perfect spiritual mind and life of Christ.** There is a wisdom that flows from man’s fleshly (fallen) nature which is totally apart from the Spirit of God.

3) The devil

Man’s wisdom is “*of the devil.*” Perhaps the best translation is *demonic.* We’re talking here of wisdom that has its ultimate origin in the devil. It emerges first in **Genesis 3**, where Satan successfully deceived Eve. It continues through the Bible where a “**wisdom of Satan**” is at work, fighting against the wisdom of God. Satan convinced Eve that she would be like God. He told her that the tree would make her wise. Ever since, people have continued to believe Satan’s lies and have tried to become their own gods (Rom. 1:18–25). **Satan is cunning! He has wisdom that will confound and confuse you if you do not know the wisdom of God.** Let us *wise up* to the wisdom of God!

b. God’s wisdom

17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is...

God’s wisdom, of course, **originates with God:** “**Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights...**” (James 1:17). The Christian looks up to heaven for all they need: **Their citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), just as their Father is in heaven (Matt. 6:9). Their**

treasures are in heaven (Matt. 6:19ff). They are born from above (John 3:1–7), and their home and hope are in heaven (John 14:1–6). *They set their affection and attention on things above, not on earthly things* (Col. 3:1–4).

And so **the Christian looks up and seeks God’s wisdom**. It is the only wisdom that **aligns** with ultimate reality (**truth**), and leads to true success (**life**). **What is true wisdom? It is Jesus (1 Cor. 1:24, 30) in whom “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3)**. And so the **first step toward God’s wisdom is to trust Jesus, God’s living Word**. And then Jesus, through his Spirit, leads us to his written word—the holy Scriptures, which make us “*wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*” (2 Tim. 3:15).

God imparts this wisdom as we ask for it in faith: “*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God*” (James 1:5). The Holy Spirit of God is “*the Spirit of wisdom and revelation*” (Eph. 1:17) and he **directs** us in the wisest paths as we trust in God, study God’s word and seek God’s wisdom in prayer.

The origin of true spiritual wisdom is God. **To seek wisdom from any other source is to ask for trouble**. There is no need to get trapped in the counterfeit wisdom of the world, the wisdom that **caters to the flesh and accomplishes the work of the devil**. May we seek the true wisdom of God in Jesus. May we all wise up!

2. Contrast in operations (3:13–14, 17)

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

Since God’s wisdom (**which is from above**) and man’s wisdom (**which is earthly, sensual and devilish**) originate from **radically different** sources, they operate in radically different ways. By their fruit they are known. **So let’s do some fruit examining**.

a. Fruit of man’s wisdom

14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth....

Man’s wisdom **bears the negative fruit** of bitter envy, selfish ambition, boasting and truth denying:

1) ***Bitter envy (v. 14a)***. This word carries the meaning of jealousy. It ties in with James 3:1, where James warned them not to be jealous of someone else’s office. The wisdom of the world says, “*You’re as good as the others, maybe better!*” It’s easy to go on an ego trip under the guise of spiritual zeal. We ought to be zealous in the things of the Lord, but we **must be sure that our motives are right**.

2) Selfish ambition (v. 14b). The issue here is “party spirit.” It’s a single word in Greek that was used to describe a politician out canvassing for votes. The world’s wisdom says, “**Get all the support you can! Ask the people in the church if they are for you or against you!**” Of course, this spirit of self-seeking creates rivalry and division. Paul warned: “**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves**” (Phil. 2:3).

3) Boasting (v. 14c). Pride loves to boast, and often does so by putting down others. Instead, we should seek God’s glory. In 2 Corinthians 10, when Paul was forced to boast about his ministry, **he was careful to give God the glory.** “Of course, we shouldn’t dare include ourselves in the same class as those who write their own testimonials, or even to compare ourselves with them! All they are doing, of course, is to measure themselves by their own standards or by comparisons within their own circle, and that doesn’t make for accurate estimation, you may be sure” (2 Cor. 10:12 PH). **When God’s wisdom is at work, there is a sense of humility and mutual submission. You have no desire to compare yourself with other Christians, because a Christian always sees Christ in every situation—and compared with him, all of us have a long way to go!**

4) Truth denying (v. 14d). Worldly wisdom denies what is true, leading to deceit. The sequence is easy to see. First, there is **selfish ambition that leads to rivalry**. In order to “win” we boast; *and boasting usually involves lies! A man’s life is not read in his press releases*; it is read by the Lord in his heart. “*Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts*” (1 Cor. 4:5).

b. Fruit of God’s wisdom

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom...17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Man’s wisdom produces all kinds of negative and corrupt fruit as we have already discussed. But God’s wisdom *bears* the positive fruit of humility, purity, peaceableness, consideration, submission, mercy, good fruit, single-mindedness and sincerity.

1) Humility (v. 13). This is not weakness, but meekness: power under control. The humble person does not selfishly assert themselves. The Greek word was used for a horse that had *been broken* so that its power was under control. **The humble person seeks only God’s glory and does not cater to the praise of men.** Such humility is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23, translated “gentleness”); it cannot be manufactured by man. Of course, there is a false humility that some mistake for meekness, but it’s counterfeit. The phrase, “*humility that comes from wisdom,*” is interesting (James 3:3). **Humility is the right use of power, and wisdom is the**

right use of knowledge. They go together. The truly wise person will show in their deeds that they are God's child. Attitude and action go together.

2) Purity (v. 17a). The idea behind the word “pure” is “chaste, free from defilement.” James used it again in **James 4:8**—“purify your hearts,” or, “make chaste your hearts.” **God's wisdom produces devotion to the Lord (2Cor. 11:3) that is expressed in a pure manner of life (1Peter 3:2).** In contrast, man's wisdom leads to spiritual adultery (**James 4:4**).

3) Peaceableness (v. 17b). Man's wisdom produces competition, rivalry, and war (**James 4:1–2**); but **God's wisdom yields a peaceable spirit.** This is the peace that comes from purity (**right thinking and living**): “**The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever**” (Isa. 32:17).

4) Consideration (v. 17c). One commentator calls this fruit “sweet reasonableness.” The idea is of being considerate of others—being gentle. **The considerate, gentle person does not deliberately cause fights, but neither do they compromise the truth in order to keep peace.** This is God's wisdom at work.

5) Submission (v. 17d). God's wisdom makes the person reasonable: agreeable and easy to live and work with; open to persuasion. **Man's wisdom makes the person disagreeable: hard, stubborn and close-minded.** The submissive person is willing to hear all sides of a question, but does not compromise their own convictions. They can disagree without being disagreeable. **They are “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19).** Many people think that stubbornness is conviction, and they must have their own way. **When God's wisdom is at work, there is a willingness to listen, think, pray, and obey whatever God reveals.** The focus of submission is always toward God first.

6) Mercy (v. 17e). To be “full” of something means to be “controlled by.” The person who follows God's wisdom is **controlled by mercy.** “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). **God in his grace gives us what we do not deserve, and in his mercy does not give us what we do deserve.** Our Lord's parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates the meaning of mercy (**Luke 10:25–37**). For a Samaritan to care for a Jewish stranger was an act of mercy. He could gain nothing from it, except the blessing that comes from doing the will of God; and the victim could not pay him back. **That is mercy.**

7) Good fruit (v. 17f). Faithful people **bear** the fruit of righteousness (**James 3:18**). **God's wisdom does not make a life empty; it makes it full. The Spirit produces fruit to the glory of God (John 15:1–16).** The lawyer in **Luke 10:25–37** was willing to **discuss** the subject of neighborliness, but unwilling to be a neighbor and help someone else. **God's wisdom is practical; it changes the life and produces good works to the glory of God.**

8) Single-mindedness (v. 17g). The word translated “*impartial*” in the NIV is probably best translated “*unwavering*” as in the NASB. It suggests ***singleness of mind and is the opposite of vacillating (James 1:6)***. When you lean on man’s wisdom, you are pressured from one side and then another to change your mind or take a new viewpoint. When you **have God’s wisdom, you need not waver; you can be decisive and not be afraid.** Wisdom from above brings strength from above.

9) Sincerity (v. 17h). The Greek word translated *hypocrite* in the New Testament means “*one who wears a mask, an actor.*” **When man’s wisdom is at work, there may be insincerity and pretense. When God’s wisdom is at work, there is openness and honesty, “*speaking the truth in love*” (Eph. 4:15). Wherever you find God’s people pretending and hiding, you can be sure the wisdom of this world is governing. “*Religious politics*” is an abomination to God. “**Faith is living without scheming.**”**

Summary. James here outlines a very powerful contrast between **the operation of God’s spiritual wisdom and the operation of man’s worldly wisdom**. It is profitable for all of us to evaluate our own lives and ministries in the light of what James says. **The church is called to operate on the basis of God’s wisdom, not man’s: “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us” (1 Cor. 2:12).** May we all **wise up!**

3. Contrast in outcomes (3:16, 18)

Origin determines outcome. Worldly wisdom produces worldly results; spiritual wisdom brings forth a spiritual harvest.

a. *Man’s wisdom produces trouble (v. 16)*

16 For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice....

Envy, strife, confusion, evil deeds. It doesn’t appear that God’s wisdom was at work in that assembly of saints! In **chapter 4**, James deals with “*wars and fightings*” among believers. Wrong thinking produces wrong living. The word translated “***disorder***” is related to “***unstable***” in **James 1:8** and “***restless***” in **James 3:8**. **Jesus used this word to describe the convulsions of the world in the last days (Luke 21:9).**

Jealousy, competition, party spirit—all of these **contribute to disorder**. The Tower of Babel in **Genesis 11** is a good illustration. From man’s point of view, the building of the tower was a **wise thing; but from God’s viewpoint, the project was corrupt and sinful. The result? Disorder; confusion.**

Disorder sets the stage for “every evil practice” (James 3:16). *Evil* here means “**worthless, of no account.**” It reminds us of the “*wood, hay, straw*” of **1 Corinthians 3:12**. A ministry operating in the wisdom of this world may appear to be successful, but in the Day of Judgment it may burn up. **And the ultimate judge is Jesus, God’s Living Word who is the wisdom of God. The most important thing we can do in our churches is measure our ministries by the standard of Jesus.**

b. God's wisdom produces righteousness (v. 18)

18 Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

There is a vast difference between man-made results and a God-given harvest. God's harvest of righteousness (right living) is reaped by peacemakers, not troublemakers not agitators. Perhaps James is here alluding to Jesus' words: "***Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God***" (Mt. 5:9). Peacemakers are acting like their true Father (*who has adopted us all in Christ Jesus*). Peace is the "soil" in which the good fruit of right living grows.

Conclusion

It is a serious thing to be an agitator in God's family. One of the sins that God hates is stirring up "***dissension among brothers***" (Prov. 6:19). We need God's wisdom to lead us into the righteousness that rejects all the corrupt fruit of man's failed wisdom. Indeed, "***blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she (wisdom) is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold***" (Prov. 3:13-14).

May we all share fully in the wisdom of God found in Jesus. May we all grow up in *the wisdom of God!*

Sermon Series is provided by Ted Johnston via the Senior Pastor Team of Tom and Alberta Ecker to assist ... Bible studies in series covering a book of the Bible.

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