

## **DOWN-TO-EARTH HEAVENLY WISDOM**

**James 3:13–18**

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James 3:13–18 (NIV)

“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. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. 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. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”

Today we look at the theme “Down-to-Earth Heavenly Wisdom.” Did you notice the Scripture I read begins with a question? “Who’s wise and understanding among you?” I’d like to be able to raise my hand, but I must admit that there are introspective moments when I look at that question and say, “Sometimes I’m wise and sometimes it doesn’t seem like I’m wise at all.”

There’s a Peanuts cartoon that shows Charlie Brown talking to Linus. They’re standing in the backyard. Their arms are resting on the fence, a concrete lock fence. Charlie is soliloquizing about life. Every word in the frames of the cartoon finds Charlie saying a thought—one thought leading to the next. He begins by saying, “I never know what seems to be going on... Right from the very start, my life has been strange... I think I know what happened... I must have missed all of the rehearsals.”

I feel that way. Why is it that you really haven’t had a chance to rehearse for big decisions in life? You sort of stumble along through them. So you find this question of James, “Who’s wise

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and understanding among you?” The Bible has a different idea of wisdom than most of our contemporary definitions. We think that somebody who has wisdom must be studying philosophy, and have a high IQ. But wisdom, from a biblical point of view, is applying our faith in everyday life. It’s acting concretely in the world in which we live, in a manner, a way of acting and speaking, that God himself would call us to.

James has been dealing with that kind of practical faith and practical wisdom all the way through his letter. Maybe it would even help us get a hold of the word “wisdom” in James 3, if we used the word “lifestyle.” For it is a lifestyle that we’re being called to. What happens a few years into the Christian life, if the wonderful change that had taken place is being unraveled, now instead of changing into the personality of Jesus Christ, you find yourself going back into your old personality?

James is facing that as he writes this letter, because as he picks up his pen to address Christians, it’s only twenty years out since the resurrection of Christ. These new believers had been able to sing “What a wonderful change,” but now, as James is addressing them, he’s finding that these first century believers have the same kinds of struggles and fallings that we have in the twentieth century. We try to correct the departure from the faith in tough times, and tough times do try our faith. He has been correcting believers who have forgotten about the change and have instead been climbing a social ladder of success and neglecting service to Christ and to the needy. He’s been talking to believers who have used their tongue in inappropriate ways and in vicious ways. Now, as we pick up this passage, he’s even addressing believers who are into warring camps. Sometimes, the warring camp is within a family, sometimes it’s within a friendship, sometimes it’s within the body of Christ. James is saying, “How would you like to have a lifestyle that is from God?” So he sets before us, in these verses from 13–18, two ways—two wisdoms, two

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lifestyles. In verses 14–16, he sets before us a lifestyle that is not from God. In verses 17–18, he contrasts that with a lifestyle that is from God. Both lifestyles are marked by certain characteristics. Both have a source that can be identified as to where the lifestyle comes from. And both produce specific results.

#### **I. The first is the wisdom that is unlike God (verses 14–16).**

It has definite character. The character has three components to it.

**A.** The first is the component of bitter strife. In other words, a way to tell whether or not we are walking with the Lord is if there is a presence of strife or anger in our life. If life is marked by anger, by outbursts of temper, by coldness, by dumping on other people, by stares and huffy actions, by laying in wait to strike a barb or do some damage with our tongue or with our actions—then we are not living God’s way, no matter what our profession of faith is. It’s so easy to slip into a kind of a life that seeks to settle the score rather than getting on with the more difficult matters of forgiveness and restoration and reconciliation.

Aren’t there moments in our own lives when we pass up opportunities for reconciliation and forgiving, healing in a relationship, because we are still going for the proverbial pound of flesh? “You’ll pay for what you did to me. I’ll make you pay, if it’s the last thing I do.”

An issue of *National Geographic* magazine included a photograph of fossil remains of two saber tooth tigers that were locked in mortal combat. One had bitten deep into the leg bone of the other, and would not let go. They both became mired in ooze and that had killed them both. Strife or anger in our life may deal a mortal blow to the person with whom we are angry. The net result may be, however, that in the process, we go down as well. In our anger, in refusing to let go of the other person, it doesn’t let go of us either, and we just as surely perish.

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James is telling us to watch the level of hostility in our life, a life that is marked by strife and contention. Being always combative, assertive.

**B.** Then he's saying to us a second word: that a lifestyle that is marked by the earthly wisdom is one indicated by selfish ambition. Literally, this phrase is, "by strife in your heart." It's the idea of elbowing other people aside to get into first place. Ego fulfillment.

A life that is marked by putting self first winds up empty. You cannot gain satisfaction through simply doing things or by climbing a ladder. In fact, the whole of Scripture is against self-fulfillment. If you are living for self, you're dead inside. The way of Christ is the way of self-denial. It's the way of the cross. It's putting Christ first. It's putting others ahead of ourselves. It's humbly serving the Lord and serving family and serving other people and serving the needy. Unless there is giving in our life, unless there's serving in our life, our life is going to wind up with a high misery index.

James is so bold to insist that, if we disagree with him, we're not to boast about it and deny the truth. The character of such wisdom produces envy and strife, selfish ambition.

Where does this kind of lifestyle come from? What is its source? James gives us three sources. One is: It's not from heaven but of the earth. It's time-bound, earth-oriented. Secondly, he says that the source is unspiritual. The underlying Greek word is perhaps one of the more untranslatable words in the New Testament—"unspiritual" doesn't quite do it—you need a whole paragraph to describe the word that James uses. It's common in the English language. The word we derive psychology from, the root word: *psyche*. It means "the soul." The Greeks had three references to the nature of the human being. Body, soul and spirit. James is using the middle word. It stands for the animating life principle which both man and animals share in common. What he's saying, therefore, in this word is a life that has a style, a wisdom that is

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filled with strife and animosity and self-seeking and ego-fulfillment, has that in common with the animals—an animating kind of principle of self-defense and self-survival. It's unable to transcend itself and become concerned and interested and altruistic toward other people.

C. The third thing James says about the source of earthly wisdom is that it is of the devil. We're either becoming (in our personality) fashioned after the personality of Jesus Christ, or we're becoming like that other person—distorted and sick and unwholesome. The result of such a lifestyle, James indicates—in which you have envy and selfish ambition—is that there you will find disorder and every evil practice. It is a constant environment of commotion and upset, disorder and uproar.

### **II. But he contrasts this lifestyle with the desired lifestyle. The wisdom that is like God (verses 17–18).**

This has a source. Its source is from heaven. James, being an observant Jew, speaks as a Jewish person would today. Normally, an orthodox Jew will not use the name of God in everyday speech, but will substitute some other word for the name “God,” because it's a sacred name and should not be used in common or everyday speech. James almost does that kind of thing here by saying, “This wisdom is from heaven.” What he's really saying is, “This wisdom comes down from God.” The idea of the Christian life is that God has a very definite personality and our goal is to see the Holy Spirit shape that personality of God in us. Therefore, the source of heavenly wisdom is owed to God.

What is the character of such wisdom? There are eight specific things that James says in verse 17 about the character of a lifestyle that comes from God.

A. The first thing he says is that it is “pure.” That is, its motives are right before God. The inner life can bear God's scrutiny. There's no hidden secret or hidden agenda in our life. True wisdom

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can open up all the inner doors of life and let God in. Where there is need for cleansing and forgiveness, they can throw that open to the Lord and say, “Lord, cleanse me.” Otherwise, we’re just not dealing with the real personality, unless we can get to the core and open up our inner life to the work of God.

Last week, we talked about the difference between deliverance and discipline. I think a great deal of the Christian life has to do with the formation of discipline. But there are also times in our life when we seemingly do not have the power to open the inner core of our being to God. We need the help that God alone can give us supernaturally, with the invasion of His presence in our life. The Holy Spirit can do more in our inner life than anything else. We’ve got to open that inner core to God.

**B.** Pure, “peace-loving.” That is the lifestyle that God brings to us; one that seeks a right relationship with God and others. And it’s not on the side of strife. It’s not confrontational in its nature. Sometimes, we find ourselves needing, within the context of the Christian life, to confront an individual in order to bring about healing and redemption and honesty and righteousness. But the basic Christian lifestyle is one of peace-loving, that looks for what there is to commend, not what there is to correct. That looks for how we can bring healing and wholeness, not how we can find something wrong.

**C.** The third quality of such a lifestyle is that it is “considerate.” Here again is a Greek word that’s difficult to translate. Aristotle defined it as, “That which is beyond the law” or which “steps in to correct things when the law comes unjust.” There are times when a person is actually in the wrong, but to apply the strict letter of the law in punishment would be to also act unjustly, and therefore, one needs to be considerate. It’s the person who knows how to make allowances,

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how to temper justice with mercy. Who knows that there are higher things than consistency and rules and regulations—that there is something called “sweet reasonableness.” Tempered justice.

Do I sometimes think of God as waiting to punish me when I step out of line? If the Christian life is developing the personality of God, then if the word “considerate” is used as a desirable quality in us, it’s got to be a quality within God himself, who tempers His justice with His great grace and mercy. He wants that in us.

**D.** The fourth word that James employs as character for a heavenly lifestyle is the word “submissive.” Submissive means two things: “ever ready to obey” and “easy to persuade.” The idea of being easy to persuade doesn’t mean a person is a jellyfish, bending every which direction. But it is a person who is not stubborn. A person who is willing to listen, to reason and to appeal. Therefore, to be submissive is to be ready to fall in line and not insist on one’s own way. As well as to have a gentle, reasonable response to life.

**E.** Then “full of mercy” is a fifth characteristic of a heavenly lifestyle. Mercy, not only towards those not at fault and needy, but merciful towards those who are at fault. Mercy.

What a way to respond to people, instead of the slam back kind of way that we find so easy to do—the ways of this earth—to find another way in the door of the heart.

**F.** A sixth quality of heavenly wisdom is that it’s “full of...good fruit.” It abides in love and joy and peace and patience and goodness and gentleness and kindness and long-suffering.

**G.** It’s “impartial”—the seventh quality. That is, it has certain convictions that are held and do not change. You can count on the person being the same today as yesterday.

**H.** Then it’s “sincere.” It’s without hypocrisy.

All these are manifestations of the life God wants us to lead. What is the result of such a lifestyle?

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If the lifestyle that was unlike God produced a devastating effect, disorder and every evil practice—verse 16—then the lifestyle that God selects for us will produce a good effect.

“Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18, NIV).

Our task, therefore, is to bring healing and wholeness and peace within relationships. The only way you get a plentiful harvest is to plant a lot of seed. As one farmer said, “The first lesson of being a farmer is, ‘Don’t be cheap with the seed.’” That’s what James is saying in a spiritual sense. We do not go through life as Christians, finding ourselves doing an occasional good deed.

An occasional kind word now and then. An occasional reconciling effort here and there. The whole idea of the goodness of Christ dwelling in us is that we are the distributor hooked up to the combine of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is wanting to dump out of our personality a seed of peace and wholeness and mercy and gentleness and health. “As we allow ourselves to be that distributor,” James says, “we’re going to grow up having a harvest of righteousness in our life.”

Good relationships with God and good relationships with people.

Down-to-earth heavenly wisdom.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, we need this kind of wisdom in our everyday life. There are moments when all of us are pressed. We haven’t been through this particular juncture of life before or this particular decision. We haven’t had a rehearsal. We desperately need wisdom. Lord, we ask that You would do this process in our life by clearing first our hearts. As we look inside of us, we ask that anything in us that is unlike You would be cleansed and forgiven. We confess our sins to You. How easy it is to say that, especially in a public worship service, to say, “We confess our sins.” But how wonderful it is, Lord, to mean it from our hearts. All of us in this room, truly all of us, have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We’ve all failed You and others

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and ourselves—in thought and in word and in deed. Forgive us, O Lord. We seek to be pure. Help us to have that wonderful heavenly aspect of consideration in our life, which doesn't demand the pound of flesh, but which is merciful and peace-loving. Which is conciliatory rather than confrontational. Which seeks a harvest of righteousness through sowing seeds of peace. There may be families and marriages here that are going through a lot of stress at this time. Maybe some of it is marked by bitter strife and selfish ambition. Teach us again Your ways. Help us to discover, in our own needs, how you saved and also how you submitted, so that, in both loving and submitting, we may lay aside anger and sinfulness and experience Your healing in our hearts. We want the wisdom that is from above. We wouldn't be here today had we not wanted to seek You and express, in a renewed way, our love. Be the Lord of all of our life, every part of it. We pray, in Christ's name. Amen.