

Essential Character: Wisdom from Below, Wisdom from Above
James 3:13–18

Turn to James 3 please. “Who is wise and understanding among you?” That is how James begins our paragraph. Who is wise and understanding among you? James writes to scattered Jewish congregations. At the time Paul was writing his letters, there were many congregations that had only Jewish believers. James wrote to them.

Suppose someone from another church took you aside, and asked you that about this church. “You go to KCC, don’t you. Who is wise and understanding among you?” The important thing today is not whose name you would give. And of course, you might say “no one.” The important thing is what you think wisdom looks like. What definition of “wisdom” would you use to answer this: who is wise and understanding among you?

James writes to churches in which people are sure they are wise and understanding, but they are not. So James writes to show as plainly as he can how wisdom from above acts, and how wisdom from below acts. James writes so that if someone says to you, “who is wise and understanding among you,” you will at least know what you’re looking for. Let’s read our text.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their 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 above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom from above is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

1 Wisdom from Above – James 3:13

Who is wise and understanding among you? Assume here that James is skeptical. People claim this for themselves. They are wrong, because they do not know what wisdom and understanding are.

Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done ... Wisdom shows itself by conduct, by actions, by how we live and what we do. Wisdom for James has nothing to do with intelligence, or how thoughtful we can make ourselves sound. We find out if a person is wise by watching them live. *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done.* That’s the wisdom test.

Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. If we're looking for wisdom, we're looking at life and actions, and we're looking for a particular kind of life and actions – deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

This word “humility” is the same word in Greek as “meek,” as in “blessed are the meek” and “learn from me, for I am meek and lowly of heart.” It gets translated “meek” or “humble” or “gentle.” All three of those are good translations. You get the idea. The second last fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 comes from the same word: “gentleness and self-control” are the last two, that is, “meekness and self-control.”

Numbers 12: “*now the man Moses was very meek, more than all the people who were on the face of the earth.*” In that story, Moses’ older sister Miriam and his older brother Aaron decided they were just as good as Moses. Why should Moses be the Lord’s prophet? They could prophesy too.

And that’s when Numbers tells us, “*Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all the people who were on the face of the earth.*” The greatest leader God’s people ever had, and the greatest prophet, was the meekest man on the face of the earth.

This is James’s opening summary of wisdom from above: who is wise and understanding among us? We are looking for someone whose conduct and actions show humility, gentleness, meekness. That way of living shows wisdom and understanding from God.

2 Wisdom from Below – James 3:14–16

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts. The leaders of God’s people, church leaders, the teachers and the wise and understanding, are now competing with each other as rivals. Bitter envy and selfish ambition.

In Acts 20, Paul met with the elders of the church at Ephesus, just the elders. He told them, “after I leave, some from your own number will rise up and distort the truth.” Why will they do that? Why will some of these very Ephesian elders do that? “To draw away followers after themselves.” It is very easy for church leaders to want to do better than some other leader, so that they turn into rivals competing with each other.

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. They are not boasting about their envy and ambition, they are boasting that they are wise and understanding. “If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about being wise and understanding.”

They boast about being wise and understanding, and at the same time they have bitter envy and selfish ambition in their hearts! “Those who are full of party spirit and bitter zeal ought at least to be honest and stop claiming to be inspired by God’s heavenly wisdom!” (Davids, *James*, 151)

Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, natural, demonic. This is the opposite of the humility and meekness and gentleness that come from wisdom.

In the early days of this church, I was sure that KCC would grow and become a large church. But it didn't. So I was unhappy. I envied pastors of large churches, of growing churches, of churches that had new people coming all the time. I envied them. I spent the first 7 – 8 years of this church like that.

The Lord was kind to me, and took it all away. He was clear. At this point in time, this is how he wanted this church to be. No one was doing anything wrong. I should relax about size and just be faithful. I was happy to set that aside. Bitter envy and selfish ambition.

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

Wisdom from below produces unrest in the family of believers, and that is a bad thing. Understand here that the world around us really does call this wisdom. We need to push hard and compete to get ahead. That really is called “wisdom” in our world, but it is wisdom from below.

The wisdom of humility and gentleness is foolish, according to the wisdom from below. But according to the wisdom from above, humility and gentleness are as good as it gets. The meek will inherit the earth, my brothers and sisters. Wisdom from below, push hard and compete, is going to crash and burn.

The problem with wisdom from below in the church, says James, is that it produces disorder and unrest. James and Paul are both adamant that God wants life in the body of Christ to be peaceful and orderly.

3 Again, Wisdom from Above – James 3:17–18

But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. The pure person, more than anything, wants to be faithful to God. “Pure” does not mean sinless. James said earlier in this chapter that we all sin in many ways. We all know that this is true of us, but we didn't know it was so true of everyone else as well. We all sin in many ways, folks.

Such people can still be pure, because the priority in their heart is to live worthy of the Lord, and always please him. Above all, we want to serve God and be faithful to him. There is a lot of that among us, and that is the most wonderful thing that God can give anyone. The wisdom from above is first of all pure.

Then peace-loving, considerate, submissive. Peace-loving. Blessed are the peacemakers, said Jesus. Paul says in Titus, “warn a divisive person once, then warn them again, and after that have nothing to do with them.” Wisdom from above produces peace, as opposed to the disorder and unrest James mentioned earlier.

Peace-loving, considerate, submissive. That word “submissive” gets translated different ways: “willing to listen,” “open to reason,” “willing to yield.” There are people who always change their minds about things. That is not good. It is hard to get anywhere with people like that.

There are others who never change their minds. They make it a matter of principle that once they’ve decided something, they will not ever change their mind. That’s not the wisdom from above, people. The wisdom from above can be sure about something, and then hear another side they had not thought about before, and change their mind. Willing to yield. The wisdom from above says, “I don’t need to have my way on this.”

Full of mercy and good fruit. In James, “mercy” means practical help. In James 2 he writes, *Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?*

The wisdom from above helps brothers and sisters in need. This happens in our congregation. It is so important.

Impartial and sincere. Wisdom does not play favorites. Some people around us are going to be closer friends than others. That’s fine, just as it should be. But when we evaluate what is good and what is not good, it does not matter whether or not they are our friends.

In Leviticus 19, Moses said, *“Do not show partiality to the poor, or favoritism to the great. Judge fairly.”*

And lastly, *Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.* Jesus said, *Blessed are the peacemakers.* The third fruit of the Spirit is “peace.” James already said that the wisdom from above meant being peace-loving, in v17. And he comes back to it here at the end.

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. Whenever we make peace with our enemies, we plant seed. We peacefully plant seed. And when that seed grows and produces a crop, what we harvest is righteousness. The seed is making peace, and the harvest is righteousness.

When we get energetic about righteousness, we can persuade ourselves that to be righteous we need to set peace aside for a while. James tells us that the wisdom from above does *not* set peace aside to produce righteousness. Peaceful actions please God and produce righteousness.

Sometimes we need to have difficult conversations, in our church and in our homes. They are important, and need to happen. Let’s not wait until we explode. Have the hard talk, and have it as peacefully as possible. Have the hard talk, and have it as peacefully as possible.

Now let’s pull together this series on essential character.

4 Essential Character – Matthew 5:3–10; Galatians 5:22–23; James 3:13–18

In Matthew 5, Jesus says this kind of living is the beatitude life that God blesses. In Galatians 5, Paul says this kind of living is the fruit of the Spirit. In James 3, James says this kind of living shows the wisdom that comes from above. They are all talking about the same kind of conduct.

What is important to God that we do every day? What is important to the Lord Jesus that his followers do every day, every week? These three Scriptures are right at the center of that. None of us do this well. We all know that. We all sin in many ways. But it is good for us to know what we're aiming at, right? Even if we can't shoot well, we'll get closer to the target if we at least know what it is.

Let's pursue the right thing. Let's aim at what's important. Let's ask God for help with this.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their 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 above but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom from above is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, James writes this in chapter 1: "*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*" So we are asking you for this. We are asking for the wisdom from above, that we have been reading about today. You give this generously, it says. You do it without finding fault, it says. Ask and it will be given to you. God, we need more of this wisdom, and we're asking you. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.