Legacy Church

James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Eight

Show Me Your Wisdom

Where Wisdom Comes From and What It Grows

James 3:13–18

Last week James taught us that our mouths reveal our hearts. We said it this way: your words don't create the condition of your heart. They reveal it. Anger doesn't put something inside of you. Anger has a way of exposing what was already there. And we ended with a question: what's happening at the source? Maybe the gossip is coming from jealousy, or the criticism from pride, or the cutting remarks from bitterness. So I told you, don't just ask Jesus to change what comes out. Ask Him to show you where it's coming from.

Here's the thing. James isn't done with the source. The very next thing he says is, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" And two verses later he's talking about "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts." He hasn't changed the subject. He's just widened the lens. James 3:1–12 said, listen to what comes out of your mouth. James 3:13–18 says, now look at what comes out of your life. Both reveal the source.

Just like our words, our wisdom reveals the condition of our hearts. There's a kind of wisdom that comes from God, and a kind that doesn't. Here's what makes this hard: both can look like wisdom. Both can sound intelligent, win debates, and even say things that are technically true. So how do you tell the difference? James gives us the same test he gave us last week: not "Was it nice?" but "What kind of fruit does it produce?" Wisdom isn't proven by how intelligent you sound but by the kind of life it produces. You can tell where wisdom came from by what grows wherever it goes. Open your Bibles to James 3:13.

i.

Real Wisdom Shows Up

> Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.
>
> James 3:13, ESV

Remember how this chapter started: "Not many of you should become teachers" (James 3:1). Then James spends twelve verses on the tongue, and now he comes back around. In other words: you think you're qualified to instruct people? You think you're wise? Okay. Let's see it.

Notice what his test is not. It's not how much theology you know, how persuasive you are, or how well you can argue. It's, "By his good conduct let him show his works." That's James all over. Real things show themselves, and he's been saying it the whole letter. Faith shows itself through works (James 2). The heart shows itself through the tongue (James 3:1–12). And now wisdom shows itself through conduct. In the Bible, wisdom isn't mainly an IQ thing. It's a life thing. Wisdom is knowing how to live well before God. So if you want to know whether someone is wise, don't just listen to their answers. Watch their life.

Then James adds a huge phrase: "in the meekness of wisdom." The Greek word for meekness is *prautēs*, and it doesn't mean weakness. It doesn't mean timid or soft. It was used for a strong horse that had been trained to respond to the reins. All that power is still there. It's just under control. Meekness is strength that doesn't need to dominate.

So James is saying, if you're actually wise, you won't have to convince everybody how wise you are. Your life will do the talking. The person who constantly has to tell you how much they know, how right they are, how many books they've read, and how many people agree with them is advertising something their life may not be backing up. Wisdom from God doesn't strut. It serves.

ii.

The Two Roots of False Wisdom

> But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.
>
> James 3:14, ESV

Now James moves from behavior to motive, from the fruit to the root. And notice where he says these things live: "in your hearts." That's the same place we ended last week. James keeps pressing beneath the surface, and he names two roots.

The first is bitter jealousy. The word is *zēlos*, where we get the word "zeal." And zeal isn't always bad. You can be zealous for God. But James puts the word "bitter" in front of it. This is zeal that's gone sour, an intense, competitive passion that can't stand to see someone else succeed. Bitter jealousy says, if you're winning, I'm losing.

The second is selfish ambition, and this one is really interesting. The Greek word is *eritheia*. Before the New Testament, it was used for people who campaigned for office: the kind of political maneuvering where you're working the room, building your coalition, and getting people on your side. It carries the idea of self-seeking, rivalry, factionalism, and positioning yourself at someone else's expense. It's the person who needs to win, to be recognized, to have people on their side. They resent someone else's success, use truth as a weapon, create factions, and constantly have to prove they're right. James says, don't confuse that with wisdom.

Here's what makes selfish ambition so dangerous: it works. That's the deception. If selfish ambition always failed, nobody would be fooled by it. But a lot of the time, it succeeds. The person who works the room gets the promotion. The person who builds the coalition wins the vote. The person who always has to be right usually gets the last word. And because it gets results, we start calling it wisdom. We call it drive. We call it leadership. We call it vision. But James doesn't measure wisdom by what it achieves. He measures it by what it produces in people.

Let me get even more pointed, and I'm including myself in this. Remember, James started this chapter talking to teachers. Some of the most liked and most "successful" pastors in the world are running on *eritheia*. They know how to build a platform and a following. They know how to position themselves, gather loyalty, and win every room they walk into. And we reward it. We buy the books, we fill the seats, and we call it blessing. Maybe that shouldn't be so.

A church can grow big on selfish ambition.
It just can't grow healthy on it.

Eventually the fruit shows up. A lot of the high-profile pastoral failures we've watched across the evangelical world didn't start with a scandal. They started with ambition that everybody applauded because it was working. So as a church, we have to be careful what we celebrate. Don't be impressed by someone's influence until you've looked at their fruit. And that goes for the guy standing up here too. Hold me to James 3.

Last week I said that if you don't speak with grace, you run the risk of being completely correct in what you're saying and completely sinful in how you're saying it. James 3:14 pushes that even further: you can be right and still not be wise. Someone can have the right information and carry it with arrogance, hostility, and a need to win, and James won't call that godly wisdom. Church, this one gets close to home for people like us. We love truth, and we should. But some of us have learned to use truth like a club. We're not trying to help anybody. We're trying to win.

Apparently there were people in these churches claiming to be wise while their lives contradicted the claim. James says that's being "false to the truth." It sounds just like chapter 2: you say you have faith? Show me.

Now it's, you say you're wise? Show me. And if what follows you everywhere you go is jealousy, rivalry, division, pride, and chaos, your fruit is contradicting your claim. Your life is calling your words a liar.

iii.

Where False Wisdom Comes From

> This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.
>
> James 3:15, ESV

Now James gets shockingly severe. First he tells us where this wisdom does not come from. It doesn't come "down from above." James has already told us what comes down from above: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). And he's told us how to get wisdom: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach" (James 1:5). Real wisdom is a gift. It comes down. It isn't manufactured by our ambition.

Then James tells us where this other wisdom does come from, and he takes us down a staircase, three steps, each one lower than the last. The first step is earthly. Its perspective is limited to this world, and it measures success the way the world measures success. Its questions are: What benefits me? How do I win? How do I get ahead? It never looks up. The second step is unspiritual. The word is *psychikē*, meaning natural or merely human. It's what fallen human nature produces on its own, without the Spirit of God. Paul uses the same word in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God." This wisdom isn't just limited to earth. It's driven by the flesh.

The third step is demonic, and James doesn't soften it. There is a kind of "wisdom" that actually mirrors the logic of hell. Think about the devil's fundamental posture: self-exaltation, accusation, rivalry, deception, division, destruction. From the very beginning, his strategy has been to get people to grab for position, to resent what someone else has, and to turn on each other.

Here's something that should sober us. James already told us that the demons have pretty good theology: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder!" (James 2:19). The demons are not short on information. They know who God is. They know who Jesus is. Their problem isn't what they know. It's what they are. Which means you can have accurate doctrine and a demonic spirit at the same time. That's what makes this passage so dangerous for religious people.

This isn't the first time James has gone here. Last week he told us the tongue can be "set on fire by hell" (James 3:6). There's heavenly speech and hellish speech, and now there's heavenly wisdom and demonic wisdom.

Same source question. Same fruit test. James just keeps pressing it deeper. Jealousy and selfish ambition aren't small sins. They're seeds. And seeds grow.

iv.

Look Downstream

> For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.
>
> James 3:16, ESV

Here's James's fruit test. You want to know what kind of wisdom is operating? Look downstream. What does it produce? Jealousy and selfish ambition lead to competition. Competition leads to division. Division leads to disorder. And disorder opens the door to "every vile practice."

That word "disorder" is *akatastasia*. It carries the idea of instability, confusion, disturbance, even social unrest. And it comes from the same word family James has already used twice. In chapter 1 he said the double-minded man is "unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). Just a few verses ago he called the tongue "a restless evil" (James 3:8). Same root. That's one of the major themes of this whole letter. God produces wholeness. Sin produces fragmentation.

Before You Turn the Page

Here's a hard but honest question. When you walk into a room, what tends to happen? When you join a team, a group, a family conversation, or a comment thread, what grows? If everywhere you go there's tension, sides, suspicion, and drama, and you're always the one who saw it clearly while everybody else is the problem, it might be time to look at the source. James says chaos isn't random. Chaos has a root.

v.

What Heavenly Wisdom Looks Like

> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.
>
> James 3:17, ESV

Now James turns the corner. He's shown us the counterfeit; now he shows us the real thing. And notice, he doesn't give you a definition of wisdom. He gives you a portrait of a wise person. Honestly, this verse reads a lot like a description of Jesus.

Look at the order: first pure, then peaceable. That matters, because James isn't advocating peace at any price. Biblical wisdom doesn't say, "Just keep everybody happy." Truth isn't sacrificed for unity. The word *hagnē* means clean, undefiled, unmixed: unmixed with self-interest, unmixed with hidden agendas. Pure comes first because you can't build real peace on top of compromise with sin. But then, peaceable. Wisdom from above pursues peace without compromising righteousness. It isn't looking for a fight. Cyprian of Carthage, a third-century pastor, pointed out that when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus, He came as a dove, a simple and gentle creature, and so the people who carry the Spirit ought to carry that same peaceable nature (Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church*, 9). Some of us need to ask: does my spirit look more like a dove or a hawk?

Wisdom from above is gentle. The word is *epieikēs*, and it's hard to capture with one English word. It means reasonable, gracious, considerate, forbearing. It's the person who could press their advantage but doesn't have to. Selfish ambition says, I have to win. Wisdom says, I don't have to win every fight.

It's open to reason, and this might be one of the most convicting words in the whole passage. The Greek is *eupeithēs*, meaning willing to listen, easy to persuade by what's good and true. Not gullible. Not spineless. But teachable. Which means one mark of genuine wisdom is this: you can still be convinced that you're wrong. Someone who can never be corrected, never reconsider, never listen, and never concede a single point may have a tremendous amount of knowledge, but James would hesitate to call that person wise.

Remember who James is talking to. This whole chapter started with teachers, so let me give you a practical word about who you follow. One of the biggest red flags in any teacher or leader is someone who can't be corrected. Pay attention to how a leader responds when they're challenged. Can they admit they were wrong? Do they have people around them who are allowed to say no? Or does every question get treated like an attack and every critic like an enemy? A leader who is never wrong isn't a leader who is always right. It's a leader who has stopped listening. And that's not just a podcast pastor problem. It applies to the people you let speak into your life, the voices you listen to online, and yes, the guys who stand up here. If your elders ever become unteachable, that's not wisdom from above. That's a warning sign. Godly leaders submit to Scripture, they submit to each other, and they can still be persuaded by what's good and true. So let me ask you: when's the last time you changed your mind about something because someone showed you a better way?

It's full of mercy and good fruits. There's that word again: fruit. James keeps coming back to visible evidence. Wisdom isn't just in your head. It produces mercy and good works. And that ties right back to chapter 2: "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). A genuinely wise person doesn't get harsher with age. They get more merciful.

It's impartial. The word is *adiakritos*, meaning undivided, without wavering, and it's built on a word James has already used twice. In chapter 1 he warned about the one who asks God for wisdom while doubting, wavering back and forth (James 1:6). In chapter 2 he warned about making distinctions between the rich man and the poor man (James 2:4). Same root. Godly wisdom isn't double-minded, and it doesn't play favorites. It isn't manipulated by status, popularity, money, friendships, tribes, or what you can get out of somebody. It judges rightly.

And it's sincere. The word is *anypokritos*, literally, without hypocrisy. In the ancient world a *hypokritēs* was an actor, someone wearing a mask on stage. Godly wisdom doesn't wear a mask. You're not performing wisdom. You're not manipulating people while looking spiritual. You're the same person underneath that you appear to be on top.

Put it all side by side. Wisdom from below is bitter, jealous, selfishly ambitious, and boastful. It's earthly, unspiritual, and demonic, and it produces disorder and every vile practice. Wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere, and it produces a harvest of righteousness. James doesn't mainly separate the two by what they know. He separates them by what they produce.

vi.

The Harvest of Peace

> And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.
>
> James 3:18, ESV

James lands the whole thing with a farming picture: sowing and harvest, seeds and fruit. Wisdom from below plants rivalry and harvests disorder. Wisdom from above plants peace and harvests righteousness. You always reap what you sow. James is just telling you to pay attention to what you're planting.

And righteousness doesn't grow in angry soil. James already told us this back in chapter 1: "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). You cannot bully people into righteousness. You cannot win enough arguments to produce holiness in somebody. Righteousness isn't a crop that grows from wrath, coercion, or bitter debates. It grows slowly, in soil that's been sown in peace. And like any harvest, it takes time. Farmers don't plant on Monday and harvest on Friday. Some of you have been sowing peace in a hard marriage, a difficult workplace, or a strained family, and you haven't seen the harvest yet. Keep sowing. James says the harvest is coming.

Notice who does the sowing: "those who make peace." That should sound familiar. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9), and James echoes the Sermon on the Mount all through this letter. Peacemakers aren't peacekeepers. A peacekeeper avoids conflict. A peacemaker walks into it, carrying truth and grace, to bring reconciliation. When God's people make peace, they're not just being nice. They're cultivating the very soil where God grows righteousness in His church.

vii.

Show Me Your Wisdom

Step back and look at what James has done over the last two chapters. He's given us three "show me" tests. You say you have faith? Show me your works. You say you're mature? Show me your tongue. You say you're wise? Show me your life.

Three "Show Me" Tests

Faith shows its works › Maturity shows its tongue › Wisdom shows its life

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James refuses to let Christianity stay invisible. Real faith produces something. Real maturity produces something. And real wisdom produces something. So the question isn't just, "Is what I'm saying true?" James pushes further: what kind of person am I becoming, and what grows in the lives of the people around me because of the way I carry the truth?

You can tell where wisdom came from
by what grows wherever it goes.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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