

James 3.13-18 “Faith & Wisdom”

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Thesis: If you could ask God for anything, what would it be? When Solomon, King David’s son, became king, God offered him anything he wanted. Solomon asked for wisdom. God was pleased that Solomon sought wisdom rather than riches, fame, or glory, and Solomon enjoyed God’s abundant blessings [1Ki. 3]. Solomon understood that God’s wisdom truly is better than gold [Prov. 16:6]. So, where can you discover true wisdom that will yield guidance and contentment in your life?

Subject: God’s wisdom versus earthly wisdom

Object: Follow Jesus and be truly wise

Who *is* wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct *that* his works *are done* in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing

to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. ¹⁸ Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Context: We've seen that real faith is proved by works and words, and now, wisdom.

1. What is true wisdom [13]? *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.*

James asks, *who is wise and understanding among you?* First, what is wisdom?

True wisdom is the application of godly knowledge. The Hebrew concept of wisdom is practical and godly. James is a Jew, and his original audience were Jewish Christians. There are over 225 references to wisdom in the Bible, over 50 in Proverbs alone. Reverence for God is the beginning of wisdom [Prov. 9:10].

The Greeks, on the other hand, view wisdom as theoretical and philosophical. The word “philosophy” is a combination of the Greek *phileo* meaning love, and *sophia* meaning wisdom. The antonym of wisdom is foolishness or folly. Accordingly, we would be wise to approach the subject of wisdom prudently. Foresight is better than hindsight, but insight is better than both.

True wisdom is revealed by actions and attitudes that honor God: *Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.* True wisdom is reflected by good

conduct meaning works or actions that honor God. These *works* or actions are *done in the meekness of wisdom* which speaks of an attitude that is submitted to God. Meekness or humility is the virtue of placing oneself under God's authority.

2. Earthly wisdom is not true wisdom [14-16]

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.

James contrasts wisdom which *does not descend from above, but is earthly* [15]. James observes that earthly wisdom is *sensual* [15] meaning that it appeals to the flesh rather than spirit or soul. Earthly wisdom focuses on personal gain apart from submission to God's values or responsibility to others, and is not of God. James notes that earthly wisdom is not of God, is fleshly, and its inception is *demonic* [16], or prompted by Satan.

Four traits of earthly wisdom:

Envy [14,16]: refers to discontentment with God's blessings, and desire for what others have.

Jealousy and covetousness are attitudes that reveal spiritual immaturity. Earthly wisdom thinks that getting something will produce true contentment but it never does.

Self-seeking [14,16]: is selfish ambition related to the desire to get ahead without regard for others.

In Matthew 20, we see the selfish ambition of the disciples, especially James and John, as they sought positions of prominence in the coming kingdom. Jesus did not rebuke their desire to be great in God's kingdom, but declared the means is through sacrificial service not self-seeking. The disciples' self-seeking was destabilizing among the twelve [Matt. 20:21-28].

John the Baptist's disciples were concerned that people were flocking to Jesus rather than John, but John rightly understood, "He must increase but I must decrease" [Jn. 3:30]. We *must* decrease.

Earthly wisdom presumes Jesus can increase and we can increase too.

Confusion [16]: is disorder from instability. Marriages, families, friendships, and church communities are destabilized when earthly wisdom is prevalent.

Earlier in this letter, James encouraged believers to ask God for wisdom, and God would supply it abundantly and without reproach. Nevertheless, James warned that we are to trust or believe that God will provide wisdom, or we will be unstable in all our ways [Ja. 1:5-8]. The person who rejects God's wisdom for earthly wisdom will reap confusion, disorder, and instability.

Every evil thing [16]: what God describes as good is viewed by the culture opposed to God as evil, and what God describes as evil is viewed by the culture opposed to God as good. Wrong thinking results in wrong behavior, and right thinking tends to produce right behavior. So, where can you discover true wisdom that will yield guidance and contentment in your life?

3. God's wisdom is true and available in Jesus [17-18]:

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. ¹⁸ Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

God's wisdom is manifest in Christ [1 Cor. 1:30]. Godly wisdom is the fruit of life spent learning of and from Him.

7 traits of Christ and true wisdom:

Pure: Jesus personifies moral integrity [1Jn. 3:3]. God is moral, and provides a moral compass so that you can navigate the culture and remain pure and undefiled. The realization that there are moral absolutes, and that these values are virtuous and provide boundaries for life with God, is critical to contentment.

Peaceable: Jesus is the Prince of Peace [Is. 9:6]. *Peaceable* has the idea of gentle and kind. Godly wisdom does not compromise truth to avoid conflict, but is compassionate in speaking the truth in love [John 8:32, Eph. 4:15].

Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace [18]. Those who are wise peacefully help produce peace with God and promote God's righteousness.

Gentle: relates to being gracious and respectful [Gal. 5:22-23, Ph. 2:3-8]. Jesus woos us with the love of God and gentleness rather than seeking to motivate by fear and intimidation.

Willing to yield: is the trait of being flexible, not stubborn, or obstinate. First and foremost, it is the desire to yield to God, especially in difficult circumstances. It is modeled by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" [Matt. 26:39].

Full of mercy and good fruits: Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount by declaring, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" [Matt. 5:7]; and concluded the teaching by noting that those who judge without mercy, will be judged without mercy [Matt. 7:2]. A truly wise person shows mercy to others in the hope that they will repent and be restored by God.

Impartial: Jesus was known to treat all people the same [Matt. 22:16]. Earlier in this letter, James exhorted that true faith is revealed by a lack of prejudice or bias [2:1].

Sincere: true godly wisdom is without hypocrisy, and is genuine. The truly wise say what they mean, and mean what they say.

James encourages us that God's wisdom is available to those who trust God and commit to Him [Ja. 1:5]. You will either look to the world and glean earthly wisdom that never satisfies, or choose to follow Jesus and be truly wise and discover God's contentment. Choose wisely...

Study Guide Qs

1. Where does the culture you live in look for wisdom?
2. Who are some people that you consider to be wise? What are some of the traits of their life?
3. What are some of the characteristics of earthly wisdom that you've discovered in addition those described in section 2 above regarding verses 14-16?
4. What are some of the traits of God's wisdom that you've discovered in addition to those described in verses 17-18 above?

Digging Deeper

1. Here is an interesting article on how to tap into God's wisdom: <https://www.gotquestions.org/wisdom-of-God.html>
2. Consider the approximately 50 references to wisdom in Proverbs. What did you discover about wisdom, God, and yourself?