

The Book of James

Lesson 7: Wisdom from Above -- James 3:13-18

Ask a room full of people whether they would like to be wise, and every hand goes up. Wisdom sounds like a treasure no one would refuse. But James does something bracing here: he refuses to let us define wisdom for ourselves. He insists that there are two kinds of wisdom in the world, and they look so different in the end that they could not have come from the same place. One comes down from above. The other, he says bluntly, is earthly, unspiritual, and even demonic.

That is a startling thing to say about something we usually admire. We tend to call a person wise if they are clever, successful, quick with an argument, able to get what they want. But James says you can recognize the source of wisdom not by how impressive it sounds, but by what it grows. Where you find bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, he says, do not boast and do not call it wisdom, for there you will also find disorder and every vile practice. That kind of wisdom builds nothing; it tears down.

The wisdom from above is recognizable by an entirely different harvest. It is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. Read that list slowly and a face comes into focus. It is the face of Jesus, who was pure and yet gentle, who was full of truth and yet approachable, who was merciful without ever compromising. Wisdom from above does not just make us smart. It makes us like Him.

And then James drops a quiet, beautiful line that ties the whole letter together: a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. The wise are not the loudest in the room or the sharpest in the argument. They are the peacemakers, the ones whose lives bear good fruit because they have received their wisdom from God. So we come to this passage to ask an honest question about the wisdom we are actually living by, and to seek the wisdom that comes down from the Father and makes us gentle, merciful, and like our Lord.

Group Discussion: How does the world usually define a wise or successful person, and how does that compare with the description of wisdom from above in this passage? Where do the two definitions most sharply collide?

Personal Reflection: Look at the fruit your way of handling life is actually producing, in your relationships and your inner peace. Does it look more like the wisdom from above or the wisdom from below, and where do you most need to change?

Read James 3:13-18

Study Questions

1. James asks, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" and answers that such a person shows it "by his good conduct... in the meekness of wisdom" (v. 13). According to James, how is true wisdom demonstrated, and how does this differ from the way the world tends to recognize wisdom?
2. Where are you tempted to prove your wisdom or competence by being impressive, right, or in control rather than by humble, good conduct? What would meekness look like in that area?
3. James warns that where there is "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts," we should not boast, for this wisdom is "earthly, unspiritual, demonic," producing "disorder and every vile practice" (vv. 14-16). What does this teach about the true source and fruit of a wisdom driven by jealousy and ambition?
4. Where do you sense jealousy or selfish ambition operating in your own heart, the quiet desire to win, to be ahead, to be noticed? How is that affecting your relationships and your peace?
5. James says the wisdom from above is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere" (v. 17). Walk through these qualities. What do they reveal about the character of God's wisdom, and how does this list resemble the character of Christ Himself?
6. Which quality in this list of heavenly wisdom, purity, peaceableness, gentleness, openness to reason, mercy, impartiality, or sincerity, is most lacking in you right now, and why do you think that is?
7. James notes that wisdom from above is "first pure, then peaceable," putting purity before peace. Why does the order matter, and what does it teach about the relationship between holiness and peacemaking in a wisdom that is genuinely from God?
8. Think of a relationship where you have been tempted to keep a false peace by avoiding the truth, or to pursue being right at the expense of peace. How does James's order of pure first, then peaceable, guide you toward something better than either?
9. James concludes, "a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (v. 18). What does this teach about who the truly wise are, how God's righteousness grows in a community, and how the peacemaking of the wise differs from mere conflict-avoidance?
10. Look back across the whole passage. James calls us to seek a wisdom that comes down from God and makes us gentle, merciful peacemakers. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to live out the wisdom from above this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Proverbs 9:10, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Christ the wisdom of God versus the wisdom of the world; Matthew 5:9,

blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God; Galatians 5:19-23, the works of the flesh versus the fruit of the Spirit; Philippians 2:3-8, doing nothing from selfish ambition but having the mind of Christ; Proverbs 3:13-18, the blessedness of finding wisdom.