

**Who Is Wise and Understanding Among You?
James 3:13-18**

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Introduction:

We like to consider ourselves wise. But **James 3:13-18** warns us that just because we think we are wise, does not mean we are. There are two kinds of wisdom—one of them is from above and the other is not. The reason we need to study this passage is found in **vs. 18**. James says, “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (ESV). Our goal is to bear fruit that glorifies God (**John 15:8**). If we will succeed, we must abolish earthly wisdom and live in godly wisdom.

Discussion:

- I. “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition ...” (**James 3:14**).
 - A. “... bitter jealousy...” **Acts 13:45** is a great example of this kind of action. When the Jews saw Paul’s success, envy entered their heart, they started blaspheming, contradicting and opposing his preaching. According to **Matthew 27:18**, the Jewish leaders crucified Jesus out of envy. Those with ungodly wisdom want what others have and it angers them that God has given someone else “their” blessing. They cannot stand that someone else has greater influence. They do not like it when someone else gets credit. They hate for someone else’s plans to be adopted. They can hardly admit it when someone else has more ability than they do. Because of this, they will grumble, criticize and even slander others. Some will go so far as to sabotage someone else’s work. Envy goes from bad to worse, even leading to directly attacking others. How many of you remember the shock we had when we learned that Olympic hopeful Tonya Harding was involved in the January 6, 1994 attack on her possible teammate, Nancy Kerrigan. Considering that example, can you envision how bad things can become in a church if even just one person is acting with ungodly wisdom out of jealousy?
 - B. “... and selfish ambition ...” Not only can the one with ungodly wisdom not stand it when anyone is “ahead” of them, they are constantly working to move themselves ahead. This word is sometimes translated “contentious,” because the selfishly ambitious is constantly contending, that is, competing, with others. To this person, there is only so much out there and if you have some of it, they lose some of it. They want most of it for themselves. They want to push themselves forward. They want their plans to be followed. They want their opinions to be adhered to. They want their interests to be addressed. They think that if people would just listen to them, then everything would be alright. They want you to hear their advice and be in awe of their wisdom. Ultimately, they want to run the show and their concern for the interests of others goes only so far as to let others know what their interests really ought to be. Paul says this type of attitude must not be among us (**Philippians 2:3-4**).

- II. “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**).
 - A. “... pure ...” That is, it is undefiled and unsullied. Godly wisdom works without hidden agendas and ulterior motives. What you see is what you get. Godly wisdom does not apply techniques to manipulate. Godly wisdom is pure and purely motivated.
 - B. “... then peaceable ...” The goal of godly wisdom is peace. The primary goal is peace with God. We do not allow sin to go unchecked because that does not make for peace with God, in fact it makes enmity with God (**James 4:4**). Then secondly, peace among the brethren. The actions of godly wisdom are not designed to stir up contention, but to avoid it. The actions of godly wisdom are not designed to put people in their place, but on a pedestal. Those with godly wisdom do not strive to bring everyone on to their path, but rather pursues a path of peace with everyone.
 - C. “... gentle ...” This term can best be understood by seeing how it is used elsewhere in contrast. In **I Peter 2:18**, Peter told servants to submit to their masters, whether they were gentle or harsh. Godly wisdom is gentle; it is not harsh, abrasive, abusive, vindictive or vengeful. In **Titus 3:2**, Paul said Titus was to teach Christians not to be brawlers (KJV) or contentious (NASB) but gentle. Godly wisdom is gentle, it does not criticize, pick fights, draw battle lines, set up sides or attack. Godly wisdom acts in kindness, blessing, honoring and praising others. When problems arise it acts with unfeigned humility, looking to keep self from sin as well (**Galatians 6:1**).

- D. "...open to reason..." Those who have godly wisdom are not so bound up in their own opinions that they cannot listen to others. If someone presents a reasonable case, they will listen and even change. They recognize in many cases there are a variety of ways things can be done. It doesn't just have to be their way. Perhaps the greatest key to being open to reason is an ear to listen. Before judging someone else's motives or drawing conclusions about their actions or purpose, those with godly wisdom listen and listen well.
- E. "... full of mercy ..." Note two passages that help explain this phrase. In **Matthew 12:7**, Jesus said that because the Pharisees had ignored mercy, they had condemned the guiltless. There are some, who strive to find fault with everyone and everything. But those with godly wisdom look for what is right. They still address sin. However, they do not try to color everything as sin so they can find fault with others for not doing things their way. In **Luke 10:37** a lawyer explained that the Good Samaritan had been merciful to the wounded Jew. Those with godly wisdom are full of mercy, that is, full of kindness and goodness. Their goal is not to inflict wounds, but to heal them, strengthening others and making them better.
- F. "... good fruits ..." We know people by their fruit (**Matthew 7:16**). If the fruit is a fig, the tree is a fig tree. If the fruit is a grape, then it is a grape vine (**James 3:12**). Those with godly wisdom are full of good fruit. We will see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in all their actions and in their relationships (**Galatians 5:22-23**). We will see actions and results that coincide with this fruit all around them.
- G. "...impartial..." Those with godly wisdom exhibit all of the above qualities to everyone with whom they come in contact. They act in the meekness of wisdom toward the poor and the rich, the black and the white, the beautiful and the ugly, the sinner and the saint, the friendly and the unfriendly, the weak and the strong, the young and the old, those who can repay and those who cannot. They make no distinctions, but treat all people with the same attitude.
- H. "... and sincere ..." Those with godly wisdom act in this way because they want to. They do not have to fake it. They have worked so it is natural and sincere. Paul made this same point in **Romans 12:9** teaching us to let our love be without hypocrisy. In another sermon, perhaps we can examine **Romans 12:9-21** to see what love without hypocrisy looks like. For now, simply read what it says. This is a picture of those with godly wisdom in action.
- III. "... do not boast and be false against the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic." (**James 3:14**).
- A. "... do not boast and be false against the truth ..." This statement, I believe, highlights the great danger in all of this. Most of the jealous and selfishly ambitious are hardly aware that they are anything less than wise. They are certain of their wisdom and understanding. But their boasting is a lie. That is, their claim to wisdom is not true. Because what they have is not wisdom at all.
- B. "... but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic." Their wisdom is not godly wisdom, but earthly. And those following this wisdom are as the men described in **Philippians 3:18-19**. Their wisdom is sensual. And those following this wisdom are like the people described in **Jude 16-19**. Their wisdom did not descend from God above, but is demonic ascending from the very pits of hell. We must be objective and honest with ourselves, examining ourselves to be certain that we show wisdom by our good conduct (**James 3:13**).
- IV. "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice" (**James 3:16**).
- A. If self-deception about this is so easy and commonplace, then we must determine a way to examine ourselves. This verse implies the way. Examine the fruit in and around your life. Throughout the book of James, we read of some of the confusion and evil that exists when we are jealous and selfishly ambitious. Though not all of these examples are given in the direct context with the verses we have studied, I believe we can see their connection to the ideas and principles of the passage. And, above all, be honest, if you see any of these things in your life, then you have envy and self-seeking that you need to get rid of.
- B. Consider **James 1:13**. Do you blame God or anyone else for your sins (or even your failures)? The jealous and selfishly ambitious are masters at shifting the blame for their conduct. When something goes wrong, do you naturally figure out how it is somebody else's fault? Be honest.

- C. Consider **James 1:19**. Do you have trouble listening? Are you quick to start talking? The jealous and selfishly ambitious have trouble listening because they want you to hear their solutions more than they really want to hear your problems. So they have trouble bridling their tongues (**James 1:26**). Do you find that you dominate conversations with your opinions and think-so's? Do you say most of the things you think? Have you ever justified that feeling by saying that you are just trying to be honest? Be honest.
- D. Consider again **James 1:19**. Do you get angry easily? The jealous and selfishly ambitious are quick to get angry because it infuriates them when others disagree. They just cannot understand why other people do not listen to what they are saying and see things their way. Do you spend a lot of time upset with others or getting on to others? Be honest.
- E. Consider **James 2:1-4**. Do you treat different groups of people differently? Is there a group that you treat with respect and awe, while you condescend to the opposite group? The jealous and selfishly ambitious butter up to people they believe will give them advantage or to people that they deem are part of the "in" crowd. Others, however, are unimportant and do not need the same respect and proper treatment. Do you act one way with one group and another way with others? Do you treat your spouse, children or parents with less respect than others? Be honest.
- F. Consider **James 2:15-16**. Do you provide lots of advice but have trouble giving people what they need to help them? The jealous and selfishly ambitious love to give people advice and tell them things will be better, but they do not like sacrificing their own things. Do your actions fall short of your words? Do you struggle sacrificing in order to benefit others? Be honest.
- G. Consider **James 3:9**. Do you curse people? What about **James 4:11**? Do you speak evil of your brother? Or **James 5:9**? Do you grumble against your brethren? The jealous and selfishly ambitious find it hard to say much good about people, especially those who disagree with them. When you talk about other people, do you spend more time talking about what they do right and what they are good at? Or do you find yourself highlighting their faults and flaws? Do you have trouble hearing someone else receive a compliment? When you do hear someone complimented, is your natural reaction to explain why they really aren't "all that"? Do you spend much time explaining why someone else's flaws are goofing things up in your family, neighborhood, workplace or church? Be honest.
- H. Consider **James 4:1**. Do you find that you are repeatedly in some conflict or another? The jealous and selfishly ambitious are typically at odds with somebody because they constantly contend with those who disagree with them. And, as earlier mentioned, the jealous and selfishly ambitious rarely see their own fault but can shift the blame for the conflict to others. Do you ever notice that a lot of the conflicts in your family, workplace or congregation seem to have a common denominator—you? Be honest.
- I. Consider **James 4:1, 3**. Do you spend much time thinking about all the things that you want? No, it is not wrong to have desires, but the jealous and selfishly ambitious gauge most situations and decisions based upon what they will get out of it and how it will make them look good. They spend a great deal of time thinking about how to get what they want and how they will enjoy it when they get it. Do you get upset when the way that most benefits you is not chosen? Do you get upset if the plan does not highlight your strengths? Does it bother you when whatever is done makes someone else look good or benefits them more than you?
- J. Consider **James 5:19-20**. Do you get upset when those who have sinned against you repent and are accepted back into the fold? The jealous and selfishly ambitious have trouble accepting the repentant because the envious (like the Prodigal's brother) think the repentant got away with something and it just isn't fair. Because of that feeling, the jealous and selfishly ambitious do not spend much time trying to bring the sinner back into the fold, especially if the sinner did something to them. Too often, they want that person to pay for what they have done. Do you spend more time talking about someone's sins than doing anything about it?

Conclusion:

"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom." Let us all examine ourselves—not everyone else—and be certain that what we do is in the meekness of wisdom. Let us keep the pestilence of jealousy and selfish ambition out of the vineyard and produce the fruit of righteousness by which our Father will be glorified.