

James 3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. **14** But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. **15** This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. **16** For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. **17** But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. **18** And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

This passage has been pivotal for me in my understanding of wisdom. It helps me self-assess my decisions and reactions. It puts up guard rails for me around vexing dilemmas and difficult decisions. I love the sharp contrast between what is godly and what is earthly, and the specific ways that wisdom is described that make it very real for day-to-day life, not just the forks in the road.

When our culture changes its values, how do you decide to go along or stand against? When someone burns you, what determines how you respond? When you have family conflict, what is the right path forward? How we handle these situations and hundreds like them will either be earthly or godly. Most of what we encounter in life doesn't have a Bible verse to apply directly.

What if you gave money to a relative for them to pay their rent. They used the money for something frivolous, and then came back even more desperately needing money for rent. Do you give it to them? If you don't give them the money they will be out on the street, in January. If you do give them the money they will not feel the consequences of their foolishness. Which do you choose? Biblically you could defend either giving them the money or not. Should you be compassionate and generous, or is this time for a truthful reckoning?

This is one reason why we need wisdom from above, because there isn't a rule we can make. Situations like this don't fit into an "always do this" or "always do that." I'm guessing that almost everyone here had a pretty quick answer whether or not to give the money a second time. Part of being human is having endless opinions and predispositions on just about everything. They are so much a part of who we are that often we don't even recognize them for what they are. Wisdom from above helps us identify our own bent, set it aside and move closer to what is right.

We live in a confusing, muddled world where core values are changing. How do you sort out what change is good and which is not? For example, just in my lifetime there have been very noticeable shifts in church beliefs on gender, sexuality, music style, dress code, acceptable language, alcohol and even how to do church. How do you know which changes are Christians waking up to what connects with people, and which are merely the values of the world seeping in? Which changes are a healthy shedding of human traditions, and which are earthly, unspiritual and demonic? This is why the wisdom that comes down from above is vital. Because by it we are true to God, and by it we reap a harvest of righteousness.

1 Kings 3:16-28

Then two prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. 17 The one woman said, "Oh,

my lord, this woman and I live in the same house, and I gave birth to a child while she was in the house. 18 Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. And we were alone. There was no one else with us in the house; only we two were in the house. 19 And this woman's son died in the night, because she lay on him. 20 And she arose at midnight and took my son from beside me, while your servant slept, and laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. 21 When I rose in the morning to nurse my child, behold, he was dead. But when I looked at him closely in the morning, behold, he was not the child that I had borne." 22 But the other woman said, "No, the living child is mine, and the dead child is yours." The first said, "No, the dead child is yours, and the living child is mine." Thus they spoke before the king.

23 Then the king said, "The one says, 'This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead'; and the other says, 'No; but your son is dead, and my son is the living one.'" 24 And the king said, "Bring me a sword." So a sword was brought before the king. 25 And the king said, "Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one and half to the other." 26 Then the woman whose son was alive said to the king, because her heart yearned for her son, "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and by no means put him to death." But the other said, "He shall be neither mine nor yours; divide him." 27 Then the king answered and said, "Give the living child to the first woman, and by no means put him to death; she is his mother."

Stunning wisdom! How did Solomon know what to do? Notice even this prostitute showed wisdom. She didn't argue, or throw a fit or laugh at the absurdity of the king's decision. She did not have envy or selfish ambition; her heart yearned for her son. She was so concerned about the welfare of her child that she would rather her betrayer have the blessing instead of being demonic and letting the child die. There is no verse anywhere in the Bible that would speak directly to this situation.

"Wisdom must go beyond knowing and doing the Word of God. Wisdom must include a sensitive, mature judgment or discernment of how the fear of the Lord should work itself out in all the circumstances not specifically dealt with in the Bible." - John Piper

How did Abigail know how to calm David's wrath when he wanted to destroy Nabal? There's no verse that says, "When an offended person wants to destroy a stubborn fool, do this..."

How do you decide what influences to let into your home? How will you spend your time and money? What is appropriate to post online and what isn't? How do church leaders decide how long the service is? There are no verses in the Bible for these questions. The answers must come from godly wisdom. Because human wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. Really, really strong words, but think about our study of 1 Corinthians. Paul exhorts them through the whole book not to pursue "the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age," but the "secret, hidden wisdom of God."

And what is the wisdom of this age like in Corinth?

Chapter 1, pick sides and line up behind a person.

Chapter 4, be puffed up and act like kings.

Chapter 5, be proud of tolerating evil.

Chapter 6, if you have a conflict with a brother take him to court.

Chapter 8, by all means if you have a freedom in Christ, lord it over those with a weak

conscience.

Chapter 11, if you have privilege make sure to oppress the lowly.

And the product was “disorder and every vile practice” just as James says. Wisdom that comes down from above is the complete opposite of worldly wisdom.

“Wisdom is not simply a matter of learning certain principles of life and applying them mechanically. Wisdom begins with a relationship with God.” – Tremper Longman

Wisdom adapts to the moment, to the people involved, to the impact on other believers and a watching world. Wisdom is not static, because it’s based on a living relationship. Remember when Solomon said to cut the baby in half? Would that wisdom have worked a second time? If he had five similar cases lined up in the courtroom could he have used the same approach with all five? Not a chance it would have the same outcome. This is the beauty of wisdom, it adjusts to the need of the moment, and yet is always submitting to God.

What is wise in one situation could be wrong in another. When Paul was arrested in Acts 22 he makes bold statements about the illegality of his arrest, but when Jesus was in the same situation He kept silent before His accusers. Near the beginning of World War II many German-Christians left the country, but Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided to return to Germany and subvert the government. Is one right and one wrong? No. Is one wise and one foolish? Probably not.

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It’s like in Matthew 11 when Jesus was addressing a fickle crowd who said John the Baptist doesn’t eat and drink therefore he has a demon. Jesus does eat and drink, therefore He’s a glutton and a drunkard. Jesus responded with, “Wisdom is justified by her deeds.” No need to make a defense. The outcome of wise works will be evident.

There are several people in my life that I look up to as wise, and you can see it in their conduct. They don’t draw attention to themselves and what they do. They don’t drop names. They don’t hint at all the good deeds they’ve done. They are just going about their business in meekness. Do you know people like this? They are wonderful to be around! They always have a kind word, or a helpful insight or a gentle correction or they just listen well. I always look forward to spending time with them. And here’s a true thing, I’m positive that if I mentioned their names, they would be more shocked than everyone else. That is the meekness of wisdom.

It’s the exact opposite of jealousy and selfish ambition. They seek to serve themselves, and are often easy to spot. But some of the time in us they are subtle and cloaked in good desires. For example, if you are married then wanting a good marriage is exactly what you should be focused on. But if you want a good marriage so much that you become critical of your spouse or over-bearing or punitive because they are not living up to expectations; then

you have let a desire for a good thing become a selfish ambition. Just because you are seeking something good, doesn't mean you are seeking it in wisdom. You can want good things for wrong reasons, or want them so much that they rule you instead of wisdom.

Sometimes it is very hard, if not impossible, to figure out our desires and what is going on in our hearts. So, James says look at your actions. He uses the phrases disorder and vile practice. Biblically speaking, grumbling and complaining are vile practices. Pouting and angry outbursts are vile. Being a bully is vile. Anything where the goal is not the good of the other is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. That is the way the world pursues what it wants. And I am so thankful that God has given us a better way. The wisdom that comes down from above.

17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James now describes heavenly wisdom, and just as it is completely opposite from worldly wisdom so is the outcome. Wisdom is first and foremost a spiritual quality. It is not having the right answer to a vexing dilemma, although that could be part of it. It is not knowledge or skill or life experience. Certainly not a byproduct of age. Wisdom is pure. There is no calculating self-interest in the background.

Literally, wisdom is holy. That's what James is saying here. Wisdom, true wisdom, is holy. How does Proverbs put it? "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight." And also, "the fear of the Lord is to hate evil." It's loving what God loves and hating what He hates that makes a person wise. James is saying the same thing. Wisdom is pure. It is not mixed with self-interest or partiality or preference. You cannot nurture hidden sins and have wisdom. True wisdom is pure.

Wisdom is also peaceable. This word has a special connotation of peace between people and peace with God. A wise person makes relationships better. They bring people closer together and closer to God. The holidays can be a wonderful time of year, but I also have empathy for people who have to spend time with family members that are not peaceable. It can be exhausting when you have extended time with opinionated people who seem to enjoy letting you know what you're doing wrong in life. Or people who are touchy to the slightest offense.

Peaceable people aren't like that. They make relationships better. It's not that they avoid conflict, or that they never start conflict. But when there is conflict their goal is to take the heat off so that everyone involved moves closer together and closer to God.

Anyone can escalate a conflict; that's very natural. You can imagine a conversation between spouses.

"You need to help out more around the house"

"I'm doing the best I can"

"Well it's not good enough"

"Maybe if you were just a little more understanding."

"I'd be more understanding if you weren't so stubborn!"

I'll tell you about a time when I escalated a conflict. It was 1980, I was 17 at the time. One cold and rainy night in Southern California I was giving two friends, Mark Longe and Tracy Sandler, a ride home after theatre rehearsal. It was about 11:30pm when I pulled up to a red light at Santa Gertrudes and Whittier Blvd. I looked left, then right. No cars in sight, so I blew the red and fishtailed through the intersection. I wish that I had looked in the rear-view mirror because as it turns out, there was a police officer right behind me. A couple blocks later he pulled me over, walked up to the driver's side and tapped his ring on the window. I rolled down the window and said, "Two hamburgers and a strawberry shake please." Not wise, and it definitely did not have a peaceable outcome.

The goal of a peaceable person is to leave every interaction with other people so that they are closer to each other and closer to God.

If you want to know what word in the New Testament translators say is the most difficult to render in English, it's this word we see as gentle. It has the idea of stepping outside the letter of the law to give a better answer than the law itself could. The gentle person knows when to apply the law and when to make an exception instead.

When your kids mouth off, how do you respond? A gentle person doesn't take it as a threat to their authority. Maybe in that moment wisdom asks a question about what else is going on in their life. Maybe it gently redirects the conversation in a positive direction. Maybe it speaks truth in love. But it never escalates the situation with threats and insults in return. Gentleness has the ability to endure injury with patience and without resentment.

When someone close to you breaks a promise or doesn't follow through on a commitment do you rub their nose in it a little bit? You have been wronged and they are 100% responsible. How do you treat them? Wisdom from above is gentle.

Jesus is gentle. No one ever has been worthier of honor or had more authority to bring justice. And yet, He was gentle with the ignorant and wayward even when He suffered at their hands. What does He say at the end of that section in Matthew 11? "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." We have wisdom from above when we model the gentleness of Jesus.

The next phrase, open to reason, literally means a willingness to be convinced. And this really makes sense for a wise person not to be stubborn in matters where God has not spoken. Because if all wisdom starts with fear of the Lord, then I am not afraid of changing my mind. I am not afraid of being wrong, and I definitely don't need to be right.

People who are not open to reason have their minds made up. They are like old AM radios, and there is some really good stuff coming over FM, but they are not tuned in to that frequency. If a political candidate from the other party does something well, they don't tune in. However, if they make a mistake, crank up the volume on that AM station. If their party candidate does anything wrong it gets filtered out or explained away.

Another common area where we have trouble being open to reason is between generations. Linda and I have adult kids that have their own views on life and priorities, and they don't even mind telling us when they think we're wrong! We could sit back and get all self-

righteous about this younger generation that doesn't appreciate all we've done. Or we could lean in and say, "tell us more, help us understand your point of view."

Someone who is open to reason considers what others are saying regardless of political party or age or anything. If I fear God as the basis of all true wisdom, then what I believe now or what I might be changed to believe doesn't scare me.

When you think of needing wisdom, do mercy and good fruits even cross your mind? Usually doesn't mine. Why is this used to describe wisdom? I think my mistake is often that I expect wisdom to mean smart, intellectually reasoned or fair. Those are not synonyms for heavenly wisdom.

When Jesus was questioned by the Pharisees for dining with tax collectors and sinners, His answer was "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" Wisdom cares about those who are suffering and does something to help. Jesus doesn't judge sinners for their poor life choices and wait for them to hit rock bottom. He goes to them and does good.

Wisdom is full of mercy when it considers the other person and their circumstances. Pick someone in your life, that if you had to rank them on a scale from 1 to 10 of enjoyable to be with, they would be a 2. Can you set that aside and show them mercy? Because my guess is most people don't want to be around them, and they get very little mercy and good fruits shown to them. This kind of wisdom doesn't show mercy expecting them to become a 9 on the enjoyable scale any time soon, and would rejoice and praise God if they moved up to a 3.

True wisdom is impartial. This one is very difficult for me and is a constant challenge in many areas of life. For example, when it comes to hamburgers I am completely partial to In-N-Out. There is no second place. As you might think, this makes me not open to reason. On occasion, I have not been gentle or peaceable or full of mercy either. Sorry Glenn Mabey and Mark Gould.

If we're honest, we recognize that we have predispositions that make it very hard to be impartial. Most of us make decisions based on our own personality, or how we were raised or what we think will make us look the least bad.

They say that power corrupts, but I don't believe it. Power just gives opportunity for partial hearts to do what they wanted all along. We have this power as parents and teachers and bosses and leaders in the church, and we need to examine our actions to sniff out the stench of partiality.

The crazy thing about this one is that almost always everyone else sees the partiality in us before we do. When I was a young child I had a relative that I knew when my sister and I were in her charge that I was going to get in trouble and my sister was going to get cookies. It didn't matter what happened. At some point, I was getting spanked and my sister was getting milk and cookies.

If we want to find this in ourselves, take a look at who you compliment and who you criticize. Do you compliment your own generation and criticize the other? Do you overlook

the negative things in your political party while highlighting the others? Do you get your news from highly partial sources?

“Those who care criticize where necessary. Those who envy criticize the moment they think that they have found a weak spot.” – Criss Jami

The final word James uses to describe wisdom is sincere. Literally, wisdom is without hypocrisy. It doesn't say one thing and do another. A sincere person is an open book; they have nothing to hide. They are the same person at home, at church and when no one is watching. I cannot think of a greater example of sincerity than Jesus when He was being questioned after His arrest in John 18.

18:19 The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. 20 Jesus answered him, “I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. 21 Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.” 22 When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” 23 Jesus answered him, “If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?”

That is the ultimate expression of sincere wisdom. For Jesus to stand there and allow creatures that He made and gave life to, to insult and assault Him, and then respond with a question designed to get to the heart of the very one who struck Him is sincerity that I cannot comprehend.

At the other end of the spectrum, people who lack sincerity are a constant frustration. A long-time counselor, David Powlison, gives his summary like this,

“They deal out global condemnation, while screaming in outrage whenever they are mistakenly criticized regarding some tiny detail of a story. They grouse about a spouse spending \$20 on some perceived frivolity, while they don't think twice about spending \$500 on their own hobbies. They damn others as theological nincompoops and biblical ignoramuses, while they themselves subscribe to theological ‘distinctives’ that are at best dubious and at worst flat out wrong.” – David Powlison

So, now that we've gone through this passage on godly wisdom, how do we answer all those tough questions from the beginning? Or ones that you have come up with in your own life? What about that one thing you and your spouse fight about over and over? I don't want to bum you out this early in the year, but there might not be an answer. But there can be peace

18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

The goal of wisdom is peace. That may come through a perfect answer to an intense conflict, but often there is no perfect answer. But, with wisdom there can be peace and a harvest of righteousness, and isn't that even better?

Five practical ways to pursue wisdom from above that lead to peace that yields a harvest of righteousness.

First, introspect a little bit on areas in your life where you don't have peace. Maybe it's a difficult decision. Maybe it's conflict with another person. And I really mean just a little bit. Enough to identify the circumstances and make a few observations, but not wallow. Then humbly ask yourself, does what I want match what God wants? Have I been peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere? Pick one of the phrases James uses and prayerfully seek understanding.

Another way is to get input from a wise person. Look for someone who has good conduct and meekness. Talk through your dilemma, and listen to their experience and advice. This is a great one to practice being open to reason. Because sometimes we hear things that surprise us.

Third, learn from your mistakes. Become aware of areas in your life where you are partial or harsh or closed-minded. Be honest about the impact you had on other people. Learn from these mistakes so that you want what God wants instead.

Fourth, read God's word regularly. Remember that the heart of wisdom is a relationship with God. Even the first three items here depend on God giving us the understanding, and an invaluable source is His word. Make a plan to read your Bible. Maybe it's one Psalm and one Proverb every day for six months. Maybe you read the New Testament all the way through this year. Or read 1 Corinthians twice a month for six months.

Psalm 119:130 The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.

Fifth, ask. James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

None of the characteristics that James uses to describe wisdom from above is limited by age or intelligence or education or how you were raised or who you are married to or what has or hasn't happened to you in life. God makes His wisdom freely, generously available to all who ask.

And what is the outcome of wisdom from above that is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere?

[A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.](#)