

Two Kinds of Wisdom

Bible Background • JAMES 3:13–18; 5:7–12

Printed Text • JAMES 3:13–18; 5:7–12 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 32:1–11

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: DESCRIBE the value of acting with wisdom from above and patience in the midst of trials, TURN from actions that have been done out of earthly wisdom and lack of patience, and EMBRACE wisdom from God and seek to demonstrate it.

In Focus

Why does everybody act like Mr. Morris is so great?” Delilah asked. “He’s not all that.” “Mr. Morris?” Serena replied. “Mr. Morris is great. I’ve been buying from him for years. He never brags about anything; he just gets the job done.”

Mr. Morris ran the corner store and pharmacy. The store had been in the neighborhood and his family for three generations. Delilah was starting to patronize a new store in the area because she had some complaints about Mr. Morris. “The steps and the sidewalk outside are always dirty, and there are always people hanging by the door asking for money and prices are too high. Yet, Mr. Morris does nothing about it.”

“The prices are what they are,” Serena pointed out. “And as for how Mr. Morris runs his place, it’s what he doesn’t do that’s more important. Mr. Morris doesn’t hassle people for being broke. The other place does.” Serena went on, “And Mr. Morris knows his customers because he’s built up relationships over the years. It isn’t like that at the chain, and you know it. Didn’t you tell me last week that every time you go in, there’s always a new team of workers?”

With her hands on her hips, Serena finished, “Mr. Morris runs a good place. You would see that if you weren’t so cranky. It’s God’s role to judge, not ours.”

Could we measure up if God judged us the way we judge other people?

Keep in Mind

“But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere” (James 3:17, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Glory (v. 14) *katakauchaomai* (Gk.) — Arrogant boasting above someone; vaunting one’s self; assuming superiority over another

B. Sensual (v. 15) *psuchikos* (Gk.) — Belonging to the material rather than the spiritual world, stimulating only the body

Say It Correctly

Stabliſh. STAB-liſh.

Fastiousneſs. fuh-SEE-shuſſ-neſs.

KJV

James 3:13 Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

James 5:7 Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.

8 Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.

9 Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door.

10 Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.

11 Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

12 But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.

NLT

James 3:13 If you are wise and understand God's ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom.

14 But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don't cover up the truth with boasting and lying.

15 For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

16 For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

17 But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere.

18 And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

James 5:7 Dear brothers and sisters, be patient as you wait for the Lord's return. Consider the farmers who patiently wait for the rains in the fall and in the spring. They eagerly look for the valuable harvest to ripen.

8 You, too, must be patient. Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near.

9 Don't grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look—the Judge is standing at the door!

10 For examples of patience in suffering, dear brothers and sisters, look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

11 We give great honor to those who endure under suffering. For instance, you know about Job, a man of great endurance. You can see how the Lord was kind to him at the end, for the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy.

12 But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned.

The People, Places, and Times

Oath. Covenants were always confirmed or accompanied by an oath (cf. Genesis 26:28; Ezekiel 17:18). The oath by which allegiance to the covenant was sworn involved a self-cursing formula to guard against disobedience. A person who enters a covenant places himself in the position where curses will fall upon him if he violates the covenant obligations. The Mosaic Law commands that Israelites swear by God's name (Deuteronomy 10:20). Taking a sworn oath in the Lord's name declared acceptance of God as their highest

authority. Jesus cautions, however, not to make oaths at all, but to be known as so faithful to your word that you do not need to swear (Matthew 5:33–37).

Background

The thesis of the book of James, Jesus' half-brother, can be found in James 2:17: that faith alone without works is dead. This is not contradictory to Paul's treatment of faith or the claim central to the Reformation that justification is by faith alone. Like John Calvin, the Reformation theologian, said, "We dream neither of a faith devoid of good works nor of a justification that stands without them." Instead, we know that true faith is always accompanied by good works, and the book of James reminds us of what those good works look like. This does not mean that as Christians, we work to earn God's approval, as such work will never yield the result we want, which is perfection. Instead, faith links us to Christ, who justifies us and sanctifies us. As we look to the wisdom that James teaches us, let us remember the right relationship between faith and works: that in the life of the Christian, they are distinct but inseparable.

The book itself is referred to by some as the New Testament book of Proverbs. Such a characterization is not unfounded. Here, proper patterns of Christian behavior are set with an emphasis on the commitment that the Christian is to have to the poor, the widow and the orphan, those whom the LORD has expressed a special care for.

At-A-Glance

1. Two Types of Wisdom (James 3:13–18)
2. Endure! (James 5:7–12)

In Depth

1. Two Types of Wisdom (James 3:13–18)

According to James, there is false wisdom that stems from bitter jealousy and self-interest. In fact, these are demonic impulses because they run counter to the values imparted by the Gospel. Jealousy and bitterness suggest discontentment, which runs counter to the message throughout the Scriptures that in Christ, we have all that we need. Self-interest and a mind constantly curved in on itself suggest a self-absorption that does not readily lead to a love of God and love of neighbor, the two great commandments. According to James, it is these impulses that undergird all types of sin. Alternatively, we are to be peacemakers, sowing seeds of purity, peace, and gentleness. By showing mercy because Christ has been merciful to us, impartiality because Christ's grace was extended to us without bias, and sincerity because of the full commitment that Christ exhibited on the cross, we exhibit the wisdom from above.

When have envy and covetousness blinded you to your love of neighbor?

2. Endure! (James 5:7–12)

In the midst of trials, perhaps the last thing we want to hear is the encouragement to endure. Often while suffering, we just want the suffering to stop. Unfortunately, life in a fallen world is full of suffering, so James' advice is appropriate throughout our lives: Be patient for the coming of the Lord. We are not to grumble as the people of Israel did at the brink of the Red Sea crossing and in the wilderness, for such a response reveals a lack of gratefulness for the gracious deliverance that the Lord has given us. Instead, James encourages us to look to the prophets and to Job as models. At first glance, even this seems difficult, as the prophets were, for the most part, reluctant, and Job's suffering was compounded by friends who were not understanding. But each of those stories end with the Lord's vindication, and so also will our stories end.

Relate a time when the Lord alleviated your suffering, whether through a friend or other means

Search the Scriptures

1. James says seeds of peace sprout into what plant?
2. What actions lead to judgment and condemnation (James 5:9, 12)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Is the Christian life of wisdom easier or more difficult than life without it?
2. What is the best remedy for envy?

Liberating Lesson

The book of James lends itself to application quite easily, as application is the theme of the entire book. Like the book of Proverbs, the book points us to wisdom, the right use of knowledge. This is the stem from which good works flower and the root of that plant is the Holy Spirit. This is a plant that merits daily watering through immersion in the Word and prayer, as we seek the Lord for daily wisdom. When you work, submit each conversation to the test: Am I seeking and encouraging the wisdom from above or so-called wisdom from below? Are my conversations pure? Do they flow with mercy? Do they yield good fruit? Or do they yield bitterness and anxiety? Asking these questions of ourselves can guide us as we seek the sanctification that only the Holy Spirit can truly offer.

Application for Activation

When you suffer misfortune, immediately run to the Lord in prayer and ask for endurance. Sometimes it is best not to pray that the trial will end, but that God will make you strong enough to go through it.

Pray daily for the coming of the Lord. Orient your heart toward that day when all suffering shall cease.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

James 3:13–18; 5:7–12

James 3:1–12 cautions would-be teachers to exercise proper stewardship of the tongue especially since more will be required of them. Improper use of the tongue seemed to have been a big issue in James' community, for he repeatedly revisits it. This time he commends those who control their tongues calling them perfect (vv. 1–2); he illustrates the power of the tongue—it is like a bridle to a horse and a rudder to a ship (vv. 3–5); he likens it to a small spark that can ignite a fire to consume a forest and to a fire that can cause a world of iniquity—it can cause havoc to its owner and be destructive in the community (v. 6).

To exhibit the unruliness of the tongue, he notes that while it is possible to train savage creatures, people find it impossible to train the tongue. He climaxes the section by showing the paradox of how we use the tongue—to hallow God, the Father, and to curse people who are made in God's image. He shows that just as it is impossible to have the same fountain produce bitter and sweet water simultaneously and for a fig tree to bear olives, even so, we cannot have blessings and cursing coming from the same tongue. This week's lesson is set directly following these arguments.

13 Who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge among you? Let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

James begins with a rhetorical challenge, asking who is wise among his audience. The question implies that then as now, there were those who opined that they are wiser and more understanding than others and could perform actions better. Rather than condemning or refuting their claim, James challenges them to prove it through their conduct. This directive is aimed at the would-be teachers addressed earlier (3:1). Here James is inquiring whether or not they have the wisdom to match their claim—to be practical teachers. Note his question, asking for someone both “wise” (Gk. *sophos*, sow- FOCE, a practical teacher) and understanding (Gk. *epistemon*, eh-pee-STAY-mohn, an expert, skilled, and scientific person). If such persons are present, James challenges them to show it by their “conversation” (Gk. *anastrophe*, ah-na-strow-FEE)—their conduct, walk, and excellent manner of life. Such people would especially show meekness, or a gentle manner. Mere intellectual acumen does not make a great teacher—comportment is a great contributor.

14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. 15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. 16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

James now sets forth two possible paths for the way forward—a negative and a positive. The first is a path to shun. Envy (Gk. *zelos*, ZAY-loce), by itself, is not necessarily negative. *Pikros* (Gk. *pee-KROCE*) is added to denote its negative implication. Bitter envy can best be characterized as jealousy, which will lead to strife. Implicit in the statement is the notion that the hearts of some would-be teachers were bitter with envy, jealousy, self-seeking, dissension, and pride. This naturally led to feelings of superiority on their part and inferiority on that of others. James strongly warns them not to take pride in that state. He employs the word *katakauchaomai* (ka-ta-kow-KHA-oh-my), which connotes vaunting one's self or assuming superiority over another. This says any who call themselves Christian who display such attitudes are misrepresenting Jesus. This calls for recognition of the fact that, as the name implies, a Christian is an imitator of Jesus Christ whom we must be careful not to misrepresent.

Verse 15 informs us that this kind of wisdom—that which allows talk that is inconsistent with the life—doesn't have its roots in the divine realm. This is significant, for he had already shown that all true wisdom or gifts come from God (James 1:5, 17). Such wisdom, he says, is earthly (Gk. *epigeios*, eh-PEE-gayoce; literally “upon the earth”), meaning it has its genesis on earth and would thus be subject to earthly limitations; and sensual (*psuchikos*, puh-soo-khee-KOCE), meaning it belongs to the material rather than the spiritual life, stimulating only the body. Finally, he says it is devilish—demonic or demon-like.

Sadly found in some church and organizations, envious and self-seeking actions cause a factious rivalry. They often have their source in the same outlook that produced the first sin—the desire for personal gain. Often, it is cleverly hidden from unsuspecting adherents until too late.

The first sin was rooted in self, and it is still at the base of every sin. Not only are selfish ambition and factiousness rooted in selfishness, so are divisive and destructive behavior. One feels no jealousy or envy of another unless one compares oneself with another and determines she or he is ahead. Envy and self-seeking also produce “confusion,” that is, a disorder that comes from instability. We must decide not to follow the devil's footsteps but to guard against his wiles. This requires self-control and constant connection with our source of help—Jesus.

17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. 18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

The second path is the direct opposite of the first. It comes from God—it is from above. Christians need to saturate their environment with prayer and the Word. They need to cast down the world's wisdom so Christ can enter and God's wisdom can take residence. The characteristics James outlines set heavenly wisdom apart from the earthly. The traits listed are those that would be in demand in any organization and desirable for any good teacher.

Possessors would thrive in a church setting or a school environment. It is evident that those possessing them are gifted by the Holy Spirit and are in union with divine agencies. Looking at some of the qualities listed will prove helpful for disciples and teachers.

James says those who possess heavenly wisdom will be pure. This means it is devoid of ulterior motives and self-interest. The next characteristic is peaceable. The root word is peace, which implies that this wisdom or its owner promotes peace. Contrary to popular belief, peace is not necessarily the absence of strife. It has the Hebrew shalom in purview and references a well-being that emanates from knowing all is well with God, and He is our friend. Such vertical connections naturally have horizontal dimensions that enrich and empower the possessor's interpersonal relationships.

James further lists the characteristics of gentleness (equitableness), charitable giving, mercy, fruitfulness in the faith, fairness, and sincerity. These are wonderful traits to possess and practice for eternity preparation and kingdom building. Those who follow us want us to be genuine and sincere. God expects us to be genuine and sincere.

The chapter climaxes with a very profound statement. It states that the outcomes of justice emanate from peace and are found in those who cultivate peace. Some people appear to thrive on conflict or contention. They seem to hate peace. James says, on the contrary, there are those who cultivate peace and sow seeds that bear fruit in righteousness. Love and peace should lubricate every Christian's actions and interactions.

James 5:7–12

James 5:1–6 outlines unjust practices for Christians generally and employers particularly, especially the selfish rich. It invites them not to mistreat employees but to pay honest wages, refrain from wanton luxurious living at the expense of workers, and refrain from condemning and murdering innocent people. James advises the selfish rich that their greed stores up for them the fires of hell and that the cries of their mistreated workers have not gone unnoticed by the Lord of Hosts. Our passage follows this section. Yet, it is important to note that James was not scolding, castigating, ostracizing, or berating the wealthy for being rich. Rather, he was advising them on what riches could do to them and of the impending judgment that was certain to accompany their choice. While we are moral agents free to make our own decisions, there are consequences that accompany the choices we make. James lays out some of these consequences here for all to see.

7 Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. 8 Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.

The “therefore” shows a tie with what precedes it, but the context is a change of both addresses and subject. His talk to the selfish rich about the judgment brings him to address the saints who are oppressed. It marks a shift from censure of the rich to the exhortation of the saints. This is visible by his return to the endearing word “brethren” (Gk. adelphos, ah-del-FOCE). He begins with a call to patience. Patience here is not the usual word but comes from a compound word implying being of a long spirit and not losing heart.

They must be patient for the coming (Gk. *parousia*, pah-roo-SEE-ah) of the Lord, that is, the Second Advent. Apparently, then, like now there were those who were restless about an apparent delay in the Advent, especially in the face of the unjust practices of the rich. These rich are prospering despite their unjust behaviors, unholy actions, and murderous practices. But verse 5 predicts their impending judgment. Christians should thus be patient, for the reign of terror by the rich and their instigator—Satan—might be long but won't be forever. The wicked shall not reign forever over God's people. Their demise is coming. In the meantime, we must be patient.

James' exhortation gives overt expression and responds to an implied question his readers may have had. This question, given all the injustices of the rich, or why are they still prospering and for how long will they continue to reign over God's people, was not new. David had grappled with it (Psalms 73:2–3), as did the prophet Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:1–4).

Many of us may still be grappling with this question. We too need to take heart, learn from James' response, and continue to set our timers and remember the Second Coming of Christ. It is much nearer now than then. It is later than we think. Therefore, look beyond the problems or difficulties of the present to the goal ahead. Set your gazes on it, get your motivation from it, and let it brighten any dark spots in life.

To strengthen his point, James used an illustration from nature/agriculture. Biblical society was agrarian; hence, much of its imagery reflect that setting. Here James says after planting seeds a farmer must wait for the harvest since nothing he does can control the process. Palestine is very dry and arid between June and September. The autumn (early) rains came in mid-October to November to soften and water the ground to allow the farmer to plow and plant seeds. The December/January rainfall penetrated the soil deeply thus allowing the crops to grow. Without this rain, the seeds would not germinate. The spring (latter) rain coming in March/April was eagerly anticipated, for it was needed to ready and promote the maturing and ripening of the grain for harvest. Without it there would be no crop to harvest.

James used this geographical phenomenon for spiritual and theological significance as the Old Testament prophets had done. Jesus sowed the seeds. Just as the farmer need the patience to wait for nature to do its work to ensure a good harvest, so Christians must be patient to allow Christ's agent—the Holy Spirit—to attain a good work in and through them. In light of this, Christians are exhorted to be patient and to make their heart stable.

9 Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door.

The brethren were groaning against each other regarding the problems. A common human propensity in stressful times is to turn on each other. James implores them to stop and gives them the purpose for his call—so they are not condemned. This call is reminiscent of Jesus' warning not to judge because we would be judged by the same measurement (Matthew 7:1–2). James gives another reason for his call— the judge is at the door— another reminder that Jesus is coming soon.

10 Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. 11 Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy

To ensure he reached the hearts of his readers with his urgent and vital appeal, James went from “brethren” (*adelphos*, v. 9), to “my brethren” (*adelphos mou*, v. 10). This builds affection and grabs attention. To further reinforce the need for patience, he cites the prophets, who spoke in the Lord's name, as examples of suffering and patience. One would think that to speak on behalf of God would have granted the prophets respect and shielded them from the people's venom, but sadly their position rarely commanded respect and was often at odds with the powerful. Some were mistreated, others were executed, some were killed, but all faced intense

opposition. Their perseverance and steadfast courage despite these odds can serve to uplift the discouraged as they model how to patiently endure suffering.

James follows up with the universal truth that those who endure are considered happy. He then cites the patience of Job, who neither complained nor renounced his faith under severe pressures and who was richly rewarded thereafter by God. God can be depended upon, for God has pity and is full of mercy (cf. Psalm 136)

12 But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.

This verse is somewhat problematic in that it seems not to connect with either what precedes it or what follows. While the prior verses deal with patience and the succeeding verses with prayer, one must recall that the original was not separated by punctuation. That said, we must note that the section begins with a command not to grumble against each other. A climax that calls for Christians to be circumspect in their speech is fitting and poignant. To provide this climax, Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount seem to have influenced James. Swearing here does not refer to the use of expletives or curse words. It is a prohibition against oaths, a call to take our words seriously. Too many are content with the idea that a word is wind forgetting that it is irretrievable once released. A call to let our "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No" be "No" is an appeal for our words to show integrity.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Wisdom About End Time Signs
(Matthew 24:3–14)

TUESDAY

Wisdom for Speaking a Prophetic Message
(Jeremiah 38:1–6)

WEDNESDAY

Wisdom in Knowing Hearts Without Blame
(1 Thessalonians 3:6–13)

THURSDAY

Wisdom in Speaking Clearly
(Matthew 5:33–37)

FRIDAY

Living Gracefully with One Another
(1 Peter 4:7–11)

SATURDAY

Wisdom in the Prayer of Faith
(James 5:13–20)

SUNDAY

Acting Wisely with Patience and Love
(James 3:13–18; 5:7–12)