



## “The Two Wisdoms” (James 3:7-18)

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Today we’re going to close out this section of James that warns us to be slow to speak; so I’ll be concentrating on verses 13-18 of chapter 3. At the same time, I do want to show the strong connection between what we studied last week on the power and effect of the tongue and how it fits with those verses. So I thought I would begin by telling you what I have every reason to think is a true story.

It comes from the thirteenth century and the court of the European emperor Frederick, who was called the Holy Roman Emperor. Frederick decided to run an experiment. He said, “I want to understand what primordial human speech really is all about. If you don’t teach an infant a particular language, what kind of language will the child grow up speaking? What is basic human speech? What was the language of the garden of Eden?”

So he gave orders to bring him a dozen infants who were newborns. He had them placed in the royal nursery under the care of the royal wet nurses, and gave orders that they were to receive the best of care. They were to be given all the essentials, including affection, but that in caring for them nobody could speak to them. Everything had to be done in a silent environment.

And that is what they did. Everything worked. They were given love and tender affection. They ate, they slept. And every single child died in infancy.

Of course, that was an idiotic experiment of an ignorant man and the babies paid the price for his cruel ignorance. He ought to have known that words, good words, are essential for human flourishing. We are verbivores by our very nature. We consume and thrive on words. Jesus made a point of this at his temptation when he told Satan to flee, because *“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”*

At the same time, unhealthy words, thoughtless or hurtful words, can do terrible damage, and that is what James says in the section that begins at James 3:7. Let's look at this passage together.

**SCRIPTURE: JAMES 3:7-18**

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*7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. 8 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing.*

*My brethren, these things ought not to be so. 11 A spring does not send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening, does it? 12 A fig tree, my brethren, cannot bear olives, or a grapevine figs, can it? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh.*

*13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the gentleness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition 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 selfish ambition 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 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

**WISDOM: A FEW BASIC FACTS**

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Now we don't always associate wisdom with the ability to get along in the world with other people; but as we're going to see, the character of God's wisdom is defined in this passage as being entirely about that. In fact, notice the expression at the end of verse 13: "*Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the gentleness of wisdom.*" The gentleness of wisdom--a fascinating expression. By that James probably means to say either that gentleness flows from true wisdom or that gentleness is the essence of wisdom.

Now we don't ordinarily think of gentleness that way, but James says that we need to restructure our thinking about wisdom. If your speech is abrasive or hostile, you aren't a wise person. Real wisdom is seen in the gentleness of our dealings with people.

But before we get too far along, let's look at a definition of this biblical word wisdom. We can hardly do better than the one from J.I. Packer. By the way, he's still going strong at age 91 up at Regent College in Vancouver. God has given him a long and tremendous ministry since he was led to Christ by C.S. Lewis in one of

his lectures while Packer was a student at Oxford. Some of you have read what I think is his best book, *Knowing God*, which I highly recommend, and from which this definition of wisdom is taken.

#### *A definition*

Here is what Packer says about wisdom:

For us to be truly wise, in the Bible sense, our intelligence and cleverness must be harnessed to a right end. *Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it.*<sup>1</sup>

James would say that the best and highest goal is going to involve relating to other people. But certain things emerge when you operate from this definition. Call these...

#### *Some implications*

By its very nature, wisdom is about getting in touch with reality and seeing how all of life fits together under God. As such, it is about understanding people and groups and events and how they all ought to fit together in a fallen world.

And that means that there is no such thing as a truly wise person who is an atheist. Scripture teaches, "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*" (Prov. 9:10). If you leave that huge factor completely out, you are dead in the water at the start. You will never be wise in any meaningful sense.

And there's something else. There are times when we will simply have to swallow hard and recognize that our knowledge of God is never exhaustive, and so we are likely to misunderstand what is the best and highest goal. Just because God has placed us in his family does not mean that he has promised to make us omniscient. We do not know all he knows. Because of that, we have to avoid the silly idea that, as Packer goes on to say...

...anything painful and upsetting... indicates either that God's wisdom, or power, or both, have broken down, or that God, after all, does not exist... *God's wisdom is not, and never was, pledged to keep a fallen world happy, or to make ungodliness comfortable.*<sup>2</sup>

That one needs to be carved in granite over the doorway of every church. So much trouble is caused because Christians don't understand it.

But James has a point to make here which links back to the previous section on the tongue. Wisdom has two faces.

## **WISDOM: TWO FACES**

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### *Its dangerous face*

The dangerous face of wisdom is words. You have to use them carefully, and thoughtfully, being slow to speak. He warned us last week about that. But then, wisdom also has a safe face.

### *Its safe face*

The safe face of wisdom is our actions. We are to behave in such a way that people are captured and attracted by the way we live. In verse 13, he asks, “*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the gentleness of wisdom.*”

## **THE CHARACTER OF THE WORLD’S WISDOM**

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I find it interesting that James still calls the dangerous face wisdom. He doesn’t call it false wisdom, though he implies that it is. He allows that the world does have wisdom. It isn’t God’s wisdom, but it is wisdom of a sort. He gives us seven characteristics of it to help us recognize it when we see it. First of all, he says that it is...

### *1. Envious in its motives*

That is, the starting place for the world’s wisdom is competition. We look at the people around us as people that we are going to have to overcome to make our way in the world. We envy them. We either want what they have or we would prefer that they not have it. That kind of attitude is bound to color your relationships. That is worldly wisdom at the heart of it. And it is what passes for wisdom in the world we live in.

Secondly, He says that worldly wisdom is...

### *2. Selfish in its ambitions*

It has as its goal to cause my personal prerogatives to be increased in the world. It seeks admiration and sometimes even seeks excellence in intimidation. Let me do the things that will cause people to sit up and take notice of me. Some wag said it this way: “The one that tooteth not his own horn, the same shall not be tooted.”

To go along with this, James says that there is a third quality of worldly wisdom. And that is...

### *3. Boastful in its claims*

What he says here is that if you are guilty of envy and selfish ambition, don’t make things worse by claiming that you are an authority on wisdom. Boastfulness is a common aggravating characteristic of worldly wisdom. When you hear braggadocio, you know you are not dealing with a wise person.

Fourth, worldly wisdom is...

#### *4. Earthly in its appreciations*

Earthly wisdom is applauded most vigorously by people who have no concept of heavenly things. They have put on blinders to the supernatural in general and to God in particular. This is the word that Jesus used in his conversation with Nicodemus when he asked him, “*If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?*” (John 3:12). Jesus was speaking of the new birth, and Nicodemus didn’t get it. His wisdom didn’t include the notion of God actually doing something inside a human being who turned to him in faith. Worldly wisdom has no category for that.

And James goes on to say that worldly wisdom is...

#### *5. Sensual in its appeal*

James uses a somewhat rare word here. We have no exact equivalent in English, but the basic idea is that worldly wisdom is all about what you can see and touch with the senses. It leaves out any dimension of the spirit and in effect reduces human beings to an animal level.

Sixthly, worldly wisdom is...

#### *6. Demonic in its origin*

All the characteristics of worldly wisdom ultimately come from the ruling genius of Satan himself. He loves above all to deceive, and when people buy in to the notion that there is nothing in the universe at all beyond what you can see and feel and taste and touch, they become willing subscribers to the devil’s wisdom. That’s where it comes from.

Seventh, worldly wisdom is...

#### *7. Disordered in its products*

In verse 16, he says, “*For where envy and selfish ambition exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.*” Confusion... disorder... chaos. All are products of what James calls worldly wisdom. We live in a world today of confusion, disorder, and chaos. I trust I don’t have to prove that to you. It seems evident enough just from reading any one day’s report of the news.

In contrast to all this, God’s wisdom is utterly different. And James gives us eight characteristics of it so that we will recognize it when we see it. More importantly, he gives us these qualities with a view to seeing them exhibited in our lives.

### **THE CHARACTER OF GOD’S WISDOM**

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He leads off by saying that God’s wisdom is...

### 1. *Good in its beauty*

You see this in verse 13: “*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the gentleness of wisdom.*” God’s wisdom is about conduct, and specifically conduct that is good.

Here it helps to know that Greek, unlike English, has not one word for good but two. The first is *agathos*, which means “good morally, good at its core.” We derive the woman’s name *Agatha* from this word. It is a word often used to describe God. But it is not the word James uses in James 3:13.

He uses the other word, which is *kalos*, which essentially includes the notion of *agathos* but adds something to it. He says that God’s wisdom is shown when conduct is *kalos*, which adds the quality of beauty or attractiveness to it. In other words, you are wise when people look at the way you live and say to themselves, “This person lives a life of goodness that is winsome. I would like to live that way.” Again, we see James using an idea that was emphasized by the Lord Jesus, who said to his disciples, “*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*” (Matt. 5:16). The *good* in that statement is the same word used in James 3:13, *kalos*. *Agathos* appeals to the moral sense, but *kalos* appeals also to the eye.

A second quality of God’s wisdom is that it is...

### 2. *Pure in its motives*

The first characteristic of God’s wisdom was goodness or winsomeness. James brings in purity here to make sure that we don’t bypass what is morally right. God’s wisdom may be winsome, but it isn’t just for show. Purity means that you don’t read a command of Scripture and then start an argument with God about why this doesn’t apply to me. If God said it, we do it.

Thirdly, God’s wisdom is...

### 3. *Peaceable in its designs*

And here we begin to notice a particular angle that this is all written from. God’s wisdom has especially to do with how we get along with people. We are concerned less with getting our own way than we are with promoting good relationships.

Fourth, God’s wisdom is...

### 4. *Gentle in its effects*

That is, it puts up with a lot before it reacts. One writer on the subject says that this word means “sweet reasonableness.”

Fifth, God’s wisdom is...

5. *Willing to yield in its attitudes*

God's wisdom is willing to listen to the point of view of other people and is open to admitting when it is wrong. This doesn't mean caving in to any shouted opinion, but being skilled in knowing when to acknowledge a better approach. It seeks to win the person rather than winning the argument.

Sixth, God's wisdom is...

6. *Full of mercy and good fruits in its products*

Mercy is one of those qualities that is woefully misunderstood today. It addresses how you behave toward people in the wrong. People who are in the right don't need mercy. Only people who are in the wrong need it—people who have behaved badly. And only people who are offended can give it. And still, people will say things like, "He doesn't deserve mercy."

But nobody ever deserves mercy. Mercy is at the prerogative of the giver, and James says that the wise Christian always has plenty of mercy to give out. He's full of it, and generous with it.

God's wisdom is also...

7. *Impartial in its judgments*

It is always fair. It isn't biased in any way. It looks to establish what is right and just. It will not favor the strong over the weak, but it won't do the opposite, either.

And then finally, God's wisdom is...

8. *Sincere in its source*

It is without phoniness or hypocrisy. It does not put itself forward or seek to impress. But it does recognize its own value.

So James urges us to exhibit God's wisdom as we go about our lives in this world. But of course, we also have to experience God's wisdom as well. As important as exhibiting wisdom is, as critical as it is, we always have to lay a hand over our mouths and recognize that the best we can do is but an imitation of a wisdom that God alone possesses. We are to exhibit wisdom in the world, but we are to admit that there are things beyond our control that we can't really affect. We have to learn to trust God's wisdom to see beyond what we can and to be pleased and happy with how he runs the universe. At best, our wisdom is finite; his is infinite, and we don't always recognize the difference.

There is probably no better statement of this than a poem written some years ago by Ruth Bell Graham. I thought I would close with it this morning. Here is what she learned about God's wisdom and ours:

*Had I been Joseph's mother  
I'd have prayed / protection from his brothers  
"God, keep him safe. / He is so young,*

*so different from / the others.”  
Mercifully, / she never knew  
there would be slavery / and prison, too.*

*Had I been Moses’ mother  
I’d have wept / To keep my little son:  
praying she might forget / the babe drawn  
from the water / of the Nile.  
Had I not kept / him for her / nursing him the while,  
was he not mine?—and she / but Pharaoh’s daughter?*

*Had I been Daniel’s mother  
I should have pled / “Give victory!  
—this Babylonian horde / godless and cruel—  
Don’t let him be a captive—better dead,  
Almighty Lord!”*

*Had I been Mary, / Oh, had I been she,  
I would have cried / As never mother cried,  
“Anything, O God, / Anything ...—but / crucified.”  
With such prayers importunate  
My finite wisdom would assail  
Infinite Wisdom. God, how fortunate  
Infinite Wisdom / should prevail*

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## **NOTES:**

1. Packer, J. I. *Knowing God* (p. 100). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.
2. *Ibid.*, (p. 101).