

TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 32:1-11
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:13-18; 5:7-12

JAMES 3:13-18

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 5:7-12

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.

KEY VERSE

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. —James 3:17

MANY FACES OF WISDOM

Unit 3: Faith and Wisdom in James

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. State the answer to the question posed in James 3:13a.
2. Contrast the sources, characteristics, and results of the two kinds of wisdom.
3. Create a plan for improvement regarding the one behavior of James 3:17 that he or she lacks most.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. How to Suffer
- B. Lesson Context

I. In Education (JAMES 3:13-18)

- A. Good Teachers (v. 13)
What Ministers Must Know
- B. Earthly Wisdom (vv. 14-16)
- C. Heavenly Wisdom (vv. 17, 18)
A Peaceful Approach

II. In Persecution (JAMES 5:7-12)

- A. Be Patient (vv. 7-11)
- B. Do Not Swear (v. 12)

Conclusion

- A. From Above
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. How to Suffer

It has been said that all of life is suffering. This idea is not all that shocking, of course. It has been articulated in many contexts around the world. As Christians, we understand that the suffering we experience is a result of sin in general.

Some try to downplay the reality of suffering. But suffering—especially in the form of persecution—is part of the Christian life. In James’s day, the limited scope of Christianity shaped the types of persecution. Today, when Christianity is a global faith, persecution differs from culture to culture. In certain African nations, Muslim populations have severely persecuted Christian neighbors. In other locations, official government policy hinders Christian meetings and the formation of churches.

In the West, the matter is not quite so clear-cut. What constitutes persecution? While we are not being thrown to the lions in the Roman Colosseum or burned at the stake, subtle forms of persecution do indeed exist. These include social ostracism, which is part of the life experience of many Christians. How should we handle this kind of persecution when we encounter it?

B. Lesson Context

At the beginning of our studies in James, we noted a few themes that run throughout the letter. These themes unite the disparate topics that James addresses. Wisdom is one such theme. Recall, for example, that at the outset of his letter James encouraged his readers to have patience in the midst of temptations or trials (James 1:2-4; lesson 9). This they could do by actively seeking God’s wisdom (1:5). In today’s text, James addresses two very different situations, both of which demand wisdom on the part of believers.

I. In Education

(JAMES 3:13-18)

James 3:1-12, last week’s lesson, introduced an address to teachers (masters) and potential teachers among first-century churches specifically. Even

so, we proposed extended application to all Christians. We wonder, however, if the remainder of James 3 is also addressed specifically to teachers and potential teachers since James does not use the words *teachers* or *masters* in these six verses. Ultimately, though, such a question is only hypothetical; it's impossible to imagine these verses applying only to teachers and not to anyone else!

A. Good Teachers (v. 13)

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.

By speaking of the one *who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge*, James likely continues to have the teachers in mind. He introduces the issue in a confrontational way: “So you think you’re wise and knowledgeable?” he seems to ask. “Then prove it by a *good conversation*.” The word in the original language translated *conversation* refers to more than talk or a pattern of speech. More broadly, it refers to one’s entire way of life or lifestyle. This word occurs in a dozen other New Testament passages.

The teacher’s pattern of life must manifest good *works*; a teacher must put into practice personally what is taught. We see this idea of matching talk with way of life repeatedly in the New Testament: the truth of Christian teaching is verified by the way of life of those who teach it.

The apostle Peter seems equally concerned with the relationship between good works and one’s lifestyle (1 Peter 2:12). A teacher’s knowledge—or claims of having knowledge—must be backed up with evidence (see James 2:18; lesson 11). There is a word for those who say one thing but do another. That word is *hypocrite*.

HOW TO SAY IT

Corinthians	Ko-rin-thee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Deuteronomy	Due-ter-abn-uh-me.
Galatians	Guh-lay-shunz.
Philemon	Fih-lee-mun or Fye-lee-mun.
Philippians	Fih-lip-ee-unz.
Titus	Ty-tus.

The word translated *meekness* carries much overlap in meaning with the word *gentleness*. Paul connects the two words that way in 2 Corinthians 10:1 and Titus 3:2.

What Do You Think?

Which will you focus on more this week: gaining wisdom that gentleness may result, or the other way around? Why?

Digging Deeper

What lessons can you take from the examples of others in this regard?

✧ WHAT MINISTERS MUST KNOW ✧

In the confidence of youth, many preachers and teachers who are fresh out of Bible college or seminary are tempted to trust in their recently acquired knowledge. That was true of me when I first entered ministry. It took some difficult relationships with critical church members to convince me that knowing all the right answers to doctrinal questions wasn’t the sole qualification for having a blessed ministry.

Yet God blessed me with one or more wise elders in every one of those churches. Their years of life had taught them some things about ministry that I had not learned in the classroom. I had knowledge that they didn’t have; but they had wisdom that I didn’t have.

James doesn’t make wisdom and knowledge mutually exclusive. The good teacher will have both! Do you? —C. R. B.

B. Earthly Wisdom (vv. 14-16)

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

Envy translates a word that can also be rendered “zeal,” as it is in John 2:17—that’s zeal in a good sense. The lesson verse before us portrays zeal in a bad sense, as an attitude that crosses over into inappropriate jealousy (Romans 13:13; etc.). That such envy is *bitter* suggests that it manifests itself in anger and harsh speaking.

It is conceivable in this context that teachers might harbor envy of each other’s gifts. This

would result in strife, as it had in Corinth (compare 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 11:18). If this is the case, there is no reason for any of James's readers to *glory* in their knowledge or their (so-called) wisdom. Such behavior will seem from the outside to prove that their teaching is a lie. Thus it brings disrepute to *the truth* of the gospel they proclaim.

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

James has articulated the standard: lives must match words. But the reality is that at least some among James's readers do not meet this standard. They adhere to their own *wisdom*, a wisdom that is *not from above*, meaning that it is not from God (contrast James 1:17). All one has to do is consider its fruits in 3:14 to see this! We might say that *earthly* wisdom is "worldly." The idea is the same: it does not originate from God.

Sensual is the very opposite of spiritual (see also Jude 19)—devoid of the Spirit of God. The condemnation *devilish* reinforces the identity of its source (compare 1 Timothy 4:1).

What Do You Think?

How should we handle wisdom principles that seem to be at odds with one another? (Example: Proverbs 26:4 in contrast to 26:5?)

Digging Deeper

How should your reaction differ, if at all, when someone quotes folk wisdom as advice? (Example: *Look before you leap* versus *He who hesitates is lost*.)

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

All of this should be no surprise: worldly wisdom leads to bad outcomes. In this case, it leads to *confusion and every evil work* (compare Galatians 5:19-21). The communal impact of this "wisdom" is damaging in the extreme. It threatens the very integrity of the churches.

C. Heavenly Wisdom (vv. 17, 18)

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.

There is a better choice! The adjectives that James applies to *the wisdom that is from above*, from God, call to mind Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23). Most of these terms are clear because they are used in a manner that is consistent with the other writers of the New Testament.

Easy to be intreated means something like "willing to yield" or "open to reason." To be *without partiality* goes hand in hand with having no *hypocrisy* (compare James 1:22, 26; 2:1-4, 9).

✧ A PEACEFUL APPROACH ✧

As my late wife, Pat, declined in health, we bought a "lift chair" for her. It both reclined and boosted her into a semi-standing position. Within a week the chair quit working. I called the furniture store to demand an immediate repair. I was told that a repairman would be out in a week. At my insistence, he came the next day. But the defective part would take weeks to arrive. I then demanded a new chair. My insistence was met with refusal.

But soon Judy arrived. I expressed my frustration, and she volunteered to help. I listened as she sweetly explained the situation. Within a few minutes, Judy received the promise that a new chair would be delivered the next day.

Judy's approach to the problem was a perfect example of wisdom. Her gentleness contrasted with my brashness; her peaceful approach countered my anger. Judy showed me how to practice what James said. Are you a Judy, or do you *need* a Judy? —C. R. B.

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

The desired goal of one who seeks true wisdom is peace. Heretofore, the teachers may have been fostering (or at least haven't tried to stop) conflicts among themselves (James 4:1). Those who *make peace*, however, are said to sow *in peace* (compare Matthew 5:9; Romans 14:19). *The fruit of righteousness* can be both what is sown and what is harvested as a cycle of peace begins. Righteousness is inclusive of one's words and one's works (compare Philipians 1:11).

What Do You Think?

What will you commit to doing this week to promote the healing of a divide, either between you and someone else or as a mediator for two warring parties?

Digging Deeper

Under what circumstances should you enlist the aid of someone in your healing effort versus trying to go it alone? Why?

II. In Persecution

(JAMES 5:7-12)

In order best to understand James's directives in 5:7-12, next, we have to understand that these are in response to the first six verses of the chapter. A strong argument can be made that 5:1-6 is spoken against landlords who are unbelievers. We notice that they are not called to repent but to "weep and howl" in light of the coming judgment (James 5:1; contrast 4:7-10).

Such landowners come from the handful of rich outsiders who make life miserable for many of their tenant farmers and/or day laborers. It is unlikely that such landlords ever hear or read these words themselves. Instead, the accusations are written for the benefit of impoverished Christians of Jewish background to whom the letter as a whole is addressed (note the 15 uses of the word "brethren"; James 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1; etc.).

A. Be Patient (vv. 7-11)

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.

James is writing to a group of believers who have cause to be angry and despondent. The word *brethren* indicates that James's words are not intended for the rich landlord unbelievers of James 5:1-6 (see above), but for Christians who suffer at their hands.

James points the oppressed believers to *the coming of the Lord* as the ultimate solution. This might seem like a cop-out to some modern readers who

are used to enacting change through the democratic process. But we have to remember that the world of the first century AD has no such process. Appeal for change might be made to the consciences of those who have the power to make a change (see Philemon 8-17). But hope for change ultimately resides in taking the long view, which looks to the return of Christ.

The patience this requires is illustrated by an analogy of a *husbandman*, another word for *farmer*. To await Jesus' return requires *long patience* on the part of believers (compare Galatians 6:9). Just as the farmer waits patiently for his crop, the poor, oppressed believers are to wait patiently for the coming of God's judgment. Because God can be trusted to send a harvest in its time (Deuteronomy 11:14; Jeremiah 5:24; Joel 2:23), Jesus can also be trusted to return as He has promised.

The seasons of rain mentioned may not be similar to our experience. In Israel it is quite rare for rain to fall between May 1 and October 15. Thus *the early and latter rain* refers to rain in fall and spring, respectively (compare Song of Solomon 2:11). Since James's addressees are "scattered abroad" (James 1:1), their experience will differ by location. But they undoubtedly know of the crop and weather cycles of the land of Israel.

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

Just like the farmer of verse 7, James's audience is to be *patient*. This no less applies to us today. The counsel to *stablish*, or strengthen, their *hearts* speaks to one's inner resolve. Christians must be resolute and courageous in earthly circumstances while awaiting *the coming of the Lord*. Such resolve will involve rejecting the negative views of skeptics (2 Peter 3:3-15; etc.).

What Do You Think?

Without giving directive advice, how would you counsel someone who comes to you admitting a problem with impatience?

Digging Deeper

How would your approach differ for someone who obviously displays impatience, but seems unaware of the problem?

9a. Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned.

Why would James's addressees be holding grudges *against* one *another*? Based on what James has said about their oppressors, we could certainly understand how many in James's audience might be tempted to hold grudges against those who have mistreated them. But that is not what James deals with in this verse.

One possibility is that those to whom James writes are taking out their frustrations with their rich oppressors on each another. Perhaps they disagree about how to handle the situation. Perhaps their oppressive situations are unequal, resulting in covetousness of a fellow believer's assets or circumstances. Regardless, they are in danger of being *condemned* unless they stop holding grudges (compare James 4:11, 12). It would be tragic indeed if the judgment that God has prepared for their oppressors also comes on some of them because of failure in this regard.

9b. Behold, the judge standeth before the door.

This warning implies the imminent return of the Lord (see on James 5:8, above). But people understand that idea in different ways since *imminent* can mean "expected very soon" or "can happen at any time." Either understanding is cause for repentance! Sin must be put aside immediately. When Christians harbor bitterness toward one another, they lose their witness.

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

Because of the strong opposition they faced, *the prophets* are examples to James's readers (and to all future generations of believers) of *suffering affliction, and of patience*. They endured so much (Matthew 5:12). As Hebrews 11:33, 37, 38 says, these were men

who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions. . . . They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy).

The prophets are thus examples to all Christians of all eras in their faith-based manner of life. They did not merely speak the words of God; rather, they lived out their faith and trusted in Him by action.

But above all, the prophets were patient. The nations of Israel and Judah heard the words of the prophets and ignored them. We know that this was frustrating for the men who were called to prophetic ministry. It required a great deal of patience for them to keep preaching God's message of repentance to people who would not listen and would not obey—to their own destruction.

What Do You Think?

Which of the prophets best serves as an example for you to emulate personally with regard to patience? Why?

Digging Deeper

Which kind of earthly suffering seems to vex Christians the most? Why do you say that?

11a. Behold, we count them happy which endure.

This phrase speaks of the prophets as those *which endure*. The language is reminiscent of the blessing found in the Sermon on the Mount at Matthew 5:11, 12:

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

11b. 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.

This leads James to another example of *patience* and perseverance: that of *Job* (see Job 1:20-22; 2:10). *The end of the Lord* refers to the Lord's purpose in allowing Job to suffer as he did (compare Hebrews 10:36).

Consider the outcomes of Job's suffering (see Job 42:10, 12-17). Those outcomes cause us to see the grace of the Lord, that He is full of *tender mercy* (see Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 103:8). The word *pitiful*, which has changed in

meaning in the centuries since the *King James Version* came into being, refers to compassion and tenderheartedness (see also Lamentations 4:10; 1 Peter 3:8).

B. Do Not Swear (v. 12)

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.

Jesus appears by name only twice in this letter (James 1:1; 2:1). Even so, James regularly alludes to His teachings, particularly as recorded in Matthew and Luke, and frequently from the Sermon on the Mount. The verse before us offers the clearest connection in that regard, which features a direct quotation from Matthew 5:34-37. Elsewhere the teachings of Jesus bubble just below the surface of James's discussions of wealth and poverty, suffering, wisdom, the control of the tongue, and much more.

The verse at hand caps off this section of James' letter. The phrase *but above all things* implies that the swearing of oaths is the most egregious sin that the original readers are engaged in. Some commentators argue that oath-swearing is the most serious because a broken oath directly involves God in a lie. We can envision situations in which poor Christians are tempted to swear oaths in order to obtain credit for food, all the while knowing they might not be able to pay the bill when it is due. In other words, the swearing of an oath involves them in behavior that does not glorify God—quite the opposite! We note the negative outcomes of oaths in Matthew 14:6-12; 23:16-22; and elsewhere.

Conclusion

A. From Above

Today's lesson brings two disparate passages together under one unifying theme: the supremacy of the wisdom from above, and the need for it in a variety of situations. Teachers, then as now, can wreak great spiritual damage through the spoken word among those they teach. Ordi-



Visual for Lesson 13. While discussing 3:17, ask the class to prayerfully consider their answer to the question on this visual for one minute or less.

nary believers, suffering greatly under economic oppression, negate the gospel and its power by harboring bitterness against fellow Christians.

The solution is for Christians to seek “the wisdom that is from above” (James 3:17). When armed with it, we can put suffering into a larger perspective and be empowered with patience to endure until Jesus returns.

We all face challenges over the course of our lives. The real question is how we will react when those times come. Will we pause to seek wisdom from above? Or will we rely on earthly wisdom in our response?

The need for wisdom from above and patience go hand in hand as our discipline and resolve are tested. All this has a very real bearing on our spiritual well-being in this life; continual rejection of God's wisdom has eternal implications. As we heed James's call to seek wisdom from above, we will experience a harvest of righteousness.

Guaranteed.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, by the power of Your Holy Spirit this day, help us to focus our hearts and minds on the wisdom that is from above—Your wisdom. We ask this in the name of the wisest person who ever lived: Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Choose God's wisdom.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Acrostic. Write the word *WISDOM* vertically down the center of the board. After you remind learners that wisdom has been the theme in the past several studies, ask, “What are some single-word descriptions of wisdom that have one of that word’s letters in common?” As learners suggest words, write them on the board, making sure that each description intersects with one of the letters of the word *WISDOM*. After you have six words to complete the acrostic, ask which one is most accurate. Discuss.

Make a transition by saying, “Today we consider more of what James has to say about wisdom as we look at two passages from his letter.”

Into the Word

Point out that James 3:13 both asks a question and implies the answer. Ask half the class to read the question out loud in unison and the other half to respond in unison with the second half of the verse. Then distribute handouts (you prepare) featuring two blank columns, one headed *Godly Wisdom* and the other headed *Worldly Wisdom*. As you read today’s text aloud, ask students to note behavior that belongs under either heading. Have study pairs or triads discuss and resolve differences or omissions in entries.

After several minutes, reconvene for a whole-class discussion. Compare the lists and discuss differences. Ask, “What can you do to contribute godly wisdom to the church today?”

Option. Distribute copies of the “Commentary from Scripture” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Let half of the class, in pairs or triads, consider the first passage noted as the other half considers the second. Call for whole-class sharing after several minutes.

Point the class to Galatians 5:22, 23, and ask a volunteer to read it aloud. Ask, “Which items from this list are also in James’s list in 3:17?” Wait

for responses, then ask, “What does this tell us about how to achieve the wisdom that James describes here?” (*Expected response:* we need the help of the Holy Spirit in order to demonstrate godly wisdom.)

Option. Distribute copies of the “Wisdom of the Sages” exercise from the activity page. Allow one minute for learners to complete Part 1 with quick first impressions. Then put learners into groups of three or four to complete Part 2.

Into Life

Ask students to conduct a search in contemporary sources for examples of godly wisdom and worldly wisdom. Do this in one of two ways:

- *Newspapers and/or magazines.* Bring an assortment of these for students to use for searches.
- *Internet.* Ask students to use smartphones or tablets to search for examples from news items of the last seven days.

With either approach, ask students to complete the activity in the same pairs or triads formed earlier for Bible study. Allow at least eight minutes to work in groups before calling the class together to share discoveries.

Discuss: “Which kind of wisdom was easier to find, and why?” Ask the class to decide on the best example of worldly wisdom and the best example of godly wisdom they found.

Point students again to James 3:17. Ask class members to decide which of the qualities listed there is the biggest challenge to them personally. Have volunteers suggest one particular action step they could take to manifest their chosen attribute of wisdom.

Distribute paper and ask learners to complete the following sentence: “I can demonstrate godly wisdom this week by _____.” Close with sentence prayers, asking that God will give wisdom to those who seek it.