



## Women's Bible Study

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Demonstrating Faith Through Wisdom

James 3:13-18

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We're now in the second half of James chapter 3. Where have we been to this point?

We have seen that James emphasizes the relationship between our words and our actions...our inner selves and our outer behavior – whether that is dealing with trials, or temptations, or our attitudes towards others, or our faith and deeds, or by controlling what we say. I guess you could say that James' thesis statement is **“As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” (James 2:26)**. In our passage today, we see the relationship between faith and wisdom, but again he starts with the same premise, that

### **I. What's Inside Shows (v. 13-14)**

Please turn with me to James 3:13, and to the outline in your prayer page.

**“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. (James 3:13)**

Good old James. He never appreciates a passive faith, but keeps hammering on the idea that one's beliefs are always demonstrated in action: **“Let him show it by his good life.”** What's inside, shows.

He begins by connecting some words that we wouldn't normally put together...wisdom and humility. After all, King Solomon is described as the wisest man who ever lived, and he wasn't exactly humble – at least, based on his immense wealth and lifestyle.

Why, then, does James connect

#### **A. Humility and Wisdom**

The older translations use the word “meekness” instead of “humility”, so the RSV says **“...by deeds done in the meekness of wisdom.” (RSV)**

And the Amplified version explains it even more:

**“Who is there among you who is wise and intelligent? Then let him by his noble living show forth his good works with the unobtrusive humility which is the proper attribute of true wisdom.” (Amplified, v. 13)**

“Unobtrusive humility” is probably a good definition of meekness. Now meekness is not a characteristic we value in our culture. Most of us think of a meek person as someone who is too shy, humble or insecure to stand up for themselves...a doormat, in other words! But biblical meekness, has specific characteristics [following comments from John Piper at [www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons)]

It means that they trust in God; they commit their way to God; they are quiet before God and wait for him to act; they refrain from taking revenge and aren't defensive; they are teachable, and reasonable – willing to listen to another person's opinion.

But this approach is very different than the world's approach to wisdom, which includes

### **B. Envy and Ambition**

**“But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.” (James 3:14)**

What is inside, shows. If your motive is ambition and you are driven by envy, this is bound to come out whether or not you try to conceal it.

Two of my sisters were in academia. One is a retired English professor, and the other is a music professor. And I always imagined that their lives were filled with the lofty pursuit of knowledge because, of course, the university is a place of ideas. But what they both discovered, the English professor in particular, is that academic life contains a lot of professional envy and infighting. With the fierce competitiveness that comes from seeking tenure or publishing, it's almost impossible to rejoice in someone else's gifts because it means that ours are going unnoticed. Humility, as a virtue, has fallen out of favor in the places where knowledge is supposed to be the greatest – another example of how God's wisdom contradicts the knowledge of the world.

Now remember, this whole passage is in the context of teaching. James 3 began with **“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” (James 3:1)** So it stands to reason that when James is talking in 3:14 he's referring to teachers who have the wrong motivation for teaching – who wanted the grandeur and social standing of being called “Rabbi” but who didn't want the spiritual underpinnings to deserve the job of teacher.

What's inside, shows. And if the motive is envy or ambition, that will eventually be revealed.

But also we see that

## **II. What's Inside Matters (v. 15-16)**

I heard from any number of you last week how unpopular the topic of the tongue was. Hmm...and I thought the low numbers in the evening group were just due to bad weather! Some of you admitted that you didn't really want to do any self-examination in the area of the tongue.

There was a time when I would have felt an absolute hypocrite standing up and speaking on how to control your mouth. But I've gotten into trouble with my mouth so many times in my life that I have been working hard on this problem for many years. In a sense, that made it easier to teach on the subject – at least I was aware that I had a problem and was consciously working on it.

But that didn't spare me from conviction when it came to **this** week's passage. Oh, my goodness! It didn't. You see, last week left us hanging with the implication that if we only can control our mouths we'd be perfect (James 3:2). But today's passage is the other half of James' point about the tongue. It's not just how well you control the externals. What we understand from James 3:13-18 is that *what is inside matters* far more, because what is inside **will come out** eventually. That's where James was heading in verse 12 when he said **“My brothers, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.”** In other words, what is really inside of you matters, because it will be revealed in your speech and actions...especially under pressure. You can cover it up, but you can't conceal it forever.

So here's my struggle, and why I've been feeling so convicted as I have studied this passage. It is not enough to train yourself to be discreet with what you say, or even to train yourself to not get angry so easily. In the end, what we need inside ourselves is **“the humility that comes from wisdom.”**

And this last week was full of opportunities to show whether I was controlling my mouth, or whether my mouth was genuinely reflecting **“the humility that comes from wisdom.”** Because this was the week other people's actions made me angry. Sure, I was able to hold my tongue. But what went on inside! And I rarely get angry...so what's happening here? Well, first, I'm being publicly held to the soul-searing standard of teaching that James describes in chapter 3 verse 1. It's not enough for me to prepare what my mouth is going to say. I need to prepare my SOUL to teach. For that I need **“the humility that comes from wisdom.”** I'm still looking for it, and therefore I have felt completely inadequate this week. Just so you know, we're all in this together, whether we're working on our mouths, our insides, or both.

James goes on to explain why What's Inside Matters:

**“Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” (James 3:15-16, NIV)**

James is saying the same thing three different ways, but we learn something by looking at the nuances.

His first term is

### **A. Earthly Wisdom**

Earthly wisdom could also be called ‘worldly wisdom’. All it means is that we’re reflecting the culture around us. I’m reading the book *The Wounded Healer* by Henri Nouwen. It talks about the post- modern world...a place where truth is what you say it is. With no absolutes, truth is one thing to one person and something entirely different to another. Earthly wisdom creeps into the lives of Christians when we fail to subject our cultural views to the standard of the Bible. For example, this generation of children is growing up hearing from the culture that “homosexuality must be ok, or God wouldn’t have created people who were homosexual by nature...”. If you hear this long enough and pervasively enough, it begins to sound reasonable. But the truth is given in Romans 1, where God speaks of homosexuality as “depravity”.

Or put it on the level of an individual life. We see earthly wisdom operating when there is no discernable difference between the way Christians live, and the way the world lives in the areas of morality, business ethics and so on.

But the next adjective he uses is

### **B. Unspiritual Wisdom**

To be “unspiritual” takes things a step further, and substitutes some form of spirituality which is not Christianity, for the truth. We read a lot in the press about celebrity religions, like Scientology or Kabbala. But true spirituality is always centered on Christ.

One of my sisters read the book jacket to my other sister’s recently published book. She said, “It seems a bit presumptuous of her to say, ‘And then I found the truth,’ as if to say that her truth is the same for everyone.” But that’s exactly what Christ said: **“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)**

We’ve often bemoaned the fact that virtually everyone we know is similar in belief, in the sense that we hardly ever get to cross paths with non Christians. But last summer we got a chance to speak at length to someone who personified this “unspiritual” approach – someone who had created his own set of beliefs about spiritual things.

We were flying home from Indonesia, where we'd visited John's brother. Our tickets took us via London, so we spent one last night there, knowing that we had to get up early, walk a mile to the station with six suitcases, take the underground through rush hour, and eventually get to Heathrow airport. We were all tired, jet lagged and very ready to come home. About 10:00 pm John became violently ill and started vomiting. The bathroom was down the hall, so he did a lot of sprinting that night. Needless to say, no one got much sleep.

In the morning we made the unprecedentedly extravagant decision to take a taxi to the station. Our driver kindly offered to drive us to Heathrow for less than it would cost to ride the train, so we settled back for an hour's drive.

Our driver was a cheerful, chatty fellow who was bent on converting us to his way of thinking about spiritual things. It quickly became clear that this man's belief system was cobbled together from several major religions. Good old John, still white in the face and very ill, began to answer questions about Christianity. I remember feeling guilty but glad that I was sitting in the back seat and reflecting how much this particular occasion was costing John in terms of being horribly sick, yet having to respond to what was clearly a spiritual opportunity.

It is definitely possible to believe in something "spiritual" that directly contradicts the true spirituality of the gospel. That's what James means when he talks about "spiritual wisdom" in this verse.

Then James uses the term

### **C. Demonic Wisdom**

At their source, all religions and philosophies which oppose God come from Satan. This is unpalatable, but true. It is what has been called "the offense of the cross." To say that there is only one way to God rules out everything else. That is hard teaching. But it is biblical.

Jesus said, **"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me" (John 14:6)** It seems pretty clear. We know that the author of all opposition to God is Satan. Therefore, whatever form it takes, any proposed substitute for the way of the cross, ultimately is a lie. And Satan is the father of lies. (John 8:44)

It's uncomfortable to think that people of other religions who are devoutly following their religious practices have missed the boat. But if we truly believe the Bible's statement that there is only one way to God, and that is through Jesus' blood, then it makes evangelism much, much more urgent. Would we not tell someone how to escape from a

burning building? James tells us constantly to link our beliefs to action, yet I know that I often think squeamishly of evangelism as pushing my views on someone else.

Let me give you an analogy. There is a new vaccine out now which stamps out the HPV virus. This vaccine should stop at least four different types of cervical cancer. Yet the vaccine itself is new, with no track record, uncovered by insurance and, most importantly, irrelevant until someone becomes sexually active. There is a push to vaccinate the entire female population from age 11 to 26, to protect them for the future.

Now it may be that in ten years this vaccine is required of us in the same way that we are now required to get a polio vaccine. It may, truly, be a lifesaver for women. And so doctors are urgently communicating the need for it, long before some of us are convinced that it is necessary for our daughters.

Put this in terms of the gospel. If I share with someone their need for Christ, they may think that it's unproven; they are not dying so there's no urgency, and so on. They may feel it's presumptuous for me to talk about their need for Christ when they don't feel any such need...just like I do about the HPV vaccine. But my reluctance to embrace it isn't going to stop my doctor from bringing it up every time for consideration...not in an obnoxious way, but a persistent and factual one. Perhaps that's a good way to approach evangelism, to say, "You need Jesus. You may not recognize it yet, but you will. And so I'll keep bringing it up when I can, for you to consider."

James has just contrasted worldly with godly wisdom. Unless it comes from above, the world's wisdom is earthly, unspiritual and ultimately demonic.

Then James elaborates on heavenly wisdom in verse 17:

### III. What is the Good Life? (v. 17-18)

**"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. (James 3:17)**

I've entitled this section, *What is the Good Life?*, harking back to verse 13: **"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life..."** Now, in verses 17 and 18, we discover that the good life really is living with the **"wisdom that comes from heaven."**

Verse 17 is filled with rich word pictures that deepen our understanding of wisdom. [The following explanations draw heavily from William Barclay's commentary *Letters of James and Peter*.]

First of all, it **comes from heaven**, from God, and is beyond anything we could come up with on our own.

Second, it's **pure**. In Greek this word meant "pure enough to approach the gods". True wisdom makes us able to behold God, because without purity, we cannot see holiness.

Third, it's **peace-loving**. The Greek word means "right relationships between man and man, and between man and God." So true wisdom brings men closer to each other and to God.

Fourth, it's **considerate**. This is a very unusual word that means someone who knows how to temper justice with mercy. The poet Matthew Arnold called it "sweet reasonableness." It is the ability to live by the royal law – loving others as much as we love ourselves.

Fifth, it's **submissive**, meaning always ready to obey, and able to be persuaded. It's willing to listen and knows when to yield, but also knows how to hold to the truth.

Sixth, it's **full of mercy and good fruit**. Mercy means that we can show the same pity for those who are suffering as God does – we reflect his mercy towards us, and that includes people who bring suffering on themselves as well as those who are suffering unjustly. But it's not just a feeling. It is the feeling turned into practical action.

Seventh, it is **impartial** or undivided. True wisdom knows the truth and abides by it, not blowing with the prevailing opinion but standing firm in conviction.

And eighth, it is **sincere** – without hypocrisy. We're not playacting; we are consistent in what we do and say, under all circumstances.

That is a lot to compress into one word: wisdom. But James tells us that we can have this heavenly wisdom because of our relationship with God.

I want to end by looking at one aspect of wisdom that stands out particularly in this passage, because it is emphasized in v. 18: "**Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.**" (James 3:18)

Why is peace so important? The 'shalom', the Hebrew word in this statement means more than the absence of war. It reflects a wholeness, a completeness, a sufficiency that comes only when a person's spirit is entirely not at odds with itself.

You see, Christ came to bring about this integration of our spirits:

**“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” (Eph. 2:14-17)**

I’ve always thought of this verse in terms of reconciliation between individuals and people groups, but it also speaks of the nature of the peace that Christ provided.

You see, from the time of Adam and Eve in the garden, humankind always has struggled with a broken spirit or a divided nature. In every person, no matter how depraved, there is a tiny reflection of his Maker, God. That is why even among criminals and murderers there can be the odd spark of humanity, or forgiveness. In some way, we all reflect the fact that we were made in the image of God, just as the creation around us gives hints of its formerly unfallen beauty.

But in Christ, we finally have a way to re-integrate ourselves with the unfallen nature we possessed at creation. Not only does Christ’s work on the cross give us access to a holy God, it also gives us a new heart and nature that want to stop sinning and follow Christ. Now, as I pointed out last week, the old sinful nature still wars against the new, and even Paul found it really difficult to keep squelched. But at least the *potential* now exists for overcoming sin and becoming more like Jesus. What that really means is that we have the possibility of being made whole again. And part of the process includes peacemaking, or reconciliation. We reconcile within ourselves by putting off the old nature and putting on the new. Then we can talk about peace with real conviction, because it’s based on the righteousness of Christ and his ability to make us whole. After that, we can reconcile with others by making peace, through Christ.

That’s what James is talking about in verse 18. **“Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”** Because of Christ, there is now a relationship between peace and righteousness.

Now there are many non religious people who work to promote peace in our world – between nations and people groups. And you don’t have to be a believer in God to find war abhorrent. But my point is that James is showing us something *beyond* human capacity to achieve, and this is why mere politics or lifestyle or even the absence of war on our planet will not achieve this sort of peace. This kind of peace, or wholeness, or restoration, is only possible because of Christ’s shed blood: **“His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace…” (Eph. 2:15)**

So if you are desperately wondering why there is so much strife in your life and indeed in the world, then understand that it will not come about until the peace of CHRIST

achieves it. That is why we must continue to carry the gospel into our community, our nation and our world. Without this basis for peace, there will be no long lasting healing or integration or wholeness taking place.

Jesus made this link between peace and God when he said, **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:8-9)**

And the N.T. is filled with statements that remind us how important it is to create peace in our own lives and others’:

**“Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” (Hebrews 12:14)**

So here are a few suggestions for working to create peace both near and far, so that we may become **“peacemakers who sow in peace, who raise a harvest of righteousness.”** It was very easy for me to quickly come up with a list of ten or twelve, in the areas of home, personal spiritual life, and the world. But I decided there would be more value in just giving three suggestions, in three areas of life, and to let you think of others on your own. So here they are:

In your home:

***Every day, have at least one conversation that is affectionate or humorous with each member of the household.*** This can be difficult if there are ongoing tensions with a child or a spouse. But as Paul wrote, **“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Romans 12:18)** This means that you have at least 50% of the responsibility for the tone of each conversation. Proverbs tells us that a soft answer turns away wrath, and that a nagging wife is like a dripping faucet. What are you doing to escalate the conversation from irritability to anger? Is there some neutral ground you can meet upon, that allows you to connect each day with your family members?

In your spiritual life:

***Learn to be silent before God.*** Silence is different than prayer. It is a waiting attitude that asks God to teach you, or guide you. Remember that meekness is teachable and submissive to God. We can never hear what is being said when our days are so noisy and overcrowded that we cannot even listen to our own bodies crying out for rest.

And in the world:

***Open yourself to people of other culture.*** Learn, read, travel, open your home to strangers. Whatever we do along these lines will help us understand more how to relate to each other peacefully instead of violently. We don’t have to go abroad to reach out to other cultures, but we may have to go across the street or across town. Hebrews tells us that we are strangers and aliens on this earth, and we must never think that we belong in our community while others don’t.

I am reading a book called *God Grew Tired of Us*, by John Bul Dau. He was one of thousands of displaced Dinka boys, called the Lost Boys, who fled southern Sudan for Ethiopia to escape civil war in the 1980's. Dodging bullets, wading through crocodile infested waters, growing up in refugee camps filled with nothing but boys and a few adult male caretakers, these Christian Sudanese began to ask themselves whether God had indeed grown tired of them, allowing them to go through these terrible disasters.

I cannot imagine how our children would fare if they were plunged into that situation. But in reading about his very foreign life, I now know something about African history that I did not know. I believe that many of the Somalis in our community similarly came to escape war and famine in Somalia. If they went through what the "Lost Boys of Sudan" went through, we should be doing everything to ensure that they experience a different response from Christians in Rochester than they did in their home country.

We can open ourselves to people of other cultures, right on our doorstep. And every step of understanding will help contribute to a climate of peace in this community, this nation, and the world. For it is only by the grace of the gospel that the world will be reconciled. **"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility."** I pray that we will indeed be able to live the good life – the gracious, lovely, hospitable, peace-making life – by "deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."