

A Learner's Permit for Life

A Word to the Wise- Part 1

James 3:13-16

By now we have discovered that the theme of this letter from James is spiritual maturity. If the letter were published as a stand-alone book, we could easily give it the title, "Growing Up in God".

While many New Testament authors, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, emphasize **what we believe**, James clearly emphasizes **how we behave**.

For James, the question is not, do you believe correctly, but are you behaving correctly?

Nowhere is behaving correctly more at risk than with our tongues. So, in the last few sessions together, James dealt with our speech—the character of our words.

Now, in **chapter 3**, James begins to reveal the character of wisdom and how it impacts our behavior.

In fact, he begins this new paragraph with a pop quiz. Are you ready?

Some of you are saying, "I'm only auditing this course." Oh no! You can't audit the Book of James. You have to do the homework and take the exams if you want to grow up in God.

Here's the pop quiz question in **verse 13**. ***Who among you is wise and understanding?***

In other words, is there anybody among you whom you would consider to be wise and understanding?

You can just imagine the buzzing going on in the assembly as people begin looking around, nudging each other and pointing toward somebody over there or someone back there.

But James is really asking more of a personal question that you could rewrite to ask, "***Are you wise and understanding?***"

James is actually anticipating everyone in the assembly raising their hand and saying something like, "I don't want to be presumptuous, and I'm not as wise as I'd like to be, but I think I've got a handle on it. I'm fairly intelligent."

James knows that nobody is going to raise their hand and say, "Not me, I'm an idiot . . . I'll go sit in the back of the classroom while you work with all the wise people up front." This is not a comment on where you're sitting, by the way.

James knows that just about everybody in the assembly will read **verse 13**, "***Who among you is wise and understanding?***" and whisper in their heart, "You know, I may not be as wise as some Christians I know, but I'm way ahead of a bunch of people sitting around me. Look! They're raising their hands. Sure, there've been times I've acted like a fool, but for the most part I've got a grip on things. I'm pretty bright. I'm in church aren't I? That should give me some tokens shouldn't it? Count me in with the wise group."

Now with all of us answering in the affirmative which James anticipates, he has set us up. He set us all up!

He's walked us into a cul-de-sac, and now he follows up the pop quiz question by effectively saying, "Thank you for raising your hand. Now let me describe a wise person and let's see how you measure up."

And now we're all thinking, "Why did I raise my hand? Can I change my answer? I want to sit in the back!"

Too late . . . besides, if you want to grow up in God—if you want to learn how to handle the maze of life, take note at what true wisdom and understanding look like.

Now, before we start our engines, let's make sure we have a grip on what James is referring to when he uses the words, "*wise*" and "*understanding*." By the way, this is the only time in the New Testament where these two words appear together.

1. Let's start with wisdom.

If you were with us when we began the exposition of this letter, you might remember the first and only other time James used the word "wisdom" was back in *chapter 1* and *verse 5 where James wrote, But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God . . .*"

We're not given a description of wisdom in this verse, we're just told we need it and we can ask for it. Now James uses it again here in *chapter 3*.

The word wisdom is *sophos* (σοφος) and the Greeks used it as a general word for knowledge, theory, or philosophy.ⁱ

In fact, you can hear the Greek word *sophos* in *philosophy*.

The Jews in the Old Testament and certainly the New Testament deepened the meaning of this word to refer to the *application* of theory, the application of knowledge, or literally bringing knowledge to life. Knowledge alone isn't wisdom; facts are not sufficient.

James is not equating wisdom with your ACT scores; he isn't tying wisdom to your grade point average or your graduate diploma hanging on the wall.

The truth is there are plenty of really smart fools living today with brilliant minds and brilliant I. Q.'s but far from God.

Solomon wrote as a younger monarch that a relationship with God was the entry point to genuine wisdom (*Proverbs 1:7*).

You can't have wisdom without a relationship with God.

You can be smart without God, but we're not talking about your GPA. Wisdom is the ability to construct a life worth living.

You see, a wise person doesn't have to get past the 8th grade which is where many of our grandparents and great grandparents stopped their education in the 1800's and early 1900's and what godly, wise lives many of them constructed.

Just read Romans 1 where unbelievers reject the truths about God, His creative power, and His revelation of the gospel then turn around and proclaim themselves to be wise. Paul writes that they have become fools instead.

The word for fool in Romans 1:22 is the Greek word, *moraino* (μωραίνω) which gives us our word, *moron*.ⁱⁱ

Imagine—it's possible to be a brilliant moron! That's exactly the contrast James has in mind in this paragraph.

A wise person, in the mind of James chapter 3, is someone who is taking the knowledge of God's truth and applying it to life.

So in Biblical terminology, knowledge might allow you to take things apart, but wisdom will enable you to put things together.ⁱⁱⁱ

2. Now let's look at understanding

Who among you is wise and understanding.

Those words might sound redundant, but they are actually unique. This is actually the only time this word appears in the entire New Testament.

The word, "understanding" was used in James' generation for someone who was becoming a specialist in some field or practice. They were literally becoming skilled at practicing their wisdom.^{iv}

Wisdom is knowing and applying the truth, and *understanding* is becoming a specialist—skilled by means of practicing the truth.

Think about it this way. When you got your driver's license, you finished learning a lot of things about a number of subjects: the laws of the road, the operation of a vehicle, etc.

You also took Driver's Ed. Your instructor was a man so desperate for money that he risked his life with a car full of 15 year olds, and he had to let them drive.

You've seen the cars—they have that sign on the roof of the car and you know to just pull over.

They drive by and that kid is holding on to the steering wheel with both hands, even sitting up close to the steering wheel, and there's a man in the passenger's seat in absolute terror.

I remember arriving at my first Driver's Ed class. I was absolutely thrilled to discover the car I would be driving was a Volkswagen Bug with four on the floor.

My family owned the exact same car, and I had spent plenty of time in our driveway, learning how to back up and pull forward – learning the timing of the clutch pedal and just enough gas at the right time. By the time I showed up for Driver's Ed, I had it down pat.

I slipped in the driver's seat; a couple of student's got in the back seat and the instructor sat in the passenger's seat. He said, "You may begin."

I put in the clutch, started the engine, pressed the gas pedal, popped the clutch and away we went, and suddenly the car screeched to a halt. I looked over and discovered that my instructor had a set of brakes on his side of the car—something my wife has wanted for years.

He looked at me and said, "Young man, we're not here to race anybody . . . we're here to learn how to drive."

Well, eventually you got your learner's permit. That was one of the happiest days of your life. Then you got to terrorize your parents!

I remember reading about one 15 year old in New York who actually ended up in the newspaper. He was walking down the street in broad day light when he was jumped by two other guys. They demanded his wallet. He refused. They pulled a gun out and threatened him. He still refused. They jumped on him and tried to get his wallet out of his pocket and he fought back. Finally some other people came to help and the thieves ran away. They said to him, "Why didn't you just give them your wallet?" He replied, "My learner's permit is in there." He'd rather die than not be able to drive.

I have read that the vast majority of accidents continue to occur in the first year of someone driving a car.

If we could just skip that first year but you can't. You need that time behind the wheel so that you can become skilled at it. You need to take all the knowledge you've learned about cars, the law, and the road system and not only apply it (wisdom), but

focus that knowledge on your neighborhood streets by getting into the car, gripping the wheel, and practicing (that's understanding).

When you became a Christian you got a learner's permit, and you soon discovered the complications of growing up in Christ.

All of your knowledge and the skill to apply it are constantly tested, because the scenery's always changing. Every situation is unique and different. The road is always twisting and turning. Life doesn't stay in park, and there are other people on the road, and they're moving too.

Out where I live there are animals to contend with—not Duke fans—I mean real animals.

My pick-up truck was less than four months old when a doe in broad daylight ran across 401. I never even saw her running at full speed until she crossed the highway. She was absolutely determined to hit me, and she did!

Driving is dangerous, so is Christianity!

The trouble is that too many Christians want to stay in the garage.

James is telling us here that in order to grow up in God we can't stay in our driveway. We have to take what we know about our walk with Christ out on the open road. Yes, there may be accidents along the way.

Stay at it! You are developing wisdom and understanding; both the application of knowledge and the development of skill is exactly what James has in mind for every believer.

The next question we need to answer is this, "How can you tell if you're getting better at it? What are the mile markers that show progress as we grow up in our walk with God?"

In *verse 13*, James will answer that question. Notice again, "**Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.**"

James provides here what we can call:

Two visible mannerisms of a wise person:

1. The first is "**good behavior.**"

We talk about someone getting out of jail early on good behavior. This is more than a reference to keeping your nose clean.

James is using a word that literally means to “return or to turn back.”

It carries the idea of returning time and time again to the truth of God’s word.

In other words, goodness—or good behavior—is walking next to the truth, and in so doing you are demonstrating righteous behavior. It is literally bound to obeying God’s word.

Good behavior, in this sense, can be illustrated in my neighborhood whenever I see people walking their dogs. A lot of people have one of those leashes—maybe you do too—where you can push a button down and the chord releases, then your dog can run ahead for 10 or 15 feet. Then you can release the button, and it begins to rewind. Your dog is effectively pulled back to your side even though they really want to run.

I’ve seen parents at the mall with harnesses on their kids and a leash. I don’t know if it’s the same kind of leash or not, all I know is I’ve watched some kids straining at their leash to run free.

Now in the meaning of this word, the one who strains against the leash designed by God’s truth is unwise, and the one who allows the truth of God’s word to pull him back in, time and time again, is wise.

It is the person who yields to the pull of the leash and walks next to the Master who will demonstrate good behavior.

James doesn’t really go on to define good behavior, does he? Because he knows everybody intuitively knows when someone, whether saved or unsaved, is behaving well.

We talk about:

- That’s a good man
- She’s such a good girl
- He’s such a good student
- He’s such a good employee
- Those are really good deeds

You say to your child when he leaves for school, “Now you be good!” You don’t have to list 30 things for him. He knows it means to share his snacks, don’t push anybody down on the playground, don’t talk out of turn, sit in your seat, and don’t yell at anybody.

Everybody knows what good behavior is!

Now the world may twist goodness and call bad—good; but in their conscience they have the

truth of God implanted, and they have a pretty good idea no matter what culture or what country.

I pulled this article off one online news agency which leaked the trouble Iran is having with keeping single people from engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage which is a violation of Muslim law. So in order to address the situation, political leaders are trying to legalize a Shiite Muslim tradition called temporary marriage. Temporary marriage is where a man and a woman can sign a contract that allows them to be legally married for any length of time, even if it’s only for an hour. The contract is signed and then followed by the man giving his bride some money as a dowry. Then they’re married for an hour.

Everybody knows it’s nothing more than legalized prostitution. Yet state-run Iranian television quoted the Interior Minister as saying, “Temporary marriage is God’s rule – we must encourage this.”

Can you imagine the effort and the hypocrisy? Before you thumb your nose at Iran, don’t overlook the fact that in America fornication is rampant, and we don’t even bother with a contract.

I couldn’t help but think of the answer provided by Paul when he wrote in **Romans 2:15** that the unbelieving world still has ***the Law of God written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing them or defending them.***

The believer does not have to go out into the world and say, “I’m going to be good, and this is what good is so now watch my good behavior.”

No, he just goes out and demonstrates good, clean living—right living—integrity and honesty, and just old fashioned biblical goodness, and the world automatically knows it.

If you want to be wise, this becomes our passion. You allow the word to define the boundaries, and you stay with the simple passion—I will be good!

Jesus Christ said, ***“Let your light so shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”*** **Matthew 5:16**

The world will intuitively know you are distinctive and your works are good. They will know that you must be empowered by the true and living Lord.

So, the first mannerism of growing wise is good behavior.

James adds another mannerism in *verse 13*. ***Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.***

2. The second is *gentleness*

A wise person is marked by, literally translated, “*wisdom producing gentleness.*”ⁱ

The word for gentle is the same word translated “meek” or “humble”.

James already used this same word back in *chapter 1* where he exhorted the believer ***to receive the word of God with humility (verse 21).***

So the mannerisms of a person growing more proficient in the application of truth to life are gentleness or often translated with the words, humility and meekness.

Jesus Christ used this same word in *Matthew 5* where he said, “***Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.***” How upside down is that?

The Greek world thought of meekness as a sign of weakness.

The meek don’t inherit the earth; they get ground into the earth. The meek, the humble, and the gentle are the doormats for the human race.

So what is Jesus and James, his half-brother, encouraging us to become here...doormats? Oh no! Meekness is not weakness. In fact, the word used here refers to power under control.

- It was used in the days of Plato for a brilliant teacher who could be disrespected by argumentative students without losing his temper and throwing them out of class. He kept his cool.
- It was used by the Greeks to describe a gentle warm fire, which is nothing more than controlled flames—fire under control.
- It was also used of a gentle breeze. The right amount of wind at the right time is a wonderful thing, but the wrong amount of wind at high speed and it is not a gentle breeze but a hurricane or a tornado.
- The word was also used of medicine—just the right dose could bring healing—

the wrong dose can bring disaster and even death.

James is talking about strength and power of a substance that is under control, and in this context it would be the **character and personality of the Christian.**

This is Jesus Christ ***who was reviled, but did not revile in return – when suffering, He offered no threats in return. (1 Peter 2:23).***

If you want to consider power under control, consider Jesus Christ...

- One word and Golgotha vanishes
- One sweep of His hand and the mocking, jeering crowd falls down and worship.

Instead, ***He humbled himself . . . and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8)***

That was power under control!

Isn’t it easy to say, “Yes, but that’s Jesus Christ—the perfect Son of God.”

You missed the beginning of that paragraph in *Philippians 2* which says, “***Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus...who humbled himself ...***”

Get this! James is under the impression that good behavior and gentle deeds are not reserved for God alone.

James is asking, “Are you a wise person?” which translated means, “Are you demonstrating power under control?”

Has anybody seen that in your life?

Have you ever seen it in someone else’s life?

I saw an unforgettable display of this when I was around 18 years of age. My dad and I were downtown Norfolk handing out invitations to sailors who were off duty for the weekend. Back in those days, the ships would empty into downtown Norfolk which was a sinner’s paradise. One bar after another, one porn shop and brothel after another interrupted by what was called in those days, “x-rated” theatres. The streets were swarming with uniformed sailors, and we were standing in the middle of one street handing out invitations to come to the servicemen’s center located there downtown.

A civilian man walked up to us and when my dad handed him an invitation, he threw it on the ground.

Then he slapped my father across the face. I looked at my dad and watched him gather himself for a moment and then say to this man, "Do you feel better now?" I was standing there thinking "We can take this guy . . . in Christian love of course". Then my dad attempted to witness to him.

To me that was an unforgettable demonstration of power under control. That's this word James uses here.

Did you raise your hand and say, "I'm one of the wise students?"

Well, here's a word to the wise from James for those who are wise and growing more skillful at the application of truth to life. There will be two visible mannerisms:

Good behavior and a meek or gentle character.

These are two mannerisms that reveal our knowledge of God's word, and the application of that knowledge (wisdom) is truly being focused on each situation we encounter (understanding) as we drive through the traffic jams of life.

Let me give you two principles drawn from James's realistic profile of a wise person.

1. Wisdom is not automatically given to those who can identify it; it is given to those who are willing to practice it.

The writer of Hebrews said that wisdom is for those *who by means of practice have learned to discern between good and evil (Hebrews 5:14).*

Wisdom is more than the mouth saying the right things. It's a resolution made over and over again to practicing it.

Wisdom is not for the curious . . . it belongs to the serious.

2. Secondly, wisdom is not automatically given to those who'd like to have it; it's given to those who cannot live without it.

Just like a 15 year old who'd rather die than not be able to drive.

Just how badly do you want wisdom?

Solomon wrote it this way, *"If you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God; for the Lord gives wisdom, from His mouth come knowledge and understanding [and] He stores up sound wisdom for the upright . . . for wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul . . . you will walk in the way of good men. (Proverbs 2)*

ⁱ John MacArthur, James (Moody Press, 1998), p. 168

ⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 349

ⁱⁱⁱ Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Mature: James (Victor Books, 1979), p.

^{iv} Adapted from D. Edmond Heibert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 205

^v www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,277449,00.html

^{vi} Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, James (Zondervan, 2008), p. 171