

The Ways of Wisdom

A Word to the Wise-Part 3

James 3:17-18

Several of our seminary graduates are involved in church planting. I've had the privilege of talking with two of them in the past two weeks.

One of them even sent me his sermon manuscripts on the book of James. His sermon introduction to this last paragraph referenced the popularity of a comedian named Jeff Foxworthy.

You remember him? He released his first comedy album in 1993 entitled, "You might be a...what? A Redneck if . . ."

His album was released in 1993, which means if you listened to it you're getting old; in fact, you're old if you know what an album is!

In his original list, Jeff included the following characteristics:

- You might be a redneck if you ever cut your grass and found a car;
- You might be a redneck if your fur coat is homemade;
- You might be a redneck if you ever hit a deer with your truck on purpose;
- You might be a redneck if you don't think these are funny. Now you're laughing.

The point is simple; how do you know what a person is like? Well, just watch him; go over to his house or job, follow them around for a while and you'll find out.

The Apostle James doesn't want us to be confused about what true wisdom is. You know you're a wise person if . . .

James seems to know how easy it is to misunderstand what he's been saying all along. He wants us to get it right.

Like the man who knew his wife's birthday was coming up soon, so he asked her (without trying to appear obvious) "Honey, if you could have one wish, what would you want?" She thought for a moment, then laughed and said, "I'd like to be eight again." He thought—that's perfect—I know exactly what to do.

So on the morning of her birthday, he woke her and off they went to IHOP for breakfast. After a huge waffle with strawberries and whipped cream, they drove to a nearby theme park. What a day it was; he put her on every ride in the park: the Death Slide, the Cyclone Whip, the Screaming Loop, the Wall of Fear, and the Double-Ring Ferris-Wheel. Five hours later she staggered out of the theme park with her husband. Her head was reeling and her stomach churning, and then off to McDonald's they went where he ordered her a Big Mac with fries and a thick chocolate milk-shake. Then he took her to the latest Disney animated movie where they had popcorn and Pepsi's and a bag of M&Ms . . . topping off the day full of fabulous 8-year-old adventures. Exhausted, she stumbled into the house late that evening with her husband and collapsed on the bed. He leaned over and softly whispered, "Well, you got your wish! How did you like being 8 again?" One eye opened in surprise and she moaned, "I meant my dress size."ⁱ

It's one thing to think we heard what our wives said . . . it's another thing to have actually understood.

In the last paragraph of *James chapter 3*, the Apostle James has contrasted the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God.

And James does not want anybody saying, “Oh, I thought you said wisdom was like... or I thought you meant this instead.”

So in the last few verses he’ll make sure we hear and understand exactly what he’s been saying.

He’s going to effectively say, you know you’re a wise person *if*.

James will provide for us seven characteristics of genuine, godly wisdom. We can’t miss it.

Let’s go back and start reading at *verse 13* and get a running start as we finish up this paragraph. ***Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. 14. But if you harbor bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so like against the truth. 15. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above; but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.*** (literally there is confusion and corruption everywhere).

Now *verse 17*. ***But . . . the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. 18. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.***

These are seven characteristics of wisdom . . . we could call them, seven ways to tell if we’re growing up in godly wisdom.

1. Pure

The first word, back in *verse 17*, is “*pure*”. Notice again, ***But the wisdom from above***—that is, from God—***is first pure***.

The words *first pure* do not mean this is the first word in the list. It actually means this is the priority characteristic of wisdom which must come first!

In other words, purity is first in importance.ⁱⁱ The word refers to moral integrity and holy living.

It is the opposite of the world’s wisdom. You might remember in the previous verse that the world’s wisdom is described as confusion and

corruption—*verse 16. ...disorder and every evil thing.*

The wisdom of the world is sensual, criminal, demonic, depraved and devious.

Now, James tells us that heavenly wisdom is first and foremost morally clean. The word refers to someone who shrinks away from pollution of any kind.ⁱⁱⁱ

It treats sin like you treat your big garbage cans—you don’t keep them in the middle of your living room; you keep them outside.

When I went to get my daughter from college and load up the truck and bring her home after Christmas break, my youngest daughter went with me. We loaded Candace’s stuff up and had just enough room for Charity in the back seat of the pick-up and Candace in the passenger’s seat with things stuffed all around them.

I had forgotten to go to the town dump before heading to Lynchburg, and I had a big bag of trash in the back of my pickup. I ended up using it to weigh down some stuff near the tailgate—not my brightest idea that afternoon.

About an hour later, as we were driving down the interstate, the wind had picked up and that bag of trash ended up toppling out. I saw it in my side mirror hit the pavement and rip open. It just exploded, and stuff went everywhere.

We went a mile or two before we were able to turn around. We pulled into a dealer’s car lot and I went in and asked for some trash bags. Unfortunately, my bag was one of those large green lawn bags that I had really loaded down over several days and the only bags they had where the small white ones.

We finally made it back around to where the bag was lying just off the left lane of the interstate. I parked there with flashers blinking away—my truck actually still in the left lane.

We hopped out and as fast as we could went up and down that area picking up all that trash.

Everything had spilled out and spread out over 30-40 feet: from broken glass to egg shells to food scrapings.

The three of us picked up all of that stuff the same way—with the tips of our fingers. Not our hands . . . just our fingertips. It was nasty.

You shrink away and crinkle up your nose when you get around stuff like that.

That’s the idea of this word used by James. He says a wise person grows more and more

disgusted with the wretchedness of sin. He doesn't coddle it, embrace it, defend it, promote it, cover it, accommodate it, entertain it or delight in it.

To the person growing in wisdom, sin becomes more and more polluted because we are growing more and more pure, and James puts this word first. That's because every adjective in this list is hinged to this word—pure.

In other words, if you don't really want to be pure, if you don't hate sin and want to be clean and pure, then never mind about being peaceable or gentle or merciful.

You get purity wrong and you're not even on the right path to finding or much less demonstrating wisdom.

By the way, this happens to provide the very first guideline to use when we are determining what is wise and what is not.

Is it pure, clean and right? We don't need to go to God and say, "Lord, I really need your wisdom about whether or not I should pay my taxes this year? April is just around the corner, so Lord, would you give me wisdom."

You don't need to go and ask Him whether or not it's wise:

- to be faithful to your spouse,
- to tell the truth;
- to obey your parents;
- to guard your appetite;
- to put filters on your computer;
- to clean up your language;
- to stay out of clubs;
- to keep your promises;
- to be honest with your employer;
- to write your own term paper;
- to pay for whatever it is you get from a store.

You never have to go to God and say, "I really need wisdom for all that stuff." Why, because none of it is right and clean and pure.

Godly wisdom will lead you to shrink away from impurity – and you don't even really want to touch it – much less pray about it.

Several years ago I had a woman tell me that she had been involved with a man for some time before finally breaking it off. She was single and he was married. They both claimed to be Christians; both of them were involved in the church. She said to me, "I was so off the path of wisdom—I was so self-deceived that we would actually meet at a hotel room, get out our Bibles,

read the word together, get on our knees and pray before committing adultery.

You don't need to pray about some things. **And if *what you believe to have received from God is truly heaven's wisdom, it will always be pure and right.***

So the Christian who wants to grow up in wisdom can ask this simple question regarding his thoughts, his words, his actions: "While I am thinking that, saying that, seeing that, doing that – am I pure?"^{iv}

That really says it all doesn't it? That's why James says, this characteristic comes first. God's wisdom is pure . . . it's clean.

2. Peaceable

James goes on in *verse 17* to add the word *peaceable*. You could translate this adjective, "peace loving".

By the way, since this characteristic follows purity, this is not the kind of peace-loving person who sets truth aside for the sake of some sense of tranquility.

This peace loving, wise person does not compromise with sin in order to keep the peace.

In fact, Jesus Christ said that His truth would not bring peace, but a sword, that is, the gospel would bring turmoil and trouble between children and parents, among relatives and extended family (*Matthew 10:34*). The believer may very well stir things up. They may very well experience trouble instead of peace.

However, as one Greek scholar wrote, "This word *peaceable* refers to a person who may be standing up against sin, but while doing so he hungers for peace, yearning to heal all divisions by wise counsel."^v

3. Gentle

James then adds another word to the list of seven in *verse 17*, it's the word *gentle*.

Now this is a different word than the one used earlier in *verse 13* where James referred to a wise person's gentleness. In verse 13, James used a word that is synonymous with humility

The word here in *verse 17* refers to someone who continues to trust God in the face of injustice.^{vi}

The Greek philosopher, Plato, used this word to refer to someone who responds wisely to the loss of personal rights and interests.^{vii}

You could paraphrase this word *gentle* as one who yields their right of way to another. You see this word operating in the parking lot after church. This word *gentle*—yielding—will be demonstrated out there.

Now be careful. The last time I mentioned being nice to each other in the parking lots around this campus, one of the crew told me afterward that it took forever to clear the parking lots between the services because everybody was trying to let the other person go first. He said, and I quote, “It was terrible... we couldn’t get everybody out.” So yield, but don’t cause a traffic jam.

This word is demonstrated in the yielding of Abraham who said to Lot his nephew in **Genesis 13**—listen, we’ve got too many people, too many herds and flocks for us both to try and live off the same land. So I’ll let you choose. You can have the fertile and well-watered Jordan or the land of Canaan, and Lot said, “Are you serious? You’re going to let me choose?”

And so Lot prayed about it for all of 15 seconds and then said to Abraham, “I’ll take the Jordan Valley.” And you would have expected Abraham to say, “Look, I’ve been thinking it over these past 15 seconds, and I’m older; God gave me the covenant promise and not you, so I’ve decided to exercise my right and I’ll take the Jordan Valley.”

But Abraham yielded; he stepped aside and allowed Lot the fertile land.

4. Reasonable

James goes on to give us a fourth description and goal of a person growing in wisdom. He says in **verse 17** *that wisdom from above is first and foremost pure, then peaceable, gentle and now reasonable.*

This word refers to someone who is easy to work with—he’s open to reason—not defensive or angry when disagreed with—he is agreeable.

In James’ day this word was actually used in a military context for someone obeying orders without question. It was also used to refer to a child submitting to the will of their parents.^{viii}

The opposite of being reasonable is being stubborn to the will of those in authority over you and ultimately to the will of your heavenly Father!

The opposite of reasonable is bull-headed, and you’re going to have opportunities to demonstrate which one you are tomorrow as you respond to those in authority over you.

It’s that easy to spot a wise person in this regard.

They’re easy to work with—open to correction—not in the back room with the others running down the crew chief, or griping about the superintendent or the demands from the teacher.

Reasonable means agreeable.

5. Full of mercy and good fruits

James gives us next the only double characteristic in the list—*the wisdom from above is full of mercy and good fruits.*

Would you notice the contrast here? The wisdom of earth in **verse 16** *engages in every evil thing*, but the wisdom of heaven is engaged in a harvest of mercy.

That’s the reason you have this double characteristic. Mercy is not feeling someone’s need; it is meeting someone’s need.

Mercy is not a feeling; it’s an action. Mercy is always demonstrated, and a person who is growing in wisdom is growing in mercy.

The wisdom of the world would say, “Not me . . . you don’t want to be giving mercy to people—what you want is to have people at your mercy.”

What a contrast the world’s wisdom is to the wisdom of Joseph, the prime minister of Egypt, in **Genesis 45**. When he finally had his brothers at his mercy (*at last at his mercy*) he chose to give them mercy instead.

The wisdom of the world is merciless; the wisdom of God is merciful, in fact it is the gospel of mercy:

- *For Christ saved us according to His mercy (Titus 2:5)*
- *God is rich in mercy (Ephesians 2:4)*

6. Unwavering

Now James adds another characteristic to the ways of wisdom. He writes near the end of **verse 17** *that the wisdom from above is*

unwavering which sounds contradictory to reasonable.

No, James isn't referring to someone who is stubborn in a negative sense. This word refers to not wavering or vacillating on principle.^{ix}

In other words, you've made a commitment to Jesus Christ, and you will not waver. No matter how it's tested; you are committed to following Him.

You put that purity ring on your finger when you were 13 or 14 or 16 and you refuse to take it off or live as if you have.

The wisest thing you could ever do with your life is commit it to Jesus Christ. Every day when you face the world you're not deciding whose team you're playing on—vacillating back and forth—your mind is already made up!

When you fail, you confess and get back in the game.

7. Without hypocrisy

One more characteristic of wisdom at the end of *verse 17 the wisdom from above is not hypocritical*.

The word, hypocrites (υποκριτης) referred to an actor—one who literally wears a mask.^x

In the days of James, the Greek actors didn't change clothes, and they often played more than one character. They wore or held up masks attached to a stick, and they became that character.

If they wanted to play a different character, they simply changed masks. James says wisdom doesn't wear a mask.

There is no pretense or play-acting in church or in life for growing, maturing believer.

Now notice, James writes in *verse 18. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

In other words, a wise person sows these kinds of seeds just described and benefits from a fruitful harvest of righteousness.^{xi}

The etymology (word history) of the word *righteousness* is interesting. It used to be spoken in the English world as right-wisness.^{xii}

Over time, right-wisness became righteous. In other words, a person who is right in his wisdom is righteous.

James is saying here that if you sow the seeds of wisdom you're going to get the right kind of harvest—a righteous harvest of peace with God and peace with others, peace within your own conscience as you walk through your day, and peace when you pillow your head at night.

James says, if you want that kind of fruit – that kind of harvest – you have to sow these kinds of seeds. I'm so glad James wrote in *verse 5 of chapter 1, If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God.*

The condition of this Greek construction implies that we all do. You could render it, "Since all of us lack wisdom, let's ask God for it."

Just keep in mind you are saying, "Lord, I want this kind of fruit in the garden of my life." The Lord will effectively say, "Then get ready to have the ground ploughed up and weeds yanked out and circumstances and comforts transplanted with a balance of cool water and hot sun."

You see, you're saying to God, "Lord, come plant these seeds, so that I can grow in wisdom and display these fruits and flowers, which are fragrant and pleasing to Christ and a testimony to others for they are these seven:

- pure
- peaceable
- gentle
- and reasonable
- full of mercy and good fruits,
- unwavering . . . and without hypocrisy.

So we pray that God will give us wisdom, not because we want a little more of it, but because we cannot live without!

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- iii D. Edmond Hiebert, James (BMH Books, 1992), p. 210
- iv R. Kent Hughes, James: Faith That Works (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 157
- v Hiebert, p. 210
- vi Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 735
- vii Spiros Zodhiates, The Labor of Love (AMG Publishers, 1985), p. 185
- viii Rienecker/Rogers, p. 735
- ix William Barclay, The Letters of James and Peter (Westminster, 1976), p. 97
- x Warren W. Wiersbe, James: Be Mature (Victor Books, 1979), p. 112
- xi Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: James (Zondervan, 2008), p. 177
- xii Zodhiates, p.212