

Does Your Life Reflect Worldly Wisdom? (James 3:13-16)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on November 15, 2009

www.goldcountrybaptist.org

James 3:13-18 is a section that everyone who studies it agrees is all about wisdom. Some would argue this is the central theme passage of the entire book, an ultimate test of true faith: Who do we trust for our wisdom? Who do we trust for wisdom about decisions we make and how we live our life? Do we live by the wisdom of the world, or do we live by the wisdom of God's Word? Is it about us or is it God that determines our choices? Are we self-centered and earthly-minded, or God-centered and heavenly-minded? James wants us to know we don't have to look any further to answer that question than to simply look at what our behavior shows. Just look at how you live your life as a pattern – he says that's the answer.

James 3 ¹³ 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 have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie 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. 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.

Notice the word “fruit” in v. 17 (“good fruits”) and also in v. 18 talking about fruit and seed that is sown and that produces a product or harvest of righteousness and peace. We have seen James already make the point more than once that fruit is determined by the root, the reality within (or lack), by its nature.

In James 2, he said faith without works is dead / useless in the sense of barren or without fruit. If there's no fruit of the Spirit in someone's life, don't assume the Holy Spirit is in their life, James would say. If there's no real fruit, there's no real faith, James says.

In James 3:12, he just finished talking about the tongue and the fact that speech problems actually reflect heart problems. And he uses the image of fruit also there in v. 12 to say what is produced is consistent with the nature of what the tree is, and by implication, inner change must take place before any lasting change in speech. True faith shows up in works (2:14-26), words (3:1-12), wisdom (3:13-18).

1. The Deeds of Wisdom

¹³ Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

Most of us in school growing up had “show and tell” time – we would bring something to show to all the others and tell about it. But when it came to Sunday School or our church involvement, we somehow got the idea that Christianity is just “tell” but the “show” part is no longer important. As long as we say the right things and know the right answers, we're all right. As a little kid, it's easier because the answer is almost always God or Jesus no matter the question.

Maybe you've heard about the guest children's church teacher who was trying to describe something for the little kids to guess and he said "it's brown, and has a furry tail, and climbs trees and collects nuts for the winter, what is it?" And one confused little boy raised his hand, and said, "I know the answer is supposed to be Jesus, but sure sounds a lot like a squirrel!" But as we have been around classes and church for awhile and we learn the right lingo and the right answers more and can say some pretty Christian-ese things, even pronouncing right some of the hard names in the Bible, we somehow think we're doing good. But James argues it's not just what you know ... what do you show?

Don't just tell, show. Show *and* tell! In v. 13, the truly wise or understanding person doesn't have to tell you, you can see it in his or her life; it shows. James has argued again and again that when someone is a true Christian, that will show in how he lives his life.

2:12 *So speak and so act as those who are to be judged ...*

2:14 *What use is it my brethren if someone says he has faith, but he has no works. Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to him "Go, in peace. Be warm and be filled," and yet you do not give him what is necessary for the body, what use is that?*

v. 18b ... *I will show you my faith by my works.*

True faith is shown in one's works, words, and wisdom. There is true and false religion (1:26-27) and true and false faith (2:14-26) and true and false wisdom (3:13-18), and the difference is found in the true reality within which will show itself on the outside, too. The first time the word "wisdom" appears in the NT, Jesus says "*wisdom is vindicated* [or "shown to be right"] *by her deeds* (Mt. 11:19). Your life demonstrates whether or not you have wisdom, or what type of wisdom you are following. That's the key issue in this text.

James 3:13 *Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.*

In our language and culture, "understanding" and "knowledge" often refers to what our brains have learned, for example in school. We get used to knowing whatever we need to for an exam the next day, but a good amount of our school education is soon forgotten and an even greater amount doesn't make it into our everyday lives. But in the Bible, truly knowing and being truly wise was determined by your life, not what was in your head or what you once wrote down on paper.

You can have all kinds of scholastic degrees and not be truly wise. I read this week about a former student of Columbia University, who once sued the University because it had failed to teach him wisdom although he believed the school implied that it would. I also read there's a lawsuit about Baby Einstein videos by parents who bought the videos thinking their kids would be geniuses by watching. But wisdom isn't taught by universities or DVD puppets .

Difference between "wise and understanding"/knowledge in v. 13? Someone at men's Bible study explained it this way: knowing that a tomato is a fruit = understanding; knowing not to put tomatoes in fruit salad = wisdom. Wisdom is applied understanding/knowledge

2. The Definition of Wisdom

Wisdom – skillful practice and application of God’s truth to life. It’s not apart from understanding, it’s linked to it. It’s living it out. Reviewing OT passages with these same 2 words helps us define:

Deuteronomy 4:6 tells Israel that obedience to God’s commands is the key, not just knowing them: “**Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’**” (ESV)

1 Kings 4:29 makes clear both terms are a gift from God: *And God gave Solomon **wisdom and understanding** beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore* (ESV)
Job 28:28 explains further that these two traits can be cultivated by fearing the Lord, and by forsaking evil, or to say it another way, reverence for God and repentance from our sin is essential to these:

... Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.

Even unbelievers recognize the value of these traits, though they don’t have them. When pagan Babylonia took Israel into captivity, Daniel 1:4 tells us they chose young men like Daniel who had “**wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king’s court**” (NASB).

When the true King, Jesus, chooses His servants, He also wants them to be wise. He told His disciples they need to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves (similar words to James 1:13). When the early church in Acts 6 saw a need to appoint new servant-leaders to care for the church’s needy (deacons before title officially) the first mark Apostles instructed was that they be men with a reputation of being “full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom.”

So what does it look like practically when someone has wisdom? The end of James 3:13 adds an important phrase, which the NIV translates “**deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom**”

The word is translated in others *gentleness* or *meekness*. In one of the opening lines of our Lord’s first sermon (Matthew 5), He used this word: “**Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.**”

This word is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5). If someone truly has the Holy Spirit within, this should be within in some measure. It can also be cultivated further with the Spirit’s help. It’s not a human disposition, temperament, or personality. In fact, this is not natural -- it’s supernatural and must be learned from Christ:

Matthew 11:29 (NASB95) *Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, **for I am gentle and humble in heart**, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.*

Jesus not only tells us that meek / gentle / humble people will be blessed, He tells us how we can be that kind of person. He offers to transfer our heavy yoke for his lighter load of grace: “*take my yoke upon you and learn from me.*” Someone has explained it this way:

‘He promises that if we consciously yoke ourselves to him, we will learn meekness and humility and will find rest for our souls. In Biblical times a young ox was yoked to an older, experienced ox, so that the older might train him to perform properly. By bearing the same yoke, the untrained ox learned the proper pace and how to heed the direction of the master. Jesus calls us to yoke ourselves to him. What a privilege and joy!’¹

Meekness is not weakness, it’s actually strength under control of a gentle humble person. No one had more power than Jesus, but in His great wisdom He rarely chose to exercise His great strength. ‘Meekness and gentleness are the opposite of harshness, a grasping spirit, vengefulness, self-aggrandizement and lack of self-control.’²

‘Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play major league baseball, attained this blend of strength, self-control, and a meek refusal to assert rights. Robinson had other options as a professional athlete. He was better at football, but professional football was already integrated. He chose to help integrate the main professional sport of his generation, major league baseball.

Robinson was a fiery man and a man of deep convictions. Ordinarily, he was fearless about expressing those convictions, but for his first two years with the Dodgers, he chose to remain almost totally silent, whatever abuse was heaped upon him. He intended to prove that his [people] had the mental *and* athletic toughness to compete at the highest levels. He had to be strong and gentle.

Robinson played second base for the Dodgers. Pee Wee Reese, a popular all-star shortstop, played next to him on the field. One day, players from another team fired the cruelest racist epithets at Robinson inning after inning. Reese, a southern man, faced a choice. He could pretend he heard nothing. He could shoot back at the other team. As the jeers grew, Reese stirred. It is customary for baseball players to toss a ball around between innings. As the Dodgers did this, Reese walked over to Robinson, draped his arm around his shoulder, and smiled at the opposing team. The tormenters fell silent. Patience and love proved Robinson and Reese to be gentle but strong. It made peace and broke the hold of the racist taunts.’³

‘The Greek word *prautei* (“gentleness”) occurs in non-biblical literature to describe a horse that someone had broken and had trained to submit to a bridle [cf. 3:2-3]. It pictures strength under control, specifically the Holy Spirit’s control. The evidence of this attitude [in Scripture] is a deliberate placing of oneself under divine authority.’⁴ In fact, the other time James uses this same Greek word is 1:21b: ... *in humility, receive the Word implanted* ...

I think James would agree with the quote from John Calvin’s *Institutes* (2.2.11, quoting Augustine) that the chief rule of Christianity is humility, and the second most important precept of the Christian religion is humility, and the third is again, humility. But James 3:14 warns of ...

3. The Danger of False Wisdom

¹⁴*But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.*

The command not to be arrogant or boast reminds of Jeremiah 9:23-24:

Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD ...

Even if you were truly wise, don't boast about what you know, boast only about Who you know and what He has done in allowing you a sinner to come to know Him by a miracle of sovereign grace. A heart that knows something of the meek and lowly Savior must have something of His meek and lowly attitude if it truly knows Him at all. Isaiah 66:2 says God only looks with favor to those who are humble, contrite in heart, trembling at God's Word. If the heart of a person is instead dominated by haughtiness, arrogance, pride, envy, bitter jealousy, self-seeking ... any claim by such a person to know the Lord and His wisdom is a lie against the truth.

The worst lie is to deceive yourself into thinking you're saved, because of intellectual knowledge or some experience in the distant past, while your heart is wicked and unrepentant and self-focused even while you sing the words of songs on Sunday that are God-centered lyrics. It's all about self still, that's why your pride and jealousy dominates you, and until you empty yourself and humbly bow before the Lord who emptied Himself on the cross and bowed His head in death for sinners who trust Him, until then you'll never experience the grace that replaces bitterness with blessedness, self with the Savior, His wrath with His righteousness.

Notice also the root problem in v. 14 – those sins are “in your heart.” It's a heart problem. If you weren't here when we studied verses 8-12 of this chapter, you need to get that CD or listen or read online to study further how heart change takes place biblically, whether for believer or unbeliever, because until the heart is addressed, there's no true lasting change. The fruit on a tree will always be bad while the tree is bad, and consistently bad fruit indicates a bad heart within that needs to come to the cross of Jesus who is the Great Physician who alone can give a new heart.

Notice the word “bitter” – it's also used in v. 11 for bitter-tasting salt water, i.e., leaves bad taste in mouth. In v. 14, it's used of a bitter or harsh attitude, which also leaves a bad taste in the mouth. And a bitter heart is very displeasing to our sovereign God who ultimately is the One who has not allowed things to go the way you would like selfishly or that you enviously wish were different, and therefore these sins in your heart are sins against God Himself, the God who has not allowed you to seek first your own kingdom and your own righteousness, and when all else should be added to you.

4. The Description of False Wisdom

¹⁵*This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.*

True wisdom is from above, i.e., from heaven, from God, but false wisdom is from below, from earth, even from demons. Let's look a little more closely at these descriptions of false wisdom, and also look at our own hearts to see where we may be living by such false wisdom (even the best of Christians I'm sure have some mixture).

EARTHLY – James says this wrong type of wisdom is earthly, or earth-bound, earthly-mindedness as Paul calls it in Philippians 3:

¹⁸ *For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ,* ¹⁹ *whose end is destruction, **whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.***

Those are people so earthly-minded they're of little heavenly good. They set their minds on things below, not on things above. They store up treasures on earth, not on heaven. They don't turn their eyes upon Jesus and look full in His wonderful face, and so the things on earth grow bigger, and the light of God's glory grows strangely dim and they no longer find His grace to be amazing.

A synonym for earthly would be worldly. If you want to know what worldly thinking is like, just turn on the TV or the radio. I don't have to tell you what it is, I don't have time to tell you all they say except to say that almost everything you will hear can be classified biblically as earthly / worldly thinking (even if it seems pretty dumb and inane, it's not just silly, it's sad because it reflects how some think and it affects how many think, even without realizing it, we gradually imbibe worldly thinking and values).

From shows about nothing, to stupid comedies, to more serious sitcoms that solve big problems in 30 minutes or less (minus commercials), to talk-show wisdom like Oprah, Dr. Phil, whoever, all are in one way or another presenting a type of wisdom or way of thinking. Not everything the world observes or produces is bad, of course. The world can see real problems, and can fight with earthly weapons and earthly wisdom to try and do some earthly good. But without God's wisdom, the world will never get to the true source of problems (sin in the heart) and the true solution (salvation and spiritual transformation by Christ.) Whatever doesn't have God's Word behind it is not God's wisdom, and if our worldview is informed by worldly insights we are worldly in those areas. "*As a man thinks in his heart, so is he*" (Prov. 23:7).

So what thinking fills your heart? Look at your life and what it is filled with. From TV news commentators to sitcoms to drama to comedies to talk shows and even commercials (if not especially commercials) many minds are being filled with earthly thinking / desires. And unless you are saturating your mind more with God's thinking and desires and running everything through that grid, you are, whether you realize it or not, being conformed to this world.

A great further study: Romans 12:2 *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind ...*

The brother of James, Jude, used the phrase "worldly-minded" in his epistle (Jude 18 NAS) to describe those who live by and follow their ungodly desires. Paul told Timothy to avoid *worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called "knowledge"* (1 Tim. 6:20, NAS). It is a type of knowledge or wisdom, but it is false because it's from the earth not from heaven.

Jas. 3:15 says not only is this wisdom earthly/worldly, it's **natural**

Some translations have “unspiritual” ESV/NIV or “sensual” NKJV
 Did you know that natural wisdom in this country actually celebrates its 100th birthday this year?

Os Guinness wrote: ‘In 1909, at the height of one of the busiest periods of immigration in American history, two arrivals from Europe stood at the rail of their ship as it passed the Statue of Liberty and entered New York harbor. The older one, a fifty-three-year-old Jew born in Moravia, poked the younger man from Switzerland in the ribs and said with excitement, “Won’t they get a surprise when they hear what we have to say to them?” ... The speaker was Sigmund Freud. His companion was his friend and disciple Carl Gustav Jung. And in the form of psychoanalysis and its legacy ... what were once the esoteric ideas of a small and controversial European elite have mushroomed in America into a dominant academic discipline and a vast, lucrative industry. More than five hundred brand-name therapies now jostle to compete for millions of clients in an expanding market of McFreud franchises and independent outlets that pulls in more than \$4 billion a year [1997 statistics] ... The couch has become as American as the baseball diamond and the golden arches ...

... [America’s twentieth century] was one of startling growth ... It grew from being a concern of a few to a concern of many, from being centered in an elite to centered in the middle class, and from being the province of the sick to the province of the unhappy too. In the process, the United States became “the world capital of psychological-mindedness and therapeutic endeavor” ... Although America had only six percent of the world’s population, it boasted ... over half the world’s clinical psychologists ... New York City claimed to have more psychiatrists than any single European country. In 1968, the United States had twelve thousand clinical psychologists while no other nation had more than four hundred [3 decades later the number had more than tripled] ... In 1986, there were 133 more Ph.D.s in psychology alone than in all the other American social sciences combined [2009 stats list psychologist in top 25 jobs in America, right after Senior Financial Analyst and Physician and ahead of Marketing Manager] ... Freud’s psychodynamic school joins the behavioral, humanistic, and transpersonal schools to form the four main schools of the therapeutic revolution. Beyond these lie a loose and sprawling mass of therapeutic theories, organizations, and techniques, also including less rigorous motivation seminars and explicit New Age philosophies.’⁵

The Greek word “natural” (v. 13) has the root we get the word psychology from, America’s major force of wisdom. You may think more with this worldly/natural wisdom than you realize:

- If you think often in terms of your own *needs* (outside of what God’s Word defines as needs; you need the Lord, and you need food and drink and shelter to live physically)
- If you say “my kid’s really a good kid at heart” and when he or she starts sinning, you assume the problem is with his friends, school, environment, etc. (but see 1:14, 4:1-2, etc.). There are no good people at heart naturally (Rom. 3), we are all sinners in need of God’s truth and discipline because there is great potential for evil in any natural heart
- If the importance of self-esteem is a part of your thinking (the Bible never tells us we need higher self-esteem but it often tells us we think too much about ourselves and need to esteem Christ more and deny self and die to self)
- If you use the world’s terms “disease” or “disorder” for what the Bible calls sin (ex: “disease” of alcoholism instead of the biblical term drunkenness, or the many “disorder” labels that are not based on any medical data or hard science but are purely based on behavior patterns which the Bible clearly describes as sin)

Is it too radical to consider some issues psychology and psychiatry calls “disorders” are actually biblically the fruit of sinful hearts and selfishness that has progressed to out-of-control sinful behavior?

Verse 14 has already talked about the heart of envy and selfishness and v. 16 takes it further to it result: ¹⁶*For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, **there is disorder** and every evil thing.*

Nearly 100 million Americans sought psycho-analytical wisdom or insight into life’s problems, and many of those really at the root have *spiritual issues at the core*, biblically speaking, and are issues the Bible speaks to and has lasting help and hope and healing for.

That statement is not at all meant to denigrate the many caring and compassionate people who work in the social sciences and try and help troubled people, but I do want to affirm that God’s Word was sufficient for God’s people to deal with spiritual and emotional struggles thousands of years before Freud and any of his buddies! And God’s Word and wisdom is sufficient for spiritual life and godliness today and has the power to not just change behavior but to change the heart and transform troubled sinners inside-and-out!

Sometimes worldly wisdom is not so obviously false because it mixes in true elements and terminology that the Bible uses.

In the allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian meets a character named Mr. Worldly WiseMan who offers his counsel to help Christian with the massive burden on his back (representing sin) and he tells him there’s a way to get rid of that burden more quickly and easily than what the Evangelist told Christian about the gospel, there’s a less difficult path. He tells him to go to another man in the village of Morality to remove the burden, saying “you will never be settled in your mind till then: nor can you enjoy the benefits of the blessings which God hath bestowed upon you till then ...” and he went on to promise him a happy home and easier life in that earthly village if he would cease from his long and hard journey to the celestial city. Worldly wisdom says that the way of the cross is foolishness, there’s a better way.

But those who have received God’s wisdom from above can sing

*At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light
And the burden of my heart rolled away
It was there by faith I received my sight
And now I am happy all the day!*

It was worldly natural/unspiritual wisdom that was at work in Peter when Jesus talked about going to the cross and suffering and dying and Peter told the Lord not to talk like that, his wisdom was better. Do you remember what Jesus said? “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*” (Matt 16:23 ESV). Which brings us to the final description of man’s wisdom in v. 15, it is not only earthly and natural; it is also **demonic**. When Peter was setting his mind on the things of man above the things of God, he was speaking wisdom straight from the pit of demons. At the end of v. 6, James said the sinful tongue is set on fire by hell.

When Satan, the demonic leader himself, tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he also tried to present another way for Jesus without the cross, he said he could get the kingdoms of this world if he would worship Satan (which was of course a lie) and Satan even used and quoted the words of God in his crafty demonic wisdom. When Satan first appears in the Bible with Eve, what does he tempt her with? Wisdom. A better way than what God has said.

False wisdom is earthly, natural, demonic – which reminds us of the three enemies of our soul, the world, the flesh, and the devil (cf. Eph. 2:1-3). Any wisdom that is not from above, James says, is earthly (the world), natural (the flesh), demonic (of the devil). That’s been called the “unholy Trinity,” or as 1 John 2:16 says it: *For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.*

5. The Deliverance from False Wisdom

HOW DOES GOD’S WISDOM COME TO US FROM ABOVE?

1. Salvation (1:17-18)

Believers are “in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God” (2 Cor. 1:30)

2. Reverence

James is a book saturated with Proverbs, which begins with “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom/knowledge” (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, or equivalent used 5x: 15:33, Psalm 111:10, Job 28:28).

Kent Hughes writes: “When we see God for who he is – holy, awesome, loving, and sovereign – and embrace a proper fear of him, we are at the doorway of wisdom. And we step through that door when we acknowledge our own finiteness and inability to direct our lives. There can be no wisdom apart from a quaking, fearful vision of God and our own contrasting littleness. This vision is the missing element today in evangelical Christianity. Christians, in their desire to be relevant and relational in their worship, have minimized the awesomeness of God and have falsely maximized their own virtues and importance. But when we truly see God and truly see ourselves, we become humble and meek, and therefore teachable and receptive to God’s wisdom. As Proverbs 11:2 says, “with humility comes wisdom.”” – p. 148-49.

3. Scripture (1:21 “in humility receive the Word ... but prove yourselves doers ...”)

Contrast foolish man and wise man in Jesus’ parable based on how they responded to or applied the Word (or didn’t)

Col. 3:16 *Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another ...*

4. Prayer (1:5-8)

¹ Kent Hughes, *James*, 153.

² *Dictionary of biblical imagery*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, p. 545.

³ Daniel Doriani, *James*, Reformed Expository Commentary, p. 122-23.

⁴ *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Jas 3:13).

⁵ Os Guinness, "America's Last Men and Their Magnificent Talking Cure," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 15/2 (Winter 1997): p. 22-33.