

A Harvest of Righteousness Sown in Peace
James 3:13-18
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Read James 3:13-18

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction

I was reading an article a while back that linked to another article that had the fascinating title of "Why Smart People Believe Stupid Things" by someone who goes by the online name Gurwinder. Skipping around in that article, here is some of what it said:

"The prevailing view is that people adopt false beliefs because they're too stupid or ignorant to grasp the truth. This may be true in some cases, but just as often the opposite is true: many delusions prey not on dim minds but on bright ones... studies show that greater bias is found within intelligent people of all belief systems, left or right, Christian or atheist, and since these biases can't all be correct, they're clearly not a product of greater understanding... What this means is that, while unintelligent people are *more easily misled by other people*, intelligent people are *more easily misled by themselves*. They're better at convincing themselves of things they want to believe rather than things that are actually true. This is why intelligent people tend to have stronger ideological biases; being better at reasoning makes them better at rationalizing... This is not to say that education is futile. Knowledge can help to limit motivated reasoning—but only if it's accompanied by a far deeper kind of growth: that of one's character... Without the right personal qualities, *education and IQ won't make you master of your biases, they'll only make you a better servant of them*. So be open to the possibility that you may be wrong, and always be willing to change your mind—especially if you're smart. By being humble and curious you may not win many arguments, but it won't matter, for even losing arguments will become a victory that moves you toward the far grander prize of truth."¹

Most people want to be known as smart, if not book smart, then at least street smart. We have benchmarks and achievements at every age: Class ranking and National Honor Society for high school students, the Dean's List for college students, and Mensa, the Society for Smart People, for adults. But being smart and being wise are not always the same thing. And as the article I just read said, it takes character and humility to truly round out a person's search for truth, it's not just about accumulating the most knowledge. Which is strikingly similar to what James argues in our text today. Last week's text/sermon was about the tongue, this week's is about the mind. And much like the tongue, the mind can be used for good or for evil, for God's glory or for our own acclaim. And James will point out that's mostly because wisdom has two sources – from heaven and from hell.

The first verse in our passage encourages the believer to

I. Strive to be Wise (v. 13)

¹³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.*

This first phrase "*Who is wise and understanding*" is a challenge more than a question. James is not looking for a show of hands as much as he is asking the readers to ask themselves if they like to

¹ <https://gurwinder.substack.com/p/why-smart-people-hold-stupid-beliefs>

think of themselves as being on the smart side of humanity. If so, you need to think about two things: how is your conduct and how is your attitude? Because wisdom is proven by good works and wisdom works best accompanied by meekness and humility. Wait, I thought that being wise and understanding was proven by making sure everyone knows that you're the smartest person in the room, by yelling out all the Jeopardy answers instantly, by doing the NY Times crossword puzzle in pen, by correcting people when they say dumb things... but good conduct and humility? You run the risk of nobody realizing how smart you are if you follow James' advice here.

I remember a guy my freshman year of college was running his mouth in the dorm and said something like, "I have a fair amount of knowledge in every subject known to man." And another guy quickly asked, "Know anything about humility?" The Greek word used for meekness in this verse, *prautes*, can also mean humility or gentleness. When we put those three traits together – humility, gentleness, and meekness – what do we usually think? Weak. Wimpy. Passive. Boring. But it certainly doesn't have to mean those things. You know who exhibited extraordinary humility and meekness? Jackie Robinson. When he broke baseball's color code, he knew that he had to be an almost perfect example of dignity and restraint while enduring the ugliest verbal abuse for being the first black player in major league baseball. Would anyone say that Jackie Robinson was wimpy or passive? Absolutely not! He was a strong man with strong convictions who was stronger for being able to keep them under control in the face of extreme provocation.² That is the type of meekness that we should strive for – the word meek, even though it sounds like "weak," actually means "strength under control."

"By his conduct let him show his works" - the word for "works" is the one that James used twelve times in the last half of chapter 2 that I preached on two weeks ago, the section that hammered home the idea that faith without works is dead. Here wisdom without works is empty as well. But it's also true that wisdom without humility is empty. If you want to be known for being an intelligent person with good understanding, you can't just learn a bunch of random facts and win your local trivia contests. Your life has to be fuller than that. For the Christian, wisdom has to have those two companions – godly living and a humble disposition.

The next three verses warn us away from the
II. Demonic Wisdom from Below (vv. 14-16)

¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

Leaving James for a minute: Corinth was a church that Paul had started and was hoping to return to, but from the reports he had gotten, he was afraid the people in the church had grown callous to God and to one another. In 2 Corinthians 12:20, Paul says, *"I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish... that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder."* That's a long list, Paul was bracing for the worst. If they had become earthly, combative, and malicious to each other, Paul would have quite a mess on his hands. His constant reminder to believers was to walk in the light, walk in a manner worthy of your salvation. James had a similar desire for believers to avoid the vile practice and demonic thinking that they could drift into. Jealousy and selfish ambition are grouped together twice in these three verses. The first time James says that if that is what is in your heart, don't boast or lie about it. The second time he says that it's most likely accompanied by evil actions, what he calls *"disorder and vile practice."*

² Adapted from Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007), p, 122.

Jealousy is a sad condition for the Christian who knows that he or she is a sinner saved by grace, deserving and expecting nothing. Jealousy, envy, and coveting are all very similar. When we entertain those dispositions, it means that we look at what others have and say, "I deserve that just as much as, if not more than, they do, I should get that as well." The tenth commandment, of course, is the ultimate prohibition against coveting: "*You shall not covet your neighbor's house... wife... servant... livestock... or anything that is your neighbor's.*" Why is this one of the Ten Commandments? It's just an inner thought, right? Coveting is not necessarily doing anything, how is it in the same list as idolatry, murder, adultery, and theft? It's because coveting is the opposite of being thankful for what God has given you. Jealousy means that we are not content with the good gifts that God gave us, that we didn't earn or deserve, and we always demand and expect more, and we look around at others and begrudge what they have. Not only does Paul say that "*love does not envy*" in 1 Corinthians 13, but he also drops both jealousy and envy into a list of sinful works of the flesh in Galatians 5 with other sins such as sexual immorality, sorcery, orgies, and drunkenness. Proverbs 14:30 says that "*A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.*"

Now, let's think about ambition: ambition is not a bad thing, in and of itself. Ambition is the fire inside you that says, "I want more out of life, I want to accomplish things, I want to achieve and leave my mark." That is a desire that God places inside each of us so that we will advance and mature in life. If everyone sat around like Peter Pan saying, "I'll never grow up," no one would get married, have families, work hard to establish a career, and work hard to advance God's kingdom. But the trick is to have godly ambition and not selfish ambition, right? Godly ambition is Romans 15:20, where Paul said, "*I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named.*" As opposed to Luke 12:16-20a, the rich man who said to himself,

'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you.'

The ultimate demonic selfish ambition was the temptation that the serpent tempted Eve with in the garden. Genesis 3:4-5: "*But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'* So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate and she also gave some to her husband." And the world was plunged into sin and disorder. Turn a few chapters forward to Genesis 11 and the incident of the Tower of Babel for the next great example of demonic ambition: (verses 1-2, 4) "*Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there... Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.'*" And what happened? God confused their speech, giving them each their own language so they could not understand each other, and dispersed them over the face of the earth, the very thing they were trying to avoid.

Selfish ambition has been one of Satan's favorite tools since the beginning of human history. It desires to achieve fame, status, recognition, success, comfort, enjoyment, and fortune for yourself, with little thought or care for anyone else. Maybe you'll bring your family along, maybe it's just all about you and your ego. You could care less about the advance of God's kingdom, just about your own kingdom. Maybe that looks like wisdom in the world's eyes, but in God's eyes its sin and failure. Paul redirects us in Philippians 2:3 - "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*"

As we turn from jealousy and selfish ambition, we are directed instead to seek

III. Godly Wisdom from Above (vv. 17-18)

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, merciful, and full of good fruit - where have we heard that list before? Several places:

- 1) Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 might come to your mind - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Those are the qualities that the Spirit works into the life of the believer.
- 2) The very first part of the Sermon on the Mount, called the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-9: blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.
- 3) How about the qualification for elders in 1 Timothy 3? *"An overseer must be above reproach... sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable... gentle..."*

"Peaceable, gentle and open to reason" are the opposites of the bitter jealousy and selfish ambition of the last section. All of these things in verse 17 bring such strength and vitality not only to an individual Christian, but to a church community:

- pure doesn't mean never sinning, but holding the pure faith and resting in God's forgiveness
- peace brings harmony among members
- gentleness is a noncombative, loving spirit that welcomes people in
- open to reason means a teachable spirit, honoring leadership
- merciful means forgiving, able to overcome conflict
- impartial means treating everyone equally, rejecting favoritism and cliques

Show me a congregation that can practice and live out those things, and I'll show you a church that will grow and thrive. We would embody what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:12 - *"For our boast is this... that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God."* And individuals who practice those things grow in Christian maturity and are blessed in every area. The last quality listed in verse 17 is *sincerity*, meaning that even though some people can fake all of these qualities, the Lord will reward those who genuinely believe them as they live them.

Verse 18 says that *"a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."* How does the church so often think about "bringing in the harvest" in an evangelistic sense? They put on big events, with advertising, and hype, with flashy programs and exciting speakers and bands. Not that there's anything necessarily wrong with that, but does it really bring a harvest of righteousness? Maybe some people are converted and brought into the life of faith, that's the best-case scenario, but maybe not. James says that a sure way to see a harvest of righteousness in this life is by exhibiting godly character. The kind, thoughtful layperson who is always quick to volunteer to help with kids, always greet the new people, and goes out of her way to love people in her neighborhood is just as likely, if not more likely, to see spiritual fruit from her efforts than the flashy events put on by a big ministry in an arena. It's not necessarily an "either-or" situation, they could both flourish. But James seems to indicate that godly character is the only sure way to see fruit produced, and that desiring shalom - peace/well-being/wholeness - is a wonderful thing to sow.

Conclusion - There's a recent movie called *The Iron Claw*, based on a true story about a family of wrestlers in the 1980s (not a recommendation). Despite professional wrestling being "fake" and staged, the Von Erich family sets as its highest goal winning the championship belt. It's really a story about parenthood and about ambition, because the father was a professional wrestler who never got the chance to fight for the championship belt, so he raises his four sons to pursue and achieve his dreams for him. His love is based on how well they train and perform in the ring, he literally tells his sons what order he loves them in, but adds that "the rankings could change" as some twisted motivation for them to work hard. And he drills into them: "If we're the toughest, the strongest, the absolute best, the most successful, nothing can ever hurt us." *Spoiler alert:* they do get hurt - the movie follows their efforts to win their matches at the expense of their physical and mental health. One of the brothers fights despite being very sick and ends up dying in his hotel room. Two others commit suicide under the crushing weight of unfulfilled expectations. The only one who survives has to consciously disappoint his father, who never apologizes or changes. It's such a tragic picture of how selfish ambition wrecks us and those around us.

Very few of us will act that extreme, but we will nourish jealousy and selfish ambition, and we will hurt the people around us to get what we want. Internally you might think, even if you never say it: "I have a plan for my life and nobody's going to slow me down. My family and friends exist to help me, I'll bend them to my will or cut them loose if they don't get on board." That's the selfish ambition that demonic wisdom feeds. The forgiven, redeemed believer still has ambition, but it's an ambition to love and to see a harvest of righteousness when we submit to His wisdom, when we embrace humility, good conduct, gentleness, mercy, and peace.

What else does the Bible say about wisdom? Proverbs 9:10 says that "*the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" Proverbs 2:6 says that "*the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*" Psalm 119:98 - "*Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me.*" How about this one: "*The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'*" (Psalm 53:1)? Do any of you know very brilliant people who are atheists? Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, the so-called "new atheists" have PhDs, they are brilliant men with decades of learning who could dig most of us under the table in a debate on almost anything. How can the Bible call them fools? It's not saying that they are unintelligent, it's that they've not submitted their learning to the wisdom of God. We can't say that Christians are automatically smarter than unbelievers; I've heard Christians say some pretty dumb things; it's not about IQ. But there is a spiritual wisdom that can only be gained from God and from having your heart changed by the Holy Spirit.

Here's how it works, think back to the introduction about how smart people believe stupid things: you have to think about foundations and worldviews. If you have a foundation and a worldview that says there is no God and nothing supernatural, then everything you learn after that has to fit inside that worldview. It's not that you're constantly weighing the information and new things you learn and trying to weigh whether there's one God who created everything; you've already convinced yourself that there's not. Romans 1 actually says that every person knows deep down that there is a God, but that humans naturally suppress that knowledge and so God gives them over to the darkness of unbelief. So, until God changes your heart and illuminates your mind with the belief in Him, you will reject Him. And, conversely, when you have a foundation and a worldview that says there is one God who created everything and has given life to all creatures and eternal life to those who worship Him, then everything you learn and read after that, you also adapt to your worldview. The fancy term that theologians use is presuppositions - what are your assumptions and convictions that you then adapt everything else to fit?

Let me give you one example, and we don't have time to do the whole discussion justice, but just to give you a sense of what I'm talking about: we can't really prove that everything was created by God in the sense that we can never replicate the beginning of the universe in a lab and subject it to the scientific method. In the last 40 years or so, the field of Intelligent Design has been introduced by men like Philip Johnson that says that everything in creation points to a Creator. And I thought, well, yeah, that makes so much sense because we can't prove that God created all things to satisfy a skeptic, but scientists can show that things in our world were created with such intrinsic complexity that they couldn't just have evolved like that, they had to have been designed to function that way. Which implies, of course, a designer. But that field of study has been roundly rejected by the scientific community because, as we've seen, if your foundation of knowledge rules out the possibility of a God, then of course you will not allow evidence that points to God.

And if you can't accept the very first line of Scripture, *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,"* then you will have a much harder time believing that God flooded the earth, destroyed a wicked city, rescued a man from inside a giant fish, and implanted life inside the womb of a virgin, who would deliver the Son of God as a human baby. You will never believe that that Son of God healed lepers just by touching them, walked on water without sinking, raised a man from the dead, and was Himself brought back to life after being brutally killed by Roman soldiers on a cross. And you'll absolutely find unthinkable the greatest miracle of all - that God used Jesus' death to pay the spiritual penalty of sinners like you and me so that we can live forever with Him redeemed and adopted into His eternal family. What is true wisdom? 1 Corinthians 1:27-30 tells us:

"But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

Jesus is the wisdom of God for humanity. Embrace Him, be transformed by Him, and you will be led in the paths of heavenly wisdom. Amen, let's pray.

Benediction

2 Corinthians 13:11 - *"Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you."*