

# For a Church Flooded with Wisdom in a World Filled with Fire

Week Four  
July 19– July 23

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A Daily Study of the Book of James  
Summer 2021

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

*James 3.17-18*

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**Cornerstone Assembly of God**  
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**Monday, July 19.....James 3.1-2**

## **Red Flag Day at the Beach**

<sup>1</sup> Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. <sup>2</sup> For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. James' charge against people rushing into teaching ministry is rooted in the words of Jesus. Read the following passages with James' words in mind. What stands out to you?
  - a. Mark 12.38-40:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. Luke 12.48:
  
2. How is the ministry of teaching others an aspect of Christian stewardship?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Remembering that we all stumble in many ways, especially when we open our mouths, how do James' words give the following proverbs clarity for our lives as Christians?
  - c. Proverbs 12.13:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - d. Proverbs 13.3:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - e. Proverbs 21.23:
  
4. Although we know that no woman or man can control their tongue completely (3.8), why should we still strive to unburden ourselves of unbridled speech?

## • PRAYER POINT •

### STEWARDSHIP IN THE KINGDOM

- Take this opportunity to intercede for those serving in teaching roles at the local church, the men and women who have been entrusted with stewarding the word of God. Pray for God's direction in their lives and teaching as they model a life surrendered to Christ for the body of Christ and the community around us.
- Italo Calvino once whimsically wrote that, "Good opportunities for keeping quiet are never in short supply." Take time today to breathe in moments of intentional silence. In the stillness, rededicate your speech to God, seeking to bring Him honor through how you interact with others.

## COMMENTARY

v. 1: **Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers...** Some scholars see this introduction as an expansion on his previous challenge to his audience to be “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger” (1.19), as well as “those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless” (1.26). James narrows the focus to the role of teaching others. The members of the churches James is addressing should take these words to heart specifically when it comes to teaching others about God.

A teacher, particularly in the context of the fellowship of believers, is an instructor recognized for their depth of understanding. The role of teacher was a prestigious one in Jewish culture, and this was carried into Christianity (Matthew 13.52). Teachers taught from the depth of their spiritual understanding and worthy faith. James makes it clear the destructive consequences of teachers who are unable to live up to their own teaching; therefore, everyone aspiring to ministry roles in the church should cautiously evaluate if their walk is in balance with their calling (Ephesians 4.1). Would be teachers should “speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful,” remembering that “mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2.12).

James’ charge to the Jewish congregations across the empire are firmly rooted in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus rebuked the teachers of the law because, although they memorized the Scriptures, their teaching was more about drawing attention to themselves and their prominent ‘piety’ than directing their attention to God (Mark 12.38-40). Reflecting on Mark, I. Howard Marshall writes, “we should not ignore the lesson that zealous faith may easily be corrupted into a pride which delights in its own piety and flaunts itself before the world.” James warns them that a heart like these teachers of the law will reap the same rebuke from Jesus.

Justo Gonzalez convincingly argues that much of the Christian life – and this includes the role and responsibility of teaching – is one of stewardship. In Luke 12.48, Jesus tells us, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” Teachers in the fellowship of believers are like the managers and stewards of Christ’s parable. When serving other servants, the responsibility will be greater. When teachers/stewards seek to supplant God’s glory with our own, we are no different than the wicked tenants of another of Christ’s parables against the self-glorifying religious system (Luke 20.9-19).

**for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness...** James is not discouraging those called to ministry or limiting them from exercising their spiritual giftings, but he is warning them of the weight of spiritual instruction. He is establishing an early church proverb built like a conditional clause, *i.e.* if you become a teacher of

fellow believers, *then* you carry the weight of stewarding God's word in your words and actions.

James is warning both current and future teachers in the Messianic communities to not subvert the Word of God by preaching one thing and living another (Matthew 12.36). James includes himself with the teachers of the Jesus movement when he says 'we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.' Teachers must responsibly handle the Word of God, creating space for it to confront them first before turning its profound power on others.

**v. 2: For we all stumble in many ways...** James understands that all Christians stumble, including teachers like himself. This is a clever way to emphasize his previous point (those aspiring to ministry should do so with caution because they stumble in sin, too) as he widens his comments to all believers. We all stumble, and we all stumble in many ways (Job 4.17; Jeremiah 17.9). This is true for teachers, preachers and pastors just as it is true for all members of the church.

James uses the word we read here as 'stumble' three times; twice here and once in 2.10. In it, he is implying transgression and sin. Paul uses this same word when discussing the sin of the people of Israel (Romans 11.11), which led to God inviting the other nations into relationship. Paul is praising God for the invitation of the nations into relationship with God even as he prays for his own stumbling people to repent and be restored.

James is generous to us, showing merciful restraint in his words, recognizing that we all fall short of the glory of God, particularly when we open our mouths (Romans 3.23). This, however, should not stop us from aspiring to be like Christ or imitating godly men and women who model our faith (1 Corinthians 4.16-17).

**And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man...** James introduced the idea of a perfect person, one who has persevered and been refined in the trials of life in 1.2-4. This perfection or spiritual maturity is the end-goal of our lifelong discipleship to Christ. James implies that this completeness could be shown in a person's control over the power of the words.

Put in reverse, Bo Reicke states, "A carefree, thoughtless exercise of the gift of speech can bring a man to destruction more quickly than anything else, since the tongue has so much influence." This is very much like the spiritual indignity the teachers of the law expressed when they brought the woman caught in adultery to be stoned before Jesus (John 8.1-11). Their pious-sounding words—seeking to influence others to condemn her while trapping Jesus with their clever misuse of Scripture—rang hollow when Jesus requested their moral bonafides to exact such an extreme judgment on another's sins. Truly, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits" (Proverbs 18.21).

**able also to bridle his whole body**...James uses this opportunity to further develop the image of a bridle he foreshadowed in 1.26. A perfect, fully mature person is able to control the self by controlling his or her speech.

For the unworthy teachers, or those assuming teaching roles and responsibilities in the Jewish congregations being addressed by James, these words must have stung. Their mishandling of Scripture was hurting others, causing division and factions by their unbridled speech.

In the words of Scot McKnight, “James really does believe that control of the tongue is a sign that one can control one’s moral life.” He will proceed with three analogies to drive this point home.

Tuesday, July 20.....James 3.3-5a

## Of Bits and Rudders

<sup>3</sup> If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. <sup>4</sup> Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the impulse of the one steering wills to go. <sup>5a</sup> So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.



## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the first of the three analogies James uses to express the tongue's impact in verse 3?
  - a. What is the size difference between the bit and the horse?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. What is a similar illustration you can make with a current mode of transportation where the larger vehicle relies wholly on the smaller piece?
  
2. What is the second of the three analogies James uses to express the tongue's impact in verse 4?
  - a. What is the size difference between a rudder and the ship?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. In this second analogy, the intention of the pilot comes into play between the small influencer and the larger vehicle. How is this second analogy different from the first?

## • PRAYER POINT •

### SPIRITUALLY TONGUE-TIED

- Often our mouths write checks our lives can't cash. How we use our speech can bless and curse us and those around us. As Douglas Moo describes the tongue, "It can be used to encourage, evangelize and endear; it can also be used to criticize, mock and curse."
- Ask the Lord to help you hold your tongue when speaking would hurt those around you, needlessly criticizing, derisively mocking and cursing. In prayer, cast off the burden of useless and injurious words.
- Also ask the Lord to give you wisdom in how to say important but difficult things that need to be said, joyously encouraging, passionately evangelizing and sincerely inspiring affection. In prayer know your words can lead to repentance and restoration.

## COMMENTARY

v. 3: **If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well...**A bit in a horse's mouth helps the rider lead the large animal where she wants it to go. James' words here are carefully chosen, built on commonly used analogies of his time. With the bit the rider makes the horse obey. The word translated obey is the Greek word *peitho* which means to persuade, to place confidence in something. For example, when the apostles were standing for judgment before the Sanhedrin who wanted to kill them as they'd killed Christ (Acts 5.33), Gamaliel dissuaded them by using the example of a man named Theudas, an insurrectionist who persuaded (*peitho*) four hundred men to follow him into revolt (Acts 5.36). However, when he was killed, his followers disbanded. The Sanhedrin did not need to kill the followers of Jesus because they had already killed their rabbi. Following Gamaliel's logic the Sanhedrin was persuaded (*peitho*) and released the apostles after having them beaten (Acts 5.40).

Paul uses this term *peitho* and its antonym *apeitho* close together in Romans 2.8. To those that persist in doing good, God has promised eternal life. But to those who are self-centered, refusing to be persuaded (*apeitho*) by the truth, they will be persuaded (*peitho*) by unrighteousness, which can only promise wrath and anger. Paul goes on to proclaim that this is a level playing field, one group of people do not have an advantage over another. A Jew or a Gentile cannot refuse to be persuaded by the truth and still reap eternal life. "God does not show favoritism," (Romans 2.11).

Considering James in parallel with Paul's teaching on the unity and diversity of the Church like a body, a teacher is like a tongue (1 Corinthians 12.12-28). The tongue, governed by the bit, is capable of directing the whole body. The teacher in the fellowship of the believers, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, is able to guide the whole congregation. The tongue of the congregation is filled with awesome potential for good or evil.

v. 4: **Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder...**James the preacher joins a second image of a small, seemingly unimportant part influencing the whole. Winds and waves can make a ship's way impossible to arrive at its destination unless the pilot makes decided use of the rudder. A rogue teacher, an unruly tongue, can do great injuring to the fellowship of believers. He is like a failed rudder which cannot compete with the strong misdirecting winds pitching the whole ship.

**wherever the impulse of the one steering wills to go...**But a pilot who makes decisive use of the small rudder can navigate the ship through the storm to port. A few words in this image are worth exploring: impulse, will and steering.

**By the pilot brings the ship through the waves by his impulse.** The word impulse implies quick response. The pilot of the ship is not stunned into indecision, but puts his will for the ship into rapid effect by strategic use of the rudder. This noun is found only one other place in the New Testament in Acts 14.5. While Paul and Barnabas were witnessing in Iconium during their first missionary journey, there was an impulse, a rapidly formed mob who willed to hurt. They took quick and decisive action to stone the missionaries. When Paul and Barnabas became aware of the plot against them, they just as quickly left the city before the mob could take hold of them.

The pilot of the ship wills to take the ship through the storm. The word used in this context speaks of the pilot's intentions, his determined plan, his resolve that underlies his actions.

Lastly, the word steering means to make straight and also carries immediacy. Two examples are useful for framing this word. The only other New Testament use is found in John 1.23 describing the ministry of John the Baptist. "He was a voice crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord..." John's message is one of commanding urgency. Another example comes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by the early church. When Balaam's donkey began to veer on the road because she saw the angel of the Lord, he beat her to make her path straight (Numbers 22.23). Little did he know that he was steering his way toward death.

Returning to James' unique use of 'make straight' in the context of ship steering, Luke and Paul were influenced by the same imagery, but used more precise terminology. Luke tells of the ship pilot literally known as the steerer or *kuberetes* (Acts 27.11, see also Revelation 18.17 and Ezekiel 27.8, 27 LXX). Paul uses the feminine form of the noun *kubernesis* describing the ministry gift of administration, literally the one empowered to guide or lead (1 Corinthians 12.28). Thomas Schreiner argues this term can be seen as equivalent to "the leader of Romans 12.8, [seeing] the gift in Romans as that of one who gives aid or cares for others.. [which] suggests that leadership is in view."

v. 5: **So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things...** Once again, James uses a word that is found nowhere else in the New Testament. The word for boasting of great things connotes a grandiosity that is out-sized from reality. We could say it a few ways: the tongue is big talk. The arrogant little tongue has a napoleonic complex.

Wednesday, July 21.....James 3.5b-8

## Of Forest Fires and Savage Beasts

<sup>5b</sup> How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup> For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup> but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the third of the three analogies James uses to express the tongue's impact in verse 3?
  - a. What is the size difference between the spark and the great fire?
  
  - b. How is this third analogy different from the first two (vv. 3-4)?
  
  - c. How is this third analogy the culminating image of the three considering James' overall message to the Church?
  
  - d. Where the image of a bit and horse emphasized outsized impact and the rudder of great impact through intentional guidance, what is the emphasize of the tongue as fire?
  
2. What do you think James means by calling the tongue a world of unrighteousness?
  
3. How can the out-of-control tongue set fire to our whole existence?
  
4. David was a poetic king, giving voice to all aspects of his life in song before the Lord. Read these lyrics of David's wrestling with the power of the tongue. What stands out to you?
  - b. Psalms 34.13:
  
  - c. Psalm 39.1:
  
  - d. Psalm 141.3:

## • PRAYER POINT •

### ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT FOREST FIRES

- Smoky the Bear would agree with James, only you can prevent forest fires. We all have the capacity to set our lives and the lives of those around us on fire in an instant. The fourth century theologian Jerome said it perfectly: “The sword kills the body but the tongue kills the soul.”
- Start today by recognizing the dangerous potential your words can have in your world. Give the Lord the reins in those places where your heart is entertaining reactionary hostility towards those who’ve hurt you. Seek to hear his healing words spoken over your pain.
- John Chrysostom encourages us to remember “the tongue is a piercing sword. But let us not wound others with it; rather let us cut off our own gangrene.” Journal or pray incisive words addressing any gangrenous areas growing uncontrolled because of unforgiveness or unrepentance.

## COMMENTARY

v. 5b: **How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!**...The tongue is only a small member of the larger body, but can wreak immense havoc if not controlled. James draws upon the imagery of the prophet Isaiah and the proverbs. Where Isaiah speaks of wickedness burning like a fire, consuming everything in its path (Isaiah 9.18). Proverbs tells us that the ungodly plot evil with scorching fire on their lips (Proverbs 16.27). The Hebrew word translated ‘scorching’ is found in Leviticus 13.23 and 28 describing how priests should examine the scars left by boiling water or fire. These are not minor wounds, but injuries that – left untreated – could become gangrenous. Where the previous two illustrations of a bit and rudder have shown the positive potential of directed speech, this last illustration will reveal the sinister potential that lies in every person’s mouth.

v. 6: **And the tongue is a fire.**...Solomon Andria notes that James does not say the tongue is like a fire, but that the tongue *is* a fire. By this he argues it “is more an identification than a comparison, for the author wants to emphasize how dangerous and destructive the tongue can be.”

The tongue of a Christian—and particularly a Christian who takes the mantle of ministry to represent God to others—has unfathomable potential to sow peace and blessing, but also the terrifying potential to do irreparable damage. The Apostle Peter was also concerned with the destructive power of the unbridled tongue in the fellowship of believers. In his first letter, he is encouraging his audience to live in harmony with one another, to repay evil with good. Put another way, Peter calls us to respond to curses with blessing. Peter drives his point home quoting the lyrics of King David: “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech,” (Psalm 34.13; 1 Peter 3.10).

**a world of unrighteousness.**... The tongue is a fire, full of positive and negative possibility. In the searing words of Scot McKnight, the tongue’s “placement as the speaking instrument gives it potency for abuse when humans choose to use it for what it was not intended to accomplish. When it is used improperly, it ‘becomes’ a ‘world of iniquity.’” This world of iniquity is where we reflect the sinful, unjust world around us filled with hostility toward our righteous God.

**The tongue is set among our members.**...In the dual context that James established at the beginning of chapter 3, first, to those who are teachers and are aspiring to positions in the church, and second, to the congregation as a whole, these words can be read in two different areas: corporate and personal.

Corporately, the teacher is the tongue set among the members of the local church. In their teaching ministries, men and women need to prayerfully root their words in God



because the world of unrighteousness is waiting to set the congregation on fire, disrupting their unity and purpose.

Personally, each believer has a tongue with which they are blessing God and cursing His image-bearers around them. This sinful activity is staining their walk with Christ, setting fire to their lives and their witness.

**staining the whole body**...The small corrupted tongue has the contaminating potential to stain the whole. Jude, James' brother, is the only other New Testament writer to use this word which literally translates as 'staining.' (Jude 1.23). In the conclusion of his letter, Jude is likewise concerned with the fellowship of believers' witness. As Tokunboh Adeyemo wisely reflected, "We are often impatient with those who disagree with our viewpoints, and outright unkind to those who doubt what we say." But like his brother James, Jude calls his hearers to mercy; "be merciful to those who doubt." Jude calls us to be faithful stewards of God's mercy and message, patiently loving them with the truth of the gospel while resisting the staining corruption of spiritual compromise. Just as believers should not be stained by the world (James 1.27) and spiritual compromise (Jude 1.23), so they should not become a staining force themselves.

**setting on fire the entire course of life**...This is literally the wheel of existence. The idea here seems to be that the fire of the tongue can set our whole lives on fire. The flames of bitter words can scorch our lives from womb to tomb. They are like a lens through which everything is seen in a new—burned down—light. Even the positive things we've said and done are tainted by the all-consuming nature of those hell-fire words.

William Brosend argues that James is reminding his audience the tongue has always been getting people in trouble across human history. One needs to look no further than the stories in the history of Israel to see his point. Men and women reaped whirlwinds of trouble from misspoken and misdirected words.

**set on fire by hell**...James draws a line for us to see the cause and effect history of the tongue's fire. We see a wheel of existence, the whole life of a person and those around him set on fire by the tongue. Now he shows where the tongue was set on fire in the first place: Gehenna. Ben Witherington reminds us that Gehenna was also used by Jesus referring to hell and was typified by "the Valley of Hinnom where garbage was dumped and burned outside Jerusalem and where in an earlier era, there had been child sacrifice."

v. 7: **For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind**...James will cap his presentation of uncontrollability of the tongue with one final contrast: humankind's ability to tame every animal conceivable but not our own tongues.

The idea of taming in the original language means to tame, subdue. It carries the idea of bringing something under obedience. For example, many times the people in the region of Gerasenes had fruitlessly tried to subdue—tame, bring under control—the man tormented by a legion of demons (Mark 5.4). Imagine their surprise when they discovered him freed of the demons, fully restored in mind, dressed and eating with Jesus (Mark 5.15)! He had been untamable.

James sets this action of taming, subduing against two overall kinds: those of the animal world and humankind. In this he demonstrates how humanity has taken dominion over all creation (Genesis 1.26, 28). Despite this external force of will, we have not been able to use that same force inwardly on our tongues.

v. 8: **but no human being can tame the tongue**...No one, James says, has been able to tame the tongue. Women and men, capable of subduing great beasts in land, sea and air, cannot bring their own tongues into submission.

**It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison**...Rather than fearing the wild beasts outside the city walls, we should fear the deadly tongue that lives not only in our own homes but our own bodies! As we noted in the first week, James is the only biblical author to use the word translated here as 'unstable.' This instability is the negation of bringing or setting something into order.

Some biblical scholars have paid close attention to the parallels James appears to be drawing in these verses with the Genesis story, through careful word choice and image selection. Drawing his audience to pay attention to God's mandate to take dominion over His creation, and later when he remarks on others as image bearers of God, then the tongue is recast as the snake in the Garden of Eden, the devil like a small fire from hell, restlessly waiting for Adam and Eve to inject his deadly poison.

Thursday, July 22.....James 3.9-12

## **A World of Contradictions**

<sup>9</sup>With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both sweet and bitter water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt spring yield sweet water.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. James tells us we bless our Lord and Father with our tongues. In what ways do we bless the Lord with our speech?
  
2. James also opines that we curse and condemn people made in His image.
  - a. In what ways do we speak evil against those God made with the capacity to know and represent Him?
  
  - b. If we curse the representative is that any different from cursing the One he represents?
  
3. What happens when sweet water and bitter water are mixed together? Why does James see this as a viable illustration for how we bless and curse with the same mouth?
  
4. Proverbs 18.21 tells us that “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.
  
5. Imagining pilgrim Israel beside Mara (Exodus 15:22-26) how can the refreshing power ensure that our speech is sweet?

## ● PRAYER POINT ●

### NO SWEET AND SOUR WORDS ON THE MENU

- Spend time today celebrating the goodness of God our Father. As Jesus taught us, hallowing His name, bringing glory and honor and praise as gifts before Him.
- Be refreshed in His word and take encouragement that He is blessing you too (Ephesians 1.3).
- Think of those who've caused pain in your life, trespassing the image of God in you. In the power of the Holy Spirit, ask Jesus to help you bless them, too. Seek to intercede for them, that God would draw them near, just as He is drawing you near.
- In these difficult acts of surrender, you are unburdening yourself of cursing them as they have cursed you. You are rejecting the bitterness too easily found on the tongue and instead accepting the mercy of God poured through you into the lives of others.

## COMMENTARY

v. 9: **Blessing and cursing**... Assuming that James is addressing two groups, first those who are teaching or aspire to teach in the church, and second the congregation as a whole, then blessing and cursing again take on corporate and personal meanings.

Corporately, as Tremper Longman notes, James “is addressed to teachers in the church since their speech is particularly edifying or destructive to others.” These teachers must model blessing God and His image bearers; bringing their words under control and relying on the wisdom that comes from above (3.18) rather than the wisdom of this world that masquerades as coming from God (3.15). Each teacher and fellowship of believers should evaluate the ministry of her teachers: are the teachers preaching in a way more reminiscent of hellfire than of blessing God’s image bearers?

Personally, these words apply to all believers, recognizing bitter jealousies and selfish ambitions that derail the unity of God’s people, prompting them to curse one another instead of building one another up as they glorify God.

**With [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father**... The word ‘bless’ here is the root of the word ‘eulogy,’ to speak well of another. For example, when Zechariah’s mouth was opened after the naming of his son, “Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God” (Luke 1.64). In the Temple, Luke tells us that Simeon praised God as He held Jesus as a baby knowing God’s promise of salvation was in his arms (2.28); exactly where Jesus’ disciples would again gather after His ascension to bless God (24.53). This state of blessing God, hallowing His name, is what followers of Jesus should be known for in the community.

**and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God**... But sadly, too often we commingle our ill wishes in our speech with our worship of God. Ben Witherington states it well: “cursing the representative is the same as cursing the one whom he represents.”

By appreciating that all people are made in the image of God, James’ audience must concede that all are made to be blessed. James uses the Greek word for ‘likeness’ used in Genesis 1.26 in the Greek translation used by the early church. Men and women, made in God-likeness, “are to be treated with utter dignity and respect” (McKnight). Followers of Jesus should not wish ill or speak condemning words on those whom God has placed His image.

v. 10: **From the same mouth come blessing and cursing**... Despite the impossible incongruity of blessing God and cursing His image bearers may seem, it happens; and it happens all too easily. This is not just a frequent occurrence among the men and women of the church, but of her teachers and preachers as well!

If we are drawing closer to Christ, increasingly redeemed and transformed by the power of His Holy Spirit, then blessing God and cursing those He's made as His special creation should be impossible.

**My brothers, these things ought not to be so...**We should hear the mournful grief in the words of James, Jesus' brother. Although we are all on a spiritual pilgrimage of sanctification, becoming less of our old self as Jesus increases in our transformed lives (Romans 12.1-2; John 3.30).

We should not be known as double-tongued people no different from the world that bless those they love and mercilessly curse those they despise. Instead, we should be known by Paul's definition found in Romans 12.9-13: people of a sincere love, horrified at the evil loose in this world as we hold tight to good that comes down to us from God; devoting ourselves to one another in love, honoring one another above ourselves; "joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." In this broken-down world, we should be known for our generosity toward one another, always practicing hospitality.

**v. 11: Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both sweet and bitter water?...**James the preacher gives his audience four images to illustrate his point of how our incongruous blessing and cursing in the same mouth appears. In nature, a spring cannot produce both sweet and bitter water. Either the water will be brackish or it will be fresh. In this sense, the bitter water overwhelms whatever fresh water may be present. So too, the words of cursing spoken against God's image bearers nullify the words of worship we lift to bless God Himself.

**v. 12: Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?...**As the congregation is evaluating the weight of James' words they must wrestle with their implications for their fellowship corporately and for each believer personally.

Corporately, James' proof that figs do not bear olives, or grapevines bear figs, reminds us of Jesus warning against false prophets (Matthew 7.15-20). If the teachers in a church hearing James' letter is not bearing the fruit of his kind—serving the body as a blessing bearer who hallows God and speaks God's blessing over his fellow image bearers—then his ministry is suspect. A good tree does not bear bad fruit, a good teacher does not curse those made in God's image.

**Neither can a salt spring yield sweet water...**One cannot expect a salty spring to bring forth sweet potable water. A salty spring will yield salty water. Frances Gench sees these images as a call to "restore integrity and discipline to Christian speech." We are not a salt spring that yields sweet words of worship. We are sweet springs, redeemed and transformed by the love and power of God (Exodus 15:22-26). As Christians will naturally bring sweet words of worship blessing God, we should also speak sweet words of blessing over all men, women and children made in His image.

Friday, July 23.....James 3.13-18

## Wisdom from Above

<sup>13</sup>Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. <sup>14</sup>But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. <sup>15</sup>This is not the wisdom from above coming down, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. <sup>16</sup>For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. <sup>17</sup>But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup>And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.



## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does James say the truly wise can demonstrate their wisdom in verse 13?
  
2. James builds a crescendo when describing the “wisdom” that comes up from below: earthly, unspiritual and lastly demonic. How does each image becomes like an extra weight, drawing the “wise” down into bitter jealousy and selfish ambition?
  - a. earthly (not heavenly):
  
  - b. unspiritual (not of the Spirit):
  
  - c. demonic (not of God):
  
3. Consider the characteristics of true wisdom. How does Jesus reveal each attribute of God’s wisdom in His ministry?
  - a. Pure:
  
  - b. Peaceable:
  
  - c. Gentle:
  
  - d. Open to reason:
  
  - e. Full of mercy and good fruits:
  
  - f. Impartial:
  
  - g. Sincere (Unhypocritical):

4. Taking special notice of the last attribute of God's wisdom, how does Jesus strike at the heart of the Pharisees' hypocrisy (insincerity)?
  - a. Teaching and Practice (Matt 23.2–5):
  - b. Motivations (23.6–12)
  - c. Effect of their Zeal and Ambition (23.13, 15)
  - d. Upside-down Teachings (23.16–22)
  - e. Imbalanced Ethics (23.23–24)
  - f. False Facades (23.25–28)
  - g. Undeserved Personal Absolution from Corporate Guilt (23.29–33).

## • PRAYER POINT •

### ESCAPING THE UPSIDE DOWN

- For too long the people in the Church have chosen to see life, leadership and wisdom as the world sees them. But this is to see things upside down, distorted and in shadow. Today, ask the Spirit to walk with you through where your wisdom looks more like the upside down than God's wisdom that comes from above.
- Challenge your heart with the words of Cassiodorus from the sixth century: "The mature faith should not have any bitterness or jealousy in them, since such things are not given by God but are conceived by diabolical fraud. For where there is jealousy, there is strife, disloyalty and every kind of evil which divine authority condemns." With the Holy Spirit, uproot those growing seeds bitterness and jealousy.
- Be refreshed, rejoicing that the wisdom of God is not like that of this world. It is not bound by earthly thinking, natural limitations of demonic distortions. It is beautiful. One by one worship God with a thankful heart that His wisdom (which He gives us generously and without hesitation) is pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. Amen!
- Pray and believe for a great harvest of righteousness, even as you sow the seeds of that peace today in your actions (great and small). Love those around you, show mercy and kindness as you rejoice in the mercy and kindness of Jesus in your life.

## COMMENTARY

v. 13: **Who is wise and understanding among you?**...James continues to address the teachers and would-be teachers in the Messianic fellowships reading his letter. Some who were actively refuting his words were surely frustrated by this point because their claims to wisdom and religious understanding were proven thin. The toxic mix of bitter cursing and sweet blessings were revealing a double-tongue anchored in a double-mind. As Solomon Andria says it, “Some of James’ readers were no doubt claiming to be wise and intelligent. The author challenges them to prove it. Wisdom is not a philosophical theory, but something that has to be demonstrated in daily life.” Wisdom is not an unapplied head knowledge but a daily expression of God’s pure, peace producing, gentle and merciful wisdom.

The phrase “wise and understanding” seems to come through James to his hearers from the law of Moses. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament before the birth of Christ, used the exact words found here in Deuteronomy 1.13, 15 and 4.6. As Craig Blomberg notes, the first two passages “refer to the qualities a leader out to possess [while] the third expands the application to the people in general.”

**By his good conduct.**...True wisdom and understanding are revealed in how Christians, particularly the teachers of the congregation, conduct themselves with others. Their interactions with others should be “attractively good, the kind of good that inspires others to embrace what is lovely” in their manner of life.

James’ definition of good conduct resonates, both in word selection and application, as that of Peter who urges his hearers to “conduct such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” Because these Christians were living a unique faith from those around them, they were experiencing the discomforts and persecutions often felt by foreigners and minority cultures. Peter is saying this is all the more reason to conduct themselves in good and honorable ways, even in the face of slander and abuse, others would see their true lives and chose to worship their God.

**let him show his works**...Although we translate this in much gentler terms, i.e. let the wise show it by his works, the original grammar is imperative. The teachers and members of the church must show their wisdom by their good conduct expressed in acts of mercy. This is true for teachers in the church and for all followers of Jesus.

Read in this way, James’ imperative sounds more like a strong heartfelt appeal to the Messianic believers with whom he just shared his great concern of spiritual immaturity in the church (3.10). In this way, he is saying, “We must show that we’ve received and understood the truth of God’s word by putting it into practice as we love Him and our neighbors.”

**in the meekness of wisdom...**Once again it bears repeating how countercultural this worldview was. At the time of James' teaching, building on that of Jesus, humility was not regarded as a virtue for the wealthy or people of social standing. This kind of gentle strength (meekness) was something best seen in slaves. Jesus turned the ethics of the world upside down, showing that "the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many," (Mark 10.45).

James has challenged his listeners toward the gentle strength of wisdom that aids us to removing our former way of life (like bitter jealousies and selfish ambitions) while simultaneously helping us yield ourselves "in ready teachability and responsiveness to God's word," (Stulac).

v. 14: **But if you have bitter jealousy...** Bitterness is the modifier that helps us know what kind of jealousy James has in mind here. The Greek *zelos* word translated 'jealousy' can be understood both positively and negatively as fervent emotions. In its positive sense, it would be read as one who is zealous, fervently striving toward a positive purpose. But this *zelos* is negative, modified by the same word for bitter previously seen with the undrinkable water polluting the sweet.

This is valuable for all believers, including those who are or want to be teachers in the Church. There is a passionate pursuit of God, a zealous hunger to serve the Lord, but if not stewarded well, can too quickly become a bitter jealousy for status and recognition that causes injury to the faith of the embittered person and those around him or her. To see this bitter jealousy as a positive outworking of their faith is to "be false to the truth."

The Messianic audience of James' message would have been well acquainted with the danger of misdirected zeal as they watched the zealots in Judea's repeated attempts to incite violence and rebellion against their Roman overlords. What started as a religious restoration movement became a political movement driven by blind hatred.

**and selfish ambition in your hearts...**Like the bitter jealousy it couples, selfish ambition is blight on the Church. It is a mercenary self-seeking that puts the wants and desires of the individual above the health of the whole or the wellbeing of the kingdom. Even in the early years of the Church, there were people who were setting their selfish, mercenary self-seeking above the good of the fellowship. Luke records the selfish ambition of Ananias and Sapphira who sought the status that Barnabas had received for his generosity (Acts 4.37-5.10). Paul was also too well acquainted with these men and women who sought to use the Church as their step stones to status (Philippians 1.17; 2.3; Romans 2.8). Sadly, these bitterly zealous and selfishly ambition people create deep and painful disorder in the church (James 3.16).

**do not boast and be false to the truth...**James is concerned that where bitter waters of jealousy and mercenary selfishness are mingling with the sweet water of their salvation, they will confuse the two and proudly boast about the corrupted faith. James is reminding his Messianic Jewish audience to remember the Prophet Jeremiah's

charge: “This is what the Lord says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 9.23-24). If their “wisdom” is not a daily exercise of kindness, justice and righteousness, but instead a discordant pursuit of personal advancement, boasting about such wisdom is profane and is a denial of Jesus’ teaching (Dan McGartney).

v. 15: **This is not the wisdom from above coming down...**Using the same structure as the Didache’s two ways, James contrasts the two forms of wisdom. He has been using contrasting images throughout his sermon, calling his audience’s attention to the things to appraise those things corrupting their faith: maligned view wealth and poverty, blessing and cursing, fresh and bitter water.

This verse is the antithesis of James 1.17 signaled by the repeating them of something from above coming down. In the first place, every good and perfect gift given by the Father is from above coming down. Here James makes it clear that the so-called “wisdom” producing bitter jealousy and mercenary selfishness is not from above coming down. They are belonging to this earth, worldly, and demonic. This “wisdom” dividing the church is coming up from hell as is the source of double-mindedness in their fellowship (1.8).

**but is earthly...**Earthly used here by James means the opposite of heavenly. James’ language is built on that of Jesus who asked Nicodemus how he would believe Him concerning heavenly things if he struggled with understanding earthly things (John 3.12). It is a very earthbound wisdom that limited him from grasping God’s wisdom and revealed Word. A sympathetic example would be a person who struggles to understand the loving fatherhood of God because they grew up in a home with an absent father. This person’s earthly experience limits their understanding of God’s character, and can only be redeemed and transformed in faith.

**unspiritual...**Theologian Dan McGartney believes the Greek word ‘unspiritual’ (*psychike*) might best be translated as “‘self-ish,’ that is, focused on the advancement of one’s own earthy personal welfare. Earthly wisdom offers a person counsel about personal advancement.” The word carries tones of the natural, the lower seen reality of human existence. Again, this fits very well into the world system where people are pitted against each other in their aspirations of advancement (*i.e.*, I must climb this ladder or secure that promotion over my colleague). This selfish or self-full, self-focused “wisdom” discounts God’s authority over our lives and workplaces, seeking to take full control of the uncontrollable in a mercenary ambition for success. This “wisdom” is no wisdom at all.

Conversely, the self-full, unspiritual person will not see God’s wisdom, but will consider them foolishness because only by the Spirit of God can His wisdom be discerned (1

Corinthians 2.14). Jude saw division in the Church because of the unspiritual, false teachers disrupting their unity because their lives were devoid of the Holy Spirit (Jude 19).

**demonic...** The unspiritual wisdom that focuses on one's personal advancement in an earthy fashion (devoid of God's supervision) is demon-like. James is the sole biblical author to use 'world' translated 'demonic.' By using this, he places the disruptive "wisdom" frustrating the fellowship of believers alongside the demonic rebellion of Satan and the fallen angels. Satan's pride, his selfish ambition and ungodly "wisdom" led him to seek personal advancement against God. Although the passages have some difficulties for modern scholars, the passages found in Isaiah and Ezekiel were seen by the early church as pertaining to Satan as well as whatever earthly parallels used (Isaiah 14.12-14; Ezekiel 28.11-19). Using the ruler of Tyre as an image, Ezekiel speaks of Satan who was full of wisdom before his fall (v. 12). But his heart became proud and his wisdom became corrupted as he became self absorbed (v. 17).

**v. 16: For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice...** James sandwiches his point by repeating jealousy and selfish ambition once again. He does not want his hearers to miss the detrimental effects of false wisdom. Where these two fleshy, demonic blights are, there will be disorder and wicked deeds, especially where they are present in the lives of teachers.

Disorder, the anarchy reaped from using others for personal advancement, wreaks havoc in the life of the individual and the community. This disorder gives way to chaos and God "is not the author of chaos," (McKnight). The Apostle Paul agrees with James in this: "God is not a God of disorder but of peace," (1 Corinthians 14.33).

Reflecting on this verse Craig Blomberg states, "when Christians strive for a higher position in church, they do not imagine that their actions will actually create more problems." This, however, is exactly what James tells us will happen. It is like introducing a contaminate into a clean room – it pollutes the whole. The disordered state creates space for all kinds of sinful reactions. Scot McKnight sums this verse up well: "Zeal and ambition break loose moral anchors, on the part of teachers, their followers, and their opponents, so that control and dominance become the guiding lights."

**v. 17: But the wisdom from above is first pure...** Now that James has provided a detailed description of false wisdom and its detrimental effects on the fellowship of believers, he overwhelms us with glorious attributes of God's wisdom and her influence on His people. He shows us what our communities of Christ could be when we reflect the wisdom coming down from our Father, modeled by Christ and implanted by His Spirit.

First of all, wisdom from God is pure. God's wisdom is unstained by the world (1.27). It is singular in focus, not double-minded vacillating with indecision and doubt (1.6-9). It

is not some human mixture of sweet and bitter (3.11-12). It is because of this purity that God's wisdom is consistent in the following attributes.

Putting God's wisdom in a polluted vessel will contaminate it. How can we seek to express God's peaceable wisdom if we have not invited the Spirit in to purify our souls? How can we aim to serve others in gentleness if our hearts are still dirty with unrepentance?

**then peaceable...** James here describes the peace – shalom – that God has designed for His kingdom. This is not just a wisdom that produces a limited zone of peace for the individual, but radiates out like ripples on the surface of the water. The peace emanating out from God's wisdom in the life of His people is the exact opposite of the conniving, ambitious teacher who causes conflict and chaos everywhere he goes. All believers, but especially those in ministry, must actively evaluate the effect of their actions: are people washed in the peace of God or racked with frustration and dissension? Looking at the fruit of their leadership “wisdom” are they peacemakers or warmongers? James says only one can be seen as from above (Matthew 5.9; Proverbs 3.17).

**gentle...** Ceslas Spicq interprets gentle wisdom as “friendly equilibrium.” In the Greek, it seeks to bring equity to justice, to appropriately balance the weight of justice, relaxing the stringency in one place that is absent in another. This friendly equilibrium seeks to fulfill the spirit of the law, gently loving others (1 Timothy 3.3; Titus 3.2).

Paul pleaded with Euodia and Syntyche, two gifted women leading in the Philippian church who had become frustrated and hostile to one another. He calls them, alongside all the Christians in Philippi, to rejoice in the Lord and be known for their gentleness, their “friendly equilibrium” because the Lord is near (Philippians 4.1-5).

**open to reason...** James adapts his previous use of the word *peitho* (James 3.3) – meaning to persuade like a rider persuades the horse by using the bit in its mouth – here with *eupeithes*. This again is one of James' unique words brought forward from classic Greek. It reveals a predisposition to being persuaded. God's wisdom is pure and innocent. It does not assume the worst. God's wisdom is peaceable, seeking to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4.3). God's wisdom is gentle and *already inclined (eupeithes)* toward others.

James is saying here that God's wisdom doesn't hold the party line because that is the way it has always been. It is not a selfish ambition that aims for personal advancement willing to leave other image bearers as debris in our path. He is saying the wisdom from above inclines us toward one another, seeking to openly hear one another (James 1.19). Scot McKnight insightfully stirs us again: “The wise teacher, because he or she knows mental and moral limitations, nurtures a willingness to listen and to change.” This is the inclined openness of God's wisdom.



**full of mercy and good fruits**...Inclined toward another, we are positioned to put God's wisdom into action by showing mercy to one another, which grows good fruits. Using the adjective "full," James combines mercy and good fruits as a singular idea. Like peaceable, we can measure whether our wisdom is reflecting God or not by its fruit. Is our "wisdom" full of contention and disorder, or is it full of merciful action toward others?

**impartial**...God's wisdom is not partial toward one over the other, it does not discriminate or favor some at the expense of others. It is whole-hearted not double-minded. This unity of thought does not allow ambiguity, especially in Church leaders, because God is not ambiguous. God's wisdom is not uncertain, ambiguously applied with hidden partiality toward one and against the other. This is the double-mindedness James rebukes in some who are unstable and destructive to the mission of God (1.6-8).

**sincere**...God's wisdom is not hypocritical, pretending to be wisdom like that of this world. The wisdom of this world, unlike that of God is hypocritical, motivated by selfish hidden agendas. Jesus contends with the Pharisees and religious leaders for their hypocrisy in life and leadership (Matthew 23).

**v. 18: And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace**...James caps his list of attributes with this celebration: those who make peace, who serve and sow peace in the community of believers will reap a harvest of righteousness. The seed of righteousness is peace. Righteousness, being right with God and right with others, is the fruit of peace fully grown. All the faithful stewards of God's justice, those who live in God's wisdom, will reap righteousness.

May we all remember as we dream of lives that fit the definition of James 3.18 that the promise of James 1.5 is still available to us! God our Father is ready, willing and able to pour His wisdom generously and without any reluctance into our lives.