

Week 10: *James: Wisdom in Action*

Hook



Main Point: Godly wisdom in action brings peace, harmony, and human flourishing.

Let's put our group's harmony to the test! On the board, write: **"Which is better?"** Then, introduce a series of well-known competitors and challenge the group to reach a **unanimous** decision on each one.

Here are some fun head-to-head matchups to consider:

- University of Texas vs. University of Oklahoma
- Ford vs. Chevrolet
- Apple vs. Android
- McDonald's vs. Burger King
- Sam's Club vs. Costco

Chances are, your LifeGroup won't agree on many (or any!) of these choices. But today's passage presents a comparison in which there is a clear winner —heavenly wisdom vs. earthly wisdom.

One is marked by peace, mercy and good fruit, while the other is filled with envy, disorder and evil practices. Let's dive in and discover why wisdom from above is clearly the better choice.

RECAP: So far in our study of James, we have learned that this book in the Bible is wisdom literature – applied wisdom which gives practical advice for real everyday situations from a Christ-centered perspective. In chapter 1, James touched on some of his main ideas – wisdom, trials and temptations, true religion, and being doers of the word, which he will later come back to in more detail throughout the letter.

In chapter 2, James started going into more detail on these topics. First, he taught that showing partiality to the rich was a sin because it was not loving the poor as ourselves.

Then he talked about the difference between the law of works-righteousness and “the law of liberty” and why we should choose grace. Then, James circled back to the idea that faith without works is dead and used examples from the Old Testament to show us how Abraham and Rahab showed their faith in action. In the last lesson, James went into more detail talking about how difficult it is to control our tongues and the damage it can cause when we don’t. In this lesson, James will talk about how godly wisdom is shown through action.

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James 3:13 and Matthew 11:28–30 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Wisdom is shown in our lives by gentleness and a pursuit of holiness.

Q: Where do we get godly wisdom? What does it help us do?

Q: Why is godly wisdom connected to humility and gentleness?

We've already learned that the genre of the book of James is wisdom literature. Everything that James has to say to the churches is written in the context and framework of sharing practical applied wisdom for how God's people can live best in the world. But James has also already talked specifically about wisdom earlier in the letter. In the opening of the letter, James told the people that if they lacked wisdom, they just had to ask God who gives wisdom generously to all believers who ask without reproach. They don't need to doubt that He will give it to them because God delights in giving His people wisdom generously (1:5-6).

In this passage, James circled back to talking directly about wisdom again, about how we can tell someone has godly wisdom by the way they live. This fits into the flow of his discussion about how faith is shown by our actions (2:14–26). First, he discussed how our faith is shown by the way we talk: those who know Jesus speak with truth, love and grace (3:1–12). Now he says that those who have true godly wisdom live with gentleness and a virtuous way of life, particularly in the way they treat other people.

The word “gentleness” is the same one used in the list of the Fruit of the Spirit, (Galatians 5:22-23). It can also mean meekness or humility. Gentleness does not mean weakness; it is power under control. It actually takes a lot of strength to live with gentleness. Gentleness is the ability to remain calm and collected no matter what is going on around you. In the Greco-Roman world, meekness was often seen as a lack of courage or strength, but in the biblical context, it is a virtue that reflects the character of Christ. Jesus described Himself as “gentle and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29).

This is yet another way that Jesus was upside-down from the world. When Jesus made His “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He came as a humble king riding on a donkey – the opposite of the kings of the Greco-Roman world who would ride into the city on a war horse with thousands of people parading through the streets (Matthew 21:5). Jesus did this to fulfill prophecy, but also because this is the kind of king

He was – gentle and humble. Though He is the most powerful Being in the universe, He didn't come to be served; He came to serve. Jesus gave up His throne in heaven to give Himself up for His people (Philippians 2:1–11).

You know that when people live with this kind of humility and gentleness, they have the wisdom which only comes from God. The “wisdom” of the world tells us to pursue power, fame and money for ourselves. Only the wisdom of God tells us to give up our honor, status and power to serve others. It may seem like this kind of a lifestyle is too sacrificial, as if we are giving up all these great things we could have for ourselves, but Jesus tells us that living in gentleness is an “easy yoke” and it will bring us rest for our souls (Matthew 11:28–30). Living with selfish ambition, pursuing fame, wealth and power, is exhausting and can bring anxiety, fear and stress. When we live that way, we are constantly working harder to get ahead, comparing ourselves to everyone else, trying to keep up with the Joneses. But when we live with gentleness and serve others, we want everyone to succeed, and we let go of that competition, the clamoring over each other on the ladder to get to the top. It is a much more peaceful, pleasant and happy life.

This gentleness shows itself in “good conduct.” The word for “good” referred to moral virtue and “conduct” referred to manner of life, particularly in the way you treat other people. It's more than just individual good deeds, but your entire way of living. The theological idea points to a life-change that is deeper than just behavior modification. In the Greco-Roman world, personal conduct was linked to social status and philosophical beliefs. But the early church emphasized that transformation is not just external, but a deep, inward change that manifests itself in outward behavior. The inward heart change of the Spirit which results in the growth of His fruit in our lives, like gentleness and humility (Galatians 5:22–25).

Q: Describe people you personally know who live lives of humility and gentleness. How can you see Christ reflected in their lives?

Q: What kind of impact do they have on their communities?

Q: What area do you need to practice humility and gentleness?

James 3:14–16; Philippians 2:1–11 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Jealousy and selfish ambition are not from God; they are earthly “wisdom.”

Q: Why are jealousy and selfish ambition contrary to godly wisdom?

Q: How did Jesus exemplify humility in His life?

Q: How do you fight jealousy and selfishness?

This section continues to flesh out what we touched on in the last section – that selfish ambition is the opposite of a life of godly wisdom. It is the “wisdom” of the world. James tells us that bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are not from God; they are earthly and unspiritual. But he goes a step further and even says they are demonic. James creates a sharp contrast here. He doesn’t mince words. This is not just “earthly” wisdom, it comes from the demonic. Satan is the “prince of this world” – “earthly” wisdom comes from him. Remember, our battle isn’t against flesh and blood (other people), but against the powers and principalities of this present darkness and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. This is why we must equip ourselves with the Armor of God (Ephesians 6:10–18). The two sides are good and evil, God and the demonic, wisdom from above and earthly wisdom.

Satan loves to divide us because a house that is divided cannot stand (Matthew 12:25). That’s exactly what bitter jealousy and selfish ambition do – they divide us. When we pursue selfish ambition, we step on other people to climb to the top of the ladder. When we live in bitter jealousy, we are constantly tearing other people down to make ourselves look and feel better. And we live in constant fear and anxiety ourselves. We’re always comparing ourselves to everyone else, working harder to get ahead, and always worried someone else is going to edge us out. It creates a *competitive* world. Paul warns us that if we keep biting and devouring each other, we’ll consume each other. We’ll all be destroyed in the end (Galatians 5:15).

But the wisdom which comes from God brings us together. It creates a *cooperative* world. When Paul described the humility of Jesus and how believers should follow His example, he told us to do nothing out of selfish ambition, but to look out for other people’s interests, not just our own. Even further, to count others *more* significant than ourselves. This kind of attitude takes away that competitive need to step on each other to get ahead. Having this kind of attitude builds a strong community. We become one body with many members all looking out for each other, of the same mind and one accord (Romans 12:3–5; Philippians 2:1–5). When we live in humility, we don’t fight for who can get to the top, we lift each other up so we all succeed.

Satan loves to divide us because it creates chaos and disorder (v. 16). But God is the God of order and peace (1 Corinthians 14:33). Satan loves to steal, kill, and destroy, but God wants to give us abundant life (John 10:10). Satan fuels a competitive world, where people bite and devour each other. Jesus showed us what self-sacrifice looks like, and

when we follow His example, we enjoy a community in which believers lift each other up. The key is humility and gentleness. Humility is not self-deprecation. Humility doesn't mean thinking less of yourself; it means thinking of yourself less. It means thinking about other people's needs, too. It isn't tearing yourself down; it's everyone lifting each other up.

Jesus is our model for humility. He had no selfish ambition. Jesus gave up His throne in heaven to sacrifice Himself for us. He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. When Jesus' disciples argued over who was the greatest, Jesus said those who wish to be great in the kingdom of heaven must become servants as He did (Matthew 20:24–28). Jesus didn't demand that people kneel before Him, even though He deserved it, but He knelt down and washed their feet (John 13).

Q: How have you seen selfish ambition destroy relationships, lives and communities?

Q: How can we build a cooperative community of those who lift up each other?

James 3:17–18; Romans 12:3, 9–18 [Read]

Talking Point 3: The wisdom from above brings gentleness and peace.

Q: How is the wisdom from above opposite from earthly demonic “wisdom”?

Q: If we sow seeds of peace and gentleness, what will we reap?

In this section, James continued the contrast between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the demonic. Jealousy and selfish ambition lead to disorder and every vile practice, but the wisdom from above is pure, peaceable and gentle and leads to peace. Pursuing the things of this world leads to division, backbiting and pushing each other down to get ahead. But when we live by the ways of Jesus, we will experience communities of peace, harmony and mutual support.

There is a long list of qualities of the wisdom from above. First, it is pure. This is the same word as “holy” or “sacred.” For the Jewish readers of James, this word would remind them of the purity and holiness associated with the ancient religious rituals of the Old Testament – the purity laws and the sacrificial system. But in a New Testament context, it draws from that theological background to talk about a deeper spiritual purity that goes beyond external rituals to encompass the heart and the mind. This kind of wisdom is set apart from the world's wisdom; it's different from the way the world works.

The wisdom from above is peaceable. It creates a state of being of harmony and tranquility between all those who share in its wisdom. In the biblical definition, peace (*shalom*) is so much more than just the absence of conflict; it's a holistic sense of well-being,

completeness and flourishing. The wisdom from above is gentle – this is a slightly different word than “gentle” above from v. 13, which is a calm strength. This is more of the idea of moderation and fairness in leadership and social interactions. This was a counter-culture virtue, in contrast to the harsh and authoritarian norms of leadership in the Greco-Roman world at the time.

The wisdom from above was also “open to reason” – not stubborn; you can have discussion with them. In the Greco-Roman world, being able to discuss things was a virtue, especially in philosophical and rhetorical contexts. But in the context of early Christian community, it meant you were willing to compromise and listen to other people and didn’t need to have your own way all the time. “Full of mercy” meant showing compassion to others in the community. “Impartial” is not showing favoritism, as James had already discussed in chapter 2. “Sincere” is genuine, without hypocrisy, pretense or deceit. In the Greco-Roman world, the word “hypocrite” originally referred to actors who wore masks when they played different characters. In Greco-Roman society, people of high social status often figuratively “wore masks” or “played parts” to maintain their status or get ahead. The Christian counterculture called for a higher standard of authenticity which reflected the authentic character of Christ. James also says that it is “full of fruit” – the Fruit of the Spirit which grows in the lives of those with godly wisdom.

All these qualities reflect a nature that leads to a *cooperative* community. A place where people will live in peace and harmony together, building up one another, loving one another, being compassionate to one another, and being open, honest, authentic and vulnerable with each other. This is the kind of community that leads to true shalom – human flourishing. The ways of the world will never lead to human flourishing. We will always tear each other down and devour each other. Only following the countercultural ways of Jesus will lead to peace, rest, joy, abundant life and human flourishing for *all* people, not just the few at the top.

We won’t really have this perfect shalom community until God’s final kingdom. But we can create pockets of that kind of community in our church communities when we live by His ways and treat each other the way that the “wisdom from above” teaches. And we can bring human flourishing to the whole world, even the world outside the Church when we walk in the ways of humility, gentleness and peace instead of selfish ambition. We will experience a harvest of shalom when we sow seeds of shalom in the world.

Q: How, when and where have you experienced shalom in your life?

Q: How can you bring shalom to the secular world around you? How can we do that together as a church community?

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Took

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Are you interested in pursuing and implementing wisdom from above but don't know where to start? Consider speaking to your LifeGroup teacher about a discipleship program called *Starting Point*. A minister will work with you to connect you with a mature believer who will act as a coach as you grow in Christlikeness. Are you interested in growing in a particular area? Check out these Prestonwood ministries.

Marriage: [Mentors4Couples](#)

Mentors4Couples is like discipleship for your marriage, and this ministry exists for three reasons:

1. We want to help marriages prevent crises rather than manage them.
2. We want to redefine what culture says about marriage and reinforce what God says about it.
3. We want to fight against the barrier of shame and embarrassment associated with marriage enrichment.

Recovering the life God intended: [Life Recovery](#)

The Life Recovery Ministry at Prestonwood helps people recover their identity and possess the life that Christ intended. Through classes, small groups and individual discipleship, emotional, physical, relational or spiritual wounds are healed through the power of Christ.

Finances: [Prestonwood Foundation's Financial Freedom](#)

God has called His people to be faithful, good managers of what He has provided, and so Prestonwood Foundation offers a *free* monthly series of classes that cover relevant topics in which we should be fully educated so we can fulfill the purpose God has placed in our lives.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on places in your life or ways you struggle with selfish ambition, jealousy or pursuing the things of this world. It doesn't necessarily have to be career-wise; it may be social, with popularity or friendships or sports – anything that can turn competitive. How have you pushed others down to try to get ahead? How have you “bitten and devoured” other people in your life? How is some ambition (and competition) healthy, but not *selfish* ambition or competition? Where does it cross the line?

PRAY for God to give you the wisdom from above. Not only so that you will know in your head the way you are *supposed to* live as a Christian but also that you *do* live that way. Pray for a heart-change, not just behavior modification. Pray for God to humble your heart so you can walk in His ways and live like Jesus, with a servant's heart. Pray through every quality of godly wisdom here and the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, asking God to grow those in you.

ACT: Practice humility. This week, look for ways you can put others' needs ahead of your own. Pray for opportunities to be cooperative and lift up other people. Spend every day thinking less of yourself and more about how you can help build up others.