

# A Study in James

## The Tests of a Living Faith

James 3:13–18

February 27, 2013

### Introduction

Consider this question: What does it take to become a mature believer? James answers this question for us in two words: *godly wisdom*. Last time we looked at the use of the tongue and how a godly person will exercise self-control with his speech. James told us that a controlled tongue is an evidence of a controlled person. But we may be asking what that has to do with wisdom. After all, the term “wisdom” is not mentioned in chapter 3 until verse 13. Although there seems to be a clear-cut transition from speech to wisdom, the goal of each is the same. In verse 2 James encourages his readers to live a “bridled life.” This is essentially the same thing as a life of “good conduct” in verse 13. We can draw a connection by saying that James is speaking of wise conduct generally in verses 13–18. Verses 1–12 deal more narrowly with the wise use of the tongue even though the term “wisdom” is not used specifically.

### Test #5: A Living Faith and Wisdom (3:1–18)

Recall that James is giving us a test. In this case, he demonstrates that a living faith should produce wise speech (vv. 3–12) and wise conduct generally (vv. 13–18).

### Godly Wisdom Produces Godly Conduct (vv. 13–18)

James begins this section by returning to the qualifications for teachers. Those who are spiritually mature should demonstrate their qualifications to teach by displaying wisdom in their conduct. As with the tongue, James adds these qualifications to address his readers’ failure to show wisdom and exhort them to change.

The Exhortation (v. 13)

James begins with a question asking, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Before we answer that question for ourselves, we must recognize that this is the same kind of person as in verse 2 — a mature man, able to bridle his tongue and body. In order to answer this

question with an affirmative, “Yes, that’s me!” we must first meet the qualifications in the verses that follow.

The person who claims to have wisdom will follow the exhortation of verse 13b. True wisdom will produce godly conduct. They are inseparable. Just as faith without works is dead (2:14–26), so also wisdom without godly conduct is foolishness. When James speaks of godly conduct, he is addressing the pattern of a person’s life. This is not an isolated good deed. It is the characterization of a person’s consistent behavior. But it doesn’t stop with simple outward activity. Wisdom will also produce humility in a person’s actions. This is similar to what we saw in chapter 1 — godly conduct must be accompanied by a godly attitude.

#### False Wisdom (vv. 14–16)

James sets up a contrast for us between false wisdom and godly wisdom. For each type of “wisdom,” James gives us a description, its origin, and its fruit. As we’ll see, false wisdom is not really wisdom at all.

##### *The Description of False Wisdom (v. 14)*

False wisdom can be characterized by two problems. The first is bitter envy. This is jealousy or covetousness. But it also includes a hateful, bitter spirit toward another person. Whether the other person is a believer, unbeliever, family member, coworker, neighbor, or whatever — bitter envy is unfitting behavior for Christians. The second problem is pure selfishness. Those who live only for themselves and care nothing for others would fit into this category.

At the root of this is a person’s motivation. If these things describe your attitude, then James demands that you stop boasting and lying against the truth. If these are your motivations, you are deceiving yourself by calling yourself wise.

##### *The Origin of False Wisdom (v. 15)*

False wisdom does not come from above (contra v. 17). James gives us three sources for this wisdom: it is earthly, sensual, and demonic. These correspond precisely to the three enemies that believers face in this life: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The “world” speaks of everything non-heavenly. It is a mindset that ignores God and the things from above (like the Scriptures). False wisdom is also sensual, coming from lusts and evil desires. The third category speaks of the demonic.

These are external forces that try to curb our thinking toward evil. We can't blame the devil for all our sin, but neither can we ignore his influence in the world.

### *The Fruit of False Wisdom (v. 16)*

False wisdom has a natural byproduct. James indicates that where envy and self-seeking exist (that was our description of false wisdom), there will be confusion and every kind of evil thing. Just think for a moment about some real life situations. What kind of work environment would you have if your coworkers were always bitter and never gave you a second thought? That would yield a very unproductive and stressful situation. Or think about a marriage that is in trouble. What will happen if the husband and wife only care for themselves and are always bitter toward one another? If you ignore the instructions of Ephesians 5:15–33 and other passages, James says all sorts of confusion and evil can result — arguing, fighting, abuse, and eventually divorce.

### Godly Wisdom (vv. 17–18)

#### *The Origin of Godly Wisdom (v. 17a)*

On the other side of the picture, James tells us where true wisdom comes from. It is from heaven above — more specifically, the God of heaven!

#### *The Description of Godly Wisdom (v. 17b)*

James gives us a list of items that describe godly wisdom. The first is the most important and sets the stage for all the others: wisdom is first pure. It is pure in the sense that it has been purified from the bad motives of bitter envy and self-seeking in verse 14. Another term we could use for this is holiness. The list of six items that follows can be grouped pairs:

- 1) Peaceable: This means free of conflict, living in harmony.
- 2) Gentle: This means kind, tolerant, and yielding to others.
- 3) Willing to yield: This means conciliatory, or willing to give up your rights for the sake of harmony. Obviously this deals with issues of Christian liberty, not clear matters of doctrine or practice.
- 4) Full of mercy and good fruits: This means someone has compassion and does something about it (e.g. Jas 1:27; 2:15–16).
- 5) Impartial: This means treating others fairly (cf. Jas 2:2–4).

- 6) Sincere: This means non-hypocritical. We shouldn't say one thing and mean something else in our hearts.

There are many parallels here with the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). When the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, He will produce godly wisdom.

*The Fruit of Godly Wisdom (v. 18)*

When all is said and done, godly wisdom will yield the fruit of righteousness. In other words, godly wisdom produces righteous conduct. The atmosphere in which righteousness blossoms is one of peace. This assumes peace within inter-personal relationships. One such atmosphere where this should be the case is the local church (note: Jas 4:1ff). But James teaches us here that godly wisdom will grow and continue to produce a crop of righteousness when we are dwelling peacefully with others.

**Conclusion**

There are many in this world who profess themselves to be wise. James's point is that if you claim to be wise, show it! Only godly wisdom produces humility and good works on a consistent basis.

Our modern culture is full of academic institutions engrossed in the kind of worldly wisdom we saw in 3:14–16. But that kind of wisdom does not attain to the ideals of godliness. Only Christ can give true wisdom to people and He offers it by transforming people's hearts and giving them freedom from the bondage of sin. But Christianity is not about taking people to the cross and dumping them there. God is calling believers to a life of faithfulness, godliness, and good works. God made the provision for our salvation and He also makes the provision for our sanctification! All we need to do is trust and obey!

~AWB