

# TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 32:1-11

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:13-18; 5:7-12

## JAMES 3:13-18

13 Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.

14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.

16 For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

## JAMES 5:7-12

7 Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.

8 Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.

9 Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door.

10 Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.

11 Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

12 But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.

## THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Choose God's wisdom.

## In Education

3:13. By speaking of the one *who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge*, James likely continues to have the teachers in mind. He introduces the issue in a confrontational way: “So you think you’re wise and knowledgeable?” he seems to ask. “Then prove it by a *good conversation*.”

14. *Envy* translates a word that can also be rendered “zeal,” as it is in John 2:17—that’s *zeal* in a good sense. The verse before us portrays zeal in a bad sense, as an attitude that crosses over into inappropriate jealousy. That such envy is *bitter* suggests that it manifests itself in anger and harsh speaking.

Teachers might harbor envy of each other’s gifts. This would result in strife, as it had in Corinth. Such behavior will seem from the outside to prove that their teaching is a lie. Thus it brings disrepute to *the truth* of the gospel they proclaim.

15. Lives must match words. But the reality is that at least some teachers do not meet this standard. They adhere to a *wisdom* that is *not from above*, meaning that it is not from God.

*Sensual* is the very opposite of spiritual. The condemnation *devilish* reinforces the identity of its source.

16. Worldly wisdom leads to bad outcomes. In this case, it leads to *confusion and every evil work*. The communal impact of this “wisdom” is damaging in the extreme. It threatens the very integrity of the churches.

17. The adjectives that James applies to *the wisdom that is from above*, from God,

call to mind Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23).

*Easy to be intreated* means something like “willing to yield” or “open to reason.” To be *without partiality* goes hand in hand with having no *hypocrisy*.

18. The desired goal of one who seeks true wisdom is peace. Heretofore, the teachers may have been fostering conflicts among themselves (James 4:1). Those who *make peace*, however, are said to sow *in peace*. *The fruit of righteousness* can be both what is sown and what is harvested as a cycle of peace begins. Righteousness is inclusive of one’s words and one’s works.

## In Persecution

In order best to understand James’s directives in 5:7-12, we have to understand that these are in response to the first six verses of the chapter. A strong argument can be made that 5:1-6 is spoken against landlords who are unbelievers. We notice that they are not called to repent but to “weep and howl” in light of the coming judgment (James 5:1).

Such landowners come from the handful of rich outsiders who make life miserable for many of their tenant farmers and/or day laborers. The accusations are written for the benefit of impoverished Christians of Jewish background to whom the letter as a whole is addressed.

5:7. James is writing to a group of believers who have cause to be angry and despondent. The word *brethren* indicates that James’s words are not intended for the rich landlord unbelievers of James 5:1-6, but for Christians who suffer at their hands.

James points the oppressed believers to *the coming of the Lord* as the ultimate solution. This might seem like a cop-out to some modern readers who are used to enacting change through the democratic process. But we have to remember that the

### KEY VERSE

The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

—James 3:17

world of the first century AD has no such process. Appeal for change might be made to the consciences of those who have power. But hope for change ultimately resides in taking the long view, which looks to the return of Christ.

To await Jesus' return requires *long patience* on the part of believers. Just as the farmer waits patiently for his crop, the poor, oppressed believers are to wait patiently for the coming of God's judgment. Because God can be trusted to send a harvest in its time, Jesus can also be trusted to return as He has promised.

In Israel it is quite rare for rain to fall between May 1 and October 15. Thus *the early and latter rain* refers to rain in fall and spring, respectively. Since James's addressees are "scattered abroad" (James 1:1), their experiences will differ by location.

8. Just like the farmer of verse 7, James's audience is to be *patient*. Christians must be resolute and courageous in earthly circumstances while awaiting *the coming of the Lord*. Such resolve will involve rejecting the negative views of skeptics (2 Peter 3:3-15; etc.).

9a. Why would James's addressees be holding grudges *against one another*? One possibility is that those to whom James writes are taking out their frustrations on each other. Perhaps they disagree about how to handle the situation. Perhaps their oppressive situations are unequal, resulting in covetousness of a fellow believer's assets or circumstances. Regardless, they are in danger of being *condemned*. It would be tragic indeed if the judgment that God has prepared for their oppressors also comes on some of them.

9b. This warning implies the imminent return of the Lord. That He *standeth before the door* can mean "expected very soon" or "can happen at any time." Either is cause for repentance! Christians who harbor bitterness toward one another lose their witness.

10. Because of the strong opposition they faced, *the prophets* are examples to James's readers (and to all believers) of *suffering affliction, and of patience* (see Hebrews 11:33, 37, 38).

The prophets are thus examples to all Christians of all eras in their faith-based manner of life. They did not merely speak the words of God; rather, they lived out their faith and trusted in Him by action.

The nations of Israel and Judah heard the words of the prophets and ignored them. We know that this was frustrating for the men who were called to prophetic ministry. It required a great deal of patience for them to keep preaching God's message of repentance to people who would not listen and would not obey—to their own destruction.

11a. This phrase speaks of the prophets as those *which endure*.

11b. This leads James to another example of *patience* and perseverance: that of *Job* (Job 1:20-22; 2:10). *The end of the Lord* refers to the Lord's purpose in allowing Job to suffer as he did.

Consider the outcomes of Job's suffering (Job 42:10, 12-17). Those outcomes cause us to see the grace of the Lord, that He is full of *tender mercy*.

12. James regularly alludes to Jesus's teachings. The verse before us offers the clearest connection in that regard, which features a direct quotation from Matthew 5:34-37. Elsewhere the teachings of Jesus bubble just below the surface of James's discussions.

The phrase *but above all things* implies that the swearing of oaths is the most egregious sin that the original readers are engaged in. We can envision situations in which poor Christians are tempted to swear oaths in order to obtain credit for food, all the while knowing they might not be able to pay the bill when it is due. In other words, the swearing of an oath involves them in behavior that does not glorify God—quite the opposite!

# INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

## TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

### Into the Lesson

W  
I  
S  
D  
O  
M

Create an acrostic of the word *wisdom*. Which word in your acrostic describes *wisdom* most accurately?

Today we consider more of what James has to say about wisdom as we look at two passages from his letter.

### Into the Word

Read James 3:13-18 and 5:7-12. As you read today's text, note behavior that belongs under either heading.

**Godly Wisdom:**

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Worldly Wisdom:**

---

---

---

---

What can you do to contribute godly wisdom to the church today?

---

Read Galatians 5:22, 23. Which items from this list are also in James's list in 3:17?

---

What does this tell us about how to achieve the wisdom that James describes here?

---

### Into Life

Conduct a search in contemporary sources for examples of godly wisdom and worldly wisdom. Do this in one of two ways:

- *Newspapers and/or magazines.*
- *Internet.* Use smartphones or tablets to search for examples from news items of the last seven days.

Which kind of wisdom was easier to find, and why?

---

Read James 3:17. Decide which of the qualities listed there is the biggest challenge to you personally. Then complete this sentence: I can demonstrate godly wisdom this week by . . .

---

---

---