

We are planted by the streams of God's wisdom.
We meditate on the desires of God, taking delight in the laws of God.
Sink your roots deep into the soil, and draw on God's wisdom.
For God will nourish us every day with insight.
Go forth, knowing that God watches over you. Amen.

“Live Well; Live Wisely”

James writes as a servant of God and Christ to believing people who are dispersed in a hostile world. We begin this series with an overview of the letter and consider how it fits with other New Testament teaching—including the perceived tension with Paul's letters. James is writing as an experienced pastor who draws from the storehouse of his experience and heaven-sent wisdom to help believers with suffering, self-delusion, rivalry, and half-heartedness.

We live in an age where the word 'Christian' is, for many, a synonym for hypocrite. We are often accused of making sanctimonious claims while acting just like everybody else. "Deeds done in the humility of wisdom" (James 3:13) are the surest challenge of this caricature. Such deeds characterize the life of Christ and James (Jesus' younger brother) and can serve as our guide in following the Lord. The New Testament letter written by James is neither soft nor cerebral. It is quick moving, hard-nosed, steeped in Judaism, and a bit homespun at times--focusing less on what to believe and more on the way of life that belief inspires.

James gives attention to godly wisdom and applies it to the development of godly character. This letter is both hope-filled and practical. Chapter one of this letter begins with a salutation and then proceeds quickly to important instruction regarding suffering, sin, and service. Having 'gotten our heads on straight,' in the first chapter, chapters two to five deal with relationships and behavior in the believing community. May God grant us ears to hear, obedience from the heart, and influence that brings honor to Christ.

The text before us begins with a question: Who is wise and understanding among you? Who knows what is worth knowing and has learned to apply the truth to life? Taken further, who should teach, disciple, and mentor young believers? Who should lead the congregation? To this point in his letter, James has focused primarily on correcting personal shortcomings and bad theology in the church. With these in mind we are prepared to discover a good alternative.

At the beginning of chapter 3 we read that 'not many of you should become teachers.' Who then should teach and lead? Who is wise and understanding? An answer is provided beginning in James 3:13. Too often we look for worldly credentials—a forceful personality or oratorical skills. Yet we will see that when James answers his own question he is most interested in character. It is critical that we have been altered by what we know; that wisdom has shaped us before we apply it to others.

James 3:13: Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

There are two words in this verse that we should give attention to. They are the English words 'good' and 'humility.' The Greek word translated 'humility' is *prautes* (also rendered 'meekness' at times). The word that's translated 'good' is *kalos*. The core meaning of *prautes* is 'to agree with God about ourselves.' The meek or humble person is someone who is confident of this: 'I am who God says I am.'

A recent study concluded that Facebook and other social networks increase feelings of loneliness for some. It is common for people to put positive news and pictures on their home page. Nobody posts these things: a picture of me in bed with the flu; a video clip—'changing the baby's soiled diaper;' the email I got from my girlfriend when she broke up with me. Knowing our own struggles, we can feel isolated and discouraged by comparing ourselves with others who display (mostly) positive experiences.

God's view of us is not filtered by what we choose to post. In truth, I am lonely, afraid, and scared; but I'm also gifted and loved. I am a child of God with a complex swirl of hopes and fears. And I know that God knows all of it. Humility then, is a view of oneself not built on comparison with other people but rather on the promises of the One who knows us completely and loves us without reservation.

Humility reduces worry and frantic uncertainty— trading these for stability. The humble person doesn't need constant reassurance or applause, doesn't turn every bump in the road into a crisis. He or she is free of the tyranny of self, seeks to hear God's voice, and doesn't care who gets the credit. 'Humility that comes from wisdom' should be evident in those who lead the church.

The other word we want to consider is 'good' ("Let them show it by their good life"). There are two primary Greek words in the New Testament that get translated by the English word 'good:' one is agathos and the other is kalos. Agathos has the idea of nobility, purity, and flawlessness. Kalos, the word found in James 3:13, means beautiful. It describes something that is not only intrinsically good, but is also attractive. A kalos person draws others to them. A kalos person is a joy to be around.

An increasing number of young Christians are distancing themselves from familiar church structures and organized congregations which they regard as self-serving. They prefer association with para-church groups that exist to accomplish good works—like fighting against poverty, abuse of children, environmental degradation, etc. The church is perceived as irrelevant or worse as long as it is turned inward, instead of being beautiful in its welcome of others and rich in good (kalos) deeds.

In fact, there is no substitute for a vital community that worships, serves, and grows together. But a Christian congregation is called to be a flock that follows a Good (kalos) Shepherd. We should work together to become a people shaped by the heart of Christ.

Having answered the question 'who is wise,' James expands his instruction by distinguishing the false from the truth. False or 'earthly' wisdom is described in verses 14-16. Verses 17-18 follow with a description of 'wisdom from heaven.'

James 3:14-16 - But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. The phrase 'envy and selfish ambition' is repeated twice in these verses. Too often positions of leadership in the church are sought for reasons of pride or profit.

Individuals and groups compete for prominence and Christ is denied glory that belongs to him. Devilish wisdom produces worthless and wicked shepherds. Consider this prophetic indictment: "Shouldn't the shepherds feed sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. You do not strengthen the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So, they were scattered because there was no Shepherd, and scattered they became food for all the wild animals" (Ezekiel 34:2-5).

James' indictment of earthly wisdom is followed by a description of wisdom 'from heaven.' James 3:17-18: But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. Wisdom is first pure and uncompromised. Purity is not narrow-minded nor hard edged, yet wisdom must begin with an unwavering commitment to truth.

Wisdom is also peace-loving, considerate, and submissive. Considerate people seek relationships that go beneath the surface. For them, "how ya doing?" is a real question. The word translated 'submissive' here means willing to listen, especially to the shy and marginalized voices that are usually discounted. It is an approach to life that invites the other person to go first. And heaven's wisdom is filled to overflowing with mercy for those whose lives are difficult.

Verse 18 uses a metaphor from agriculture—sowing in peace and raising a harvest of righteousness. Good outcomes do not arrive immediately. A wise leader will both speak and be silent; will take action and hold back; will give instruction and serve by example—knowing that God is faithful and that the fruit of righteousness will appear in due time.

Sixty years ago, the Disney Company produced an animated feature based on the life of an eccentric nineteenth century folk character known as Johnny Appleseed. In fact, the first prayer I ever learned was a song from this show: *The Lord is good to me and so I thank the Lord for giving me the things, I need; the sun, the rain and the apple seed. The Lord is good to me. I am glad I know it still.*

The original Johnny Appleseed was an itinerant Bible teacher who was committed to simple living and generous to a fault. He became widely known for planting apple orchards throughout Indiana and Ohio, knowing that they would be beneficial to a generation of people he would never know, content with the good harvest that would come later. The same can be said of planting a tree under whose shade you do not expect to sit. You may never see the tree full grown, but it will provide amazing shade. Blessed are older people who plant trees knowing that they shall never sit in the shade of their foliage. Those who plant trees, knowing that only others will enjoy the shade, are public benefactors.

There's a depth of meaning that we can bring to our lives when we take action for something greater than ourselves. Henderson's quote and Johnny Appleseed mission, in particular is about doing things in this life that will benefit people far after the time we have passed.

Is there anything you're doing to make this world a better place for the generations to come?

Similarly, James' instruction makes clear that those who sow in peace trust God to bring a righteous harvest at a time of his choosing. Who is wise with the wisdom that comes from heaven? It is the man or woman who has learned that God can be trusted. His presence allows us to live with both patience and confidence, giving away the life we have received in abundance.

In conclusion, we find the perfect embodiment of 'wisdom from above' in the life of Jesus. Jesus is the answer to the question of James 3:13. All who would serve God's people as under-shepherds must learn from him, be formed by obedience to him, be dependent on the power of his Spirit. Jesus is the peacemaker who sows in peace. He is considerate, pure and peace loving, welcoming, submissive, and full of mercy and good fruit. Let us say yes to his invitation:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30

In the precious name of our Lord and Savior. Amen

(Adapted from: <https://www.pbc.org/messages/the-gentleness-of-wisdom>)