

Wisdom and Word

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

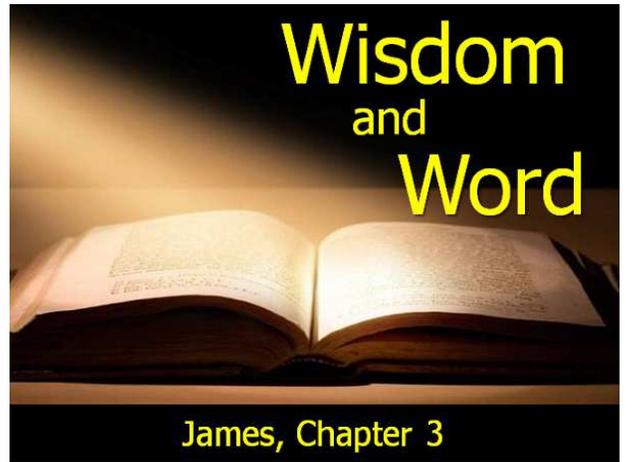
First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois – April 24, 2016

James 3:1-18 ESV

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 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. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. 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 will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!

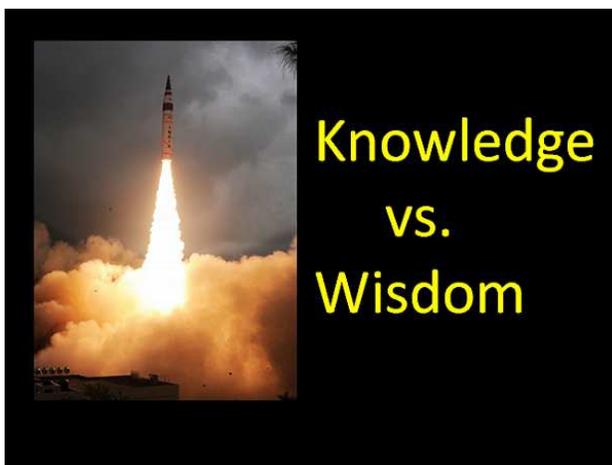
And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. 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.



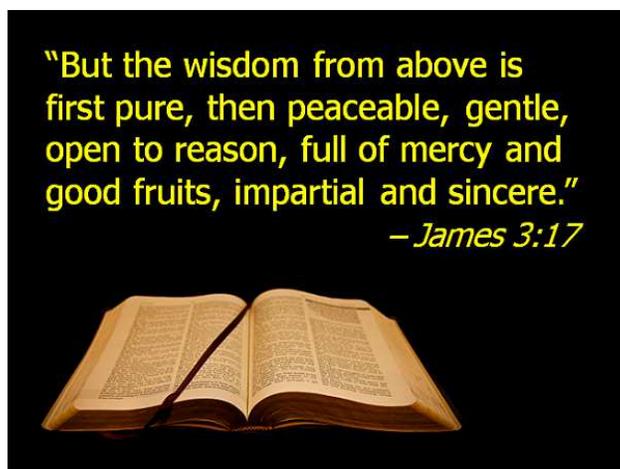
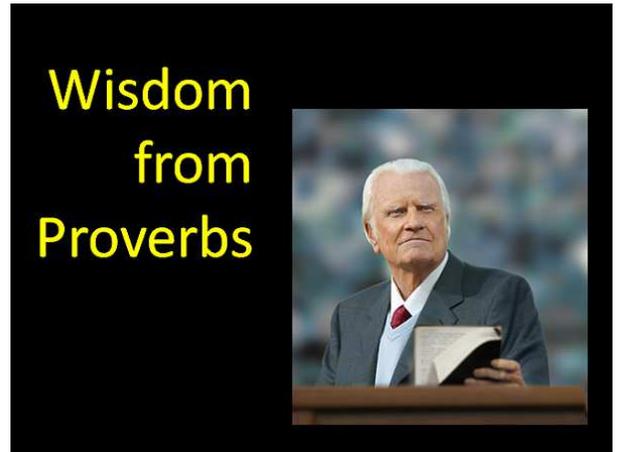
As we proceed with our study of the Letter of James, we come today to chapter 3. In this chapter, James's topic is *wisdom*. He also writes about how we can misuse our tongue, but he frames that discussion within his treatment of wisdom. Wisdom is an important subject throughout the Scriptures. Several books of the Old Testament are known as the "Wisdom Books," especially Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. But there are "wisdom" passages elsewhere as well; some of the Psalms, like Psalm 37, are "wisdom Psalms," and segments of the writings of the prophets of Israel can be classed as "wisdom literature."

What is wisdom? Sometimes we tend to equate wisdom with knowing a lot of facts. It *is* important to know the facts – "just the facts, ma'am" – but in the Bible wisdom is more than knowledge of the facts. What you do with those facts is just as important as having that knowledge in the first place. We all know of brilliant people with vast knowledge, especially technical knowledge, who've used their knowledge in a destructive way – to build horrific weapons, for example. Dr. Werner von Braun designed rockets for Hitler that rained destruction down on England during World War II – and then was brought to the United States to work on our own atomic missile program. As a technician, he focused on the "facts" of his craft and not on the ethical issues involved. I recall Tom Lehrer's 1964 parody of Dr. von Braun: "Once the rockets go



up, who cares where they come down? That's not my department,' says Werner von Braun." And highly knowledgeable, highly skilled rocket scientists today in Iran or in North Korea are up to the same game. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that even if a rocket scientist has impressive "knowledge" he doesn't necessarily have *wisdom*.

So in Scripture, wisdom is more than impressive knowledge of the facts. Biblical wisdom is practical wisdom — an understanding of *how to live*. One writer has defined such wisdom as *the ability to cope*. A wise man or woman is one who knows how to handle the issues of life, especially the issues of personal relationships. The Book of Proverbs is filled with this kind of wisdom. Billy Graham used to say that he read a passage each day from both the Psalms and Proverbs — from the Psalms to strengthen his relationship with God, and from Proverbs to help him get along with people. We could just open our Bible to Proverbs and put our finger down anywhere, and find useful counsel for the conduct of our lives. I turned randomly to Proverbs 15, and found this advice: "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (v. 1). "Better a little with the fear of the LORD than great wealth with turmoil" (v. 16). "A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel" (v. 18). "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed"

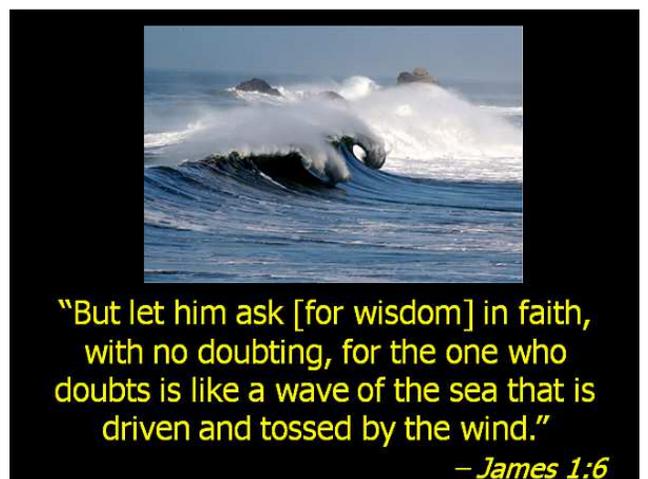


(v. 22). "Those who disregard discipline despise themselves, but the one who heeds correction gains understanding" (v. 32). The overall philosophy of biblical wisdom is well stated by Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding."

James's topic, then, in this chapter is wisdom of that biblical, practical kind. For the outline of our treatment today, we're going to the next-to-last verse in the chapter, verse 17: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere." Let's look at each of these qualities as James brings them out in this chapter, and elsewhere in his letter.

First, James indicates that wisdom comes "from above," that is, by insight that comes from the Lord and not from trying to figure things out given the presuppositions and prejudices of human culture. At the very beginning of his letter, in chapter 1, he wrote, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." (1:5-8).

If we're not prepared to activate our faith — that is, to do whatever God calls us to do — then the conduct of our life will be inconsistent, wavering between God's way and the way that's being pressed upon us by a godless environment. James is saying that if I'm not prepared to go "all the way" with God, then I won't get his wisdom in any given situation.



Instead, I'll be conflicted, not knowing which way to turn. Sometimes life presents us with hard decisions we have to make. We won't get any clear direction unless we remain fully committed to what the Lord has laid out for us in his Word.

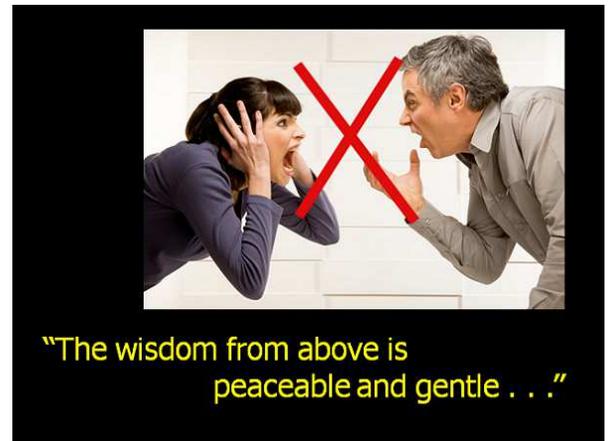
"The wisdom from above
is first pure . . ."



That's why James says "the wisdom from above is first *pure*." That doesn't just mean "pure" in the sense of being kind of angelic and holy sounding. It means "pure" in the sense of being uncontaminated by side issues and hidden motives. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). What he meant was, not that we need to be without any faults, but that we're *single-minded* in our intention to serve the Lord, and not "double-minded." I think James is picking up that thought from his brother, and James knows what it was like to have mixed feeling about what God is doing. After all, he was part of Jesus' family that came and tried to take him home because they thought he was kind of crazy about this "kingdom of God" business. I'm sure James wanted to see God on the move, as did all devout

Jews of that time, but he wasn't sure that was happening through his own brother. So James went through his own "double-minded" period, and he understands the kind of stress that puts on a person and how they can't have a very productive or satisfying life. The wisdom that comes from God, then, has to be pure, so it's going in one direction, toward the fulfillment of God's revealed plan for the redemption of his human family.

The second thing James says about "the wisdom from above" is that it's *peaceable and gentle*. And here's where he has a lot to say about the tongue, because our mouth can sometimes get us into a situation that's anything but peaceable and gentle. "The tongue is a small member," he says, "yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! 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" (3:5-6). I think we've all had experience of this. Husbands, have you ever uttered a careless remark that resulted in your wife not speaking to you for hours, or maybe days? (And *vice versa*.) I tell you, that can be hell — until God's peaceable, gentle wisdom returns and the situation gets ironed out! (Thank the Lord, Shirley Anne and I have learned how to avoid that scenario.) The advice James gave in chapter 1 is always useful: "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (1:19).



"The wisdom from above is
peaceable and gentle . . ."

With the tongue, James says, "we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing" (3:9-10). The family's in the car on the way to church, the children are complaining and scrapping with each other, the mom and dad are bickering about this and that — and then they walk into church with "Praise the Lord! Isn't God good?" (That's a favorite illustration of Joyce Meyer's.) We need to watch the tongue *at all times*, not just when the preacher might be overhearing us. Maybe the place we need to watch it the most is in our own homes.

After all, *our mouth builds the highway we travel on through life*. As Proverbs 18:21 (RSV) states, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits." Negative, critical, complaining speech will build a fruitless and unrewarding pathway through life. Nehemiah told his fellow Judeans, "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10); the apostle Paul, threatened with shipwreck, urged his shipmates to "take heart" (Acts 27:22), to be of good cheer. But negative speech can help to bring about the very thing we dread. Please don't tell me that by complaining about a situation you're only being realistic. If

**"Our mouth builds the highway
we travel on through life."**



we're made in God's image, as Scripture says, then we have the same power to create our world as the Lord had when he spoke this universe into existence: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). The tongue is to be used for creative, and not destructive, purposes. And, as Jesus said, "By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:37 RSV).

Our words can have a powerful effect on our environment. A Japanese scientist discovered that plants would grow better, and be healthier, if kind and encouraging words were spoken over them. That's true of other things as well, including our human bodies. Shirley Anne put the idea into a sonnet:

*The words we speak should all be good and sweet —
an adage from of old, so often said —
in case, in time, their substance we must eat
and not then find them toxic, and be dead!*

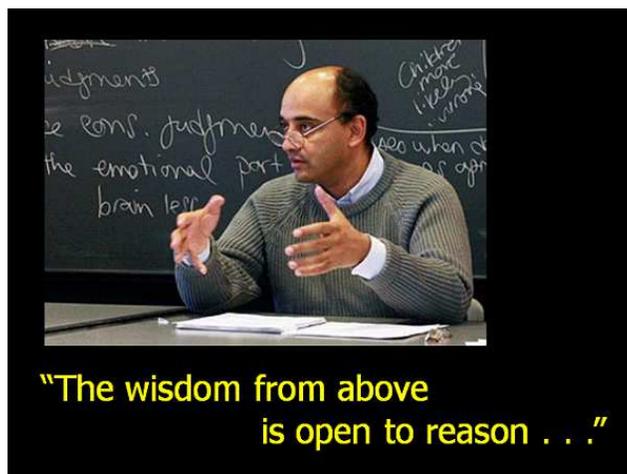
*And now the quantum physicist says, too,
that research shows effects which are quite clear:
how atoms and electrons rendezvous
according to the stimuli they hear.*

*So let us speak according to a plan
for peace, and love, and right, and so align
our universe for benefit of man
and beast, in harmony with God's design.*

*Then mind the words you speak, and be discreet,
for what you say the molecules repeat!*

James goes on to say that the wisdom we need is *open to reason*. Being unshakeable in following the way of the Lord is a good thing, but being stubborn about our own opinions — when they have no real foundation in the Word of God — is another matter. As Proverbs 18:2 states, "A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion." I remember one lady who said to me, "I don't care what the Bible says, that's what I've always believed." God gave us a mind, and the ability to look beyond our unexamined prejudices and reason things out in a logical way. If we look at the state of our nation right now, we can understand the damage that's done when unreasonable and ill-considered policies go unchallenged.

I think that's why James begins this chapter with a warning: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways" (3:1-2). That's a sobering thought for a preacher, and should be a thought-provoking for anyone who presumes to instruct others in how they should be living. After all, teachers and professors ought to be "open to reason" and willing to scope out the truth of a matter before they pass their knowledge along to others. From my own experience as an instructor I can tell you it can be embarrassing to discover, too late, that what you've been passing off as the real truth about something turns out to have been just so much garbage! That



**"The wisdom from above
is open to reason . . ."**

was the apostle Paul's experience when, after Jesus met him, he found that what he'd been teaching before had been just refuse — see Philippians 3:8. (I wonder if he and James ever compared notes about that?)



James adds that the wisdom we receive from God is *full of mercy and good fruits*. He covered that aspect of wisdom in chapter 2, where he wrote that "faith without works is dead." "Show me your faith apart from your works," he said, "and I will show you my faith *by my works*" (2:18). And the works James was referring to were works of mercy, of caring for the needs especially of brothers and sisters in the faith who are in need. One of the remarkable features of the New Testament church, one that got the attention of non-believers, was the way Christians cared for one another, including their physical needs.

We don't usually associate this kind of caring with "wisdom," but James clearly does here. He's only following the wisdom of Proverbs, which states, for example, "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done" (Proverbs 19:17). In the faith of Israel, there was always a concern to care for those in the community who were in need; the Law of Moses stipulates that debts were to be canceled every seven years so that people wouldn't be consigned to perpetual poverty (Deuteronomy 15:1-4). And it adds, "If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need" (Deuteronomy 15:7-8). At the beginning of his preaching of the kingdom of God, Jesus declared, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). To demonstrate the reality of God's rule, he and his disciples maintained a treasury from which they gave aid to the needy. James, in his concern for mercy to those in need, is simply following the path his brother laid out — and so should we.

Finally, James describes the "wisdom from above" as *impartial and sincere*. Again, he covered that thought in chapter 2 when he urged his readers not to show special favor to a wealthy person who came into their assembly by giving them the best seat — while shoving the less privileged worshiper off to the side, out of the way. Within the family of God we're not to make distinctions among ourselves, ranking people based on such factors as economic status, educational level, racial identity, or sex. It was one of the remarkable features of the early church that such divisions didn't count within the Christian community. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28-29).

This kind of impartiality within the kingdom of God stems directly from the teaching of Jesus himself. We only have to turn to the "Sermon on the Mount" for his words:

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:43-48).



Sometimes we regard being “perfect,” like God, as an impossible goal because we think of perfection as moral perfection, being entirely without sin. But when Jesus illustrates the Father’s perfection, he speaks of his *impartiality*— God treats all his creatures with the same benevolent care, whether they deserve it or not. And we’re to imitate him in this respect. It’s easy to see where James is getting his ideas about how we’re to conduct ourselves as worshipers of the Lord: he’s getting them from his own brother’s teaching.

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”
— James 3:17



This, then, is the “wisdom from above” that James urges upon us, a wisdom that comes from the Father himself. We’re to ask for that wisdom *in faith*— that is, sincerely and with the determination to do whatever God calls us to do, for that’s what faith is. We need to ask for that wisdom with what George Pearsons calls “bulldog faith” — faith that doesn’t let go till it gets what it’s after. We need that wisdom, all of us. We need it for our personal lives, we need it as a Christian congregation in this city, we need it as God’s people in a world that often seems to be spiraling into darkness. And *we can have that wisdom*; the Lord has made it available to us through his Word, as his Holy Spirit brings it to life in our minds and hearts.

Text ©2016 Richard C. Leonard
Images from Internet sources