

James 3:13-16

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[0 : 0 0] I'll please open up James chapter 3, because that's where we'll be this morning. You know sometimes when you go to the doctor for a checkup, he says, stick out your tongue.

! Let me have a look at your tongue. You maybe think to yourself, my mouth's fine, I don't know what you're worried about my tongue for. But of course, he looks at the tongue because the tongue reveals something about what's going on at a deeper level. There are things on the tongue that point to something else going on elsewhere. It's an indicator of things that are otherwise hidden. Well, last week James showed us what was on our tongues. And this week he follows what he sees there to the deeper problem, to the deeper issues. The Lord Jesus has told us that out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. So issues with the tongue reveal issues with our hearts. And this morning James shows how our hearts operate according to what we love and what we think is wise. What we love, our desires, and what we think is wise. What is a prudent way to live our lives in the world. Our hearts are captivated by those things. Our hearts lead in those, are led in those directions. And our tongue is simply an indicator of that. But do you notice there, James verse 13 asks, who is wise and understanding among you? He's shown us what was on our tongues and he's going now to the deeper issue. And remember, when James talks about wisdom, he isn't merely talking about knowledge, about things that you might know. He is talking about something practical. He's talking about an approach to life that you take. And what we see this morning is that he distinguishes between two types of wisdom. One, verse 15, that he says is from above, the good stuff that comes from God, or the alternative, verse 16, that is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. James' way of saying it's from the world, the flesh, the tongue is an indicator that reveals which one of these approaches to life that someone takes. In fact, it's not simply the tongue. It's not just our words. It's not just our speech. But James connects this to what he's already said in the letter about how someone's whole life reveals their heart and the kind of wisdom that shapes their life. Do you see that? Verse 13 again, by his good conduct, let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. Verse 16, where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, those are conditions of the heart, jealousy, selfish ambition, there will be a life that flows from that, and the life is one of disorder and every vile practice, James says.

So, this morning, what's happening is we're being invited to go beyond our tongues and look at our lives and see what they tell us about the kind of wisdom we're allowing to shape and form us. The wisdom that is informing the way that we live our lives. And James describes these two approaches to life, and as he does so, I want to suggest that each one of them reveals, I want to suggest what each one of them reveals about how we view God and how we view the world. You see, you can look at the approach to life that you take, and it reveals something about how you view God and how you see the world around you.

And that's what I want to do. So, here's our first point this morning. Let's look at earthly wisdom. This is a mindset. This comes from a mindset that says, God is there, and life is a contest. God is there, and life is a contest. Verses 14 to 16. 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. So, this person's heart is captivated by bitter jealousy, envy, and selfish ambition, which creates in turn disorder, conflict, and what James describes as every vile practice, which I take to be the behavior that we've heard James expose and rebuke in the letter up to now. So, anger and division and political manipulation and cozying up to influential people in the church, hoping that you might benefit, ignoring the needy. That's what he means by every vile practice. This person's heart, and therefore their lives, are like this because while they might think that God is there, they haven't rejected God completely. They think that he is there.

They don't like where he has put them. Of course, this group are scattered, and they're persecuted, and life is difficult, and many of them have lost everything, and they are bitter about that. They've lost confidence in the fact that God is meaningfully engaged in this situation, and he is so for their good.

[5 : 22] So, when you lose sight of God in that way, life becomes a contest. It has to. You have to push ahead.

You have to do better than other people. God helps those who help themselves after all. So, we do what we can to get ahead and to be in control, and they use their tongues, verse 10, to tear other people down. They curse rather than bless. It's also possible in the context here, chapter 3, verse 1, that this group, or people that are like this, are ambitious to lead this scattered church. They would do a much better job in these difficult circumstances than this bunch of jokers. So, they're pushing themselves forward. God is there, but life's a contest.

You think about it, there's a logic to this, and I guess that's why James calls it a kind of wisdom. And, of course, it's certainly seen in the way, in this way in our culture today, isn't it? Don't we celebrate those who go and get it? You deserve the best. Make it happen. No one's going to hand it to you. You've got to tough it up and get on and make life for yourself. And when things get tough, we're told, well, you've got to go and fight for what you want. But look at what that does to your character. Look what that approach to life does to your character. Jealousy, envy, it's such a toxic thing. When you see others succeed, when they get the promotion or the pay rise or the thing that you want, and that thing that you want, it could actually be anything. When that happens, it eats you up.

You can't enjoy their success. Of course you can't. You can't even think of their name without your body heating up with anger. You actually hate them, and you want them to suffer.

Look at what that does to you internally. There are people around you who, when you see them, your heart is so taken up with envy that they steal your joy. There's an old story about two men.

[7 : 38] One was envious. The other was covetous. And they're both granted a wish with the proviso that the one who chose first would get exactly what he asked for, while the other man would get twice what the first man had asked for himself. The envious man was told to choose first. Well, that's going to cause him great stress, isn't it? Because he wants to ask for something great for himself, but he realizes that this would lead to the other man getting more. He thought for a while, and he asked to have one of his eyes poked out. That's exactly what envy does to us. We would rather suffer than have someone else thrive.

This is why selfish ambition comes up here as well. We push ourselves forward in order to beat others, in order to win. We've got to win all the time. Well, if that's the way you live your life, inevitably it leads to disorder, conflict with others. As long as those kinds of people don't get what they want or think they deserve, there is a nastiness that grows. That competitive spirit will do anything to get ahead. So they treat people badly, especially those that they particularly envy. Jealousy, envy expresses itself in a host of really unpleasant ways. A drivenness to succeed, boasting when you're winning, criticizing when you're not winning, complete misery when things don't go well, joy at others' failure, and just a profound sadness when things don't go exactly as you want them to. That sadness can sometimes work its way out in anger. We see it in our culture all the time now. When other people don't have what you want, we insist that the state should do something to give us what they have so that we can have what they have.

When you see life as a contest or like a zero-sum game, that is, for someone else to have more inevitably means less for you, you can't but be jealous.

And that is why James identifies the source as earthly, unspiritual, demonic. James is saying here again in his characteristic direct style, he's saying, if your heart is captivated by envy in this way, the roots of that come straight from the demons of hell.

[10 : 23] Because the reason for this approach is born out of a failure to see God as he really is. It adopts an approach to life that fails to grasp how God really treats us.

Of course, there is a better way, isn't there? Earthly wisdom, God is there, life is a contest. A much better way, secondly, is that we live according to heavenly wisdom, which sees God is good and life is gift.

God is good, life is gift. Look at verse 17, Describing this wisdom, it's a beautiful picture, isn't it? Qualities that we hear them read out and we think, I just wish there was more of that in my heart. But when we discover that this wisdom is from above, it's very obvious that it's then not something

we can work up ourselves.

We can try and create in our own strength. It is given by God. It is another one of the good and perfect gifts that come down to us. Chapter 1, verse 17, from the Father of lights.

[11 : 49] Every good gift comes to us from His hand. And we receive wisdom by acknowledging that God is God. And we humble ourselves to ask for it.

This beautiful list of qualities in verse 17 mark the life of the wise person because fundamentally they know that this is God's world and they trust their lives to Him in faith.

They see that they don't have any claim on God. He can do what He wants. That is completely up to Him. We have no claim on Him. We don't, He doesn't owe us anything.

We can't twist His arm up His back to get things from Him. These people don't assert any sense of rights. Rather, they're grateful. People who live according to heavenly wisdom are grateful that we get to be here.

We get to play in the game of life. Of the billions of people who could have been born but weren't, we get to go on the roller coaster.

[12 : 53] We get to go up and we get to go down. We get to scream in terror and we get to cheer with delight. We get to play. Life is a gift.

When you know that God is good and He gives it all as gift, your life displays this good conduct.

Verse 13. What this looks like then is fleshed out.

Verse 17. The wisdom from above is first pure. Pure. Heavenly wisdom creates a moral purity in our lives. Those who have been cleansed by Christ's blood have received His purity and live lives of purity as a result.

I think that James is more interested here in the devotional purity that flows from heavenly wisdom.

Remember, this is one of the big targets in the letter, the double-mindedness in these Christians.

And he's reminding them that heavenly wisdom is single-minded about the things of God. We don't bow the knee to God and then bow the knee to other things as well.

[13 : 59] We don't gather today and worship God and then leave and give ourselves to the invented gods all around us. We don't come to church and lift our voices to the living, one true and living God and then leave here Monday morning, get back into it with the gods of status and cultural acceptance and the gods that allow you to be yourself and free yourself and express yourself.

No, our religion, our devotion, our worship is pure. And why wouldn't it be? If God is good and life is gift, there's no need to look anywhere else for the good life.

Why would we give ourselves to those other things hoping that they will deliver what the seedier corners of our heart want when in actual fact, we're giving ourselves to the God who is good and who gives us all that we have from His hand as a gift.

Peaceable. Peaceable. When you've received peace with Christ as a gift, again, not because you've earned it, you have all the resources that you need to live out the peace of Christ towards others.

If you believe that God is good and that He holds you in His hands, if you believe that He is trustworthy, you don't need to make sure that everything goes your way. You don't need to be in the contest to get ahead of that other person.

[15 : 26] The thing that causes so much of our conflict is a need to have things our way and to be better than other people. A need to prove yourself as the winner. Being peaceable doesn't mean that you don't stand up for what is right.

Caring for the weak in society will involve a fight. Pursuing justice where clear wrongs have been committed the same. We get our hands dirty and we go into battle, as it were, in those cases.

But at a personal level, heavenly wisdom releases you from the things that cause conflict. To verse 18, be a peacemaker. Make peace with others where possible. Remember, again, what Jesus taught us.

Remember the words that James is simply drawing his hearer's attention back to. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

It is peacemakers, verse 18, that sow in peace and reap a harvest of righteousness. I'll say more on that in a minute. Amen. Peaceable. This then also works out in gentleness or verse 13, meekness.

[16 : 37] When you know the Lord Jesus, the one who is gentle and lowly of heart and that he has met you in your sin and that he has redeemed you from that sin. And by the way, you know that he doesn't just do this once.

The Lord Jesus doesn't just meet you in your sin once. We can think that he was gentle and gracious to us when we first came to Christ. We can talk about it in the past and say, yes, the Lord was merciful to me.

I was a sinner running away from him. I was living my life on my terms and he met me in my sin and he saved me. He was gracious to me. He forgave my sin.

But we think now, when we sin, Jesus shakes his head. Up in heaven, he's shaking his head and he's kind of sucking his teeth. Not again. He's in heaven taking deep breaths.

I think lots of us think about the Lord Jesus like that. We think that, we think that, yes, he saved us by his grace that first time, but he's kind of really fed up with us now.

[17 : 41] And because he keeps his promise, that promise that he made that he would never leave us or forsake us, he's keeping his word through gritted teeth, if not at all. The Lord Jesus meets our repentance with gentleness and grace every single time.

When that reality hits your heart, when the magnitude of this gift actually lands with you, when you feel it in the depths of who you are, you treat others the same way.

You can't but be kind and make allowances for people. You make allowances for their weaknesses, for their failings, for their stupidity. You say, oh, that doesn't sound very nice.

That's not very kind. No, let's be honest. People can do stupid things. Being kind isn't about pretending that stupidity isn't stupid. But it means that you overlook it.

It means that you forgive it. It means that you move on without resentment. You are gentle rather than harsh. Gentleness.

[18 : 54] Open to reason is next in there. Heavenly wisdom is seen in the person who is open to reason. They're teachable. Literally, it is they are persuadable.

The person who will admit it when they're wrong. They know that they're not God and so they can change their mind. They can admit fault. They can say sorry.

They can be okay when they're not right. In their marriage, with their children, in church life, in their relationships. I'm sorry. I was wrong.

Oh, I hadn't seen that before. I didn't understand that. You're right. Let me ask you. How hard do you find it to change your mind?

Or to have your mind changed by someone else? How hard do you find this as a measure of how heavenly wise you are? If God is good and life is gift, you recognize that he puts other people in the world to teach you and to correct you and even give you more wisdom than you have today.

[20 : 08] An openness to your own finitude and your own weakness is essential if you're going to discover or grow in the wisdom that God gives because it requires you being open to having your mind changed about him and how he wants you to live.

Can God's word correct you? I ask you, even those of you who have been Christians for a long time, will you let the Bible change how you think and act?

Persuadable and then full of mercy and good fruit. Those who have received mercy are merciful to others. A good way to think of this quality is that mercy is compassion in action.

Compassion in action. It sees a need, it feels sympathy or pity and it acts on it. Mercy moves towards those in need like widows and orphans, 127. Those who have no protection under law, those who suffer and no one seems to care.

Heavenly wisdom is seen when you move towards people like that. God is good. And in doing so then, it expresses the impartiality that James mentions next.

[21 : 20] Wisdom from heaven is consistent in the way that it treats people. Rich and poor, just the same, completely impartial because heavenly wisdom recognizes that we're all equal at the foot of the cross. In the life of the church, we are all equal at the foot of the cross and that is why we can be impartial.

God is good. Life is gift. It's not a contest. And then finally, James says, wisdom from above is sincere.

It's genuine. What you see is what you get. You're the same person behind closed doors as when you're with others. You're the same person online as you are in the real world.

Your social media reflects who you really are and shows what you actually look like. Sincere.

Heavenly wisdom has no hint of hypocrisy.

It demands the sincerity and the consistency of Christ. And in the context of this letter, it is the antidote to the problems that James has been addressing. Who is really wise and understanding

among you?

[22 : 30] He's asking this group and he's saying, I've looked at your tongue. These are the problems I see underlying your tongue and I've seen it in your behavior. And what you need is heavenly wisdom.

When you boil it down, the wisdom from above looks like, chapter 1, verse 19, a bridled tongue. It looks like care for the poor and needy brothers and sisters who are suffering, 127.

It looks like refusing to show partiality, hoping that you will benefit in some way, 2, 1 to 7. It is seen in courageous and costly decisions for the sake of obedience to God, 2, 24.

And it sounds like using your words to bless and encourage and build up and not curse even when things are tough, 3, verse 10.

Here's the thing. James closes out this chapter with a reference to sowing and to harvest. Do you see that, verse 18? And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

[23 : 40] And he's saying, if you sow into the ground the sort of life that he describes here as marked by heavenly wisdom, you can look forward to a harvest of righteousness.

Do you know that your life could really count for something? You have the ability to change things for the better, to leave this place in a better state than you found it, to live a life that makes a difference.

Is this on YouTube? I could get sponsors for this kind of message. This kind of message sells. You know that your life could really count for something. Click here. But it's true.

Your life can leave a legacy for good in the world. That's what James is saying. That surprises us. We know that there are a few special people out there in the world, don't we?

Like that chap Nicholas Winton, the subject of the recent Anthony Hopkins film, One Life. A remarkable man who rescued more than 600 children from the Nazis.

[24 : 48] We know that there are a few of those out there. amazing people who do amazing things and leave a legacy. But we ask ourselves, is that possible for ordinary folk, just regular people like you and me?

Can I do that? Look at verse 18. James talks about the life that produces a harvest of righteousness. That is a life that leaves behind a legacy of goodness and truth and beauty.

A life that when it's effected or gathered up has made a difference to the people around whom and the place in which it was lived. But for a harvest to be reaped, there first needs to be a sowing.

Something needs to be planted if there's going to be fruit. So, we sow in peace, James says, this life of heavenly wisdom.

And if we do that, we can look forward to the harvest. harvest. And of course, we do this in hope because, like any harvest, the bit at the beginning and the middle doesn't often look like very much.

[26 : 00] while life marked by this wisdom and these qualities doesn't always appear to have much impact on the world around you, James assures us here that while for a long time there might not be much to see, one day then something sprouts and then grows and then comes the harvest.

And of course, this is all resting on the promise of Jesus that He will make all things right. So, we must live by faith. Wait patiently while there's little or nothing to see.

The influence of our lives marked by heavenly wisdom on those around us and the place that we live. But we rely on the Spirit to work rather than take matters into our own hands. Rather than to decide on a different way of viewing God and viewing how we get on in life and we look forward to the day when our peacemaking will vindicate us as sons and daughters of God.

A day when our meekness will bring in our inheritance. A day when our mercy will return mercy to us. And when our daily fight for purity of heart will open the door for us to see God.

So, this morning I want to encourage you to sow the life of heavenly wisdom wherever the Lord has placed you. And the first step in that is making sure that you think rightly about God so you see Him as a loving Father.

[27 : 34] He is good. He is a loving Father who has saved you from your sin and reconciled you to Himself and who looks on you chapter 1 verse 18 as His first and His best. You're His first fruits.

And you see Him as a generous Father. A generous Father who gives you everything you have. All of life is gift. And He is working the circumstances of your life even the hard bits for good.

When you see God this way He is good and He is generous. It will change how you live because it will change your heart. And you'll choose the wisdom from above that shapes a beautiful life.

So go to God who is loving and generous. Yoke yourself to Jesus whose life gave us the example to follow. And the harvest will follow. Let's pray together.