

## Worldly-Wise or Word-Wise

*13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.*

*14 But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. 16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.*

*17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. 18 Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (Jam 3:13-18)*

Have you ever watched a bird stuck inside a room, trying to get out through a closed window? The bird will fly again and again into that pane of glass, bouncing off it, and then trying again. You can't help feeling sorry for the creature, because you know that that poor bird is doing something that makes sense from the perspective of a bird's brain. The bird can see the sky, the trees, the outside world straight ahead, and in a bird's world, when something is visible, and straight ahead, you fly towards it. But then each time you do that, you bounce against something. But then you look, and you can see the sky and the trees and the outside world, nothing is in front of you, so you try again. And the same thing happens. You will watch birds do this for hours on end, exhausting themselves sometimes to death because what they are doing makes sense to them.

If we were to stretch the word a little, we could say that the bird is using the wisdom it has. It is making sense of the world with what knowledge it has. It so happens that it has no understanding of glass, so when it encounters glass, it will repeat a pointless and futile action again and again. Its wisdom will injure or even kill it, because its wisdom cannot deal with the world that it.

I wonder if human beings sometimes seem like those birds to heavenly observers. Because from Heaven's perspective, you watch human beings doing actions that make sense to them. They know what they want to achieve, they see the goal ahead of them. But then they do it and they slam into the wall of conflict, and fights, and strife, and pain with others. A bit bewildered, they shake it off, and re-double their efforts, going at it again. But once again, they bang into this wall of emotional pain, problems, divisiveness, ugliness. And since they know what they want to do, they conclude it must be someone else's fault, because they know what they want, and it makes sense, and it is a good idea, and they deserve it, so they go again.

Over the years, this kind of wisdom, this kind of 'life-skill', this kind of approach to relationships and problem solving steadily gets worse. The relationships erode and erode into divorce, church splits, lawsuits, betrayals in business, children not speaking to parents. All the while, people become more entrenched and more committed to their positions, and more right in their own eyes. This is the self-destructive bent of human beings. We follow a path that makes sense to us, is wise in our eyes, though it destroys people around us. And because we believe it is wise, we will keep flying into that window.

The problem we have is the same problem the birds have. Our wisdom is transparent to us. It makes perfect sense to us. We can only see where we want to go, we can't see this barrier of selfishness that we will keep banging into.

God has a remedy for this. God is in the position we are in when we watch those birds. We say to those birds, if only you understood what glass is. God says, if only you understood that your wisdom is self-destructive wisdom. If only you understood that what transparently makes sense to you is still wrong. There is worldly-wisdom, which destroys you and others, and there is Word-Wisdom, which brings the sweetness of Christlike relationships.

Here in James 3, God is going to show you what has become invisible to you. He is going to show you the glass. He is going to show us how to test whether our wisdom, our way of making life work, our life-skill is God's. Once we apply that test, for the first time, we may see what we are flying into, why we keep repeating the pain, the strife, the ugliness.

As we have seen before, James tests the internal with the external. He tests what is in the heart by what is in the life. So he will give us the taste-test, and then he will give us the root and fruit of the world's wisdom, and the root and fruit of the Word's wisdom, God's wisdom.

## **I. The Taste-Test for Wisdom**

*13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.*

James begins with the question – who is wise and knowledgeable or skilled or intelligent among you? Now, perhaps few will rush up and loudly boast that they are wise. But almost everyone believes he or she is wise. How do I know? Every one of us applies what we believe is the best way to make life work. Every one of us has a kind of wisdom. Each of us very much believes that the way we are approaching marriage, parenting, working, finances, relationships is the best way. If there was a better way, we would do that. But we apply in real life what we think is the best way of doing things.

Now James says, if you want to know what kind of wisdom is in your heart, you show it by conduct. That's the taste-test for what wisdom is in your heart.

***Jam 2:18*** But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

In other words, someone says, what I am doing is a good and wise course of action. James says, it doesn't matter what you say your motives are. It doesn't matter what you say your reasons are for doing what you are doing. It doesn't matter what you claim to be the great and noble quest you are on. What matters is what you actually do.

See the problem is this, there are different kinds of wisdom. But whichever kind you choose, it makes perfect sense to you from where you are sitting. It is like that transparent pane of glass to the bird. When it makes sense to you, it makes sense! The problem we face is the problem James keeps dealing with in this book: self-righteousness and the self-deception that goes with it. We are right in our own eyes. We justify our actions.

But James says, stop looking through the glass at where you want to go. Look at the action of crashing into the glass and bouncing off. Look at the conduct. Do the taste-test of actions to get the flavour of what is really in your heart.

Wisdom worth the name, what God calls wisdom will be demonstrated by good conduct in meekness. Humility will surround the beauty of the actions that a wise person does.

***Ecc 8:1*** Who is like a wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, And the sternness of his face is changed.

That's Word wisdom. Whichever kind of wisdom is controlling you will manifest in your actions. So having established the test for wisdom as our actions, now James is going to give us the two

kinds of wisdom, and where they come from. Their root and their fruit – their source, and their course.

## **II. The Root and Fruit of Worldly-Wisdom**

*14 But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. 16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.*

Here's the first conduct test. If in your inner person – your thoughts, your attitudes, your emotions, your feelings, you have bitter envy and self-seeking, then do not pretend you have God's wisdom, and that what you are doing is the right thing to do.

Bitter envy is the idea of extremely zealous jealousy. This is a person energetically, emphatically pursuing his own way. He wants to get his own way with the jealousy of a god that will allow no rivals. He wants to get his way at all costs. And he does so in a sharp, piercing, cutting way. Cross him, and you will feel the temperature chill, the flavour of conversation will sour, the countenance will harden.

Not only bitter envy, but self-seeking. This is ambition to please self. This is the prosecution of my goals, my priorities, my desires over everyone else's. I have the right to be happy, even if it comes at the cost of the happiness of others. The language of this heart is "I deserve, I ought to have, I should be treated, I expect, I demand, Is it too much to ask that, All I expect is a little"

You are zealous for yourself, jealous for your own way, eager to see yourself be right, served, honoured, vindicated.

To claim you are doing what is right, what is good, what is wise, what is best, when what is in your heart is selfishness is a false boast, and ultimately a lie. You are not doing what is wise and best, you are simply pleasing yourself and claiming it is for God's glory. You are going on a selfish spending spree, and charging it to the account of God's glory, and God's wisdom – but what you are buying is pure selfishness. Yes, you think it is right, but that doesn't change the fact that it is a boast and a lie.

This kind of wisdom, James says, is not God's wisdom. Verse 15 – it doesn't come from above (where every good and perfect gift comes from). Instead, James gives us three words to describe this wisdom, each one descending lower in terms of the source.

This wisdom is firstly earthly. It is this-worldly. It comes from the way of life that lives for the here and now, with no thought of Heaven and eternal rewards.

This wisdom is secondly sensual. It is soulish, unspiritual, rooted in a service of the physical body, and the physical world, and the ambitions of the natural man whose affections are set on this earth. It lives for this life, it lives for what mortal man can have

This wisdom is thirdly demonic. It lives independently of God, in defiance of His lordship, without referring anything to God's Word, without submitting completely to His laws and statutes, loving what God hates, and hating what He loves.

But no mistake, it seems wise, or else millions of people would not follow it. It makes sense. It seems compelling to you. It seems it will make life work. It seems pleasurable, it seems useful. If I think it is wise, then surely it is. How could my wisdom be demonic wisdom? If it seems right to me, it is.

*Proverbs 12:15 The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But he who heeds counsel is wise. (Pro 12:15)*  
*Proverbs 16:25 There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.*

*Proverbs 21:2 Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the hearts. (Pro 21:2)*

Why does the Bible compare us to sheep? Because sheep follow a path that can destroy them, and will stay on that path until it does. We need outside guidance. We need intervention. We need correction.

So how do we get off this path? How do we know that the root of the wisdom in our hearts is demonic? James says – remember the taste-test. Look at the conduct.

*16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.*

*Because* (James is giving us the reason we know that this wisdom is from Satan) where that extreme jealousy for self and that selfish ambition from verse 14 exist: this is what you will find: confusion and every evil thing. Worldly-wisdom produces this kind of conduct: confusion, which refers to disorder, unruliness, unrest, tumults. Where worldly wisdom is the root, the fruit will be the bitter taste of conflict, disunity, ungodly debates.

In fact, alongside the misery of disordered relationships will then come every evil thing. Like flies drawn to rot, so this demonic chaos will soon attract malice, slander, gossip, rivalries, lies, deceit, revenge, insults, manipulation. Sin will beget sin, and soon the shopping list of evil injuries done to one another will be so long you'd run out of space to keep track of it. And let me say that demons delight in the chaos, the disorder that their wisdom brings to life.

If anyone in the Bible illustrates this, it is King Saul. Here was a man who began his ministry saying he was so unqualified, and appearing so humble, but very soon, he is gripped by profound rivalry and selfish ambition as David is praised more than he. And so begins an ever worsening obsession with being the unrivalled king, expelling David, pursuing David, slandering David, hiring hitmen to murder David, until eventually he is consulting a witch to find out what to do next. As we read the story we see Saul like that bird, we see his selfish ambition. But the deceitfulness of sin is that Saul probably only saw the importance of an unrivalled throne of Israel, the need for a unified Israel.

This is the taste in your mouth when the root of the wisdom is evil: a trail of broken relationships, church hopping as a result of strife, a marriage held together for sheer convenience, or multiple divorces, church discipline and excommunication, steady alienation of family members, breakdown in communication between parent and child, continual conflicts with managers or subordinates at work. ***Gal 5:15 But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!***

But this is what self-deception does: if I am acting in a sinful way, it's because of the other person. If there is disorder, it is the fault of the other person. I'm trying to do the right thing! I'm doing what's best for us! I'm only serving God!

***Jam 4:1 Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?***

Paul warns Timothy that if a man refuses to submit or agree with the doctrine of submission “*he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions,*” ***1Ti 6:4***

I have never met a contentious man or a contentious woman recognise that about themselves until someone forced them to really taste the fruit of their lives. It's always transparent glass – always other people.

If that sounds like our lives, like our marriages, our church relationships, our work relationships, our family, God wants us to stop and see the glass pane of selfish ambition and deep devotion to self that is driving us. We need to stop seeing through and out at our supposed ideals and see that the fruit has its root in something earthly, sensual and demonic.

But now James wants to give us the opposite. He wants to give us the real and true wisdom. He will show us what God's wisdom, what Word-wisdom looks like

### **III. The Root and Fruit of Word-Wisdom**

*17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. 18 Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

Wisdom from above. James told us in chapter 1 that every good and every perfect gift comes from above. Wisdom which has its root in God is going to produce very different fruit. So different is this fruit that James gives us its seven different flavours, as it were. Seven is often the number of perfection in the Bible, like the sevenfold spirit of Messiah in Isaiah 11. This is wisdom that comes from above, so it is perfect, as perfect as the Holy Spirit of wisdom, as perfect as Christ, the fulness of wisdom, as perfect as the Father, God alone wise.

When Scripture gives us lists like this, we should really take note. Like Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, like the description of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, this is a verse begging to be memorised. It has the beauty of the seven colours of the rainbow, the completeness of the seven notes of the diatonic scale, the wholeness of the seven day week, here is the wisdom we want for our lives.

Wisdom from above is first pure. It is holy and sinless. No selfishness or pride taints it, but it is rooted in the first and second commandments – loving God first, and loving neighbour second. Wisdom is not polluted with selfish agendas. We saw this in Jesus, when He said, “*for I always do those things that please Him.*” (Joh 8:29)” In Gethsemane, when He was most severely tested to strike out for selfish ambition, He said, “Nevertheless, not My Will, but thine, be done.” When we have Christ's wisdom we are controlled by love for God and love for neighbour.

Wisdom from above is secondly, peaceful, or peaceable. This wisdom longs for peace. Not peace at all costs, mind you, but order – a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness. It's the opposite of what Proverbs calls the contentious man or woman.

*Proverbs 26:21 As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, So is a contentious man to kindle strife.*

The contentious man wants a fight, he wants a debate, a quarrel, a lawsuit. Perhaps he feels most alive and most vigorous when fighting, but his motto in life is that of Goliath, “Give me a man that we may fight together.”

On the other hand, it was said of Jesus, “*He will not quarrel nor cry out, Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets.* (Mat 12:19)” He preached in the Sermon on the Mount “*Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.* (Mat 5:9)”

Jesus knew who to oppose and when, who to argue with and when, but the last thing that could have been said about him was that he was abrasive, aggressive, pugnacious, a brawler, a bully, a bulldog always in attack mode. When we have our root in Christ's wisdom, the fruit is bringing peace wherever we go, as much as it lies in you. **Rom 12:18** *If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*

The third colour in this rainbow, the third note in this octave is that of gentleness. This word in the original carries not merely the idea of a tenderness in voice and action, but of being fair-minded and moderate. You are the kind of person who seems approachable, who people expect to have listen to them and deal with them gently, kindly, fairly, reasonably.

**2Ti 2:24** *And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient,*

Think of the women who had lived in sin, but fell at Jesus feet, washing His feet with tears and wiping them with their hair. Why didn't they do that with any of the Pharisees? Think of the children who were trying to get to Jesus while the disciples were trying to keep them away. Why didn't the children run towards the Sadducees and the rabbinic scholars. Jesus exuded gentle approachableness, a kindness that said, you can come to me. That was His invitation, wasn't it? “ 28 *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Mat 11:28-30)*

When the tap root of your soul is drinking from the Word, and not the world, people know that with you they will have a good-listener, a fair-minded, tolerant and kind-hearted person.

Pure. Peaceable. Gentle.

The fourth flavour of this fruit is a word found only here in the New Testament, translated willing to yield. This is a word which means the attitude of someone who wishes to be persuaded by truth, and who is willing to yield if he finds he has been wrong, or has not seen the whole truth, or finds that his opponent has more knowledge, better reason, clearer understanding. He is persuadable, open to reason, willing to give in. He possesses the ability to submit to truth. The opposite of this is being stubborn to the end, intractable, incorrigible. The person who, long after he has been proved wrong, doggedly hangs on to the argument, fighting to have the last word, the last email reply. For him, it is more important to not allow the person to win, than for anyone to actually be right or wrong. But Christlike wisdom is happy to yield to truth, to wisdom, and sometimes simply to other's preferences, other people's way of doing it, to what will serve others, smooth things over.

Our Lord Jesus seemingly had not wanted to display his power at the wedding in Cana, but at the request of His mother, He was persuaded, He yielded. When the Syro-Phoenecian woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter, Jesus told her that His mission at the time was to Israel, not Gentiles, that you do not feed the pets with the food needed for the children. And when she added to His illustration, saying , “yes Lord, but sometimes, crumbs fall of the children's table, and the dogs eat it, so here I am, waiting for a spilled crumb.” Jesus was persuaded, willing to give in to her request.”

See, the person who cannot tell the difference between being willing to yield, and being weak-willed or cowardly or man-pleasing, doesn't yet have this wisdom. Jesus was willing to yield, but He was the strongest character to ever cross the face of this Earth.

Here's the fifth note in this octave of wisdom: full of mercy and good fruits. The wisdom from above has deep compassion, sympathy and mercy on the people it deals with. It brings out the good fruits of mercy. It does not try to savage its opponents with piercing words, freeze them with coldness, devastate them with a verbal barrage, intimidate with threats and loud voices. It's goal is not victory. It's goal is mercy = help for the other person. When Jesus saw the crowds, He was moved with compassion. When Jesus saw Matthew or Zacchaeus the tax collector, or Nicodemus the curious Pharisee, or Joseph of Arimathea the secret disciple, or an adulterous woman thrown at His feet, He reached out to help. I suggest that even in His sharp dialogues with the Pharisees, he was mercifully showing the people in Israel closest to Hell how wrong they were. The cruelest things you can do to someone else is to completely dismiss him or her. Jesus took His opponents

seriously, loved their persons, and warned them. Do people know that when they come to you, you will be seeking their good? In your disagreements, do you feel sympathy for your opponent, and desire his or her wellbeing more than winning the argument?

Here's the sixth colour in this rainbow of wisdom: without partiality. Wisdom from above is not fickle and man-pleasing, jumping from one thing to another to gain advantage. Wisdom from below is always partial towards one person – Self. Wisdom from above is impartial, giving the other person the same treatment as self, not unfairly taking your own side again and again. You have to realise how stratified and partial Jewish society of the first century was, partial towards men, partial against women and children, partial towards the rich, partial against the poor, partial towards Jews, partial against Gentiles. And Jesus comes and teaches everyone, receives women, children, the poor, the wealthy, Pharisees and Roman centurions. Not because they are of any advantage to Him. And even when debating with Pharisees, He was not partial to Himself. He said, “ 30 *"I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me. 31 "If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true. 32 "There is another who bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which He witnesses of Me is true.(Joh 5:30-32)* When the Holy Spirit of wisdom fills us, we are impartial, willing to even rule against ourselves if necessary, submitting it all to God's Word.

The last layer of this perfect wisdom is without hypocrisy. True wisdom is sincere. It is not double-minded, phoney, or faking it so as to get something else. It says what it means and means what it says. You remember the origin of the word *sincere*? It's from the Latin *sine cera*, which means without wax. In classical times, unscrupulous merchants would sometimes cover up the cracks in the clay pottery they sold with wax, which could then be coated and covered up with some surface clay. But in the heat of the Mediterranean, that wax would melt, and the vessel would leak. So, some merchants made the guarantee on their vessels – *sine cera* – without wax. The sincere person is without hidden agendas, without the cracks of deep hidden moral sin, without the cracks of a double-life, nicely covered up with a respectable exterior and a happy church-face. Jesus was sincere. And they sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, *"Teacher, we know that You are truthful and teach the way of God in truth, and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any. (Mat 22:16)* Is your wisdom sourced in the integrity of a wholehearted, transparent devotion to God?

Imagine this rainbow appearing in your relationships: pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. So how do we get this wonderful wisdom?

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

Back in verse 13 he told us that the good works of wisdom are done in humility. Here he tells us the good works, the fruit of righteousness are sown in peace by peacemakers. Here is the secret of how you get this perfect wisdom in your life. Humility and peacemaking.

A humble person says, not my wisdom. Not my glory. Not whether or not I win, or get my way, or please myself, but what will glorify God, edify my neighbour and satisfy my yielded heart. I want His ways, not my own. In my marriage, in my family, in my church, in my family, in my townhouse complex, in my neighbourhood, in my community – Hallowed by God's name, not mine. May His kingdom come, not mine. May His will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven, not may my will be done on Earth by heaven. I repent of pride. I repent of Satan's call to be wise in my own eyes, to pursue selfish ambition.

And then the second thing I do is that I actively seek peace. I desire to get all my relationships into a

place of peace. I contend only if I have to. I don't relish conflict. I long for the order and beauty of Spirit-filled relationships. I sometimes have to embrace some disagreement or hard conversations, or firm defence to get there, but that's where I want to be, not in a place of tumultuous war all the time.

James says, if the fruit is disorder, non-stop conflict and all the accompanying evil, then the root was not godliness, but earthly, sensual, devilish wisdom which is all about getting my own way. And if we say that the conflict and misery and the contention is the other person's fault, and it's because of people not understanding what I'm trying to do, then we are that bird on the window. We will keep slamming into the glass of our selfishness hitting other's selfishness, until we agree with God that evil fruit means an evil root.

You want the sweet fruit of purity, peace, gentleness, flexibility, sympathy, fairness and sincerity? Humble yourself to seek God's glory in your situation and your neighbour's good. Be filled with this Word of Christ, and by His Spirit. Actively seek peace using these, however long it takes to get there. And suddenly the window will open, and you'll breathe the free air of God's wisdom in your relationships.