Session 7: James 3:13–18

OPEN

What was your best subject in school? Why did you excel in this?

What was your worst subject? How bad was it?

Thankfully (for most of us), knowledge is not the same as wisdom. We'll be learning more about wisdom today from the book of James.

READ

Read James 3:13–18.

Leader: *Read it aloud yourself, or ask someone you know who is a confident reader. Ask the others to listen carefully and/or follow along.*

WATCH

Show Session 7: *James 3:13–18* (8 minutes).

DISCUSS

Verse 13 starts off with a question, so let's answer it. Who is the wisest person you know, or have known?

Why do you say that? How did they show their wisdom?

We started off today by talking about our best subjects in school. **Were these wise people in your life also the smartest people you've known? Or is wisdom something different from intelligence?**

What do verses 13–15 tell us about what wisdom is and isn't?

In the video Francis described it this way,

> Wisdom is not about education...wisdom is about action. It's about character. James says if you have wisdom from above... then [you're] going to be pure. There's going to be a holiness about your life.

Leader: *If you have a whiteboard available, you might create two columns—"True Wisdom" and "False Wisdom." You can add to it as the discussion continues.*

Verse 13 talks about a "good conduct"? How would you define that? What kind of "good conduct" does a wise person exhibit?

Why is meekness part of true wisdom?

Have you known people who thought they were wise but really weren't? Were they meek? Did they show humility?

Francis pointed to this tendency in many of us.

> We live in a time where everyone wants to give advice. They want to tweet, they want to show of their wisdom, but it's interesting the Bible says the person who truly has wisdom is going to have a meekness about himself or about herself. It's not arrogance. It's gentleness.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about wisdom in the following Bible passages.
Psalm 90:12; Proverbs 9:10–12; Ecclesiastes 1:17–18; Jeremiah 9:23–24; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31.

What do these verses teach us about what wisdom is and isn't?

Do they confirm what James is saying, or provide a different perspective?

How does "numbering our days" (Psalm 90) bring wisdom?

How does wisdom bring sorrow (Ecclesiastes)?

In these passages, what is the relationship between wisdom and boasting?

The Bible has a great amount of teaching about wisdom. These are just a few of the passages we could consult. One regular theme is that true wisdom doesn't crow about itself. The wise person recognizes his or her own limitations and does not boast. Wisdom is a sober thing, with understanding of the sorrows of life as well as the joys. The wise person knows how short life is and has a healthy fear of the Lord.

Now we need to use our imaginations.

Why would James write these verses? What problem existed in his world that made him say this?

We might assume that there were people who claimed to be wise, but they harbored "bitter jealousy and selfish

ambition." They were boastful. Perhaps these were the same teachers who had trouble controlling their tongues (see James 3:1–12). Did this mean they were bad-mouthing those who disagreed with them?

What were they disagreeing about? Well, we know that there were substantial disagreements in the early church, mostly about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Would Gentiles be accepted in the church? Would they be forced to keep the Jewish law? Could Jews and Gentiles worship together? There were also questions about who Jesus was—human or divine. And there were various cults afflicting the church, some imposing new rules and some involving the worship of angels.

We know most of this from the apostle Paul. In fact, in his letters to the Corinthians, he describes some people who apparently called themselves "super-apostles." These people were proud and boastful, ambitious, envious of Paul, and they criticized him (see 2 Corinthians 10–11; also Colossians 2:20–23).

Was James writing about the same people? Maybe not, but it was at least the same sort of situation.

Leader: *Ask someone to read Matthew 7:15–20.*

That's what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. **How does it compare to what James says here in James 3?**

When people set themselves up as sages or prophets, you need to look at their lives. **What "fruit" are they bearing? Do their lives confirm the truth of what they're saying?**

In James 3:16–17 we see descriptions of the "fruits" of true wisdom and false wisdom. **What's the difference? How can we tell them apart?**

What does it mean for wisdom to be "pure"? How can wisdom be "open to reason"?

PEEK AT THE GREEK

The word the ESV translates as “open to reason” is from the Greek, *eupeithes*. This word occurs only once in the New Testament. The literal translation means “easily persuaded,” but we shouldn’t read this as being a push-over or gulliable. Instead, *eupeithes* describes a person who is willing to listen to others and willing to defer to the wishes or desires of others. It is a disposition opposite of the “selfish ambition” (*eritheia*) in verse 16.

GO DEEPER

Learn more about the qualities of true wisdom by comparing with the Beatitudes.
See Matthew 5:3–10.

Throughout the book of James there are many similarities to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

What qualities of true wisdom listed in James 3:17 are similar to the qualities of “blessed” people in Matthew 5:3–10?

Why do you think there are such similarities?

What do you think verse 18 means?

It might help, once again, to think about the people James is writing to, and those he is writing about. It seems that false teachers were causing division, saying hurtful things, claiming to be wise, but consumed by envy and ambition. Were they doing these things in the name of righteousness? That is, were they trying to promote some standard of righteousness by attacking everyone who didn't play by their rules?

If so, then James might be telling them, "The only way to achieve righteousness is by making peace. If you really want to help people be more righteous, then be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Stop tearing people down and start building people up. Promote peace in the church, and we will grow in righteousness."

What can you do to promote peace that yields "a harvest of righteousness"?

LAST WORD

As we go through the book of James, it's hard to escape the idea that it was written to religious people. They considered themselves wise, and they boasted about that. They liked to be well-respected, and when they saw others who got more respect, they envied them, criticized them, and tried to get ahead of them. They must have had their ideas about how everyone else should live. And maybe this started with a genuine desire for righteousness, but this desire was soon clouded by impure motives, by personal ambition.

This description would fit the Pharisees of Jesus' day (which may explain why there are so many parallels with the Sermon on the Mount). Apparently there were still these voices in the early church. And maybe we have some similar voices today—saying unkind, divisive things; driven by envy and ambition; sowing discord rather than peace.

If we were to name those people and criticize their spirit, we'd be dragged down into the same kind of conflict that James wants us to avoid. Let's work for peace. But let's not be drawn in by those who boldly claim that they are wiser than everyone else. Let's be wary of impure motives. Be careful what you listen to.

James keeps the focus on true wisdom that comes from God. It is humble, caring, peaceful, quick to listen. Think once more about the wisest people you know. They probably don't have all the answers, but they're wise enough to go to God to get the answers. They're probably so humble they wouldn't call themselves wise. They're probably patient enough to put up with all the fools around them without insults. This is what heavenly wisdom looks like.

LIVE IT OUT

The book of James emphasizes the active side of our faith, so let's consider several ways we might put its teaching into practice.

Prayer: James 1:5 invites us to ask God for wisdom. As Francis Chan suggested in the video, "Say, 'God, I've been pursuing success, I've been pursuing riches, I've been pursuing knowledge but I see in Scripture now wisdom is what You value and it should be what I value...Give me the wisdom I need to navigate through this life in a way that honors You.'"

Memorization: Learn the Beatitudes from Matthew 5:3–10. Or at least create some mnemonic way to remember the eight qualities that Jesus describes there.

Study: Do a computer (or concordance) word search through the Bible for "wisdom" and/or "wise." Pick ten verses from different books (not all from Proverbs!) and study them.

Honor: Do something to honor a person whose wisdom you have been blessed by. If the person is still living, thank them by telling them what they have taught you. If they have passed, then thank God for them, and find some way to commemorate their effect on your life.

Evaluation: Do this with a kind, humble heart. Name the 5 to 8 opinion leaders in your life—people in church, school, work, the media, etc.—whose ideas you regularly pay attention to. Based on the teaching in James 3:13–18, do you feel these people are speaking God's wisdom into your life? This is not an invitation to pride, criticism, or a divisive spirit on your part—just a way to check your regular input with the descriptions of heavenly wisdom we learned today.