

Words of Wisdom

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Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[0 : 0 0] and we're reading verses 13 to 18. And it's on page 1215 of the Church Bibles. James chapter 3, verse 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. 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, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

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 reap a harvest of righteousness. This is the word of the Lord. Thank you so much for reading.

[1 : 1 0] Please keep your Bible open at James chapter 3, and I'll pray for us. Let's pray together. We do so thank you, Heavenly Father, for freedom to gather around your words. And we pray, please, that you would speak to us.

Use your word in our lives productively this evening, we pray. And we ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake.

Amen. There's something in us human beings that just loves a challenge. Swim the channel, climb Mount Everest, run the first four-minute mile.

Well, if it's there to be done, somebody's going to have a go at doing it. And the next thing, and the next thing. And sometimes that love for a challenge can be exploited.

Just wind your mind back, if you can, to school when you were small. I wonder if any of you had a teacher who said something like this. Now, I wonder if there's anyone here who could tell me the answer to this very difficult question.

[2 : 2 0] And instantly, if you're anything like me, all around the classroom, everyone is desperate to hear the question so that they can get their hand up first. Because everyone wants to look clever.

The people who received this letter seem to be the kind of people who are up for such a challenge, especially when they might have a chance to look clever.

And like a master teacher, verse 13, James asks the question, Is anyone out there really wise and understanding? And instantly, one anticipates, all the hands are up, sir, sir, sir.

Or that's what it was like in my school anyway when I was little. A whole bunch of little boys desperate to look cleverer than the next one. However, some challenges have a sting in the tail.

Ah, says the teacher, you can show me how wise you are. Can you? Yes, yes, we can, say the hearers. Now, folks, I've dramatized that. This, of course, is a letter, not a children's classroom situation.

[3 : 22] But I think that's precisely the sort of method being used here. Welcome back to the letter of James. We've been in chapters 2 and 3 over the last few weeks. And we find ourselves in a letter written to deal with Christians behaving very badly towards one another.

Horrible behavior is scattered all the way through this letter. In many and various ways, we meet the full range of relational nastiness, from indifference through anger through malice, all the way, chapter 4, to murderous hatred.

And bit by bit, James has been pulling the lid off this can of worms to see what lies underneath this unpleasant but all too common reality, namely that Christians do not always treat one another the way that God has treated them.

If you've been with us, you'll know that speech has been a particular issue in this letter, as it always is when people are behaving badly. Just look at chapter 1, verse 19 again. My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this.

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Here are people then who are not quick to listen and are ever so quick to speak and therefore often getting angry.

[4 : 43] Now, by chapter 3, the lid is significantly off the can of worms. Why are people behaving badly? James shines his spotlight, not just on their speech, but on their teachers.

Chapter 3 is full of stuff about speaking, but the focus is on the teacher. Chapter 3, verse 1. Not many of you should become teachers. And the first half of the chapter, he explains why that is.

And look at the last verse. Peace makers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. Anyone who knows Jesus' parable of the sower recognizes that the Bible sometimes uses the language of sowing and reaping a harvest in connection with teaching.

And James often alludes to Jesus' teaching in various ways. So I think from beginning to end, this chapter has the teacher in view. And the two halves deal with complementary things.

Part 1, don't many of you become teachers? You're much too slow to listen and quick to speak and quick to anger for that. Part 2, well, who ought to be the teachers then?

[6 : 00] And that's the question we're asking this evening. What sort of teachers? What sort of teachers did James' hearers need? And what sort of teachers do we need?

What sort of teachers do God's people in Zambia need? It's a very important question. And important not just for our church leaders, but for every Christian.

Because at one level or another, we all have a teaching role in relation to one another. The job of passing on truth from one to another isn't just the pastor's job.

There are lots of formal teaching roles in our churches. Small groups, kids' own student Bible studies, roots. And wider than that, we all have the responsibility of speaking the truth in love towards one another.

Think, for example, of all the words that have already been spoken in this gathering this evening. Think of all the words you've spoken to one already just since coming through the door.

[6 : 59] And think of the words that will be spoken after the formal bits over this evening. Think of the volume of words. And think of the potential of those words.

For good or ill, for building up or tearing down. For self-promotion or for building others up. What sort of word speakers are we going to be?

And are we going to desire to be our teachers? Which brings us back to the question that James asks in verse 13. Who is wise and understanding among you?

Let them, look at it, verse 13. Let them show it. Prove it, says James. Prove your wisdom. And bearing in mind that we find, what we find in this letter, you can imagine James' hearers responding to this question in rather predictable sorts of ways.

Who is wise? Can you prove it? And all around the room, they're desperate to prove it. Clever Clarence is polishing up his facts. He has to be the cleverest in class.

[8 : 06] He always has to be cleverest. And then there's wordy William, who's running through his eloquence exercises. If there's anyone with the gift of the gab, it's him. He's confident.

And then there's brilliant Bruce, who's trying to remember which of his past speaking engagements to mention as proof of his great wisdom. And then in the corner there's subtle Sarah, who's thinking of that devastating remark.

She might drop into conversation after a while just to upstage all the boys. Can I say at this point that any resemblance to people you might know is purely accidental?

Who is wise among you, says James? And they're all ready to prove it. Their hands are up. And whose does James give the wisdom prize to? Well, blow me down, verse 13.

Let them show it by their good life. By deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.

[9 : 11] These are the kind of teachers that James wants. Those whose lives are marked by goodness and humility. Jillian the good and Hamish the humble. Who would have thought it? They look so ordinary.

And I'm quite sure that had this been a classroom discussion, there would no longer have been any hands up. For goodness and humility are not what James' readers are currently aspiring to.

These are not the qualities they had in mind in the how to look wise stakes. The hands are all down. No one wants to have to engage in that sort of proof.

But with that clever question and answer, the trap has been sprung. And what James does next is twofold. First, he describes the wisdom they currently have, verses 14 to 16.

And then he describes the wisdom they need. So let's look at those in turn first. The wisdom they have, verse 14. What is it that makes these people so keen to be teachers?

[10 : 15] Well, it's mentioned twice. Look at verse 14. And look at verse 16. Do you see the repeating pair? Verse 14.

Bitter envy. Selfish ambition. And again, verse 16. Envy. Selfish ambition. Why are they slow to listen?

Quick to speak. Quick to anger. Why are some so keen to be teachers? Because they're ambitious and envious. They want to be recognized.

They want to be recognized more than other people are. Now, you might well say, well, look, all that sounds a bit extreme. Can that really be a motivation amongst teachers in church?

And the answer, of course, is absolutely it can. Last week, we noted that we live in a culture which loves a clever speaker. And in a world that loves impressive speech, the church loves impressive teachers.

[11 : 15] Dressed up in spiritual clothes, of course, and shiny suits. And so often with the appearance of spiritual power. So both listeners and speakers have to be careful.

For not all that looks wise is wise. Let's think about listeners first. As listeners, we are often attracted to those who are good with words.

At a distance, we love to listen to the erudite, the accomplished, the high-sounding, the dynamic. And sometimes for all the wrong reasons, we can feel good because we know what so-and-so thinks about something.

It's the spiritual equivalent of reading Hello! magazine or following celebrities on Twitter. We listen to the podcasts and read the blogs because it makes us feel good to think that we know what that person thinks about something.

Closer to home, we're often more impressed by a person's skill with words than we are by the integrity of their lives. See where James points for evidence of wisdom, verse 13?

[12 : 20] Not the words, but the deeds. The integrity of the life, the character. So listeners need to take care.

We're sometimes attracted by the wrong things. What about speakers? Those who have speaking opportunities or responsibilities among us.

Well, let me say that when you're involved in Christian ministry, there's very little you do that anyone can measure apart from the things that you say. And nearly all the important things about Christian ministry are invisible to people most of the time.

Many of us have jobs in which the outcomes are relatively easily measurable. The items do or don't get sold in our shop. The buildings do or don't get built by our engineering company.

The rooms do or don't get decorated by our decorating company. The patients do or don't get cared for in our GP surgery. The exams do or don't get passed in school. And so on.

[13 : 21] How measurable is the world of gospel ministry? Bums on seats is a very poor measure of anything spiritual. It is so hard to measure the impact of God's word on people's lives.

But what can be seen and assessed is the speaking. And so there's great pressure if you are a speaker to look good in the speaking activity, the bit that everyone sees.

And it's very easy for the position of teacher and the opportunities it brings to be envied and when it's achieved, jealously guarded.

In church, many long to be teachers and guard their position selfishly, feeling threatened by others, reluctant to promote the gifts of others, upset that they were not chosen to do this or do that.

Why did I not get that invitation? Why was that person chosen to speak at the youth group at weekend? Why did they get to lead the Bible study and not me? That's precisely the sort of wisdom that James' hearers have.

[14 : 29] Where does it come from, this wisdom? Well, look at verse 15. Such wisdom does not come down from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, in fact demonic.

You can be absolutely sure that when people are quick to speak, won't listen, often angry, eager to be the one who's teaching, threatened by the gifts of others, this is not something that comes from heaven.

Of course, the words spoken may be spiritual-sounding words, but it's not from heaven. In fact, it's from everywhere but that. Much of what masquerades as spiritual in our world is not.

And of course, words are such easy things to come by, aren't they? And such an accessible cloak for ambition. If you can breathe and think and move your mouth, which is true of most of us this evening, you have at your disposal an inexhaustible supply of self-promoting material, your words.

And if you have the role of being a teacher, you've got a public platform for your words. And if you're good at it, you can dress up your ambition in beautiful-looking clothes designed to make you look better than others.

[15 : 57] Where does that come from? Well, not from heaven, says James. And you can tell that by its results. Verse 16, what does it do, this kind of wisdom?

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find a disorder and every evil practice. Now, here we're coming very close to the heart of this letter.

What is the cause of all this relational dysfunction that the letter's written about? Well, significantly, the jealousy and ambition of those who have a voice.

Show me a church full of disorder and evil behavior, says James, and I'll show you a church where somewhere, someone is working hard to look more impressive than others.

What a clever question that was, wasn't it? Who is wise and understanding among you? Oh, you'll have goodness and humility then, won't you? No, you don't.

[17 : 00] No, you don't, do you? What you really have is selfish ambition and jealousy dressed up in spiritual clothes, and it doesn't come from heaven at all. And that's why things are the way they are.

What a devastating diagnosis. But, thankfully, James doesn't leave it there. He doesn't just talk about the wisdom they have. He talks about the wisdom they need and the teachers they need.

So let's look at that. The wisdom they need. He's already described it in headline terms. The wisdom they need is good and humble. The pursuit of goodness and humility is not usually what gets people out of bed in the morning in our world, is it?

And I don't think those things have ever been mainstream desires in any age. One commentator writes this, there was some place for humility in Hebrew thought.

But the dominant morality of the day associated that term with weakness and groveling. It's linked with adjectives like ignoble, abject, servile, slavish, downcast, and low.

[18 : 16] Epictetus names it first in a list of moral faults. Humility. Humility first in a list of moral faults in the ancient world.

But James loves it. Look at what it looks like, verse 17. And here he unpacks these ideas of goodness and humility in more detail.

And there's something just very attractive about this list. But the wisdom that comes from heaven, the real stuff, is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere.

Let's just look at those words quickly. Pure, not corrupt, peaceable. What a contrast that is with verse 16, which is self-assertive.

Considerate, not harsh or unkind or rigidly self-serving. Submissive, compliant, open to reason, willing to give ground, not insisting on its own way.

[19 : 30] Full of mercy, quick to be generous and forgiving, compassionate. So much that's needed in the situation James is writing to. Full of mercy and good fruits, just producing good things.

Impartial, literally, not divisively judging. Without doubleness, single-minded towards people. That's been such a big theme of this letter all the way through.

And finally, sincere. It's not faking. It's not putting on a show. They're just beautiful characteristics, those, aren't they? That's the wisdom from above, says James.

That's how to recognize the God-given stuff. It might not be flamboyant or impressive looking, but it's certainly remarkable.

And those are the qualities you need to look for in your teachers. And those are the qualities you need to aspire to personally.

[20 : 33] And look at verse 18. Look at what it produces. These are the qualities that will produce peaceable godliness in a church.

And these are the qualities that will produce in God's people what God desires for them. At the last day, a harvest of righteousness and peace.

Well, our time is nearly gone. What sorts of teachers do we need then? And what sorts of abilities will we value?

What will we look for? Who will we look for to take on positions of responsibility in our church or our Christian union or our youth ministry or wherever? It's so easy to think that what we need is more of clever Clarence or wordy William or brilliant Bruce or subtle Sarah because they look really cool superficially.

And we forget that one of the reasons we notice brilliant Bruce is that he's boastful Bruce. And one of the reasons we notice Sarah's subtlety is that she's actually subtly self-promoting.

[21 : 46] We do not need brilliance. What we do need right across the board, in every department, in any position of responsibility, and indeed in every part of life is humble goodness.

It's so unremarkable looking. Actually, it's extraordinary, isn't it? That's what God values. And we know that because we follow a Lord who himself demonstrated precisely those qualities.

You could not describe our Lord Jesus Christ as an insecure person, desperate to leave his mark on the world. And yet he's changed everything for everyone.

You could not describe him as a self-promoter, yet he's the most famous of all ever. You could not describe him as one who stood on his own rights, who had to have the last word in every conversation, who always needed to be talking and knocking other people down.

Could you? Not one who talked against others in order to profit himself. Not one who used his words for himself at all.

[22 : 58] But he is the ultimate in wisdom and our only hope. Folks, if you're just here this evening looking into Christianity for yourself, it's all about him, really.

Everything's all about him. One who used not only his words for the good of others, but poured out his life for the good of others, a sacrifice for the sins of others.

It's all about him. Do come back and learn more. It's all about him. And he is the antidote to the fruitless human pursuit of making one's mark in the world.

What a waste of time and energy and words it is, spending your life trying to make your mark on the world.

My mother died just before I went to university when I was 18 years old. I can now not remember the sound of her voice. When I die and my sister dies, no one will remember her.

[24 : 03] Everything you do and all the words you speak will disappear into the silence. What a waste of time and energy using your words to make your mark on the world.

Now that's not what words are for. Words are for others. And Jesus' way of doing things is the pattern we need to aspire to. Humble goodness, it's such an ordinary thing, isn't it?

Actually, it's so extraordinary. Isn't it unusual to find a human being using words not for self-promotion but for the good of others? Isn't that an unusual thing?

And the great encouragement of this passage is that it's not, first of all, brilliance with words that God uses to produce a harvest of righteousness. James is looking down the line to the last day.

What will do the business in God's word? What will produce the results, the wonderful results that God will produce at the end? What's going to do that? Words spoken in humble goodness for the benefit of others.

[25 : 12] And that means, of course, that many of those who will be most useful as teachers in Christian settings will be the very slowest to push themselves forwards. There will be people who need to be asked the question, have you ever thought that you ought to be pursuing this further?

And almost certainly they won't have. Do not waste your words and energy in self-promotion. What did God give us words for?

What a waste to use the good gifts that he's given us for bigging ourselves up in the eyes of others. All that will produce is disorder and every evil practice, says James.

Instead, we can aspire to goodness done with humility. We don't have to be brilliant to do that. It's within the reach of anyone who follows the Lord Jesus.

That's where the return lies. Words spoken for the good of others in humility. That's the route to a great harvest in the end.

[26 : 21] And with God's help, that is within the reach of all of his children. Let's pray together and give thanks to him for that. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

Just a moment to respond in the quiet to what God may have said to us and then I'll lead us in prayer. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

have mercy on us oh lord for the misuse of our words we pray with gratitude that you would help us to look to your son the lord jesus christ we thank you that he used his magnificent words not to promote himself to make a mark on the world world for himself but rather for the communication of your truth to others so that we might be saved and we thank you that he did that not only with his words but in his actions with his whole life we thank you for the great encouragement that ordinary words spoken in his spirit with humility and goodness for the sake of others can produce a great harvest in the end we pray that we might aspire to words like that and to a harvest like that we pray that you give to those in our church in positions of leadership in teaching responsibility humility and goodness and deliver us please from chasing after cleverness with words for that for their own sake help us rather to speak your truth with humility towards one another and please use our ordinary everyday words to build one another up in love and produce a harvest of righteousness in this church in the present day and at the last day we ask this in jesus name amen