

# Wisdom For “Dummies”

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James 3:13-18

July 8, 2018

## Introduction:

One of the great movies to come out of the 1990's was a little film starring Tom Hanks entitled *Forrest Gump*. The movie is about a young man by the name of Forrest Gump who isn't exactly the sharpest crayon in the box, if you know what I mean. Forrest is sort of a simpleton who isn't very bright, and certainly not as worldly-wise as his dear childhood friend Jenny. As Forrest and his friend Jenny grow up, they grow apart and their lives take two completely different paths.

Forrest haphazardly goes through the 1950s and 60s, almost totally clueless as to the important historical events and persons he repeatedly encounters. Yet through all the social turmoil of those years, Forrest retains his purity and innocence. The goodness of his character and kindness of his heart remain intact from beginning to end. On the other hand Jenny, his friend and later love interest, is an intelligent young woman who goes to college and eventually becomes a hippie. As time passes we watch Jenny slip into drug addiction, abusive relationships, sexual immorality, and flirtations with suicide.

As a result one can look at the movie *Forrest Gump* as a tale of two people. It contrasts the “stupid and dim-witted” character of Forrest Gump and the simple joy and richness of the life he leads with the “worldly-wise” Jenny who shipwrecks her life through sex and drugs. In the end, the movie begs the question, “Who's really the stupid one here?”

This morning, we have the same sort of question to ask ourselves. But our question is not about “stupidity” but about “wisdom”. The passage we'll be looking at this morning is concerned with the question, “What makes a person truly wise?” In order for us to answer that question correctly, we need to see what God has to say to us through his servant James. So please turn open your Bibles with me to James 3.

Just so you know, we're in James instead of Romans this morning because I expected that lots of people would be out of town for the holiday weekend and I didn't want a large number of folks to be gone when I was starting into a very significant passage that I really want people to be here for. Much of what will follow in Romans 9 builds upon the sermon I had originally intended to do today, so I thought it best to delay it by a week and preach a stand-alone message instead.

So with that explanation out of the way, please follow along as I read James 3:13-18. James writes, **“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.”**

Many people think wisdom is all about what you know, but James challenges his readers to see that wisdom isn't so much about what we know as it is about what we do. Wisdom ultimately is an action word, or if I can maybe slightly alter a quote from the movie *Forrest Gump*, Forrest Gump famously said, "Stupid is as stupid does," but James is saying to us in this passage that wisdom is as wisdom does. So let's work our way through this passage together by considering our first point which, which concerns...

## 1. The nature of true wisdom (v. 13)

James begins by asking us a question in v. 13, "**Who is wise and understanding among you?**" Since James is asking let's go ahead and answer: Who here thinks they're wise and understanding? Now I won't make you raise your hand or anything, but just think about how you would answer that: would you consider yourself be wise and understanding? Now I'm willing to put myself out there and say, I'd answer "yes" to that. I think I'm a pretty smart guy! I earned "A's" throughout school, I went to college, and even got my Masters' degree. Plus, I've lived a few decades now and have acquired some wisdom from living life, so yeah, I think I have wisdom and understanding.

So if that's you, James then lays down a challenge for those of us who think we're wise. He says, "If you think you're wise, then **By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom...**" In other words, show it in your actions. Now that's not what I was expecting. I mean, shouldn't James be asking for our school report cards or our SAT scores as proof? Come on, James! Don't you see the impressive diplomas that I have hanging up in my office? I took Greek and Hebrew in seminary. I can explain the ontological argument for God's existence. How many people here can do that, huh? Doesn't that count for anything, James?

No, not really. Wisdom is not about how much stuff we know. Wisdom is about what we do with the stuff we know. Perhaps you have an advanced degree or really high IQ. That might make you smart, but it doesn't guarantee to make you wise. Wisdom, James says, is shown by the kind of life you lead. Wisdom is as wisdom does, and what wisdom does are works done "**in the meekness of wisdom.**" Notice that he connects meekness to wisdom. There's a meekness, a humility, that comes from wisdom. So that means if you're a boastful, arrogant person, then you don't possess wisdom, no matter what college degree or really impressive title you have.

Consider for a moment Muhammad Ali. Ali was an intelligent man who once held the title of the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. But Ali was not wise. And I can say he wasn't wise because he didn't demonstrate the humility or meekness that comes from wisdom. Instead, his boastful and arrogant demeanor is legendary.

*For example, there's a story told about him that once during a flight on the way to a boxing match, the aircraft ran into foul weather, and moderate turbulence began to toss it about. The passengers were accordingly instructed to fasten their seatbelts immediately. Everyone complied but Ali.*

*Noticing this, the flight attendant approached him and requested that he observe the captain's order, only to hear Ali audaciously respond, "Superman don't need no seatbelt." The flight attendant did not miss a beat and replied, "Well, Superman don't need no airplane either."*

- Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God*, (Word Publ., Dallas: 1994), p. 7

So then if you answered my previous question about whether you think you are wise and understanding affirmatively, then you need to examine yourself and ask, "Do I conduct myself with meekness to prove it?" And if you didn't think you were wise, then you might need to reconsider your answer as well. A person who never graduated from grade school can be wiser than a person with a PhD because wisdom is not shown by the kind of stuff that you know but by the kind of humble life that you lead. A wise person demonstrates his wisdom through meekness, not by being a know-it-all.

Moving on now, we've talked about the nature of true wisdom, now we need to turn our attention to our second point this morning, which is...

## **2. The nature of false wisdom (v. 14-15)**

Having shown us the nature of true wisdom, now in v. 14-15, James wants to contrast the nature of true wisdom with false wisdom. Look back at your Bibles with me at v. 14. **"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."**

False wisdom is easily distinguished from true wisdom because it will manifest itself differently. Whereas the nature of true wisdom is meek and humble, the nature of false wisdom is self-centered. James mentions **"bitter jealousy"** in v. 14. The idea is of wanting something for yourself you don't possess and thereby becoming angry as a result. He also says false wisdom is characterized by **"selfish ambition."** Someone with false wisdom is concerned only with one's self and striving to get what he wants at all costs, regardless of what it does to others. In particular, as Douglas Moo points out in his commentary on this passage, "[James] is thinking of the kind of jealousy or envy that people display when other people challenge their own ideas and gain some hearing for them." (Moo 171)

False wisdom always has to be right. Have you ever met someone who always has to be right? Annoying, isn't it? It's the kind of person who always has to have the last word, who can never concede that you've made a good point or admit that some point in their argument is not a strong one. And if you challenge them on it, they get mad and take it as a personal attack. Do you know someone like that? Sadly I have to admit that I can be like that at times, although I think I've improved over the years. Sometimes when I'm discussing a theological or political issue with somebody, it's easy for me to insist on my point of view and get irritated if the other person fails to grasp the flawless beauty of my irrefutable logic and gifted intellect. It's hard work to

try to really listen to what the other person is saying and be humble enough to admit when they've make a good point.

Well, my experience has shown me that I'm not alone in this. In the majority of conversations I have where differences of opinions or positions are involved, I find people are rarely willing to listen with an open-mind or concede points the other person makes. The political realm is littered with this kind of thing. If you listen to Rush Limbaugh, you'd think that liberals are all just a bunch of touchy-feely morons without an ounce of sense in their heads. And if you watch liberally-biased CNN, you'd think all conservatives are just dim-witted, slack-jawed religious bigots who want to turn America into a theocracy. And I need not even mention how these things go down on social media! These days it's like finding a needle in a haystack to come across someone who can discuss political matters without resorting to straw-man arguments and personal attacks!

So let me say to you guys, don't be like this! Demonstrate wisdom by having the humility to listen to other people who disagree with you. Don't just dismiss them out of hand because they're on the opposite side of whatever position you think is true. Don't immediately rush headstrong into the conversation to show them how wrong they are. Listen, really listen to what others have to say and if they make a good point, admit it! Let them know. Chances are if you show others that kind of humility, they will likely be willing to do the same for you.

Why is it so important for us to do these kinds of things? It's important because of where false wisdom comes from. James identifies the source of this self-centered, argumentative kind of "wisdom" in v. 16. He says it comes not from heaven, but rather it is "**earthly, unspiritual, demonic.**" There is nothing righteous or spiritual about being pig-headed. That's not a virtue. We can't try to baptize our intellectual arrogance under the waters of "conviction" or "being opinionated." A haughty, self-assured attitude is not godly: it's demonic! True wisdom that comes from God is humble; so-called "wisdom" that boasts arrogantly of how right it always is comes from the devil, not from God.

So then, we've seen James contrast the humble nature of true wisdom that comes from God with false wisdom, a self-centered "wisdom" that is "**earthly, unspiritual, demonic.**" Now in the next few verses, James is going to lay out the fruit of these two types of wisdom. What are the practical results of false and true wisdom? Let's look at our third point where James talks about the fruit of false wisdom.

### 3. The fruit of false wisdom (v. 16)

Follow along with me in your Bibles starting at v. 16, "**For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.**" James reiterates the nature of false wisdom here by using the same words he used back in v. 14. False wisdom is characterized by "**jealousy**" and "**selfish ambition.**" When people insist on always being right and are only concerned about championing their opinions, then James says that "**there you find disorder and every evil practice.**"

This is a passage that should be a required memory verse for everyone in any type of church leadership. How many times has a church been destroyed by those who put their own personal agendas ahead of the needs of the whole church body? Far too often I fear. Years ago when I was doing the job search, I was the number two guy that a church in Ohio was looking at. This church was having their first choice come out to visit, but if he didn't work out, then I was on the on-deck circle to come out to candidate next. Well, a couple of weeks later this church contacted me. The other guy did come out and the congregation voted on him. He needed 75% of the vote to get in; he got 74%. Because it was so close, they thought they would take another vote the following week, which they did. This time he only got 69% of the vote. When the voting results were announced, close to half of the congregation got up in anger and walked out of the church. This group of people who left then called this pastoral candidate and told him they had left the church and planned to start a new church and wanted to call him to be their pastor. He accepted.

While there are many things that make me sad about that situation, the thing that really gets my goat is this pastoral candidate. Why in the world didn't he chastise these people for splitting the church? The damage these self-centered people did not only to the interpersonal relationships in the church but also to the reputation of the church in that community was terrible! Yet this pastor sanctified their behavior by accepting their call to lead their new splinter group. He had the opportunity to gracefully accept the church's vote and then call these folks who walked out to repent and submit to the church's decision. But he took the route of selfish ambition which resulted in the kind of **"disorder and every vile practice"** that James writes about here in v. 16.

Let me say that I'm glad that hasn't been the case for us here at Grace Fellowship. In the eight plus years that I've been here, we've seen quite a number of changes. We had a huge remodeling project six years back that left us meeting in a funeral home for six months; we changed our name, we've hired three different associate pastors and now we are in the process of looking for our next one. There has been plenty of opportunity for **"jealousy and selfish ambition"** to exist here and yet we've sailed through these potentially choppy waters with ease: no church splits, no big fights, no warring factions.

As a result, I think this is a church that has wisdom; true wisdom because of how we've behaved towards one another in the midst of changing circumstances. We haven't seen the **"disorder and every vile practice"** James warns us of. Heck, we even got through an incredibly contentious political season with the election back in 2016 and nobody flinched, even though we didn't all agree on what candidate to vote for. So that makes me glad and it makes me hopeful. So Grace Fellowship, please continue to show wisdom by your conduct. Don't ever allow bitter jealousy or selfish ambition characterize us as a church. Let us be wise by action is wisdom towards one another.

And what wisdom looks like is spelled out for us in the last two verses. James concludes this section by describing for us our fourth point this morning...

#### 4. The fruit of true wisdom (v. 17-18)

Again, look back at what James writes in v. 17-18, **“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.”**

If you want to know if somebody has wisdom, you don't need to give them an IQ test; all you need to do is look at the fruits of their life. James gives us a list here of some of the characteristics of a person with true godly wisdom. First, he says that a wise person is **“pure.”** He is not a corrupt or immoral person, but strives to keep himself pure in thought and deed. He's a pursuer of righteousness in his life.

Next, the person with true wisdom will be **“peaceable, gentle, and open to reason.”** These character traits are the exact opposite of the person who is driven by **“bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.”** Whereas an unwise person is contentious and always trying to stir trouble, a wise person is **peaceable** and makes it his goal to deal with conflict in healthy ways, that brings about reconciliation, not division. Instead of being rude, he is **“gentle”** towards others. He listens to what others have to say and gives their viewpoint sincere consideration without interrupting them. The wise person also is **“open to reason.”** He realizes he doesn't know everything and is willing to learn from others, to be challenged and corrected. He can actually utter those three almost unheard-of words of, “I was wrong.”

James goes on to say that wisdom from heaven is also **“full of mercy and good fruits.”** A wise person isn't quick to condemn, but is willing to extend mercy to others, realizing that he himself has been the recipient of God's mercy. Such a person will demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in his life. He also is **“impartial and sincere.”** He's not quick to give undue deference to one position and then vilify the opposing view. He has a desire to fairly consider opposing views and give sincere thought and consideration to viewpoints other than his own.

That's quite a list! So now I need to ask you, how do you measure up? If we would consider this a spiritual checklist for wisdom, how many boxes could you check off? In light of this list, how would you answer the question James asked at the beginning of this passage, **“Who is wise and understanding among you?”** Or you know what might be even better for you to do than asking this of yourself? Ask somebody who knows you really well if these traits characterize you. Our hearts can be very deceptive and sometimes we see only what we want to see about ourselves. A close friend who is willing to shoot straight with you can help you see character flaws and sinful behaviors that you may be blind to. If we truly want to be wise, then these are the characteristics that need to be true of us.

Finally then, James wraps this section up in v. 18 saying, **“And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”** The exercise of true wisdom results in peace. Wise men are peaceful men, not quick to quarrel or cause strife, but who rather devote themselves to living in harmony with others.

When one strives for peace in relationships with others, then James says that such a person will sow **“a harvest of righteousness.”** Those virtues just listed by James will grow stronger in your life when you steadfastly pursue peace instead of strife. It comes when we are following in the footsteps of Christ our Lord, who modeled for us true wisdom in his life. As Christ-followers, we are to walk as Christ walked, and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to empower us to bear the fruits of the Spirit as we live out the gospel in our words and deeds. That’s where true wisdom is found: in Christ, living in light of the gospel, with meekness, gentleness, purity, sincerity, and genuine love and respect for other.

### **Conclusion:**

So as we close this morning, I’d like to return to the character of Forrest Gump as an example of wisdom. Forrest Gump was not smart by anyone’s reckoning, and that’s part of the charm of his character. But although he was not smart, Forrest Gump was wise. He was wise because he lived in humility, wasn’t full of selfish ambition, but was considerate, sincere, and pure towards others. While he never said it this way, I think he would agree with James that wisdom is as wisdom does. As Christians, may each of us live as men and women who demonstrate the true wisdom of God by following Christ our Lord, allowing the wisdom he manifested to bear fruit in our lives as a harvest of righteousness, all to the glory of God.

Let’s pray.