

Two Kinds of Wisdom

James 3:13-18; 5:7-12
SS Lesson for 08/30/2020

Devotional Scripture: Proverbs 2:1-6

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Key Verse: James 3:17

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

TYPES OF WISDOM (JAMES 3:13-18)

Wisdom that leads to good conduct and works (13)

Conduct that is worthy of the gospel of Jesus (Phil 1:27)

Conduct that is an example (1 Tim 4:12)

Conduct that is without covetousness (Heb 13:5)

Conduct that is honorable (1 Peter 2:12)

Conduct that makes evildoers ashamed and turn to God (1 Peter 3:15-16)

Conduct that shows we know God (Jer 9:23-24)

Conduct that displays we are obedient to God's Word (Matt 7:24)

Earthly wisdom (14-16)

Earthly wisdom does not glorify God (Rom 1:20-23)

Earthly wisdom does not understand spiritual things (1 Cor 2:14)

Earthly wisdom can be of the devil (John 8:44)

Earthly wisdom can pervert us away from God (Acts 13:10)

Earthly wisdom is sensual, comes from ungodly lusts, and causes divisions (Jude 17-19)

Godly wisdom (17-18)

Godly wisdom comes from God (Prov 2:6)

Godly wisdom comes through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:8)

Godly wisdom is pure (Titus 1:15)

Godly wisdom is beyond human understanding (Rom 11:33)

Godly wisdom is salvation to those who believe (1 Cor 1:21)

Godly wisdom is in Jesus (1 Cor 1:30)

Godly wisdom brings understanding and hope (Eph 1:17-18)

Godly wisdom teaches to redeem the time (Eph 5:15-17)

TWO CHARACTERISTICS OF GODLY WISDOM (JAMES 5:7-12)

Patience (7-10)

Patient while seeking God (Lam 3:25-26)

Patient while standing firm (Luke 21:19)

Patient while doing work produced by faith (1 Thess 1:3)

Patient while imitating those who will inherit God's promises (Heb 6:12)

Patient and being still before God (Ps 37:7-9)

Endurance (11-12)

Endurance that displays that one is living worthy (2 Thess 1:3-5)

Endurance of hardships (2 Tim 2:3)

Endurance that is rewarded by reigning with Jesus (2 Tim 2:12)

Endurance that proves one is a child of God (Heb 12:7-9)

Endurance by standing firm (Matt 24:13)

CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

COMMENTARY THOUGHTS FROM BOB DEFFINBAUGH

The Source of the Problem: Two Wisdoms (James 3:13-18)

Conclusion

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE NIV STANDARD LESSON COMMENTARY

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE ECHOES COMMENTARY

Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

It has been said that all of life is suffering. This idea is not all that shocking, of course. It has been articulated in many contexts around the world. As Christians, we understand that the suffering we experience is a result of sin in general. Some try to downplay the reality of suffering. But suffering—especially in the form of persecution—is part of the Christian life. In James's day, the limited scope of Christianity shaped the types of persecution. Today, when Christianity is a global faith, persecution differs from culture to culture. In certain African nations, Muslim populations have severely persecuted Christian neighbors. In other locations, official government policy hinders Christian meetings and the formation of churches. In the West, the matter is not quite so clear-cut. What constitutes persecution? While we are not being thrown to the lions in the Roman Colosseum or burned at the stake, subtle forms of persecution do indeed exist. These include social ostracism, which is part of the life experience of many Christians. How should we handle this kind of persecution when we encounter it? At the beginning of our studies in James, we noted a few themes that run throughout the letter. These themes unite the disparate topics that James addresses. Wisdom is one such theme. Recall, for example, that at the outset of his letter James encouraged his readers to have perseverance in the midst of temptations or trials (James 1:2-4). This they could do by actively seeking God's wisdom (1:5). In today's text, James addresses two very different situations, both of which demand wisdom on the part of believers.

Key Verse: James 3:17

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.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

A key to right talk is right thought. The tongue is contained in a cage of teeth and lips, but it still escapes. It is not intelligence that keeps the lock on that cage; it is wisdom—a wisdom that is characterized by humility, grace, and peace.

3:13. James asked the rhetorical question, **Who is wise and understanding among you?** “Wise” (*sophos*; cf. *sophias* in 1:5) describes one with moral insight and skill in the practical issues of life. “Understanding” (*epistēmōn*) refers to intellectual perception and scientific acumen. **Let him show it.** Here is an original “show and tell.” Wisdom is not measured by degrees but by deeds. It is not a matter of acquiring truth in lectures but of applying truth to life. The **good life** and **deeds** are best portrayed **in the humility of wisdom**, or “wise meekness” (*prautēti sophias*). The truly wise man is humble.

3:14. True wisdom makes no room for **bitter envy** (“zealous jealousy”) or for **selfish ambition** (“factious rivalry,” *erithian*, from *eritheuō*, “to spin wool,” thus working for personal gain). This is nothing to glory about. To **boast** (lit., “exult,” *katakauchasthe*) in such attitudes is to **deny**, or “lie against,” **the truth**.

3:15-16. Envy and strife are clear indicators that one's so-called **wisdom** is not from above (cf. 1:17), **but is earthly, unspiritual** (“natural, sensual,” *psychikē*), and **of the devil** (“demonic,” *daimoniōdēs*). **Envy and selfish ambition**, or rivalry, can only produce **disorder**, or confusion, and **every evil practice**. A truly wise person does not seek glory or gain; he is gracious and giving.

3:17. Wisdom that comes from heaven (lit., “wisdom from above”; cf. “from above” in 1:17) **is first... pure** or “holy” (*hagnē*), then **peace-loving, considerate** or “forbearing,” **submissive** or “easy to be entreated” (*eupeithēs*, only used here in the NT), **full of mercy and good fruit, impartial** (lit., “without uncertainty”; cf. “not doubt” in 1:6), and **sincere** (“without hypocrisy”).

3:18. Peace is the seed sown that yields **a harvest** (lit., “fruit”) **of righteousness**. The truly wise man is a man of peace. To achieve “righteousness,” spiritual maturity, practical holiness—the theme of this book—a believer must learn to speak with care. Winsome speech comes from a wise spirit. A controlled tongue is possible only with cultured thought. A mouth filled with praise results from a mind filled with purity. A believer should stand confidently (chap. 1), serve compassionately (chap. 2), and speak carefully (chap. 3). He should be what God wants him to be, do what God wants him to do, and speak as God wants him to speak.

5:1. The same exclamatory interjection used in 4:13 introduces this section: **Now listen** (lit., “Go now”). The **rich people**, so often the object of envy, were the object of James' scorn and condemnation. He put down those who placed their arrogant trust in things which were doomed to decay. **Weep and wail**, could

be elaborated as “burst into tears” (*klausate*; also in 4:9) and “howl with grief” (*ololyzontes*, an onomatopoeic verb used only here in the NT). Money brings merriment only temporarily; wealth eventually results in **misery** (*talaipōriais*, from *talaō*, “to undergo, endure,” and *pōros*, “a callus” or “hardened concretion”).

5:2-3. Riches rot, and fine **clothes** may be chewed up by **moths**. The story is not from “rags to riches” but from “riches to rags.” **Gold and silver** are the most sought-after metals and have long been considered the material standards for the world. Though they do not rust, they do become **corroded**. Gold can darken and silver tarnishes. **Their corrosion** (*ios*, or “poison,” as in 3:8 and Rom. 3:13) is a testimony to the rich man’s folly and will consume his **flesh like fire**. As metals lose their luster, the poison of greed eats up people. The corrosion of **wealth** is testimony to this sickness of the wealthy. Hoarding for **the last days** only gives more fuel for the fire that will consume the lost.

5:4-5. It is not the wealth itself that is condemned, but the greedy attitude toward it and the grisly actions with which it was obtained. God is not deaf to the cries of injustice that rise both from **wages** withheld in fraud and from the laborers who have been oppressed by the rich. The Jewish converts were well aware of God’s Law forbidding holding back on wages (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:15) and oppressing the poor (Prov. 3:27-28; Amos 8:4-6; Mal. 3:5). The life of **luxury** (*etryphēsate*, “to lead a soft life,” used only here in the NT) **and self-indulgence** (*espatalēsate*, “to live voluptuously or wantonly,” used only here and in 1 Tim. 5:6), is like so much fat for the **slaughter**. The sarcastic illustration was vivid for Jewish believers who had seen many fattened sheep and oxen meet their fates in sacrifice.

5:6. In the scramble for more wealth, the rich used their influence in courts of justice, and in the process were guilty of bringing condemnation and even death to **innocent men** who offered no resistance (“innocent men” is lit., “the righteous one” though it probably refers to a class of people rather than to one individual). What began as an interest in money ended as an insensitivity to murder. A believer who seeks spiritual growth dare not become caught up in the accumulation of wealth for himself. He should share his possessions for God’s glory and the good of others. From the rich, James turned to the restless. For these he again used the friendly address, “brothers.” The tone turns from stark condemnation to sensitive consolation. James excoriated the rich but encouraged the receptive. He appealed to his brethren to be patient. He defined the essence of patience, gave some examples of patience, and indicated an evidence of patience.

5:7. Be patient, then (lit., “therefore”), said James as a direct corollary to the coming judgment on the wicked rich. “Be patient” (*makrothymēsate*) comes from a compound of “long” (*makros*) and “temper” (*thymos*). The idea is to set the timer of one’s temper for a long run. Think long. Focus on the final lap in the race of life. Have a long fuse. Look ahead to **the Lord’s coming**. The essence of patience is furthermore seen in **the farmer** who **waits** patiently (*makrothymōn*) for the needed **rains** and the ultimate **valuable** (lit., “precious”) **crop**.

5:8. The application is clear. Just like the farmer, every believer should **be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near**. The Lord’s return (*parousia*) should stimulate every believer to patience and persistence.

5:9. James called for the believers to stop groaning lest they be judged, because Jesus **the Judge is standing at the door!** In view of the hope of Christ’s soon return, believers should cease the petty conflicts to which James alluded in chapter 4. As children in a school classroom look out for their teacher’s soon return, God’s children should be on guard for Christ’s return. In so doing, good behavior and mutual harmony are essential.

5:10. James reminded his Jewish **brothers of the prophets** who endured much **suffering** with **patience** (*makrothymia*, lit., “long-temperedness”; cf. v. 7) as they spoke out **in the name of the Lord**.

5:11. As you know (lit., “behold”), **we consider blessed** (lit. “happy or fortunate”; *makarizomen*) **those who have persevered**. James then presented another well-known and highly revered example of patience, Job. The Lord honored **Job’s perseverance** with multiplied blessings (cf. Job 42:12). Interestingly, James did not say that Job had *makrothymia*, “patience,” but that he had *hypomonēn*, “steadfastness, endurance, perseverance” (cf. James 1:3; Col. 1:11). Job endured and he was steadfast, though he was impatient with God! James summed it up: **The Lord is full of compassion and mercy**. “Full of compassion” is a compound adjective (*polysplanchnos*, from *polys*, “much,” and *splanchna*, “innermost parts” or “seat of

affections”), used only here in the New Testament. “Mercy,” also rare (*oiktirmōn*, from the verb *oikteirō*, “to pity”) is found only here and in Luke 6:36.

5:12. Above all, my brothers, concluded James, **do not swear** or take an empty oath. For those who truly demonstrate the persistence and patience prescribed for believers, there is no need to invoke an oath, whether **by heaven or by earth**, that their word is certain. (“Swear” does not refer to profanity but to taking an oath.) The testimony should be such that when one says **yes**, it means **yes**, and when he says **no**, that is just what he means (cf. Matt. 5:37). The soon return of the Lord, the Judge who stands at the door (James 5:9), is motivation enough for this kind of honesty and trustworthiness, lest one **be condemned** (lit., “fall under judgment”).

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Types of Wisdom (James 3:13-18)

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.

Wisdom that leads to good conduct and works (13)

Conduct that is worthy of the gospel of Jesus (Phil 1:27)

27 Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel,

Conduct that is an example (1 Tim 4:12)

12 Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

Conduct that is without covetousness (Heb 13:5)

5 Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Conduct that is honorable (1 Peter 2:12)

12 having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Conduct that makes evildoers ashamed and turn to God (1 Peter 3:15-16)

15 But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; 16 having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.

Conduct that shows we know God (Jer 9:23-24)

23 Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, Let not the mighty man glory in his might, Nor let the rich man glory in his riches; 24 But let him who glories glory in this, That he understands and knows Me, That I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight," says the LORD.

Conduct that displays we are obedient to God's Word (Matt 7:24)

24 "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock:

Earthly wisdom (14-16)

Earthly wisdom does not glorify God (Rom 1:20-23)

21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,²³ and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man -- and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

Earthly wisdom does not understand spiritual things (1 Cor 2:14)

14 But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Earthly wisdom can be of the devil (John 8:44)

44 You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.

Earthly wisdom can pervert us away from God (Acts 13:10)

10 and said, "O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?"

Earthly wisdom is sensual, comes from ungodly lusts, and causes divisions (Jude 17-19)

18 how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. 19 These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit.

Godly wisdom (17-18)

Godly wisdom comes from God (Prov 2:6)

6 For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding;

Godly wisdom comes through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:8)

8 for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit,

Godly wisdom is pure (Titus 1:15)

15 To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.

Godly wisdom is beyond human understanding (Rom 11:33)

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

Godly wisdom is salvation to those who believe (1 Cor 1:21)

21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

Godly wisdom is in Jesus (1 Cor 1:30)

30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God -- and righteousness and sanctification and redemption --

Godly wisdom brings understanding and hope (Eph 1:17-18)

17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, 18 the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,

Godly wisdom teaches to redeem the time (Eph 5:15-17)

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, 16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Two Characteristics of Godly Wisdom (James 5:7-12)

7 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain.

8 You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

9 Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!

10 My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience.

11 Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord — that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

12 But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No," lest you fall into judgment.

Patience (7-10)

Patient while seeking God (Lam 3:25-26)

25 The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; 26 it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Patient while standing firm (Luke 21:19)

19 By standing firm you will gain life.

Patient while doing work produced by faith (1 Thess 1:3)

3 We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Patient while imitating those who will inherit God's promises (Heb 6:12)

12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

Patient and being still before God (Ps 37:7-9)

7 Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. 8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret — it leads only to evil. 9 For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.

Endurance (11-12)

Endurance that displays that one is living worthy (2 Thess 1:3-5)

3 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. 4 Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. 5 All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.

Endurance of hardships (2 Tim 2:3)

3 Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

Endurance that is rewarded by reigning with Jesus (2 Tim 2:12)

12 if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us;

Endurance that proves one is a child of God (Heb 12:7-9)

7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? 8 If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. 9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!

Endurance by standing firm (Matt 24:13)

13 but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Source of the Problem: Two Wisdoms (James 3:13-18)

13 Which of you is wise and understanding? By his good conduct he should show his works done in the gentleness that wisdom brings. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfishness in your hearts, do not boast and tell lies against the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come from above but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16 For where there is jealousy and selfishness, there is disorder and every evil practice. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, accommodating, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and not hypocritical. 18 And the fruit that consists of righteousness is planted in peace among those who make peace.³⁴

At this point in our text, one has to say, “How can it be that man can control every creature, but he cannot control his tongue? How can it be that while every natural entity produces one kind of fruit, the tongue produces both blessings and cursings?” I believe verses 13-18 answer these questions. In verse 1, James began this chapter by warning “wanna-be teachers” that they should keep silent. One of the main reasons these folks should not teach is because they would do it for the sake of their own egos, not for the edification of others. In other words, “wanna-be teachers” want to teach to show people how wise they are. Thus, the whole matter really comes down to wisdom.

The chart at the end of this lesson will summarize what I believe James is saying in verses 13-18. These verses are all about wisdom – two kinds of wisdom. There is a worldly wisdom that makes much of the teacher, of his style, and of the novelty of his content. We see this very clearly in the church at Corinth. Some folks were gaining a personal following, resulting in division (1 Corinthians 1:11-12). Paul refused to employ this kind of wisdom, but rather determined only to preach Christ and Christ crucified (1:23), even though it was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1:22-25). These slick teachers were arrogant and taught their brand of worldly wisdom by means of deceitful and manipulative methods. Paul refused to employ such methods (1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:2).

Worldly wisdom is from below; it is earthly, natural, demonic (3:15). God’s wisdom is from above. Worldly wisdom denies the truth, and in a selfish and boastful way, produces the fruit of “**disorder, every evil practice, and destruction**” (3:5-6, 10, 16). Worldly wisdom tends to be mere words. Heavenly wisdom certainly uses words, but it manifests itself in godly works. The wisdom from above consists of God-given wisdom and understanding (see James 1:5) that produces the fruit of purity (see 1:21, 27), a peaceable spirit which is gentle and accommodating (slow to anger, 1:19-20), and which is impartial (contrast 2:1-3) and not hypocritical (see 2:15-16).

Man is a fallen creature, and this is painfully evident wherever we look. A Christian is a “**new creation**” in Christ, but he is also a person whose flesh is weak, and who cannot withstand temptation in the power of the flesh (see Romans 7). The same mouth may sometimes speak divine wisdom, while at other times, it speaks human wisdom. This explains why man is unique among the creatures God has made. If one is truly wise, he will control his tongue, and as a result, he will be slow (reluctant) to speak.

In the abundance of words transgression is not lacking;
but the one who refrains his lips is wise (Proverbs 10:19).

The shrewd person conceals knowledge,
but the heart of fools publicizes foolishness (Proverbs 12:23).

The person who is knowledgeable restrains his words,
and one who has discernment has a cool spirit (Proverbs 17:27).

A fool takes no pleasure in understanding
but rather in disclosing what is on his mind (Proverbs 18:2).

The one who guards his mouth and his tongue
keeps his life from troubles (Proverbs 21:23).

Do you see someone who is hasty in his words?
There is more hope for a fool than for him (Proverbs 29:20).

Conclusion

As we seek to explore the implications and applications of this chapter, we must first turn to its meaning for those to whom it was specifically directed. “Wanna-be teachers” are instructed to be very reluctant to become teachers, knowing that more severe judgment will come to them *as teachers*. This text is not intended to discourage those who should teach. Timothy is one such teacher who needed to be encouraged – even prodded a bit – to teach:

11 **Command and teach these things.** 12 Let no one look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in your speech, conduct, love, faithfulness, and purity. 13 Until I come, **give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.** 14 Do not neglect the spiritual gift you have, given to you and confirmed by prophetic words when the elders laid hands on you. 15 Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that everyone will see your progress. 16 **Be conscientious about how you live and what you teach.** Persevere in this, because by doing so you will save both yourself and those who listen to you (1 Timothy 4:11-16, emphasis mine).

3 I am thankful to God, whom I have served with a clear conscience as my ancestors did, when I remember you in my prayers as I do constantly night and day. 4 As I remember your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. 5 I recall your sincere faith that was alive first in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice, and I am sure is in you. 6 Because of this **I remind you to rekindle God’s gift that you possess** through the laying on of my hands. 7 For God did not give us a Spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control (2 Timothy 1:3-7, emphasis mine).

1 I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom, 2 **preach the message, be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient, reprove, rebuke, exhort with complete patience and teaching** (2 Timothy 4:1-2, emphasis mine).

James is not concerned with encouraging the “Timothys” here, but with silencing those who, for self-serving reasons, were aspiring to be teachers. Throughout chapter 3, James has sought to show how dangerous the tongue can be, especially for the teacher who has an audience, or who therefore has the opportunity to inflame or poison (to follow through with his analogies) a large number of people. How many cults have been the fruit of a winsome teacher’s heresies? How many churches have been split by a teacher of error? How many seminaries have been corrupted by a charming teacher who departs from the truth of God’s Word? The damage that has been done – and is yet to be done – is great, and so is the judgment that will fall on those who teach with wrong motives and a wrong message.

This warning should not be viewed as though it were limited only to preachers and pastors. It applies to everyone who teaches. This includes both men and women, for women teach younger children in the Sunday school, and mothers teach their children at home. They also teach women’s Bible studies. Men teach in many different contexts as well, and they should heed these words of warning. In our church, we have an open worship meeting, where any man is free to stand and teach or share, and so this warning would certainly apply to all the men of the church.

In a somewhat different way, Paul also encourages people more generally to remain silent. We see this instruction regarding silence in several of Paul’s epistles:

9 Likewise the women are to dress in suitable apparel, with modesty and self-control. Their adornment must not be with braided hair and gold or pearls or expensive clothing, 10 but with good deeds, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. 11 A woman must learn quietly with all submissiveness. 12 But **I do not allow a woman to teach or have authority over a man. She must remain quiet** (1 Timothy 2:9-12, emphasis mine).

26 What should you do then, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each one has a song, has a lesson, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all these things be done for the strengthening of the church. 27 If someone speaks³⁵ in a tongue, it should be two, or at the most three, and one after the other. And someone must interpret. 28 **But if there is no interpreter, he should be silent in the church. Let him speak to himself and to God.** 29 Two or three prophets should speak and let others evaluate what is said. 30 And **if someone seated receives a revelation, the person speaking should conclude.** 31 For you can all prophesy one after another, so all can learn and be encouraged. 32 Indeed, the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, 33 for God is not characterized by disorder but peace. As in all the churches of the saints, 34 **the women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak. Rather, let them be in submission, as in fact the law says.** 35 If they want to find out about something they should ask their husbands at home, **because it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church.** 36 Did the word of God begin with you, or did it come to you alone? (1 Corinthians 14:26-36, emphasis mine).

Silence can edify, just as speech can. When women obey Paul's instruction to remain silent, they demonstrate submission to their husbands, and to the instructions of the Word of God. But it is not just women who are to be silent. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul requires men not to speak in tongues when there is no one present to interpret. He requires a man to stop talking and to sit down and listen (to be "quick to hear"?) if another receives a revelation while he is speaking. Paul says that after two or three men have already exercised a particular gift (here it is tongues or prophecy), no one else should seek to exercise that gift in that particular meeting. That is enough of one good thing, and time for other forms of edification.

What I am trying to say is that there are times when every one of us should remain silent. According to James, every one of us should be reluctant to speak, rather than to compulsively strive to speak. There are some folks who should not speak at all. These are the folks who do not have the message of the gospel right, or they are motivated by selfish desires. But for all the rest of us – men and women – we need to learn when to be quiet and to listen to what others have to say. We may wish to rebuke or to complain when we should put up with our situation silently (see 1 Peter 2:18-3:2). We may wish to give advice when the wise thing to do is to keep silent. While there are many times when it would be wrong to remain silent, there seem to be at least as many times when it would be wrong to speak. Silence really can be golden.

Once again, James has returned to the relationship between our words and our works. The "wanna-be teachers" seem to be convinced that wisdom is a matter of words alone. James does not deny that wisdom is spoken in words, but he also wishes us to understand that wisdom is demonstrated in works. James tells us that the mouth is capable of incredible duplicity; it is capable of speaking words of blessing and words of cursing. We cannot know true wisdom by words alone. The person who is truly wise is the one who lives life skillfully (this is what Proverbs is about), so that we know to whom we should listen. Reading in James reminded me of these words of Paul:

31 Therefore be alert, remembering that night and day for three years I did not stop warning each one of you with tears. 32 And now I entrust you to God and to the message of his grace. This message is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. 33 **I have desired no one's silver or gold or clothing.** 34 **You yourselves know that these hands of mine provided for my needs and the needs of those who were with me.** 35 **By all these things, I have shown you that by working in this way we must help the weak,** and remember the words of the Lord Jesus that he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:31-35, emphasis mine).

16 Nevertheless, let us live up to the standard that we have already attained. 17 **Be imitators of me, brothers and sisters, and watch carefully those who are living this way, just as you have us as an example.** 18 For many live (about whom I often told you, and now say even with tears) as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, they exult in their shame, and they think about earthly things (Philippians 3:16-19, emphasis mine).

And what you learned and received and heard **and saw in me**, do these things. And the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:9, emphasis mine).

4 We know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 in that **our gospel did not come to you merely in speech**, but in power and in the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction (surely you recall the character we displayed when we came among you to help you). 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, when you received the message with joy that comes from the Holy Spirit, despite great affliction. 7 As a result you became examples to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:4-7, emphasis mine).

6 But we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from any brother who lives an undisciplined life and not according to the tradition you received from us. 7 For you know yourselves how **you must imitate us, because we did not behave without discipline among you, 8 and we did not eat anyone's food without paying. Instead, in toil and drudgery we worked night and day in order not to burden any of you. 9 It was not because we do not have that right, but to give ourselves as an example for you to imitate.** 10 For even when we were with you we used to give you this command: "If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10, emphasis mine).

In his speaking and writing, Paul could appeal to his audience to consider his lifestyle in order to see how he practiced what he preached. Paul's authority and credibility came, in part, from the way he lived out his life. His words and his works were consistent. What Paul preached, Paul practiced. Note, too, that when Paul lays down the qualifications for an elder, he calls for qualities in the candidate's life which are observable, and which demonstrate true wisdom:

1 This saying is trustworthy: "If someone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a good work." 2 The overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, 3 not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not contentious, free from the love of money. 4 He must manage his own household well and keep his children in control without losing his dignity. 5 But if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for the church of God? (1 Timothy 3:1-5).

Likewise, those who are false teachers will be known by their fruits:

15 "Watch out for false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are voracious wolves. 16 **You will recognize them by their fruit.** Grapes are not gathered from thorns or figs from thistles, are they? 17 In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree is not able to bear bad fruit, nor a bad tree to bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 7:20 So then, you will recognize them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:15-20, emphasis mine).

8 And just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these people—who have warped minds and are disqualified in the faith—also oppose the truth. 9 **But they will not go much further, for their foolishness will be obvious to everyone,** just like it was with Jannes and Jambres (2 Timothy 3:8-9, emphasis mine).

1 But false prophets arose among the people, just as there will be **false teachers** among you. These false teachers will infiltrate your midst with destructive heresies, even to the point of denying the Master who bought them. As a result, they will bring swift destruction on themselves. 2 And many will **follow their debauched lifestyles.** Because of these **false teachers**, the way of truth will be slandered. 3 And in their greed they will exploit you with **deceptive words. Their condemnation pronounced long ago is not sitting idly by;** their destruction is not asleep (2 Peter 2:1-3, emphasis mine).

Whether it be wisdom or folly, you can be certain that either will be evident in the works of a man. True wisdom is practical and practiced by those who would teach it.

It has been observed that the words of James are more like the words of Jesus than any other New Testament author. We can certainly see the similarity of James 3:8-12 with these words of our Lord:

43 "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, 44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from brambles. 45 The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for his mouth speaks from what fills his heart" (Luke 6:43-45).

The *heart* is the key to controlling the tongue. James is not calling for more will-power and determination to control our tongues. If the tongue is set ablaze by hell, then only heaven can help us. And God has provided us with this help. He has given those who have placed their trust in Him a new heart. We are to be keepers of the heart, so that the thoughts of our heart are on Him who died for us. As our hearts are filled with Him, with His Word, with His salvation and grace, then our lips will reveal the overflow of our hearts.

More than any act of guarding, guard your heart, for from it are the sources of life (Proverbs 4:23).

The fruit of our lips, then, reveals the condition of our hearts. In the Book of Romans, Paul turns to a number of Old Testament texts to show that we are all sinners, deserving of God's eternal wrath. A number of these focus on the tongue:

3:9 What then? Are we better off? Certainly not, for we have already charged that Jews and Greeks alike are all under sin, 3:10 just as it is written:

“THERE IS NO ONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE,
3:11 THERE IS NO ONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,
THERE IS NO ONE WHO SEEKS GOD.
3:12 ALL HAVE TURNED AWAY,
TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME WORTHLESS;
THERE IS NO ONE WHO SHOWS KINDNESS, NOT EVEN ONE.”
3:13 “THEIR THROATS ARE OPEN GRAVES,
THEY DECEIVE WITH THEIR TONGUES,
THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS.”
3:14 “THEIR MOUTHS ARE FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS” (Romans 3:9-14a).

Does your tongue betray the fact that you are a sinner, deserving of God’s eternal wrath? Then God has given us the solution in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Your acceptance of Christ’s provision for your salvation involves your heart and your tongue:

10:8 But what does it say? “*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*” (that is, the word of faith that we preach), 10:9 because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10:10 For with the heart one believes and thus has righteousness and with the mouth one confesses and thus has salvation. 10:11 For the scripture says, “*Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.*” 10:12 For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him. 10:13 For *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved* (Romans 10:8-13).

If you have never acknowledged your sin, I urge you to do so this very day. If you desire the freedom of God’s forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life, then I would urge you to do as Paul has indicated above – believe in your heart that Jesus died for your sins and that God raised Him from the dead. Trust in Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It is through Him alone that we can be saved.

(Adapted from URL:<https://bible.org/seriespage/3-taming-tongue-james-31-18>)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Today's lesson brings two disparate passages together under one unifying theme: the supremacy of the wisdom from above, and the need for it in a variety of situations. Teachers, then as now, can wreak great spiritual damage through the spoken word among those they teach. Ordinary believers, suffering greatly under economic oppression, negate the gospel and its power by harboring bitterness against fellow Christians. Both circumstances damage Christian witness to others. The solution is for Christians to seek “the wisdom that comes from heaven” (James 3:17). When armed with it, we can put suffering into a larger perspective and be empowered with perseverance to endure until Jesus returns. We all face challenges over the course of our lives. The real question is how we will react when those times come. Will we pause to seek wisdom from above? Or will we rely on earthly wisdom in our response? The need for wisdom from above and perseverance go hand in hand as our discipline and resolve are tested. All this has a very real bearing on our spiritual well-being in this life; continual rejection of God's wisdom has eternal implications. As we heed James's call to seek wisdom from above, we will experience a harvest of righteousness. Guaranteed.

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary

Earthly Wisdom - James warned against following worldly wisdom and pointed out its destructive results. The person with worldly wisdom is violent, critical, and constantly provoking negativity. This person's spirit is bitter and self-seeking, causes divisions, and is boastful, sensual, and deceptive. This person's mind works against the things of God and possesses no true wisdom at all. He or she is self-centered and working against God.

Wisdom from Heaven - Wisdom is an invisible inner quality. However, wisdom's characteristics manifest themselves in the daily activity of the believer, for all to see. James added the word meekness to the definition of this virtue, possessing humility and gentleness. Godly wisdom results in pure motives and attitudes. Like the Father, His children should be patient and kind. One scholar called it "sweet reasonableness," extending graciousness and treating others the way you would want to be addressed. It is a decision to willingly look at people and issues from different sides rather than being inflexible. In this wisdom is no sign of harsh, unfair judging. It has no hidden agendas, avoids conflict, and honestly desires the best for others.

Hold On: Jesus Will Return - James encouraged his fellow Christian brothers and sisters to exercise perseverance, especially in light of their present difficulties. When facing persecution and unjust treatment, he said to keep in mind that Jesus is coming back. He will eventually put everything in order. It is like a farmer who plants seeds, knows they are coming up, but cannot see any immediate results. We keep meditating on the sure reality—Jesus is coming back to take His children home. In the meantime, we are loving toward each other. When we are going through a hard time, it is easy to take out frustrations on whoever is standing in our way. However, we must be gentle, patient, and friendly. God shows His love and sustains us throughout hard times. Even in our pain, the Lord will accomplish His plans and purposes. We don't depend on our own reasoning—we know that He will guide us better than we can ourselves.