

## Seeking Wisdom

Jonathan K. Dodson | James 4:13-17 | September 2013

Last week we introduced the book of James with three images: the mirror, the arrow, and the crown. It's a picture for the whole book. The mirror is God's royal law, which tells us what is true, who God is, and how to live. The crown of life is a combination of God's favor and eternal life. The arrow is the path from the mirror to the crown. It's how you get there. It's the person who perseveres through life, hoping in the crown. You might say the crown of life is the bait (without a hook); it's the reward. Now, the challenge is to truly persevere, to stand steadfast with character and conviction, to become a better you over time. To do this, we need *wisdom*. What is wisdom? How do we get it? How do you use it to make decisions? Before we get on with moving straight through the letter, let's gather James' wisdom on wisdom, so we are all on the same page about how to persevere, how to be a better version of ourselves, who so follow the arrow, they gain the crown.

### Wisdom From Above

If you had to explain wisdom to someone, what would you say? Wisdom is good advice, captured in sayings like: "Fail to plan and you plan to fail"? Sounds like a hard won lesson. I've discovered that the more I plan my week with my wife, the less confusion we run into. It brings us together, integrates us in heart and mind. We do it every Sunday night together, going through the week to decide who we want to host, how to spend our time, what to do with kids. We get easily divided when we don't do it. But you don't need to know God to know this; it's *common wisdom*. James says there's an *uncommon wisdom*: "[Who is wise and understanding among you? \(jump down to his conclusion\) 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" \(17-18\)](#). Wisdom, it appears, has to do with peace. It is peaceable, sows in peace, and is characteristic of peacemakers. Busy, frantic, divided people are far from peaceful, adrift from the shores of wisdom. Let's clear the fog. Look with me in 17. Wisdom three things: **from above**, first pure, and full of good fruits. These three phrases, I believe, frame wisdom very well. I've been told I'm growing some wisdom. Five years ago I didn't have a single grey hair, now my beard is peppered with them. Does wisdom come with age? Austin songwriter David Ramirez says: "The biggest lie I've heard is that wisdom comes with age." Well, it's not the biggest lie you'll hear, but it is a lie. Wisdom isn't waiting for you at the end of your 30's, 40s, 50s, or 60s. There are a lot of old, foolish people. Yet, a lot of us think "If I just had a 60 year old mentor, then I'd know what to do. Mentors are a privilege, but they aren't essential for wisdom. Then where do we find wisdom? James says, "[wisdom comes from above](#)" (3:17). It has a certain perspective, an angle, a way of seeing the world, your circumstances, your life. Perspective can change everything. Take a look at this [image]. You've seen it before. Is the woman young or old? It depends on your perspective, on the angle you take. Perspective makes a difference. Wisdom comes from above, not ahead or around. It is the same place that every good and perfect comes from (1:17). What does he mean? The above/below imagery isn't just spatial; it's—if I can use this word—*eschatological* (*the last things, end times—better—the place God dwells*). God sees things from the future. *Just think, if you knew the future, would it change your decisions in the present? When stocks would soar, when a car wreck was going to happen?* Of course it would.

You'd be foolish not to follow your insight from the future. God sees things from the future, so wouldn't it be wise to follow his counsel? **True wisdom comes from God's vantage point** but his perspective isn't just "from the future"; it's beyond the future. It is the vantage point of the kingdom of God, a kingdom beyond what we can presently see, feel, taste, and touch, with values that often run counter to our culture. The wisdom from above is from a King who knows how everything works, how humans flourish. *Wisdom is how life works.* We are made to be guided by kingdom compass, by a perspective we don't inherently possess. We all know it deep down, which is why we search for God and pray. Human counsel is all over the map, but the wisdom from above has an unimpeachable quality to it. It's beyond prosecution or error. How do I know? James says, "[But the wisdom from above is first pure](#)" (17).

### **First Pure**

Proverbs, the classic wisdom text, shows us two women. One is seductive, who beckons us in, to delight in her pleasures, her name is Folly. The other is classy, elegant, a real lady. She opens her seven-pillared home for us to discover riches. Her name is Wisdom. She is pure. James says wisdom is *first pure*. Why? Because impure counsel isn't wise counsel. The word "pure" means blameless, flawless, perfect. In its perfection, it has a moral quality to it. James contrasts it with "[the wisdom that does not come down from above,](#)" a kind of counsel motivated [by bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts](#)" (3:14). James calls this earthy, unspiritual, demonic. Isn't demonic over the top? Not really. Think about what demons do. They oppose your very nature, and try to distort you, to move you away from blameless, wholeness. To understand the difference between wisdom from above and below, let's examine the earthly, which is motivated by **jealousy**. Jealousy doesn't look above; it looks around. Take for example, a single woman who came to you and said, "I'm jealous. You have a husband. I've been waiting so long. I found this really great guy. He's got a great job and is fun. He's not a follower of Christ, but I'm gonna date him." The counsel that isn't from above will listen, empathize, and promise to pray for you, and entirely ignore the jealousy, ignore God's perspective, and let her friend date her way into bed with a non-Christian. Why is this bad counsel? Because it props up a bad path as a good; it opposes the truth. What truth? I know this rubs some of you wrong. It sounds prudish. But let's play the counsel out. They date, start sleeping together, he begins to lose interest, starts overworking, wants her to move in with him. Eventually, the relationship wears thin. He's moved on with his buddies. She feels neglected, envious of his time, and throws herself into her career. Notice that jealousy popped up again. A relationship started in jealousy is a relationship destined for destruction. It isn't built on mutual respect, self-sacrifice, and belief that marriage exists ultimately for God. Instead, she built the relationship out of an insatiable need for self-fulfillment, something no human can give. God made us for him. "Our souls are restless until they find their rest in Thee." - Augustine Wisdom from above insists on purity because it's what we are made for, when we're in step with it, we line ourselves up with God's perspective, step into his light, and enjoy his blessing, wholeness. If your counsel is impure, it's not wise. You're going against the grain of how you were made. Some of you need to love people enough to give them counsel that is first pure. Another quality that contaminates wisdom is **selfish ambition**, which refuses to look up and only looks straight ahead, running over others in pursuit of glory. A husband or father may stay in the office late, connect at late happy hours, remain attached to social media, and neglect

his family. Why? Because if he's at the events, if he makes the right connections, he can get a better position, salary, house, car, savings, and so on. "It's for the family," he tells himself, meanwhile the family is utterly neglected. Selfish ambition is blind ambition, it blinds you to other things and people. Its singular focus—success, approval, conquest—lets all else fall to the side. He looks up ten years later and his wife is gone, his kids are embittered, and he has a bunch of stuff. Selfish ambition. James calls this friendship with the world, cozying up to power structures for personal gain. Now, are sex and money bad? Not at all. They're just the wrong target. Money can put food on the table, but wisdom puts laughter around the table. Money can buy a house, but wisdom makes it a home (Waltke). Wisdom that takes God's perspective, and insists on holy living, is how we live whole, peaceable lives. I've met Christians in Africa who are dirt poor, but live under the wisdom from above, and are rich in happiness. If you've been sucked in by the demonic, life distorting counsel, there is hope. Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil. James says resist the devil and he will flee, submit to God. How does the devil flee? When we submit to God, not to our impure counsel, modern ethics, or the influence of peers, but to the wisdom from above that is flawless. You give up your perspective for God's perspective. It's called trust. How do you know God is trustworthy? Look at Jesus. Jesus is the wisdom that comes from above. He defies prevailing convention and save-your-self counsel. Even his closest friends called him away from the cross (get behind me Satan), but Jesus insists on our wholeness all the way through his broken body, into death, and out the other side. Praise God he deafened his ears to bad counsel, and followed the path from above, to secure forgiveness for people who insist on their own way, they're perspective. Jesus is trustworthy because he was the innocent suffering for the guilty. There's a purity in him we can't find other places. True wisdom originates with something so pure it can never be wrong or wrongly motivated. It is soaked in one hundred percent goodness, better than anything or anyone you know. Flawless beauty, shimmering white perfection, makes God the only true starting place for wisdom: "Christ the power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24).

### **Full of Good Fruits**

Finally, wisdom is "full of mercy and good fruit" (13). "[Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom](#)" (3:13). Its awkward wording. *He's saying that wisdom works*. Wisdom is how life works—in Christ—but wisdom also does work. Wisdom doesn't hang in the ether. It doesn't descend upon the old. The wise get wisdom into their lives, into their deeds. You can tell someone "selfish ambition is blind ambition," but if you're driven for success yourself, then you're not wise. Wisdom is fruitful; it leads to the good life. How? "[Your conduct shows in your works in the meekness of wisdom](#)" (14). Wisdom works *in meekness*. You have to be humble in order to become wise. In secular culture, humility is the way down. Don't tell people your flaws, they will think less of you. Instead, impress them. In the kingdom, humility is the way up. Because of Jesus, you can be confident in what God thinks of you, so you can show your true colors. You can be wrong, be instructed by others, and receive God's perspective. Wisdom says: God knows better. That's hard for sophisticated urbanites who pride themselves on their progressive views and niche knowledge. The universal prerequisite to wisdom is hunger; you have to want it so bad that you'll seek, knock, and ask for it. And if you do, the door will be opened, opened for you to walk through it. To live wisely, to persevere, to put counsel to grindstone of life. We do this in Fight Clubs and City

Groups. Get with some folks and invite wisdom, then put wisdom to work. To some of you this is daunting. You'll need to change your whole approach to life. For others, you know this but needed the reminder. This is lifelong stuff, but it's worth it. Why should you endure? Sow to wholeness/peace and you'll reap a whole harvest of righteousness in this life and finally in the life to come. The age of the crown is hard to imagine, but its true.

Lewis: "At present we are on the outside of the world, on the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of the morning but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But...some day, God willing, we shall get in." If you're in Christ, you're already in, and through his wisdom and grace you can pull freshness and purity right into your life even now.