

Worldly Wisdom is Bitter, Godly Wisdom Sweet

James 3:13-18 • 2021-09-26



Have you ever had to distinguish between a poison berry and an edible one? It's not always easy just by looking at the surface. Growing up my family had a yard filled with all kinds of edible fruits. We had currents, grapes, raspberries, plums, and a variety of edible food in every corner of our large yard. There were even wild strawberries and grapes covering the woods nearby. And I could just grab one in season and have a snack. They all looked delicious, and they all tasted great. But there was one wild plant growing around my grandma's lake home which looked particularly sweet. It grew nestled right along with all the raspberries as if they were a promising treat. But those berries were a lie. It surprised me that those bright red berries were actually poisonous. At a young age that was confusing to me because every other fruit was tasty. Those with the brightest colors were often the best. But that's not always the case. Some are bitter poison. The same is true regarding people and their wisdom. Today we look at how the apostle James contrasts two different types of wisdom. There is worldly wisdom and godly wisdom. And it doesn't matter how much a person might boast. Only one type of wisdom produces fruit that is truly good. We'll look at James chapter 3. We'll learn how worldly wisdom is bitter but godly wisdom sweet.

James presents a challenge: "Who among you is wise and intelligent?" We know how the world would answer that question. It would look to the person who is shining the brightest and has the appearance of the best life. The world highly regards the person who is healthy, wealthy, and popular.

But James isn't interested in telling us how the world would answer his question. He wants us to know how God would answer it. *"Who is wise and intelligent? Let him by his good way of living show that he does things in wise humility."* A person's wisdom eventually becomes evident by their life. There might be a healthy fitness model or athlete that everyone admires and looks up to. But how can you go on admiring the healthy and fit sports hero when you discover they can't even get along with their teammates or their own brother or sister? Is that something we should emulate or envy? And the wealthy businesspeople and celebrities might have the world's attention and piles of wealth to flaunt. But who cares if they can attend an award ceremony or gala in a flashy dress if their way of life is tattered and broken by addiction or abuse? And maybe you once envied the popularity of that classmate in high school or college. But did that envy continue when you found out not even his own wife considered him popular enough to hang out with anymore because he chased after other women? Putting on a show of being worldly wise is easy but walking in true wisdom is not.

Ironically, James says the wise person doesn't show it to everyone. You won't see the wise person boasting. They won't be the person flaunting their body or skill. They won't be the person making a show of their wealth. They won't be the person who likes to jump up on the stage and be the center of attention at the party. James points out that true wisdom shows itself as a person lives with good character but does it all in humility. James says, "Let the person who is wise show it." But he actually doesn't mean for them to boast! He means let them live in humility.

The worldly wise, however, like to put on a show. They are like the bright poison berry that makes everyone think they are wise. To that person James says, "Stop it! You're not fooling God and you're not fooling his people who see your life!" *"If you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not boast and lie, contrary to the truth."* You see, a person who has worldly wisdom can blend in like a bitter and poisonous fruit. They can ascend to positions of leadership and be praised by many. Others can look at the surface of their life and be amazed at what they have accomplished. But inside there can be a poison which ruins every bit of godly wisdom and goodness in all they do. James points to the sins which sit in the heart, often unseen by others: envy and selfish ambition.

And this is where it gets hard for us. James's challenge regarding true wisdom isn't designed for those sports heroes, wealthy icons, and movie stars in the world out there. His challenge is directed at believers -at us. James knows that among the believers there can be those who appear great, but are really rotten on the inside, filled with bitterness. And the root source of that bitterness is envy and selfish ambition.

Remember what we read earlier in Mark 9 about Jesus' disciples? They argued among themselves about who was the greatest! Isn't that what we are tempted to do throughout our lives too? Envy and selfish ambition can be found in every heart. Have you ever witnessed one co-worker tearing down another? Have you ever done it to those around you? You know how it works. You share your pitch of the truth in a way that makes them look as bad as possible. All the while you're able to put on a show of being good and wise. You greet them in the morning and are polite to them on the surface. But do you sometimes gossip behind their back? Is there a family member whom you struggle to say a kind word to? What is the cause? Might it sometimes be envy on your part? Do you have a struggling relationship one someone close to you? I know how much selfish ambition can tear one apart. James tells us, "Stop pretending you're wise if you harbor envy and selfish ambition in your heart. Others can't always detect it. But you're lying. It's a bitter poison."

Have you ever watched one of those extra features that come with a movie that details the behind-the-scenes filming? To me it seems as if there is something a little off about one of the types of extra features. Maybe you know what I'm talking about. It's that extra feature which has all the actors in the film talking about how great the other actors in the film are. They praise the director and other actors as phenomenal. What seems off to me is that this isn't really a behind the scenes extra feature. It is just another way the actors get to promote their own film as one of the best films. On the surface it all seems so humble as they heap praise on each other. But when you put it all together it is really self-serving boasting. You will often find actors turning on each other years later and describing how awful it was to work with certain movie stars. Maybe those put on the screen aren't always what they portray themselves to be. But isn't it like that for everyone? Doesn't everyone put some sort of false front on to present themselves as better than they really are -especially when they are given a platform to boast? Just look at some of the things you will find on people's social media. They will share their photoshopped best moments. But what is behind the camera the rest of the day? What is behind your polite front and social media posts? Some Christian men will attend church and be polite among others, but then get drunk and yell at their own wife and children. Some will put on a show. In what area of your life are you tempted to just put on a show of wisdom but have poison within? It might fool some, but it's not fooling God.

What does worldly wisdom come from? Worldly wisdom is not from above but is "worldly, unspiritual, and demonic." James is referring here to the three chief enemies of God. These three are found throughout Scripture and summarize the sources of evil around us and within us. When we boast of our wisdom and are driven by envy and selfish ambition we are not just going to crumble and fail. We are serving the enemies of God. To chase after worldly wisdom is to love the unbelieving world and to hate God. To harbor envy and selfish ambition in our hearts is to let our sinful flesh drive us instead of the Holy Spirit. To strive in envy and to tear others down isn't just impolite, it is demonic and serves the purposes of the devil. There are some who speculate that envy was the devil's downfall. They may be right. The devil envied God's position, so he rebelled. The devil envied all the gifts which God gave the man and woman in the garden, so he sought to bring them down and take it all away. Envy sees what God has graciously given others. And instead of rejoicing in a gracious God it despises his gifts. Selfish ambition puts your own agenda ahead of God's will and the good of others.

And what is the fruit of worldly wisdom? *"Where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and every bad practice."* Look at a home where siblings are always comparing with one another and striving to get ahead of the other. It will be a divided house. Look at a church council where one man is trying to take over and get his way. It will be a divided and lost council. Look at the marriage where one of the partners is coveting what his neighbor has. That marriage will be filled with bad habits that will bring ruin. To live by the world, the flesh, and the devil leaves us with the fate of them all. We will be judged with this world, we will be punished according to our sinful flesh, and we will share the fate of the devil and his angels—all the demons in hell. That is indeed a bitter end for worldly wisdom!

But there is wisdom that comes from above. James' description of that type of wisdom gives it an entirely different source. Instead of coming from the three chief enemies of God, it comes from the Triune God. God the Father in his great wisdom sent his Son to come down from above. Jesus, the Son of God is wisdom in the flesh. James lists off the description of the wisdom from above and in doing so he perfectly describes the man Jesus. The wisdom from above is pure and holy. Jesus lived without sin as the perfect Son of God. His character and life showed true wisdom. He is peaceful. Jesus did not come to tear down the sinner, but to bring the sinner peace. He loved that peace so much he came to be our source of peace. He came humble and gentle. The word my Bible translates as "reasonable" here can also be translated as "submissive or obedient." Jesus submitted to the Father's will and obeyed. Jesus was full of mercy and good fruits. Those fruits poured out everywhere he went. Jesus was impartial, that is, he didn't exclude anyone who came to him seeking forgiveness. Jesus is sincere. When he speaks it is true and will always be true.

Here is true wisdom. It is described in wisdom coming down from heaven to be our Savior: *"Indeed, let this attitude be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. Though he was by nature God, he did not consider equality with God as a prize to be displayed, but he emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant. When he was born in human likeness, and his appearance was like that of any other man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."* (Php 2:5–8) The devil came into the world with envy and destruction. The Son of God came into the world with humility and rescue. And God exalted him and made him the king of peace with a harvest to gather.

The harvest of wisdom from above is sweet! *"A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who practice peace."* It is a harvest of peace. We are rescued from hell and belong to our God. Through his life and death, a seed was sown which will produce a new and good crop. His life took our place. His death our death. And we get the sweet fruits of wisdom from above that brings us peace. It is an everlasting peace because he lives forever!

There are two kinds of wisdom. One is of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. The other is from above. One is humble, the other boasts. One deceives and lies, the other lives by the truth. One produces disorder and evil, the other mercy and peace. Who is wise? He who follows and trusts in Christ. Turn from bitter lies to his forgiveness and peace won on the cross. Produce sweet peace. Worldly wisdom has a bitter root, godly wisdom produces good fruit.