

August 30 Lesson 13 (NIV)

TWO KINDS OF WISDOM

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 32:1-11

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 3:13-18; 5:7-12

JAMES 3:13-18

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. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

JAMES 5:7-12

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. ⁹ Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

¹⁰ Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

¹² Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned.

KEY VERSE

The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. —James 3:17

MANY FACES OF WISDOM

Unit 3: Faith and Wisdom in James

LESSONS 9–13

LESSON OUTLINE

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- A. How to Suffer
- B. Lesson Context
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 - A. Good Teachers (v. 13)
What Ministers Must Know
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 - C. Heavenly Wisdom (vv. 17, 18)
A Peaceful Approach
- II. In Persecution (JAMES 5:7–12)
 - A. Be Patient (vv. 7–11)
 - B. Do Not Swear (v. 12)

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- A. From Above
- B. Prayer
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HOW TO SAY IT

CorinthiansKo-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

DeuteronomyDue-ter-ahn-uh-me.

GalatiansGuh-lay-shunz.

PhilemonFih-lee-mun or Fye-lee-mun.

PhilippiansFih-lip-ee-unz.

TitusTy-tus.

Introduction

A. How to Suffer

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?

B. Lesson Context

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; lesson 9). 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.

I. In Education (JAMES 3:13–18)

James 3:1–12, last week’s lesson, introduced an address to teachers and potential teachers among first-century churches specifically. Even so, we proposed extended application to all Christians. We wonder, however, if the remainder of James 3 is also addressed specifically to teachers and potential teachers since James does not use the words *teachers* in these six verses. Ultimately, though, such a question is only hypothetical; it’s impossible to imagine these verses applying only to teachers and not to anyone else!

A. Good Teachers (v. 13)

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.

By speaking of the one *who is wise and understanding*, James likely continues to have the teachers in mind. He introduces the issue in a confrontational way: “So you think you’re wise and understanding?” he seems to ask. “Then prove it by living *a good life*.” The word in the original language refers to one’s entire way of life or lifestyle. This word occurs in a dozen other New Testament passages.

The teacher’s pattern of life must manifest good *deeds*; a teacher must put into practice personally what is taught. We see this idea of matching talk with way of life repeatedly in the New Testament: the truth of Christian teaching is verified by the way of life of those who teach it.

The apostle Peter seems equally concerned with the relationship between good deeds and one’s lifestyle (1 Peter 2:12). A teacher’s understanding—or claims of having understanding—must be backed up with evidence (see James 2:18; lesson 11). There is a word for those who say one thing but do another. That word is *hypocrite*.

The word translated *humility* carries much overlap in meaning with the word *gentleness*. Paul connects the two Greek words that way in 2 Corinthians 10:1 and Titus 3:2 (there translated “considerate” and “gentle”).

B. Earthly Wisdom (vv. 14–16)

14. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

Envy translates a word that can also be rendered “zeal,” as it is in John 2:17—that’s zeal in a good sense. The lesson verse before us portrays zeal in a bad sense, as an attitude that crosses over into inappropriate jealousy (Romans 13:13; etc.). That such envy is *bitter* suggests that it manifests itself in anger and harsh speaking.

It is conceivable in this context that teachers might harbor envy of each other’s gifts. This would result in strife, as it had in Corinth (compare 1 Corinthians 1:10–13; 11:18). If this is the case, there is no reason for any of James’s readers to *boast about* their understanding or their (so-called) wisdom. Such behavior will seem from the outside to prove that their teaching is a lie. Thus it brings disrepute to *the truth* of the gospel they proclaim.

15. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

James has articulated the standard: lives must match words. But the reality is that at least some among James’s readership do not meet this standard. They adhere to their own *wisdom*, a wisdom that *does not come down from heaven*, meaning that it is not from God (contrast James 1:17). All one has to do is consider its fruits in 3:14 to see this! We might say that *earthly* wisdom is “worldly.” The idea is the same: it does not originate from God.

Unspiritual is the very opposite of spiritual (see also Jude 19)—devoid of the Spirit of God. The condemnation *demonic* reinforces the identity of its source (compare 1 Timothy 4:1).

16. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

All of this should be no surprise: worldly wisdom leads to bad outcomes. In this case, it leads to *disorder and every evil practice* (compare Galatians 5:19–21). The communal impact of this “wisdom” is damaging in the extreme. It threatens the very integrity of the churches.

C. Heavenly Wisdom (vv. 17, 18)

17. 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.

There is a better choice! The adjectives that James applies to *the wisdom that comes from heaven*, from God, call to mind Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23). Most of these terms are clear because they are used in a manner that is consistent with the other writers of the New Testament.

Submissive means something like “willing to yield” or “open to reason.” To be *impartial* goes hand in hand with having sincerity (compare James 1:22, 26; 2:1–4, 9).

18. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

The desired goal of one who seeks true wisdom is peace. Heretofore, the teachers may have been fostering (or at least haven’t tried to stop) conflicts among themselves (James 4:1). Those who are *peacemakers*, however, are said to *sow in peace* (compare Matthew 5:9; Romans 14:19). *A harvest of righteousness* can be both what is sown and what is harvested as a cycle of peace begins. Righteousness is inclusive of one’s words and one’s works (compare Philippians 1:11).

II. In Persecution (JAMES 5:7–12)

In order best to understand James's directives in 5:7–12, next, we have to understand that these are in response to the first six verses of the chapter. A strong argument can be made that 5:1–6 is spoken against landlords who are unbelievers. We notice that they are not called to repent but to “weep and wail” in light of the coming judgment (James 5:1; contrast 4:7–10).

Such landowners come from the handful of rich outsiders who make life miserable for many of their tenant farmers and/or day laborers. It is unlikely that such landlords ever hear or read these words themselves. Instead, the accusations are written for the benefit of impoverished Christians of Jewish background to whom the letter as a whole is addressed (note the 14 uses of the phrase “brothers and sisters”; James 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1; etc.).

A. Be Patient (vv. 7–11)

7. Be patient, then brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

James is writing to a group of believers who have cause to be angry and despondent. The phrase *brothers and sisters* indicates that James's words are not intended for the rich landlord unbelievers of James 5:1–6 (see above), but for Christians who suffer at their hands.

James points the oppressed believers to *the Lord's coming* as the ultimate solution. This might seem like a cop-out to some modern readers who are used to enacting change through the democratic process. But we have to remember that the world of the first century AD has no such process. Appeal for change might be made to the consciences of those who have the power to make a change (see Philemon 8–17). But hope for change ultimately resides in taking the long view, which looks to the return of Christ.

The patience this requires is illustrated by an analogy of a *farmer*. To await Jesus' return requires *patiently waiting* on the part of believers (compare Galatians 6:9). Just as the farmer waits patiently for his crop, the poor, oppressed believers are to wait patiently for the coming of God's judgment. Because God can be trusted to send a harvest in its time (Deuteronomy 11:14; Jeremiah 5:24; Joel 2:23), Jesus can also be trusted to return as he has promised.

The seasons of rain mentioned may not be similar to our experience. In Israel it is quite rare for rain to fall between May 1 and October 15. Thus *the autumn and spring rains* refers to rain that comes during the rest of the year (compare Song of Songs 2:11). Since James's addressees are “scattered among the nations” (James 1:1), their experience will differ by location. But they probably know of the crop and weather cycles of the land of Israel, at least from what Scripture tells them about it.

8. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

Just like the farmer of verse 7, James's audience is to be *patient*. This no less applies to us today. The counsel to *stand firm*, or be strengthened, speaks to one's inner resolve. Christians must be resolute and courageous in earthly circumstances while awaiting *the Lord's coming*. Such resolve will involve rejecting the negative views of skeptics (2 Peter 3:3–15; etc.).

9a. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged.

Why would James's addressees be holding grudges *against one another*? Based on what James has said about their oppressors, we could certainly understand how many in James's audience

might be tempted to hold grudges against those who have mistreated them. But that is not what James deals with in this verse.

One possibility is that those to whom James writes are taking out their frustrations with their rich oppressors on each another. Perhaps they disagree about how to handle the situation. Perhaps their oppressive situations are unequal, resulting in covetousness of a fellow believer's assets or circumstances. Regardless, they are in danger of being *judged* unless they stop holding grudges (compare James 4:11, 12). It would be tragic indeed if the judgment that God has prepared for their oppressors also comes on some of them because of failure in this regard.

9b. The Judge is standing at the door!

This warning implies the imminent return of the Lord (see on James 5:8, above). That he is *standing at the door* can mean “expected very soon” or “can happen at any time.” Either understanding is cause for repentance! Sin must be put aside immediately. When Christians harbor bitterness toward one another, they lose their witness.

10. Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Because of the strong opposition they faced, *the prophets* are examples to James's readers (and to all future generations of believers) *of patience in the face of suffering*. They endured so much (Matthew 5:12). As Hebrews 11:33, 37, 38 says, these were men

who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions.... They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—he world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

The prophets are thus examples to all Christians of all eras in their faith-based manner of life. They did not merely speak the words of God; rather, they lived out their faith and trusted in him by action.

But above all, the prophets were patient. The nations of Israel and Judah heard the words of the prophets and ignored them. We know that this was frustrating for the men who were called to prophetic ministry. It required a great deal of patience for them to keep preaching God's message of repentance to people who would not listen and would not obey—to their own destruction.

11a. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered.

This phrase speaks of the prophets as those *who have persevered*. The language is reminiscent of the blessing found in the Sermon on the Mount at Matthew 5:11, 12:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

11b. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

This leads James to another example of *perseverance* and patience: that of *Job* (see Job 1:20–22; 2:10). *What the Lord finally brought about* refers to the Lord's purpose in allowing Job to suffer as he did (compare Hebrews 10:36).

Consider the outcomes of *Job's* suffering (see Job 42:10, 12–17). Those outcomes cause us to see the grace of the Lord, that he is *full of ... mercy* (see Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 103:8).

B. Do Not Swear (v. 12)

12. Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned.

Jesus appears by name only twice in this letter (James 1:1; 2:1). Even so, James regularly alludes to his teachings, particularly as recorded in Matthew and Luke, and frequently from the Sermon on the Mount. The verse before us offers the clearest connection in that regard, which features a direct quotation from Matthew 5:34–37. Elsewhere the teachings of Jesus bubble just below the surface of James's discussions of wealth and poverty, suffering, wisdom, the control of the tongue, and much more.

The verse at hand caps off this section of James' letter. The phrase *above all* implies that the swearing of oaths is the most egregious sin that the original readers are engaged in. Some commentators argue that oath-swearing is the most serious because a broken oath directly involves God in a lie. We can envision situations in which poor Christians are tempted to swear oaths in order to obtain credit for food, all the while knowing they might not be able to pay the bill when it is due. In other words, the swearing of an oath involves them in behavior that does not glorify God—quite the opposite! We note the negative outcomes of oaths in Matthew 14:6–12; 23:16–22; and elsewhere.

Conclusion

A. From Above

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.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, by the power of your Holy Spirit this day, help us to focus our hearts and minds on the wisdom that is from above—your wisdom. We ask this in the name of the wisest person who ever lived: Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Choose God's wisdom.¹
