WISDOM FOR HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

James 3:13-18

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While I was on vacation, someone left a story on my desk that I have used before, but I’ll tell it again. A guy was marooned on a deserted island. When a ship came to his rescue, the captain learned that the man had lived alone on this island for five years. He noticed three huts, so he asked the man about them.

The man pointed to one and said that he lived there. He pointed to the second hut and said that he went to church there. “What about that third hut?” the captain asked. The man replied, “Oh, that’s where I used to go to church.” The version that I heard added that the man was a Baptist!

We all desire harmonious relationships, and yet many Christian churches and homes are marked by frequent conflict. Being Christians, we put a spiritual face on our side of things to make it look as if we’re defending the truth or standing on principle. There is certainly a place for defending the truth, as you know. But there is a right and a wrong way to contend for the truth. The great defender of the faith, Paul, wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 2:24-26), “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.”

He did not say, as many today would have us believe, “Don’t get into disputes about the truth, because love is more important than doctrine.” He did say to correct those who are in opposition to the truth, but to do it with kindness, patience, and gentleness.

The churches that James wrote to were experiencing conflict (we will see more of this next week in 4:1-2). When James writes (3:14), “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart,” the Greek conditional clause indicates that it was true.
James was not addressing a hypothetical situation that might arise in the future, but rather a real situation that already existed.

In the context, he began chapter 3 warning that not many should become teachers, because we will incur a stricter judgment. Then he broadened the exhortation to deal with a problem that we all wrestle with, the evil of a destructive tongue. In our text, James may still be focusing, at least in part, on those who would become teachers. Teachers are especially prone to boast in their knowledge and wisdom. They easily may fall into jealousy against those who have a bigger audience than they do. They may succumb to wrong motives, serving out of selfish ambition, trying to attract people to themselves, rather than to Christ. So our text especially applies to all of us who teach God’s Word.

But it also applies to every believer, in that James is showing us God’s wisdom that will lead to harmonious relationships. He contrasts it with worldly “wisdom” that inevitably leads to conflict. The things he writes here apply to harmonious relationships in the church, but also in our homes and in all of life. James is saying,

For harmonious relationships, behave with godly wisdom, not with worldly “wisdom.”

First, the positive:

1. For harmonious relationships, behave with godly wisdom (3:13, 17).

In typical fashion, James sets his trap and then springs it! He asks (3:13a), “Who among you is wise and understanding?” Perhaps some of the self-appointed teachers were thinking, “I’m glad that you recognize my talents!” Then in his no-nonsense style, James springs the trap (3:13b): “Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.”

It’s easy to claim to have wisdom. James says, “Show me your wisdom by your life!” The old King James Bible uses the word “conversation” (NASB= “good behavior”), but in 1611 that word did not refer to speech, but to your way of life. Your deeds should display “the gentleness of wisdom.”

“Gentleness” is often translated “meekness.” It is one of the beatitudes (Matt. 5:5) and it is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). The
Greek word did not connote a mild, weak person who is always nice, but rather had the idea of strength under control. It was used of a tamed horse, which is powerful, but submissive to its master. A meek person may be very strong, but is completely submissive to God’s Spirit. Moses is described as the meekest man on the earth (Num. 12:3, LXX), yet he was a very strong leader. Jesus described Himself as meekest (Matt. 11:29), and yet He powerfully confronted the religious leaders and drove the moneychangers out of the temple. So neither “gentleness” nor “meekness” really communicate the true meaning of the Greek word.

James was steeped in the Old Testament, and the Hebrew word for “wisdom” has the nuance of skill. Specifically, the kind of wisdom that the Book of Proverbs exhorts us to seek is the skill to produce an attractive life in God’s sight. James may have had in mind Job 28:28, which in the LXX uses the same Greek words for wisdom and understanding. It reads, “And to man He said, ‘Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.’” True wisdom is based on knowledge, but it is more than knowledge. It is the ability to live in a manner pleasing to God because you understand His truth and you live in constant submission to His Spirit, applying that truth to all of life.

In 3:17, James tells us that the source of this wisdom is “from above.” This in line with Proverbs 2:6, which declares, “For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.” As we will see (3:15), there is a so-called worldly “wisdom,” but invariably it is at odds with God’s wisdom (see 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16). This is to say that if you want to be truly wise, you will only attain it by seeking God and the truth of His Word. In 3:17, James lists seven marks of godly wisdom.

(1) Godly wisdom is pure.

James underscores the primacy of purity when he writes, “first pure.” Without purity, it is not wisdom from above! The Greek word means to be unmixed, unalloyed, or untainted by any impurity. It may point to moral purity, but in the context here, it especially has the sense of being free from any jealousy or selfish ambition. In other words, it is focusing on our motives. If we seek wisdom so that we can lord it over others, or use it for our own advantage or power, it is not pure, godly wisdom. Our motive for
seeking wisdom or for using wisdom must always be to glorify God and to build up the person to whom we are speaking.

We especially need to keep this in mind when we get into a doctrinal dispute with anyone. It is easy to want to win the argument, but you can destroy the person you are arguing with. Or, you want to prove that you are right so that you look good, but you excuse your pride by telling yourself that you are contending for the faith. Before you jump into any doctrinal dispute, ask first, “How important is this issue in light of God’s glory and this person’s spiritual wellbeing?” Also, keep in mind how difficult it is for you to change your mind on an issue! It takes time, so be gracious in granting that to the other person. Keep in mind Paul’s words about not quarreling, being kind, patient, and gentle. And, ask God to open the person’s eyes and grant repentance. Your motives must be pure, or you are not acting with godly wisdom.

(2) Godly wisdom is peaceable.

Purity is first, but then wisdom is peaceable. In other words, if you compromise purity for the sake of peace, you are not acting in godly wisdom. On the other hand, if you hold to purity in a contentious or cantankerous manner, you are not displaying godly wisdom, because it is peaceable.

Seeking peace in relationships is not a minor theme in the Bible! Just after his counsel to wives and husbands (1 Pet. 3:1-7), the apostle Peter cites from Psalm 34, “He must turn away from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it” (1 Pet. 3:11). Those words apply to all relationships. We are to go after peace as we would pursue an animal in the hunt. Paul echoes this theme often. In Ephesians 4:3, he says that we are to be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Seek peace and pursue it with diligence!

If you are always stirring up controversy over petty issues, you are not acting with godly wisdom. While we should never compromise doctrinal purity on essential truth, neither should we fight over minor matters where godly, Bible-believing people differ.

Years ago, I received in the mail a number of papers from a man who had graduated from the same seminary that I graduated from. I assume he got my name from an alumni directory, since I
did not know him personally. I threw the papers away in disgust, although I should have saved them for sermon illustrations! But the guy was going on at length about how someone at the seminary took some Hebrew word from Chronicles in a way that this guy insisted was not correct! He thought that he was wise and that he was defending the truth, but he was not displaying godly wisdom because he was not peaceable.

(3) Godly wisdom is gentle.

This is a different Greek word than the one translated “gentleness” in 3:13. William Barclay, who was an expert on the meaning of various Greek words, states, “Of all Greek words in the New Testament this is the most untranslatable” (The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of James and Peter [Westminster Press], Revised Edition, p. 95). He goes on to say (pp. 95-96) that the man with this quality “knows how to forgive when strict justice gives him a perfect right to condemn. He knows how to make allowances, when not to stand upon his rights, [and] how to temper justice with mercy....” Douglas Moo (The Letter of James, Pillar New Testament Commentary Eerdmans/Apollos, p. 176) says that the word “indicates a willingness to yield to others and a corresponding unwillingness ‘to exact strict claims’.” It is a quality that Jesus possessed (2 Cor. 10:1), and it is a requirement for elders in the local church (1 Tim. 3:3).

(4) Godly wisdom is reasonable.

The word means, literally, “easily persuaded.” But it does not mean being gullible or credulous, but rather being willing to defer to others, as long as a core doctrine or moral principle is not at stake (Moo, p. 176). In other words, it is “quick to hear” (James 1:19), and knows when to yield for the sake of peace.

Early in my ministry, veteran pastor Ray Ortlund was kind enough to go out to breakfast with me and spend a couple of hours answering my many questions about pastoral ministry. One thing he said that stuck in my mind is, “You’ve got to decide where you want to give blood as a pastor.” Some issues are not worth giving blood over, but others are. Godly wisdom is able to discern the difference and willing to yield on minor matters. The wise man is
willing to listen to others' views and to change if he is proved wrong.

(5) Godly wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits.

Many of these qualities echo the beatitudes (gentleness, purity, peace), and that is also true of mercy: “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy” (Matt. 5:7). Jesus often underscored the importance of mercy (Matt. 18:21-35; 23:23; Luke 10:37). He said (Luke 6:36), “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Being merciful means not only having compassion for the person who is suffering apart from anything that he did, but also showing compassion to the one who is suffering because of his own fault (Barclay, p. 96). God is merciful to us in spite of the fact that our problems usually stem from our own sin and rebellion. But while we were yet sinners, He sent Christ to die for our sins (Rom. 5:8). We are to extend the mercy that we have received to other undeserving sinners.

By adding “good fruits,” James is harking back to what he said in 2:14-17, that our faith must show itself in practical good deeds. If we see someone in need and do nothing to help, “what good is that?” (See 2:16.) In other words, godly wisdom is not theoretical, but practical. It rolls up its sleeves and takes action.

(6) Godly wisdom is unwavering.

The word is used only here in the New Testament. It may mean “impartial” (NIV, ESV, KJV), in the sense of not taking sides based on a party spirit or personal cronyism. But it also may mean “undivided,” in the sense of unwavering loyalty to God. James will hit this in 4:4, where he makes the point that you cannot be a friend of the world and of God at the same time. Godly wisdom does not play politics with the truth, shading it according to personal advantage. Rather, it holds unswervingly to the truth in love.

(7) Godly wisdom is without hypocrisy.

It is sincere. What you see is not a mask or cover-up. The word was used originally of Greek actors who played a part on stage that was not like what they were in person. Douglas Moo comments (p. 177), “The person characterized by wisdom from heaven will be stable, trustworthy, transparent— the kind of person
consistently displaying the virtues of wisdom and on whom one can rely for advice and counsel.”

If we all would seek to live by these seven qualities of godly wisdom, personal conflicts would be greatly minimized and harmonious relationships would blossom and grow. But, unfortunately, we all battle the world, the flesh, and the devil. These forces combine to draw us astray into worldly “wisdom,” which causes disharmony in our relationships.

2. If you act with worldly “wisdom,” you will produce conflict (3:14-16).

James lists five marks of worldly “wisdom”:

(1) Worldly “wisdom” is rooted in bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

He mentions these two negative traits twice (3:14, 16). They both deal with hidden motives of the heart (“in your heart,” 3:14). As I said, they are traits that those who teach the Word may easily yield to. If someone challenges our teaching or another preacher across town has a bigger congregation, we can become jealous. Godly wisdom, as we’ve seen, would listen to the one who raises an objection and consider whether he may have a valid point. If we hear that the preacher across town has a bigger church, as long as he’s preaching the truth, we should think, “Praise God that His truth is going forth!” But worldly “wisdom” doesn’t seek God’s glory. It is rooted in selfishness and pride.

(2) Worldly “wisdom” is arrogant.

The Greek means, “Stop being arrogant.” Again, it is easy for those who teach to fall into pride, thinking, “I’m right and those who disagree with me are either stupid or sinning!” As Paul says, “Knowledge puffs up” (1 Cor. 8:1, ESV). Everyone ought to study the Word and become knowledgeable in the things of God. We all should know what we believe and be able to support it from Scripture. But, we should always be on guard against the pride that so easily creeps in. If we start parading our knowledge or using it to “put others in their place,” we are not displaying godly wisdom.

(3) Worldly “wisdom” lies against the truth.
Coupled with the previous trait, the sense here seems to be: “If a man who is motivated by jealousy and personal ambition gets up and arrogantly berates others and proclaims how much he knows, his actions are giving lie to the truth he professes to be teaching.”

During my college years, many of my friends became enamored with a Bible teacher who professed to know Bible doctrine, but who reeked of arrogance. He would write Greek and Hebrew words on the overhead as he taught, parsing the verbs and telling everyone that the Greek language was exact in its meaning, and thus his view was the only correct view. (No language is exact; they all have many ambiguities!) He would put down those who disagreed with him. His followers would pounce on anyone who didn’t use the exact phraseology of this teacher. If you dared to ask, “Where’s the love?” they were quick to quote the teacher, that biblical love is a mental attitude that has nothing to do with kindness, compassion, or tenderness. I believe that that man in his arrogance was lying against the very truth that he sought to teach.

(4) Worldly “wisdom” is earthly, natural, and demonic.

James doesn’t mince words! The source of this worldly “wisdom” is not God, but rather at best the natural man, but ultimately, Satan himself! These terms move from least to worst. “Earthly” suggests a “perspective that fails to consider God’s realm and will” (Moo, p. 173). “Natural” is always used negatively in the New Testament, as opposed to “spiritual” (1 Cor. 2:14; 15:44, 46; Jude 19). “It has to do with that part of man ‘where human feeling and human reason reign supreme’” (ibid.). “Demonic,” of course, points to the ultimate source of all that is opposed to God.

(5) Worldly “wisdom” results in disorder and every evil thing.

When Paul exhorted the Corinthians about the problems in their assembly, he said (1 Cor. 14:33), “God is not a God of confusion but of peace....” The word “confusion” is the same Greek word that is here translated “disorder.” Moo comments (p. 174), “The same ‘disorder’ is bound to break out in churches where people are pursuing their own selfish concerns and partisan causes rather than the good of the body as a whole.”

James sums up his point in this paragraph in 3:18:
3. **Peace must be cultivated with deliberate effort and attention (3:18).**

The English Standard Version translates the verse: “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” His point is simple: You reap what you sow. If a farmer sows corn, he reaps corn, not beans. If you sow peace, you will reap peace. If you sow selfishness and strife, you will reap conflict.

But also implicit in the verse is the fact that a harvest is not accidental or serendipitous. No farmer sits around doing nothing all year, then goes out into the field and says, “Whoa, look at that bountiful harvest!” If there is a harvest, it’s in part because he has worked hard to cultivate that harvest. If you see a church or a home where there is peace, it is because the members have worked to cultivate peace. They have listened to one another, respected one another, judged their own selfishness and pride, and sought to live in accordance with godly wisdom, not worldly “wisdom.”

**Conclusion**

Settling arguments peacefully in English pubs has often been a difficult task. So, in 1955, the Guinness brewing company decided that an official record was needed to pacify its customers. The Guinness Book of World Records was created. It has been a best seller ever since. By 1987, it had sold more than any other copyrighted book in publishing history! (From “Fedco Reporter,” April, 1987.)

We have a far better best seller to help us to live harmoniously: the wisdom of God’s Word. But because of selfishness, pride, and jealousy, many Christians have used the Bible to attack others and to justify themselves. James wants us to apply godly wisdom to our personal lives and relationships.

Is there peace in your home? Are you at peace with those in this church? If not, check out what kind of seed you’re sowing. If you’re sowing worldly “wisdom,” you’ll reap disorder and every evil thing. If you sow God’s wisdom, you’ll reap peace.
Application Questions

1. Where is the biblical balance between truth and love? Why is it wrong to compromise truth in an attempt to show love?
2. Which of the seven qualities of godly wisdom do you most need to work on? How will you do it?
3. Which of the traits of worldly “wisdom” are you most prone to? How will you guard against it?
4. How (practically) will you pursue peace this week?