

The War Within

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[0 : 00] All right, we're going to read from James chapter 3, verses 13 through James chapter 4, verse 1. This is God's holy word. Who is wise and understanding among you?

By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder in every vile practice.

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.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? This is God's holy word. We're walking through the letter of James, piece by piece, week by week.

[1 : 08] And Philip Melanchthon, the great reformer, Lutheran reformer, he gives us a really great summary, a helpful summary, of everything that we've said so far in the book of James, so we don't have to walk back through it all.

He says, Faith alone saves, but saving faith never remains alone. So James has told us that faith alone saves you. You're justified by faith alone, but your faith never remains alone.

Instead, a life of faith always shows up. It always becomes visible through good works, through conduct, through the way you live life. And so last time we were in James 3, we talked about words. So when you become a Christian, your speech patterns should change. And James talked to us about something so scary, really, and that's that our words have such power, power to give life, power to break people's lives.

And so we have this power made in God's image. And he said that you will know someone's faith. You will know that they're growing in faith by the way they speak. Our patterns of speech have to change. And so here today, he carries on the same logic, but turns towards a broader concept of wisdom.

[2 : 14] So you'll know wisdom by conduct. You'll be able to see wisdom. So if you walk up to somebody, you can't just say, you can't just look at somebody you've never met before and say, I think that this is a person of great faith, of great wisdom, of really healthy speech patterns.

No, that's not something you can see. It's an invisible quality that has to come out. So James says here, who is wise? Who is understanding among you? Well, they will be known by their good conduct, by the way they live their life.

Wisdom shows up. Our faith shows up in the way we speak and the way we live. And so that's the big question today. Verse 13, who is wise? And then he says, and understanding among you.

So that word understanding, who is knowledgeable among you? One of the, some of the commentators, I should say, think that that little phrase, wise and understanding among you, is a way of saying who is able to be a teacher in the church.

They must have both wisdom and knowledge, wisdom and understanding. So he's saying knowledge is not enough. The person in the room who has great theological knowledge, it's not sufficient that they become a teacher in the church.

[3 : 18] Instead, there also has to be wisdom. And he tells us what that is. It's when faith actually manifests in your visible life, what you actually do and how you actually live. Talk is not enough. Knowledge is not enough.

But wisdom shows up in good works and the way we live. Now, that's the same thing that he said in chapter 1. So I've said most weeks that everything in this book shows up in chapter 1.

So I'm probably being very repetitive. So sorry about that. But what is wisdom? Wisdom is just maturity. And what is maturity? Maturity is just what James means in James 1-4, that when you come to faith and you follow Jesus, you start to become like him.

And he says, and you become perfect, James 1-4, teleos, perfected, or really the word is maturing, mature. And so wisdom is just maturity. It's just that you've been growing in Christ-like maturity. You follow Jesus, you become like him. And it shows up in the way you live your life. So let's think about that very carefully so that we can grow into it this morning. Number one, what is wisdom from above?

[4 : 22] Wisdom from above, that's what he calls it. Secondly, the war within, the problem we have. And then finally, wisdom from above revisited. So first, wisdom from above. Now he gives us here in this passage a real portrait of a wise person.

And you can see the list down in verse 17. But wisdom from above, and then he gives you these virtues, visible virtues, pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy, full of good fruits, impartial, and sincere.

Every one of those deserves for us to linger for a while. But we won't do that today. But there's a logic to it. There's an order to it. The first thing he says is the wise life shows up as pure.

And that is being contrasted with selfish ambition and envy or jealousy that he just talked about in the verse before. And he's saying that purity is when you are uncontaminated by self-interest.

You are not curved in on yourself, pointing at yourself all the time. Instead, you are other-centric, ecclesiocentric, church-centered, and other-centered. He said that's a pure heart.

[5 : 26] That's a heart that's like Christ. And that's the first thing. If you have that, if you have a heart that is turned away from self, then everything else can follow. So that's why it's first. And so he gives this list, peaceable.

The Greek word there carries the weight of the Hebrew shalom. So not just a person who avoids conflict, but actually makes peace between people. So a wise person is a peacemaker.

You are bringing people together when they're in conflict, especially in the local church, and you're producing shalom, flourishing for people in a culture. And then gentle, willing not to insist on your own rights.

That's the Greek word that's used here for gentle. You're choosing grace instead of revenge. That's the word gentle. And then open to reason. A wise person is genuinely persuadable.

So you don't come into a conversation with an agenda. Instead, you're truth-driven. So you are genuinely able to change your mind when you're wise. You're open to reason. And then sincere, impartial.

[6 : 28] Sincere means not hypocritical. What's true on the outside in your life is actually manifesting your heart. So you don't live one way on the outside, but there's something very different going on on the inside.

So that's wisdom. All the commentators basically say that when James talks about wisdom, there's a single word you can use, wholeness. Wisdom is just wholeness. It's where your outer life matches your inner life.

You're whole. You're complete. You're lacking in nothing, as James says. Wholeness. It's knowledge of God lived out. It's understanding and wisdom. Wisdom is actually living out the knowledge of God you have in your heart.

It's a selfless heart united with a selfless life. It's interested in good relationships. It's your relationship maker. Not in the sense of dating necessarily, but in the sense of you bring people together, and you want to seek peace, and you want to create a great community.

That's this idea of wholeness. You care about the whole body, the church, the whole body. You're ecclesiocentric in that way. I spend a decent amount of time in my life right now watching kids and young teens play football.

[7 : 37] And one of the things I've noticed that many of you who are better football knowledge people than me already know is that you can have a really great player, the best player, an academy player, a 13-year-old academy player that's already been recruited by Hibs and Harts and Rangers and so on.

But they get out on the pitch, and they become the worst player. And the way that they are the worst player is they don't pass. They're not interested in assists. They are only interested in owning the ball.

They have great understanding and knowledge with their feet. And you watch it, and it's beautiful. But they don't have any wisdom. See, wisdom is wholeness. Wisdom brings people together. And on the pitch, if you're going to be a wise footballer, you have to be a team baller. You have to play team ball. You have to be interested in assists more than scoring. That's what he means by wisdom.

It brings people together. It's holistic. It's concerned about the whole group, every single one of us in this room, all together at the same time. Wise people reconcile with others.

[8 : 37] They make peace. They say the right things at the right time. They build community. They're driven by truth and by gentleness and grace at the same time. Now, James gives us a summary word here to summarize this whole person.

And he says it's called the meekness of wisdom. So the one word he gives you in this passage to say what does this look like, it's the word meekness. I looked up in our modern dictionaries, Oxford, Cambridge, dictionary.com, the way that people use the word meekness.

Modern English has, in the dictionary writers, have ruined the word. They've made a terrible mess of it. So what some of the descriptions in the dictionaries are, meekness is docile, spiritless, submissive.

One dictionary even said, when you let others run over you. And that's not at all what the biblical word meekness means. And so the modern word has really messed it up. This word pruitas, meekness, it shows up in Socrates and Aristotle.

What they meant by it was a person who argues their case without losing their temper. That's how Socrates used it. Or Aristotle said, one who cares about justice but never seeks revenge.

[9 : 48] So the Bible here says that meekness is the great single word that captures the whole of what a wise person is like. And we could say it like this, meekness is not the absence of strength.

It's a strength that is found somewhere else to rest besides revenge, besides violence, besides harsh words of insult. And instead, it's found a place to rest its convictions in God for everything. So a meek person is a person who's so secure in all that God says about them and all that God's given them that they are able to be gentle on the outside. So meekness is when you are lion-like with your convictions in your heart, yet you look like a lamb in the way you relate to everyone. Lion-like on the inside, so gentle, lamb-like on the outside. It's when you have understanding, knowledge of God, and security in God. Therefore, you become wise.

You become lion-like, yet so gentle. I remember back in my high school years, and I wonder if it was the same here, there was always in every year, every class, that one guy, that one girl who everybody was afraid to cross.

[11 : 06] Some of those people, everybody was afraid of because they were bullies. And so you were afraid of getting beat up by them. But there was always that other person. I wonder if you had that other person. Maybe you were that other person. The person that you don't cross, you don't, nobody ever insults.

Why? And it's because they were so secure in themselves that anything, any darts that had ever been thrown at them in the past just never stuck. And so people stopped trying to rile them up. People stopped trying to mess with them. They never needed to win. Their gentleness was so real, but you knew that on the inside, if there was an issue of injustice, the bully was the one person who was scared of them.

That's meekness. Meekness is when you've got such security that the darts don't stick. And so you're able to be so strong on the inside that you can actually be incredibly gentle on the outside, incredibly lamb-like on the outside.

We, Christians in this room, we've got so much knowledge about God, but when we look at this list, pure, peaceable, gentle, able to be persuaded, sincere, impartial, we can look at ourselves and see the gap between the knowledge of God that we have and the people we actually want to be.

[12 : 23] And this is the person we want to be, but we feel, we recognize in our lives that we're not there yet. And so often that's because we look up and we say, I know, I can say I'm a sinner.

I can say Jesus Christ died for my sins, but it's not helping me in this moment. We feel that gap in our lives. And the difference here is the difference between knowledge and experiential knowledge, tacit knowledge and experiential knowledge.

You know, we can say, I know I'm a sinner, but have you yet come to a place where you experience that reality? I'm a sinner. It brings you to tears.

It moves you. It destroys you. Have you come to a place where you can move from mere knowledge to experiential knowledge, where you say, I know I can say Jesus died for me, and there's a difference in coming and saying, I know Jesus died for me.

That's how you move from mere understanding to meekness, to wisdom. You see here, the way it really works, Aristotle said, you've got to train yourself into this through discipline.

[13 : 27] But here in this passage, you'll see what James writes. He says, seek the meekness of wisdom. And then later on, he calls it the wisdom that comes from above.

That's a language from the gospels. Wisdom from above, from above, wisdom of heaven. That's how Jesus talks to Nicodemus in John 3 and says, what do you need to change in your life?

What do you need? You need the spirit. This is a subtle reference to the Holy Spirit. Wisdom from above. Who is the Sophia from above? It's the Holy Spirit. And Aristotle said, you've got to train yourself into this, but the truth is, you need the Holy Spirit.

It's a gift. It has to be given to you. The Spirit gives it to you by grace, and then you seek it simultaneously. It's both and. It's never one or the other. You really can become a lion on the inside and lamb-like on the outside, as gentle as Jesus Christ, and it's a gift of the Spirit.

Now, secondly, why haven't we become this person so far? And we're told here, this is why I wanted to read just one verse of chapter 4. It seemed like an odd place to end, but pretend that there are no chapter divisions.

[14 : 34] There aren't in the original text. There's no headings in your Bible. You've got to take that, cover that up with your finger. And see, notice in verse 13, there's a question, who is wise and understanding among you?

Then down in chapter 4, verse 1, there's a question, well, what causes quarrels and fights among you? See, that's a frame. On one hand, who is wise among you? On the other, who amongst you are causing fights?

So he's saying, we will know by good conduct who is growing in wisdom. He's talking to Christians. And then on the other hand, we'll know by conduct who is not growing in wisdom, who is foolish, who's causing the fights and the quarrels among you.

You see, these two questions are the bookends between wisdom and foolishness in this passage. And he tells us really plainly the difference. And he tells it in chapter 4, verse 1, is the answer not this, that your passions are at war within you.

So what's the answer? The answer is, if you're a believer today in this room, there is a war raging inside of you. And the war is between life and the Spirit, the Spirit who is with you right now, present with you, and the reality that you are born into this world fleshly.

[15 : 48] What does he say? Unspiritual, earthly, demonic. And he said, that is the war that is raging in your life at this very moment in this room as we sit here.

I just have a question for you as we think about it. Are you engaging in that war? Are you aware of that war? One of the things Paul tells us is if you're not actively in that war, in that fight, listening to the Spirit versus listening to your flesh, you're losing.

If you're not aware, if you're passive, you're losing. And so that's why he says, who is wise among you, we can see. We can see who's growing. Who is causing fights and quarrels among you? It's because you're letting your passions, you're a believer, but you're letting your passions win the war when the Spirit's gently whispering to you all the time to kill those desires.

And so he's telling us here, you really do have to engage the fight to put on wisdom by fighting, by putting away your desires. You've got to do things you don't want to do because your desires are earthly, unspiritual, demonic, he says.

And so he gives you two qualities of what it looks like to not be growing, to be walking instead of foolishness, and they are bitter jealousy, he lists them, and selfish ambition.

[17 : 01] The Greek word there is bitter zeal, but the word bitter makes it into the word jealousy or envy or covetousness. And so he says the opposite of growing in wisdom is to embrace envy and covetousness, which is in us all.

It's to let it grow. It's to let it take hold. There's a good kind of jealousy when you are jealous for a spouse that they would be faithful. That's a good kind of jealousy.

That's the jealousy God has for the church. But there is an evil kind of jealousy, and it's really discontentment. It's feeling resentful about the advantages, the possessions, the life that other people have.

So bitter jealousy or envy or covetousness is when you say effectively, I just want my life to be different than the providence God has given me. And I really want the life of the other person. And it's a quiet reality that rots the soul from the inside out. It sucks away all joy when you're walking through a season of bitter jealousy and envy and covetousness. And so he's telling us here, we all, it's not that some of us, he's saying, we all have this in us.

[18 : 11] And if we're not listening to the Spirit and fighting bitter jealousy and envy, it will be growing. Covetousness will be growing. The second one he says is really just a clarification of the first, selfish ambition.

This is what Aristotle said about this word that's used. It's one word in the original text. Aristotle said, selfish ambition is the self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means.

What it means in the Bible is when you say, quietly maybe, not too loud, but my life is about me, my pursuits are for me. Every relationship you have is what am I getting from this?

So it's a life that's curved in on itself, self-centric instead of theocentric, God-centered, or church-centered, other-centered. And it's exactly the thing that life in the Spirit is meant to free us from.

So you know you're becoming wise when you can feel that you are forgetting about yourself more often and more concerned with other people and their problems and their issues and the things that are going on in their lives.

[19 : 11] And so James pulls no punches. He tells us what this is. He says it's earthly, meaning it's living life as if there is nothing above the sun.

There is no God above you. Then he says it's unspiritual, living according to the mere human reasons, human desires. It's actually a word that says it's living like an animal, merely with animalistic desires.

And then the third thing he says is it's demonic. Now he's not saying that believer you are demon possessed. He's saying our natural desires are demon like. He's saying Satan taught us to be like this.

This comes from the corruption of the Garden of Eden. This is who we've been ever since. And he's calling us today to see that if you're not, if you're in a place where you're not growing, it's not because you're not justified by faith.

It's because you're not walking in step with the Spirit. You're not listening to the Holy Spirit. When you feel the prompt of the Spirit saying don't go there, don't do that, don't look at that, you're losing those battles and so you're not growing, you're diminishing, you're becoming more self-centered, more curved in on self instead of growing in quote, good conduct.

[20 : 24] I'll move on to the final point but the word good conduct, he says wisdom will show up in good conduct, verse 13 and 14. We've got two words for good in the New Testament and this is not the one that is the opposite of bad.

This is not the one that is the opposite of evil. This is the one that is opposite of ugly. And so the word he uses, you will be known, the life of meekness and wisdom, you will be known by your beautiful conduct, not your ugly conduct.

So he's saying that when you put on the Spirit and you seek the Spirit, your life grows into a life of beauty. Beautiful conduct, beautiful wisdom is because of how it all comes out.

The meek person is the most dangerous person in the room in a way. Not because they will hurt you, no they won't. Not because they'll seek revenge, they won't.

But because they do not need anything from anybody. And in that, that kind of freedom is almost incomprehensible to a world that is run on selfish ambition.

[21 : 29] almost incomprehensible. How to change, lastly. How do we change? How do we grow into this person? Paul says, our natural instincts are demon-like.

You do not need an exorcist. You need a Savior. You need a Redeemer. And so, the wisdom from above, thirdly and finally, revisited once more. Let's look at it once more.

How do we change? Now, we've already been told about meekness in the beginning of the book, chapter 1, verse 21. And here's what James says, therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness.

Sounds almost identical to this passage. And receive with meekness the implanted word, which will save your soul. So, Paul, James gave us exactly what we're supposed to do back in chapter 1.

Put away the desires of the flesh and instead receive with meekness, gentleness of spirit, the implanted word. And so, he tells you, how do you change? You've got to receive the implanted word today.

[22 : 31] And receiving the implanted word means that either the word has already been implanted in you and you need to re-receive it over and over again. Or today, you might sit here today and you need to receive the word.

What is the word? What is the word that you need to receive? And when you read this list in verse 17, just think about it for a second. What is the word? One who is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

The word is Jesus Christ. You need to receive the one who is this list. This list is a person and that person is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, we read it in our call to worship.

He has one moment in the Gospels where he gives an autobiography, one moment where he talks about himself so clearly in his own virtues and it's in Matthew 11. It was our call to worship today.

He says, come to me, all you today who are weary, I will give you rest for I am meek and lowly in heart and in me you can find rest for your souls.

[23 : 45] On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus was standing before Pontius Pilate, you'll remember this, and he says to Pilate, if I desired, I could call down twelve legions of angels right now to do away with all of this, to do away with the cross, to do away with my being brutally beaten and murdered by my own creation.

He said that to Pilate and he was telling Pilate that but he didn't do it. That is not weakness. That is the most astonishing kind of restraint in world history. It is meekness.

It is the lion of the tribe of Judah choosing to become the lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. And when he was on the cross, you'll remember, he looked up and he did something unbelievable.

He said, Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing. Father, my murderers do not understand what they are doing. That is not weakness. That is unbelievable.

meekness. Such restraint. Such gentleness. Such tenderness to the person that has hung him upon the cross to every single one of us in this room today.

[24 : 53] And so, the cross of Christ does two things for you this morning. First, it shows you when Jesus hung on the cross, you can look at him and realize how sinful you are. How full of selfish ambition and envy and jealousy every one of us really is.

How much fleshliness, demonic-like longings we have. But then secondly, when he looked up at the cross and said, Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.

That tells you something. He came to rescue you from yourself. He came to forgive you. He came to turn you outside of yourself and focus you in the way you were made on others and on him and on the local church and on the body.

He rescues you from yourself and he can today gift you with the meekness of wisdom, with peace and purity and impartiality and sincerity. He can do that. Let me finish by giving you three things to do to grow in this way.

Number one, it's straight out of the text. He tells us first, receive the implanted word this morning. So if you're a Christian, you already have the word of Christ in you, the Holy Spirit.

[26 : 00] Today, you need to come and receive that word again and look for the spirit in your life and re-receive the implanted word. Look to Christ through the word. Let me read this sentence because I want to say it correctly.

Meekness is the fruit of a particular kind of security. If you do not trust God today, you need to fight. You have to fight for everything in your life for yourself. Your reputation, your comfort, your place in the pecking order.

But if you are genuinely convinced that the God of the universe is your father, is your defender, and your deepest satisfaction, you today can afford to be gentle. You don't have to fight for everything in your life anymore.

You don't have to climb up the pecking order. If you are in Christ, you can afford to be gentle. You can afford not to treat conversations as transactional. I got a letter in the post yesterday from an elder in Mississippi from where we're from.

And he had mailed it on January 2nd. And I got it on March 20th. Now that's because he mailed it to our old house in Murrayfield and it went back to him.

[27 : 10] And then I think from I'm looking at all the stamps on the envelope, it looks like he tried it twice and then it came back again. And then he mailed it to my parents and then they mailed it. So I finally got it.

So it was all about the new year. So he wrote me a new year letter. But I was prepping this passage yesterday at the house and got the letter. And this is what the letter said. As you enter a new year, take heart.

The same God is with you and goes before you to demonstrate his redemptive power in your life. The instructions are still the same. You must keep your focus on the word of God. You must believe it.

You must obey it. The surging, swirling waters of doubt, the impregnable fortresses of satanic distraction, the dismays of sudden unexpected trials, the fears wrought by past failure and present danger, they are very real.

But if you have been redeemed by grace and seated with the presence of the Spirit, sorry, excuse me, sealed with the presence of the Spirit, so the Lord your God comes with and before you.

[28 : 15] Keep your eyes this year on his word. Read it. Obey it. Follow it. In 2026, you have never been this way before.

You will need it. Signed out. Listen to the Spirit. Receive the implanted word day by day. You have never been this way before. Tomorrow is a new day and you've never been to tomorrow yet.

You need the word. It's the only way to grow in the meekness of wisdom. Secondly, verse 14, if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition, don't boast. What is he telling us there?

He's saying, remember last time was all about words. He's saying, if you know that you're in a place right now where you are particularly walking in the flesh, not the Spirit, he says, don't boast. In other words, practice silence with your speech, which is a way of saying that you have to make a conscious decision to step forward with new disciplines, new practices to address the sins of the flesh that you are walking in at the minute.

So he's saying, in order to practice weakness, you have to decide today to put away the sins of the flesh and to make practical steps. So he's saying, if you struggle with boasting, then be silent.

[29 : 28] Just say, this week I'm going to talk, not very much at all, because every time I open my mouth, I tend to brag. You see, he's saying habits matter, disciplines matter, taking steps matter.

Let me paint a quick picture for you between two people.

Person A, someone struggling like we all have, like I certainly have, with selfish ambition. every conversation is subtly about establishing where we stand. When we listen to somebody talk, we're actually just waiting to talk.

When we praise somebody, it's in order to get something back. When we're talking to people, we're calculating what it is that we can get from them, and if this conversation will provide anything of fruit at all.

People are background noise. When we feel threatened, our words get sharper and colder. We need something from every person we meet because life is about me.

Person B, walking in the meekness of wisdom. They're genuinely curious about the person in front of them, and so they truly listen. They're not running an internal calculation of what they're getting from this conversation.

[30 : 31] When someone else wins, they celebrate it because they're truly glad. They're truly happy about it. Their identity is not built on being right. It's not built on being better. Their words build up others because they don't need to tear people down.

They don't need anything from the people they meet. They have everything they need in Christ. The difference is not personality. The difference is not the past. The difference is simply what source are you running to day after day.

That's the difference. Thirdly and finally, at the very end of this passage, verse 18, when you put on the meekness of wisdom, a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

So here at the very end, he turns this to the community and says a harvest of shalom, a harvest of peace, a harvest of flourishing is sown by all of us when we together seek this kind of life, seek this kind of peace.

What is he saying? He's saying that the farmer does not reap on the same day that he sows. And to build a community of peace, purity, sincerity, impartiality, wisdom, wisdom takes a long time.

[31 : 39] That's what he's saying. And in other words, it's that a community, a beautiful church, a beautiful community is built on the thousands of small moments, thousands, millions of small moments of years of interactions with one another where we're seeking to genuinely be for each other.

Ecclesiocentric, theocentric, not self-centered, the meekness of wisdom. With Christ, you can afford to be other-centered. Let us pray.

Father, we want to get away from our self-interest and we struggle so much with selfish ambition and bitter jealousy and envy and we are curved in on ourself as it's been said throughout church history so often.

Turn us around, flip us upside down, give us a different sense of what we were made for. Lord, renew us to be the people you made us to be. Imago Dei, the image of God in the world.

So teach us today as we sing in this final hymn to be other-centered all because we are putting on the meekness of Christ through the implanted word. So speak the implanted word, O Lord, into our hearts.

[32 : 45] I pray for those in this room who may need to meet with you the word himself for the first time, the logos, the word who gives life. Lord, by the Spirit, would you give life to someone here today who does not yet know hope through the word, through Jesus.

So I pray for that. And then I pray for the rest of us that are believers today that you would teach us wisdom, meekness, through the word sung. And so we pray for that.

In Christ's name, Amen.