

Sermon Series: Wisdom that Works

#7 Counter-culture wisdom James 3:13-18

Intro

What would it take to turn you into a peacemaker?

I'm not referring to a mediocre feature film from the 90's!



I'm talking about peacemakers as those who promote **unity** and **harmony** rather than division and discord in their households, churches, and neighbourhoods alike.

In our passage from the Letter of James chapter 3 today, **being a peacemaker** is **the priority**. James will stress to us how it is **God's wisdom** that **makes for peace** and will urge us to be peacemakers in the church.

In verses 13-18 today James is still working his theme of **wisdom**, as in the previous verses about **wise use of speech**.¹

1. Two kinds of wisdom (13-16)

Firstly, in verses 13-16, James introduces a **diagnostic tool** for discerning when God's wisdom is at work.² He says there are **two kinds** of wisdom; **only one** leads to peace.

We read in James 3:13-15...

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

James has introduced us to God's wisdom as **something coming "from above"** earlier in this letter.³

¹ In the next passage James will address conflict and quarrelling in the churches as a result of a lack of God's wisdom.

² As in the previous passage, James may have leaders/teachers in mind here as the first focus of investigation

³ 1:17, 21, 25

I had a friend who used to lampoon some Christians saying that they were “so **heavenly minded** that they were of **no earthly use.**”

But notice here James how James says genuine spiritual wisdom expresses itself in **humble character, peace-making actions, and helpful speech**; this is what should flow from a person’s life when God’s wisdom is in them.⁴

James chooses a Greek word for “wise” in verse 13 speaks of that place where **theory and practice intersect.**⁵

So too, he uses a word for “**understanding**” in verse 13 that identified those whose **effectiveness in practice** showed them to be **an expert in their field.**

Who are the genuinely wise and understanding ones in the churches? James would have us look for **experts in Christ-likeness** in terms of their **humble character, kind speech, and in acts of mercy that lead to peace.**

James contrasts God’s wisdom with what he calls “**earthly**” **wisdom.** James is **not deriding** ordinary human intelligence or ingenuity. The Greek word for “earthly” means **temporal or perishable.** Instead, James sees the vain boasting of some in the churches that resulted in division, dissension and discord as a stark comparison to the **glory, goodness, and eternity** of God’s wisdom that makes for peace. In comparison, their version of “wisdom” seems “**devilish**”⁶ **in origin.**

The goal James has for the churches that James knew from his Jewish background is summed up in the **Hebrew word ‘shalom’.** A vision for communities of real and active peace and blessing generated by God.

There are **two sources of wisdom,** says James. You can test them out in community by the kind of community that is **produced as a result.**

1. One kind leads to **disorder, rebellion, and bitter envy** in community (see verse 16). Like the **unstable** person of 1:18, like the “**untameable tongue**” of 3:8, and like the **bitter** water of 3:11, someone marked by

⁴ Not as a means of qualifying for God’s acceptance, but as a sign that God’s acceptance is with us and at work in our hearts by the Holy Spirit now. James does not speak explicitly about the Holy Spirit, but writes of God’s wisdom as if it is synonymous with what Paul writes of the Spirit.

⁵ Grounded in the Hebrew word *hokma*, and reminiscent of the OT idea that “the beginning of wisdom is the fear (reverence) of the Lord”

⁶ Pertaining to demons, like those we see Jesus encounter in the Gospels

selfish ambition, divisive speech, and superiority over others not drawing upon God's wisdom.⁷

2. On the other hand, James' teaching suggests that when you witness humility of **character, words that encourage faith, and acts of mercy that lead to peacemaking**, then **God's wisdom** will be the source – you'll recognise God's wisdom by the **sense of shalom** it creates in community.

2. The Humility of Wisdom (17-18)

James then goes on in verses 17-18 to **answer in more detail the rhetorical question** asked in verse 13: "Who is wise and understanding among you?"

He writes:

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Mariam Kamell notes in her commentary that an expression like the "**humility of wisdom**" would have been **unheard of** in the 1st century Hellenistic world.

Meekness was not a well-respected trait in Greek thought. But that's what James is describing here, in biblical terms. Humility was often **considered as weakness** and taught as **something to be avoided**.

I think Aussies really respect the humility we see in Ash Barty, the world #1 tennis champ. We admire her readiness to acknowledge her team and her mentors, and not boast in her own prowess. But ask an Aussie what they think of "**meekness**," and I don't think it would be thought of as a positive trait.



Lockdown 2020 saw a boom in **big screen TV sales** and a huge number of people streaming a new show called **Ted Lasso**. Season 2 has dropped for Lockdown #5 and Ted will out-rate the Olympics.



⁷ James has already taught us that only "good gifts" come down from heaven, 1:13-18

He's a newly appointed manager of English football team AFC Richmond, only **he's an American**. And, he's never had success at the top level.

In season 1 Ted Lasso quickly reveals his **humble, peacemaking qualities**.

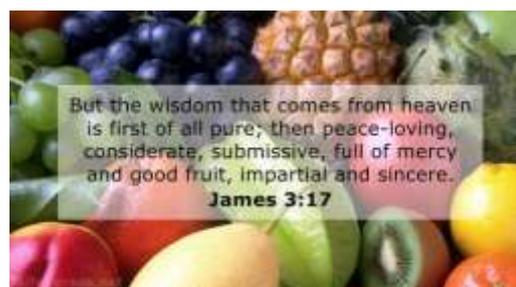
- For example, Ted **elevates and celebrates** the most invisible, most lowly, and most persecuted member of staff (Nathan, on the left below) and even asks his advice on football strategy.
- Also, Ted gently **brings down from his high pedestal** the most self-centred, most ego-bloated, most divisive team member (striker Jamie Tartt, seen on the right).



If you asked an Aussie audience which of these characters is “meek”, they would most likely look to Nathan. “Meekness” is associated with being passive and gentleness is often considered too lenient in today's thinking. The meek one in our minds acts like a doormat, and always be overlooked. We tend to associate **meekness** with **weakness**.

But if we look through the lens James gives us in chapter 3, verse 17, **the truly meek character of these three**, from a biblical point of view, **would have to be Ted Lasso** himself (It's not lost on me that the most Christ-like character is a white, middle-aged, middle-class American male!) The big surprise here is that the one who exhibits biblical “meekness” in this TV show is also an **extrovert**, a **proactive** leader, a positive **encourager**, a good **conflict resolver** and **peacemaker**. In contrast to our negative caricature of those who are meek today, Ted Lasso, so popular with viewers, is an example akin to James' description of meekness.

Let's go back to James' list of qualities produced to gain a fully Christian view of “meekness” produced by God's wisdom, or the “humility of wisdom”. It makes for a



good description of the qualities expressed in the **life and ministry of Jesus**.⁸

1. The list in verse 17 begins with a foundational truth - God's wisdom is **firstly "pure"**.⁹ That is to say, it will be aligned with God's **righteousness**; it will have moral blamelessness as its goal. "Wisdom, free from any stain or blemish," says Douglas Moo, "would be incapable of producing anything evil." Surely James' Hebrew heritage has influenced his priority here, with ritual purity so much a part of his formation in devotion to the God of Israel before becoming a follower of Jesus. Lest we think meekness leads to leniency towards sin, injustice and evil, God's wisdom will be marked by a priority for holiness of life.

The next six Greek words of verse 17 form an easily remembered **alliteration** for the original audience.¹⁰ This list reminds us of Paul's **the fruit of the Spirit**.¹¹ Here, in verse 17, we have what we might call **the fruit of wisdom**. Kamell says, "What Paul says the Holy Spirit produces, James says God's wisdom produces."

2. **Peaceable** is the second quality of God's wisdom in verse 17. Those who claimed to be "wise" yet were causing divisions make this characteristic of genuine wisdom a high priority. The Old Testament taught that wisdom produces peace (e.g. Prov. 3:17), but as we see in Paul's teaching (Gal. 5:22), it is born of the Spirit's work within a faithful Christian. It is easy to

The next three words of the list unpack the kind of peace-making God's wisdom produces:

- to be **gentle** is to be kind,
- to be **open to reason** is to be agile of mind and not defensive, and
- to be **full of mercy** and "**good fruits**" means that forgiveness and acceptance is not mere words, but actions that heal and raise up and restore others.

3. **Impartial** is the second-last in the list of verse 17. This is the most helpful translation of a difficult Greek word.¹² James prefers single-minded,

⁸ 2 Corinthians 10:1; Matt. 20:25-28; Phil. 2:6

⁹ Gk *hagnos*

¹⁰ After the word for pure, five words beginning with an "ee" sound, and two beginning with an "aay" sound

¹¹ Gal. 5:22,23

¹² Gk *adriakritos*

unwavering Christians over those who are “double-minded” (James 1:7-8). James is down on those who divide and segregate (2:1-4). Wise Christians are those who **do not** exhibit unfair prejudice.

4. Lastly, wisdom must be **genuine, sincere**. The original recipients of this letter were used to people boasting in their cleverness; making public, showy claims not necessarily backed up by any evidence of truth (sound familiar today?)

James closes out this lesson with verse 18, with an image familiar to an agrarian society. And so, we return to where we began this sermon. **What would it take to make you into a peacemaker?** And do you want to be part of the peacemaking that reproduces healthy church communities?



James originally wrote these words to give the ancient church a **diagnostic tool** to discern who is genuinely wise amidst all the clashing claims and boasting. For us, his lesson helps us to make a list of **prayerful goals** to ask God to develop in our own lives and our own churches. We can use James’ wise words as a guide for the kind of Christian and the kind of community God wishes us to be, to ask God **to produce in each of us more and more** the qualities that make for peace; that build a sense of **shalom**.

A Prayer

God, who gives good gifts “from above”,
create in us, we pray...

the spiritual qualities that make for peace in community,
the humility of character that helps us to boast in your goodness,
acts of mercy and justice that raise others up to healing and wholeness,
and words that build others up and encourage faith.

We ask this all through the one who said “Blessed are the meek...” and “Blessed are the peacemakers...”, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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