

A Study in James
Part 9 – “False Wisdom”
James 3:13-16

There's a great story in Grant Teaff's book. *I Believe*. It concerns a wealthy friend of his who wanted one trophy for his game room more than any other – a grizzly bear! The story goes that he had found the perfect spot to hunt for a true trophy bear, flew into the area, and began his hunt. He followed some tracks until he finally felt he was getting very close. Slowly and carefully he hiked up a narrow trail in search of the bear. Suddenly, there it was. The man raised his rifle to shoot the bear; but, just as he was about to shoot, his foot slipped on a rock and he nearly fell off the mountain trail! Miraculously he got a grip on the ledge with his hand and scrambled back up the ledge as his gun fell from sight to the deep ravine below. He looked up and was faced with the enormous grizzly lurching toward him. He jumped up and began to run; though the bear was gaining on him fast! He lost his footing again, rolling head over heels down the side of the mountain. When he finally stopped, he was on his knees. Being both a Christian and very smart, he felt that this certainly was a sign. So, being on his knees anyway, he began to pray. He bowed his head, and as earnestly as he had every prayed, said, “Dear God, just make this a Christian bear, please!” When he opened his eyes, he could see the bear's teeth inches away; he felt the warm breath of the bear on the back of his neck. However, to his amazement, the bear was also on his knees, eyes closed, and his head bowed. With his great paws together in prayer, he saw the bear mouth the words, “Dear God, bless this food to the nourishment of my body!”

It was a Christian bear, but it was still a bear! This seems to be the underlying principle of James' words in our text today. James' age, and ours as well, is riddled with religious men who claim to have special wisdom about life, when in fact they offer nothing but foolishness. They are religious fools, but they are still fools. To follow them is to suffer great personal loss and damage!

TAKE YOUR BIBLES PLEASE...

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, and demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. (James 3:13-16 ESV).

The key question for us is how to determine if a man's message of wisdom is valid or not? Of course, one good way is to check the individual's life. Is the wisdom he is recommending for you working in his life? That's not the most reliable method however. While actions do indeed speak louder than words, the real key is in understanding the wisdom as it is measured against the Scripture. Be that as it may, James specifically addresses teachers and preachers in our verses today. He gives us some practical principles.

First, the Motives of This Fake Wisdom Are Evil (vv. 13-14).

It is helpful to keep in mind that this passage is addressed primarily to those who would be teachers. These are in danger of being victimized by the false wisdom. The first evident bad thing about this wisdom is in its motives. They are totally wrong.

Three bad motives are alluded to in this verse. They are centered in the heart of the man. If these things are in your heart, you are following a course of life that will lead to personal ruin.

1. **First, bitterness is a bad motivation.** This bitterness may be directed toward either god or man; however, in the context it would seem to be directed toward man. It is associated with jealousy. There is a course of life that is motivated by bitterness. It can take the form of a desire for revenge. Many people do the things they do because secretly they are hoping to get even with someone. **This is the motive for the first murder in Scripture.**

So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. (Genesis 4:5-8 ESV).

2. **Second, envy is a bad motivation.** Actually James ties bitterness and envy together. Since they are both directed toward another, they do belong together. Envy is jealousy. The word means “zeal.” It is not in itself either good or evil. It depends on the motivation and objective or the passion. Whenever it is directed toward another person or something that a person has, it is evil. Such motivation is not from God.
3. **Third, strife is a bad motivation.** “Strife” is pushing forward for personal gains. It is selfish ambition. It is selfishness in action. The person so motivated is thinking only of what a certain action will mean to him. He has no interest in how it will affect others. If it causes him gain and others difficulties, that simply is an acceptable loss. Self-interest is their only concern.

Our actions are empty and without positive meaning. You can see how destructive this kind of motivation would be in any relationship. Many of the couples I counsel have not learned this lesson. They have not been able to approach one another with deference. They live positionally rather than relationally. It is an incredibly destructive behavior to adopt. The world would tell us differently, but it is no more than false wisdom.

Second, the character of the False Wisdom is Evil (v. 15).

Now James shows us the character of this false wisdom: *This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.* With these three words, “earthly, unspiritual, and demonic,” the true character of false wisdom is revealed. Certainly it does not originate with God. Look closely.

1. **First, this false wisdom is “earthly.”** This adjective means literally that it is on the earth. The meaning is that it originated on the earth in contrast to originating in heaven. If man is only a creature of the earth, such wisdom is acceptable. But, if in the end a man must stand before a holy God in the heavens and give an account, such wisdom is totally inadequate.

2. **Second, this false wisdom is “unspiritual.”** Some translations use the word “sensual” here; the more correct translation would be “natural.” It is natural in contrast to spiritual. This is the word the Apostle Paul used to describe unregenerate man. He is a natural man. Simply, he does not know God. It has its origins in an unspiritual mind. More must be expected from those who are in the Spirit of God. They have access to the wisdom of God.
3. **Third, this false wisdom is “demonic.”** Literally James is saying it is demon-like. Of course the contrast is easy here. This kind of wisdom is a stark contrast to that which is God-like. Both the demonic and divine have wisdom. Demonic wisdom is always motivated by self-interest, bitterness, and jealousy. The devil’s goal is to dethrone God and place himself in that position. False wisdom is one of his tools.

About the best thing you can say about a selfish man is that he looks like his father – the devil. The devil is the root of this kind of character. You’ve known people like this. J. P. Morgan was the most influential financier of turn-of-the-century America. He was also a man who lived the opposite of this false wisdom. He was a man of legendary integrity. Once, when asked whether money or property was the basis for business and credit, he answered: “Neither. The first thing is character... money cannot buy it... a man I do not trust could not get money from me on all the stocks and bonds in Christendom.” Morgan lived by that code of character. When he bought Andrew Carnegie’s steel business for \$400 million and formed US Steel, that complex transaction was sealed by a simple verbal agreement. Each man knew the other would keep his word without fail.

Worldly wisdom – false wisdom – does not conduct itself with integrity.

Third, the Fruits of False Wisdom Are Evil (v. 16).

If a man is motivated by envy and self-interest, he is following wisdom that is earthly and devilish. If he is following such wisdom there will always be two results.

1. **First, this false wisdom will produce confusion.** This is a word that means “disorder,” or “disturbance.” It is used of insurrections and unruliness. It is the opposite of peace. A person following a false wisdom will experience fragmented relationships with others and himself. Trouble will be his harvest. Whether in a family, business, or church this kind of self-centeredness will always result in confusion.
2. **Second, this false wisdom produces evil works.** All kinds of worthless, evil practices will be produced by following this false wisdom.

The New Testament provides us with one unforgettable example of this truth. The priests at Jerusalem, the leaders of the nation of Israel, were living by this false wisdom when Jesus came. The Scripture tells us they were motivated by envy. Their only concern was self-interest. They viewed the claims of Jesus as a threat to their favored position. This prompted them to arrest Jesus, to unjustly condemn him and cry for his death. **Could anything be more false than this? We must remember if we choose to live by the wisdom of this world, it will produce in us every kind of evil practice. It will cause us to lie when it is in our best interest. It will cause us to be dishonest and steal if it seems in our best interest. It will cause us to act immorally and forget the vows we have made. It will cause us to knowingly hurt other people as we seek revenge to vent or placate our bitterness.**

This passage serves as a serious warning to all of us. We should take it to heart!