

Lesson 3 | March 19, 2023

True Wisdom

Study Text: James 3:1–18

Central Truth: Godly wisdom guards the tongue and pursues peace.

Key Verse: James 3:17

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 (KJV).

The wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere (NLT)

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize the importance of using their words to influence others in a positive manner.
- Students will guard their words to be sure what they are saying is pleasing to God.
- Students will seek godly wisdom rather than earthly wisdom.

Introducing the Study

Say: Have you ever watched people during a heated argument? Their expressions can be frightening, and they may wave their hands or say cutting words. Then, they often walk away angry. This example of unwholesome communication is a symptom of a life that is controlled by worldly wisdom. But God offers wisdom that helps us control those actions and words if we will ask for His help.

Opening Activity—Wise Words

Ask. Give some examples of wise words you learned when you were younger that have helped direct your life.

Say: Most of us heard wise sayings from our parents or grandparents as we were growing up. If we examine those sayings carefully, we might find they are based on the wisdom of God, especially if we come from a long line of believers. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In this week's lesson, we will examine James's teaching concerning godly wisdom. Early in our study, we will discuss our words and the difficulty we have in controlling our tongues, especially in emotionally charged situations. But when we allow God's wisdom to control our lives, we will find that He helps control our words—one of the greatest challenges we face.

Part 1—Influence of the Tongue

Responsibility of Teachers

James 3:1–2

[Jas 3:1-2 KJV] 1 My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. 2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same [is] a perfect man, [and] able also to bridle the whole body.

Say: Teachers carry an immense responsibility for others, regardless of whether they are teaching children, teenagers, or adults. Teachers who take their responsibility seriously make a great impact on their students. But teaching should not be taken lightly or as a path to recognition from others. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

When James wrote that not many should presume to be teachers, he was not discouraging people from becoming teachers (James 3:1). Rather, he was indicating that teachers have important responsibilities and will be judged more strictly. Apparently some believers wanted to become teachers for the authority and prestige that accompanied the role. But with leadership also comes responsibility and accountability.

Teaching is a sacred gift given to the Church (Romans 12:7; Ephesians 4:11), and teachers are required to handle God's Word correctly. Teachers influence their students through their teaching of the Scriptures. And since they transmit the truths of God's Word to their students, they need God's wisdom.

Many individuals view their teachers as examples of godliness. Teachers are expected to have a high standard of morality and are to be trustworthy. A teacher who fails to live up to these standards may discourage others and hinder their relationships with God. Teachers will be judged because of this added responsibility that God has given to them.

Teachers are not the only ones who need to watch their lives. All of us may occasionally offend (James 3:2, KJV; "make many mistakes," NLT). But if we can control our tongue, we will be able to control our whole body—all aspects of life—as well.

Discuss

? Why will a teacher be judged more strictly?

? Why is it important for teachers to have a high standard of moral integrity?

Words Can Change Lives

James 3:3–4

[Jas 3:3-4 KJV] 3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. 4 Behold also the ships,

which though [they be] so great, and [are] driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.

Say: Teaching includes both words and behaviors, but James chose to move directly from his warning about the responsibility of teaching to the topic of controlling the tongue. Actions are more easily controlled than words, but words can either destroy or build someone up in a matter of seconds. The words we speak will control, not only the direction of our lives, but the lives of others as well. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Resource Packet Item 1: Taming the Tongue

Distribute the worksheet, and give students a few minutes to fill it out. Then discuss the statements and why students agree or disagree with each one.

In describing the power of the tongue, James used two illustrations—a bit in a horse’s mouth (James 3:3) and a ship’s rudder (verse 4). Both are very small, yet they control something large. In the same way, a person who controls his tongue can control his whole being. The bit provides direction as the horse moves to the right or left in response to a small amount of pressure. Likewise a helmsman can move an entire ship, even in the midst of a storm, by simply moving the rudder.

The tongue is a small part of the human body, but its words provide direction, both for the speaker and those who are listening. The words we speak can give us a reputation for being truthful and kind, or they can give us a reputation for being angry, dishonest, and spiteful. They can also provide direction to others as we use our words to witness and disciple. Perhaps this is why James connected teaching to the use of the tongue.

Discuss

? How can we use our words to provide direction to others?

? Why is it so difficult to control the words we say?

Part 2—Destructive Power of the Tongue

As Destructive as Fire

James 3:5–6

[Jas 3:5-6 KJV] 5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! 6 And the tongue [is] a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

Say: While the tongue can give direction to our lives and the lives of others, an uncontrolled tongue can bring destruction. Conflicts often start as minor disagreements, but they can destroy relationships when heated words erupt. Gossip can spread and destroy families, churches, and communities—all because people are unable to control their tongues. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

James also compared the tongue to a spark (James 3:5). A small spark can ignite a destructive forest fire, sometimes burning entire communities. Likewise, through uncontrolled speech, the tongue can destroy relationships, assassinate characters, hinder the faith of other believers, and discourage unbelievers from coming to Christ.

An uncontrolled tongue is “a whole world of wickedness” (verse 6, NLT). Just as an uncontrolled fire consumes everything in its path, an uncontrolled tongue destroys through its unrighteous speech.

A tongue that is corrupt defiles the whole body because our character is revealed through our speech (Matthew 15:18–20). In fact, the tongue has the ability to corrupt all of society. According to James, this kind of speech has its origin in hell itself (James 3:6).

The tongue can bring life or death, hurt or healing (Proverbs 12:18; 18:21). Speech that is not sanctified by the Holy Spirit can bring discouragement and destruction to others. With our tongues, we can speak words that cut deeply into a person’s emotions and cause heartache. As believers, we are responsible to please God with our speech and offer encouragement to those to whom we speak. To do otherwise is not a godly use of our speech.

Discuss

? In what ways is the tongue like a spark of fire?

? What examples can you give of a hurtful situation that was turned into a healing one because of someone’s words?

Hard to Tame

James 3:7–12

[Jas 3:7-12 KJV] 7 For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: 8 But the tongue can no man tame; [it is] an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. 9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. 11 Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet [water] and

bitter? 12 Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so [can] no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

Say: If you have ever attended a circus, you probably were awed by the lion tamers who were able to command these mighty beasts to obey them. Or you may enjoy watching horse or dog shows, impressed by the training the animals display. Yet James declares it is easier to domesticate all kinds of animals than to control our own tongues. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

People have been able to tame many animals, yet no one can tame the tongue (James 3:7–8). The tongue is full of poison and, if uncontrolled, it can spread its deadly poison through lies, gossip, and other hurtful words.

Unfortunately, some Christians speak praise to God and then turn around and curse others. Some believers may express worship to God but bitterness and hatred toward those He has created. But as believers, we should reflect the love of Christ. Even things in nature do not act contrary to their nature. Fresh water and salt water cannot originate from the same spring (verse 11). A fig tree will not bear olives, and a grapevine will not yield figs (verse 12).

Jesus taught that the words of our mouths reflect the true content of our hearts when He said, “What you say flows from what is in your heart” (Luke 6:45, NLT; see verses 43–45 and Matthew 12:33–37). Our words reflect our relationship with God, and they have the power to either destroy or lift up. If our words are habitually destructive, we should reevaluate our relationship with God.

Words spoken in spite or anger can cut more deeply than a knife. An unbridled tongue will not speak kind words, but a tamed tongue will only speak kind words. God has called us to control our tongues and speak words that will strengthen and encourage others. We can ask God to help us make our words pleasing to Him (Psalm 19:14). His Spirit can enable us to guard our speech so we only speak words of praise to God and words of encouragement to others.

Discuss

? What kinds of inconsistent speech are we sometimes tempted to use?

? What is the key to controlling our unruly tongues?

Resource Packet Item 2: The Powerful Tongue

Distribute the worksheet, and have the students answer the questions individually or in small groups. To save time, you may want to assign each question to a different student or small group, then ask them to share their responses with the class.

Part 3—Earthly and Heavenly Wisdom Contrasted Earthly Wisdom

James 3:14–16

[Jas 3:14-16 KJV] 14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. 15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but [is] earthly, sensual, devilish. 16 For where envying and strife [is], there [is] confusion and every evil work.

Say: Wisdom is usually highly valued, but the world often fails to differentiate between the wisdom of God and its own destructive “wisdom.” In fact, the characteristics of earthly wisdom are often admired and sought after. Successful business leaders are admired for their ambition, even if they are dishonest and selfish in their dealings with others. This “me-first” mentality encourages what James refers to as “selfish ambition” (James 3:14, NLT). (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Sandwiched between two statements regarding the wisdom that comes from God, James 3:14–16 describes the earthly wisdom that results in “disorder and evil of every kind” (verse 16, NLT). Worldly wisdom bears the fruit of contention and factions. James described the attitudes displayed by those who rely on such wisdom.

One who is “bitterly jealous” (verse 14, NLT) displays a hallmark of worldly wisdom. The word bitter carries the idea of something that is irritating to the taste. James used this word in verse 11 to describe the bitter spring water. Bitterness spoils relationships and saps spiritual strength. A jealous individual holds a grudge against another who possesses something he himself would like to possess, such as material goods, position, or power. Combining bitterness with jealousy intensifies the behavior of such a person. Selfish ambition is a preoccupation with personal desire, not the needs of others. Jealousy and selfish ambition must not be found among God’s people.

James instructed his readers not to boast in an attempt to cover up these worldly characteristics. Boasting places self on a pedestal above others and sometimes even above God. The root of this boasting is pride, which will eventually lead to personal and spiritual disaster (Proverbs 16:18). Such evil practices result in serious problems in social and spiritual relationships.

James told his readers to “lie not against the truth” (James 3:14, KJV). They were to no longer attempt to deceive by falsehood. God desires His children to be honest with all people. An ungodly lifestyle cannot be hidden but is plainly seen in a person’s attitudes, actions, and speech. Instead of drawing one closer to God, these actions lead to broken relationships and spiritual decline. These actions and attitudes have no place in the life of a believer.

The wisdom of the world has its origins in the world system (verse 15) and is influenced by Satan. It glorifies people and places human philosophies above God’s wisdom. James concluded that “wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind” (verse 16, NLT).

Discuss

? Why might Christians be tempted to adopt the wisdom of the world instead of the wisdom of God?

? How can Christians avoid worldly wisdom?

Heavenly Wisdom

James 3:13,17–18

[Jas 3:13, 17-18 KJV] 13 Who [is] a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. ... 17 But 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. 18 And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

Say: In James 1:5, we are encouraged to ask God for wisdom. When we do that, the wisdom He gives stands in stark contrast to the earthly wisdom we just discussed. Before launching into his description of earthly wisdom, James challenged his readers to prove that their wisdom came from God by the way they lived. He then described worldly wisdom and contrasted it with the wisdom from God. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

After describing the negatives of earthly wisdom, James turned to the positives of godly wisdom, which can only come from God. It is this type of wisdom that God wants His children to embrace.

Godly wisdom is pure—chaste, clean, innocent, and perfect (James 3:17). The Greek word translated “pure” comes from the same root as the words translated “holy,” “hallow,” and “sanctified.” We must not mix worldly wisdom with the purity of God’s wisdom.

Human wisdom leads to competition, rivalry, and war. However, godly wisdom encourages peace. When we have God’s wisdom, we will try to bring harmony between people who are at odds with each other.

God’s wisdom in us is also manifested by our consideration of and our fairness toward others. God has demonstrated His gentleness toward us and expects us to be gentle with others. His wisdom is always reasonable, not harsh, stubborn, or self-seeking. When we have this kind of wisdom, we readily submit to His will for our lives.

Rather than causing dissension and trouble, the wisdom from above is “full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds” (verse 17, NLT). This wisdom is undivided and does not show favoritism. God gives us His wisdom so we may grow in our walk with Him.

We find God's wisdom by first realizing that we need it. Second, we need to pray to receive His wisdom and expect Him to answer. Third, we must study God's Word. Fourth, we need to listen to the Holy Spirit and obey Him. Fifth, God may use an individual or a situation to speak to us when we are seeking guidance. Remember that God desires to give wisdom to those desiring to help others.

The wisdom from above is worth pursuing. Worldly wisdom brings trouble and pain, but godly wisdom bears a "harvest of righteousness" (James 3:18, NLT).

Those who embrace God's wisdom will be peacemakers (see Matthew 5:9). They will enjoy a bountiful harvest because they help heal relationships and reconcile factions. Peacemakers sow seeds of peace and in return receive a bounty of righteousness.

Godly wisdom brings righteous living. When this wisdom is manifested in our lives, we will bring peace to those whose lives are in turmoil because of sin. It is this wisdom that God wants us to display to others.

Discuss

? What is godly wisdom, and how can we find it?

? How does the use of godly wisdom relate to controlling our speech?

Resource Packet Item 3: Contrasting Wisdom

Distribute the worksheet and ask half of the class to work on the "Worldly Wisdom" column and the other half to work on the "Godly Wisdom" column. Then ask a few people to share their responses and discuss them as a class.

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: God has given us His wisdom so we might bring honor to Him by our godly words and actions. In fact, many people have come to Christ because a believer lived a godly life in their presence. A genuine Christian testimony can be a powerful influence on others. Having godly wisdom will help you live a godly lifestyle and bring peace to the turmoil around you.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Seek out a teacher or mentor who impacted you earlier in your life, and express appreciation to that person.
- Pay close attention to the words you speak to your family, coworkers, and others to see how well you are controlling your tongue.
- Pray for God's wisdom to prevail in your words and actions.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Discouraging Words.
Numbers 13:26–33

Tuesday:

Encouraging Words.
Proverbs 25:11–13

Wednesday:

Conversation of the Righteous.
Malachi 3:16–18

Thursday:

Be True to Your Word.
Matthew 5:33–37

Friday:

Title.
Reference Speak Truthfully and Wholesomely.
Ephesians 4:29–32

Saturday:

Proclaim Christ with Wisdom.
Colossians 1:24–28