

Wisdom From Above
James 3:13-18
Bellevue Baptist Church
July 12, 2026

Please open your Bible to James 3. As you're turning there, I want to express appreciation to Cory O'Hara for bringing his A-game last week, for delivering a wonderful message from James 2.

As Cory started the message, he told the story about the start of his stellar basketball career. When he showed this photo of himself, it made my heart sing, because I too, once believed I was destined for the NBA.

Just look at me here, a member of the Tampico Tigers, #21 the same number as my favorite player Dominique Wilkins of the Atlanta Hawks. I'm sure you will agree that the two of us, side-by-side—that is a screen full of athletic potential right there..

Like Cory, I played countless hours of basketball as a kid. I don't know what motivated him, but my ambition was fueled by watching the Varsity players at our high school. Those young men were the Nephilim—the giants who moved among mortals. In my ten-year old head, all those guys were like Gandalf in the Lord of the Rings and me, a mere hobbit.

I would sit in the stands and stare at these young men, like they were the elephants and giraffes at the zoo. I studied the way they walked, and talked—they seemed to be oozing with confidence. I remember thinking to myself, "Someday...I'm gonna get there." All I had to do was turn 17 and make the starting five, and life would be all down hill from there.

Five years passed and there I was—one of the five people selected by the great Coach Jim Brandau, to take the floor at the tip-off. I had reached the pinnacle, and yet, inside I felt like an imposter. As the band played and went on the court, I didn't feel unbeatable. I felt nervous and nauseous—I felt weaker than I thought I would.

And it dawned on me—those Varsity players I had idolized—they were probably projecting confidence also. They were the fake-till-you-make-it types too. Inner confidence doesn't come with age. No. Wisdom doesn't arrive after a certain number of birthdays or achieving a certain goal. Wisdom and confidence come from a strong relationship with God.

The peace we're all searching for isn't found on a basketball court, in leading a Fortune 500 company, or even building a family—none of those things. Inner peace grows as we enter a deeper, more abiding relationship with Jesus Christ and by growing in His wisdom.

That leads us to James 3. James wants to answer a question every one of us should ask:

How do I know if I'm actually growing in wisdom?

How can I tell whether I'm becoming more like Christ or if I'm becoming a crusty old man? How do I know if my thinking is being shaped by heaven or by the world around me? That's exactly what James is going to show us today. Like you just saw, me and Cory, side by side, James is going to place two kinds of wisdom side by side. Here's what heavenly wisdom looks like. Here's what worldly wisdom looks like. Which one are you? Let's see.

James 3:13...

¹³Who among you is wise and understanding? By his good conduct he should show that his works are done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast and deny the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense. ¹⁸And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.
James 3:13–18

Are you growing in wisdom from above? Here's how you know.

Wisdom From Above...

1. Shows up in gentleness. (v.13)

Who among you is wise and understanding? By his good conduct he should show that his works are done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom.

Softness is the signature of saintliness. One of the ways I know I'm walking in the flesh, is when I'm taking a harsh tone with my wife, for no apparent reason. There's just an edge to my voice, and usually, it has nothing to do with her. In my heart, the flesh was somehow activated. No gentleness, no softness in my tone.

James says that gentleness and wisdom are always tied together, like a motorcycle and a sidecar. The way you talk indicates who occupies the throne of your heart.

Surely you can detect how countercultural this is. Our world applauds the boss who pounds his fist on the conference table. The coach who humiliates her player in front of the team. The celebrity chef who screams at all the incompetent people in the kitchen. The world says, "If everyone is afraid of you, you must be in charge." But the Bible presents a very different picture of strength. Who is wise among you? The person who has learned to speak with kindness, even when hard things need to be said.

In v. 13: The word that James uses for gentleness means tenderness—one who has the authority to bring thunder, but uses the thunderbolt sparingly. His power has been tamed, like a wild horse that's been broken, made useful to its owner.

In the world of sports, this made me think of the great Roger Federer. Today, many people think of Federer as the picture of elegance and composure on the tennis court. This man was silky smooth. Calm. Classy. Unflappable. But that's not how he started.

At sixteen years old, Federer became so angry during a practice that he hurled his racket at the fence in frustration and his coach kicked him off the court. Federer was forced scrub the team's toilets for a week.

In an interview I saw, Federer said: those toilets changed my life. It was a turning point. From that moment on, Federer said, I would aim for a game of finesse, not fury. I would master my emotions.

The wild horse had been broken by a tooth brush and some toilets.

One of the greatest gifts God can bring to a person is failure. In loss, we learn to be led. As A.W. Tozer said:

**It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply.
—A.W. Tozer**

In the Bible, we see God taming wild horses all the time, people like Moses. In Numbers 12, we learn that this man who was a fugitive, on the run after murder, was changed by the spirit of God. At one point, the Lord called him the meekest, most humble person on the Earth.

But, Moses had a flesh button in his heart too, one that could still be activated, and when he struck a rock, rather than waiting on God, he failed that test, he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

What's the lesson? If you think you are wise and humble, beware. Don't ever put that label on yourself, because the minute you start to think that, you're becoming proud of your humility, you're getting wise in your own eyes. And you know what the Bible says about that. Proverbs 26:12?

Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. Proverbs 26:12

How do you know this has happened to you? The easiest way is to listen to the sound of your own voice. Have you lost your gentleness? If it can happen to Moses, it can happen to me, and you.

For each of my points, I'll provide a quick test. Here's...

The Gentleness Test

- **Do I speak to people with tenderness or toughness?**
- **Do my words cause people to feel valued or diminished?**

Who is wise among you? There's a gentleness that comes from wisdom.

Let's keep going. What else will James say? In vv.14-16, we discover the second quality of heavenly wisdom. It...

2. Shuns selfish ambition (vv.14-16)

But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't boast and deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice.

How do you spot the least wise person in the room? Here's a mindblowing insight: they are **self-ish**. Think about that word with me for a minute—the “ish” part. If a person is **bookish**, what do they do? **They think about books all day**. Their Instagram is stuck on the algorithm of the top 100 books every person should read. They are book-ish.

If a person is **stylish**: they **think about clothes all the time**. They like to look online and see what's on-sale. They are style-ish.

If a person is **self-ish**, they **think about self all the time**.

A selfish person is constantly asking: *How do I look?* And not just “How do I look” but how do I look compared to others? Envy is the giveaway. Envy is the me-monster. Bitter envy, as James says here—it’s what happens when I look at another person’s success, and believe this is throwing shade on me.

Their promotion... my career. Their house... my house. Their marriage... my marriage. Their vacation...my vacation.

And if envy was a problem twenty years ago, social media has thrown a thousand gallons of gas on the fire that was already burning. Her post....my post. Her skin...my skin. His workout plan...my workout plan. His Bible reading next to his perfect cup of espresso...my measly devotions done with Folgers.

The more self-ish I am, the more I view others as a threat to my world dominance.

You can be sure that you are not walking in wisdom, when you are spending hours comparing your lot in life with his or hers. David said in the Psalms:

My boundary lines have fallen in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. Psalm 16:6

David looked at what God had given him and said, “Wow, what lavish gifts you have bestowed on me! What an incredible piece of land. All this...is mine??” That’s walking in the Spirit—grateful for all one has. But envy activates the flesh, and this verse gets changed.

Her boundary lines have fallen in pleasant places; surely she has a delightful inheritance. Psalm 16:6

When we let our mind run loose like this, we have left the way of wisdom. We have become three things instantly—did you see it in v. 15? James pulls no punches. We are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

Bitter envy, when it’s allowed to grow, becomes the treadmill that never turns off. No matter how much you get in life, there will always be someone that is getting a little more.

Once in an interview, famous entertainer Madonna was honest about her ambition and the exhaustion she felt. She said:

My drive in life comes from a fear of being mediocre. That is always pushing me. I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being but then I feel I am still mediocre and uninteresting unless I do something else. Because

even though I have become somebody, I still have to prove I am somebody. My struggle has never ended and I guess it never will. –Madonna

She may not be a model of Christianity, but she is here a model of honesty. She says, “Here’s how my career goes. I accomplish something. People applaud. I feel momentarily special. A few days later, someone I view as a rival accomplishes something. People applaud louder. I am mediocre.” Rinse and repeat.

When we think like this, and we all have, James describes this thinking as demonic oppression. Why? Because envy didn’t start with us. It started with Satan. Scripture says Satan was once an angel of light. He was given a glory from God, but when he looked at his glory, and God’s glory—he thought his boundary lines hadn’t fallen in pleasant places. He wanted more for himself.

And today, whenever I crave my brother’s blessings rather than thanking God for mine, I spread the infection.

In V. 16, he makes the bold statement about the spread of envy and selfishness: *For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there is disorder and every evil practice.* Why? Because a room full of self-centered people, all competing for glory, is a foreshadowing of a place called hell. And trust me—nobody wants to be in that room.

So, let me give you..

The Selfishness Test

A quote from Charles Spurgeon will do it. Do you feel conviction? He said:

A man will speedily sit down and sympathize with a friend’s griefs; but if he sees him honored and esteemed, he is apt to regard him as a rival and does not so readily rejoice with him. This ought not to be: without effort we ought to be happy in our brother’s happiness. –Charles Spurgeon

If you are among the wise people on Earth, then you can tour your friend’s sprawling estate, and say: “What a place the Lord has provided! I celebrate with you.”

Did you pass the gentleness test, and now the selfishness test? If so, two down, one to go. James has one more coming, when he says that heavenly wisdom....

3. Spreads peaceful fruit (vv.17-18)

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense. ¹⁸ And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace.

Notice the fruits of God's good trees. James is describing what naturally grows around someone who is filled with the Holy Spirit. The fruit is easy to see. What is the fruit? He fires off 8 things. First, this person is:

Pure: their heart is clean

Peace-loving: they do not create unnecessary conflict (low-drama)

Gentle: there is a subtle softness

Compliant: they are willing to follow another person's plan.

Full of mercy: they are quick to forgive

Full of good fruits: positive things happen around them

Unwavering: they are not flaky people, but dependable.

Without pretense: They don't put on a mask, or act as if they have it all together.

Doesn't that sound like someone you'd want to spend more time with? Doesn't sound like someone you want your son or daughter to marry?

Wisdom, as it accumulates, produces a life-giving person. When this person walks into a room, people breathe easier. Relationships heal. Hope grows. The Spirit of God moves. That's why James closes this section the way he does:

"The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace." (v. 18)

That's the language of agriculture—of the harvest. Wise people are sowers of seed. They are like farmers who have learned to be patient. A good harvest is a result of longevity. The wise do the right and simple things, day after day, year after year, knowing that one day, God will reward them with a field full of crops.

No, you don't turn wise when you turn 17, when you make the starting five on the Varsity. No, you become wise by imitating the Lord Jesus, doing what He says, and letting his life-giving character become yours.

And when you do, you as a person become like a field full of crops. Good fruit falls from your tree and your family tastes it. Your friends experience it. Your church benefits from it. When we follow the Prince of Peace, we produce peace.

So here is the fruit test: and I warn you—this one is going to hit close to home.

The Fruit Test

In his book, *Respectable Sins*, which I have placed in the library and bookstore: Jerry Bridges has a gut-wrenching chapter on selfishness. There, he says:

A lot of selfishness is exhibited in the home among family members. Outside the home we are apt to be on our best behavior and act as we know we should. But in the home we tend to put aside those artificial restraints that are not part of our true character. Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins*

Ouch. If you want to know who you really are, don't look at the footage at school or work. No, take the water sample from home. See how clear and pure that is. Home is the place where artificial restraints are left in the garage. Our true colors come shining through inside the walls of our houses.

There, we say things to our family that we would soften in society. We all know, the people at work may say, "He's so nice. He's such a servant..." But at home, he expects her to wait on him hand-and-foot. If we want real answers, we are willing to do what Bridges says next: *Since selfishness is so difficult to see in ourselves, it would be good to ask your family: "what is it like to live with me?"*

Does my life make this home a place of peace?

Now, with my time remaining, let me see if I can tackle some questions that rise from this text.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

How can I tell if I've become wiser over the years or just more "set in my ways?"

Is it a good thing or a bad thing to become "set in our ways."

Now, let's think biblically about the pros and cons of hard cement. The good side is we become less gullible. We've been tricked too many times to fall for that nonsense again. 1 Timothy 4:7 says: *Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.* It's a good thing to learn from the school of hard knocks. To spot the counterfeit bill as soon as it's taken from the customer's wallet. As we get older, we are less likely to be blown and tossed by the latest trends and false teachings that come along. This is one of the reasons why hipster churches who have nothing but young people walking the halls is dangerous. When we are young, we all need mentors that are a little more "set in their ways."

But there is a danger when I become one who is set in his ways. I can start to think that what the world needs more of, is my opinion. If they would just do it “my way” we’d get this thing back on track.

I've noticed something over the years. The most immature Christians are always clamoring to be heard.

Proverbs 10:19:

**When there are many words, sin is unavoidable,
but the one who controls his lips is prudent. Prov. 10:19**

Remember Proverbs 10:19, the next time you're tempted to voice your opinion without praying about it first. You are becoming wise in your own eyes, when you think that the world needs more of your words.

**A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:
Isn't a measure of selfish ambition necessary to accomplish great things?**

Is there such a thing as “sanctified self-interest?” Sure there is. Jesus said:

Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves don't break in and steal. Matthew 6:20

Store up FOR YOURSELF, some gold and silver in heaven. He's referring to a kind of sanctified savings plan. Don't keep all your prized baseball cards in a wet room full of mold! No, put them in a hard plastic case, in a climate controlled room!

We are not fools for wanting a reward. But the wise realize that only those things that we do for the glory of God are able to exist beyond the grave.

Selfish ambition asks, "How can I get my fifteen minutes of fame on Earth?" Holy ambition asks, "How can I use my gifts to spread God's name?"

In the famous movie, *Chariots of Fire*, there is a scene that stands out. The main character, Eric Liddell, was born with an unusual talent to run. He has already committed to becoming a missionary in China, but he still thinks he may want to try out for the Olympic team. His sister, Jennie, worries that his devotion to running is distracting him from God's work.

And he says these words to her: "I believe God made me for a purpose..but He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure."

Liddell said, I want to pursue this, because when I do, I feel as though I'm doing the thing I was put on the planet to do.

Selfish ambition says, "Look what I can accomplish." Holy ambition says, "God has given me a gift and I don't want to waste it."

When you are doing the thing He made you to do, there is enormous joy in that act. So find out what you can do that brings God the most glory, and you the most joy, and with a kind of sanctified selfishness—prioritize those things.

A Student Asks:

In addition to my Bible, what is something I could read that could help me stay humble?

The best way to remain humble is to build a regular practice of repentance. How can you continue to see yourself as a sinner that has been saved by grace, and not, a spiritually elite person whom others are lucky to know?

Many years ago, I stumbled upon something called John Wesley's Holy Club Questions.

John Wesley was one of the great Christian leaders in history. Long before he became famous for his preaching, he and a group of friends at Oxford University formed what became known as the "Holy Club." The year was 1729. Their goal was simple: they wanted to take following Jesus seriously.

They met regularly to pray, study Scripture, confess sin, and ask one another hard questions. They understood something that many Christians forget: if God is going to use you greatly, you must first become humble. The pathway up in God's Kingdom always begins by going down.

So they developed a list of searching questions to expose pride, uncover hidden sin, and keep their hearts soft before the Lord.

Let me read you just a few:

- **Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am?**
- **Do I confidentially pass on to others what was told to me in confidence?**
- **Am I a slave to dress, friends, work, or habits?**
- **Do I thank God that I am not like other people?**
- **Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold resentment toward, or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?**

Can you imagine asking yourself those questions like these every week? And that's just five of them!

Humility doesn't happen by human decision. It happens by consciously rejecting every pocket of unholiness that lives in our hearts unnoticed. Wesley's questions act like spiritual mirrors, revealing things we would otherwise miss. And you can find them online. Just google John Wesley's Holy Club Questions.

Those questions can help you get low. If you want God to use you, then you've got to get low. The greatest leaders in Christian history are those who continued to get low before God.

Former pastor of this church, Adrian Rogers often shared that God had called him to preach while he was still in high school, but he felt woefully inadequate. When he had been called upon to pray out loud at Sunday School one week, he felt like he had no words to say, that he wasn't gifted with verbal skills. But deep in his heart, he continued to feel like the Lord was calling him to give his life to the ministry of preaching. And one night, he was out for a walk. While passing one of his favorite spots, his high school football field, something happened....

One night, walking on the football field, I felt a need to kneel and pray. Alone on that football field, I called out to the Lord, "God, I want You to use me!" Kneeling did not seem good enough or humble enough, so I laid down prostrate in the grass and said, "Father, I want You to use me." That did not seem humble enough, so I took my finger and made a hole in the dirt and put my nose down in that hole. I called out, "Lord, I am as low as I know how to get. I want You to use me."
—Adrian Rogers

And he went on to make the following comments about that experience. He said:

Something happened in my life that night... I had a personal experience with the Holy Spirit. From there his life went up, because he was willing to go down, to humble himself and get low. That's what the wise are willing to do.

Not long ago, I was reading back over a book by Jerry Bridges called *Respectable Sins*. It's a very convicting book that reveals how we often justify little sins that we consider "less serious" and live as though God doesn't see or care. The chapter that I felt was most gut-wrenching was the chapter about selfishness. He says this:

A lot of selfishness is exhibited in the home among family members. Outside the home we are apt to be on our best behavior and act as we know we should. But in the home we tend to put aside those artificial restraints that are not part of our true character. Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins*

Ouch. Anybody feel the Spirit step on their toes? It's true isn't it? We say things to our family that we would soften at work or with a stranger. We let our guard down and we can come home with a self-centered attitude, even while the people at work think, "He's so nice. He's such a servant..." Look at what Bridges recommends...

Since selfishness is so difficult to see in ourselves, it would be good to ask other family members to point out any tendencies toward selfishness they see in us. And we should do this...without bringing up any selfishness we see in the other person.

So there you have it, Jerry Bridges builds the case, like the book of James—that true wisdom, a person who models their life after His, shuns selfish ambition, refuses to draw attention to themselves, and focuses their energy on serving God.