

AM 01-25 Wisdom from Above vs. Below

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Thesis

Heavenly wisdom is clean and right. It seeks peace, not conflict, and it leads to good actions. This kind of wisdom is the opposite of earthly wisdom, which is driven by selfishness and ends in harm.

Lesson Alignment (Bloom's Taxonomy)

Introduction

Hook: Wisdom That Wrecks a Church

Not everything that sounds smart is from God. Some “wisdom” walks into a church wearing a suit and carrying a Bible—yet it leaves behind arguments, ego, and division. People call it “being realistic” or “being strategic,” but James calls it something else: earthly, natural, demonic.

James shows us there are only two kinds of wisdom. One comes from above and builds peace. The other comes from below and breeds strife. The real test is not how clever it sounds—it’s what it produces in the church.

I. The Roots and Source of Earthly Wisdom

(James 3:14–15)

What James Is Really Targeting

James is not impressed by intelligence, talent, or strategy. He is after **motive**. He is asking a deeper question beneath behavior and speech:

Why are you doing what you are doing?

In James 3:14, he exposes the heart of what he later calls *earthly, natural, demonic* wisdom. This wisdom does not begin with bad ideas. It begins with **bad desires**.

“But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.” (James 3:14, NASB 1995)

James identifies two root sins that poison wisdom at the source.

1. Bitter Jealousy (*pikros zēlos*)

This is not normal concern or healthy zeal.

- **pikros** means sharp, harsh, resentful, poisoned
- **zēlos** means zeal, rivalry, jealousy

Together, the phrase describes a **resentful drive that cannot stand to lose**.

This spirit says:

- “Why should he get that?”
- “I deserve more recognition.”
- “If I cannot win, I will make sure someone else loses.”

It is not content with faithfulness.

It demands **superiority**.

Ecclesiastes 4:4 — “I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor.”

Much human effort is driven not by love for good, but by competition and resentment.

Simple Truth:

Bitter jealousy turns ministry into competition and turns brothers into threats.

2. Selfish Ambition (*eritheia*) — The Core Motive

This word is the key to James’s argument.

Eritheia originally referred to a man who:

- Canvassed for political office
- Used flattery and manipulation
- Stirred up division
- Said whatever was necessary to win

It describes **ambition without conscience**.

This person:

- Changes convictions when convenient
- Becomes whatever gains advantage
- Uses people instead of serving them

- Discards truth when it costs too much

Modern Illustration

Think of a modern politician who:

- Promises one thing to one group and the opposite to another
- Claims strong convictions but has none
- Uses fear, outrage, or religion to gain power
- Stabs allies in the back once they are no longer useful

That is eritheia.

James says this motive is **demonic**—not because it looks evil on the surface, but because it mirrors Satan’s strategy:

- Power without submission
- Gain without truth
- Victory without righteousness

This is the motive.

This is the reason.

This is the “why.”

Lying Against the Truth (James 3:14)

James says those who live this way are *“lying against the truth.”*

This does not mean they openly deny Scripture.

It means:

- They claim God's wisdom
- But operate from selfish motives
- They cloak fleshly ambition in spiritual language

This is **religious cover for self-interest**.

Jesus warned about this:

Matthew 7:15–16 — False teachers are known by their fruit, not by their words.

II. The Destructive Fruit of Worldly Cunning

(James 3:16 — explained and extended by James 4:1)

“For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.”

(James 3:16, NASB 1995)

Exegesis of Disorder

James now moves from **motive** (James 3:14) to **results**.

He is no longer diagnosing the heart; he is describing the fallout.

James does not speculate.

He states a spiritual law:

Where selfish ambition rules, disorder is guaranteed.

The word translated “*disorder*” is **akatastasia**.

It means instability, unrest, confusion, commotion, and breakdown. It was commonly used of riots, political chaos, and social upheaval. It describes a condition where nothing stays in its proper place and nothing remains secure.

This is the direct opposite of how God works.

From creation onward, God brings **order out of chaos**:

- light separated from darkness
- land separated from sea
- truth separated from error

Earthly wisdom reverses that process.

It takes what God ordered and throws it back into confusion.

James is clear:

Disorder is not accidental.

It is not a personality clash.

It is not “growing pains.”

It is the fruit of selfish ambition.

“Every Evil Thing”

James adds a sweeping statement:

“and every evil thing.”

This does not mean every sin appears immediately, but that **no sin is excluded** once selfish ambition is in control.

When the heart believes it knows better than God:

- Truth becomes negotiable
- People become tools
- Loyalty becomes conditional
- Sin becomes justifiable

Once ambition replaces submission, there is **no moral ceiling**.

Anything that serves the self becomes acceptable.

How James 4:1 Explains James 3:16

James does not change subjects in chapter 4.

He **explains the source of the disorder** he just described.

*“What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?
Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?”
(James 4:1)*

James 3:16 describes the **environment**:

- disorder
- chaos
- evil multiplying

James 4:1 exposes the **engine** driving it.

The word translated “*pleasures*” is **hēdonōn** — the root of the word *hedonism*. This is not limited to immoral pleasure. It includes **self-centered desire** of every kind.

James’s picture of desire “waging war” is not calm or passive. It is restless.

It is like a person who cannot sit still. Their leg is always bouncing. Their fingers need something to grab. Their eyes keep darting around the room. They have to *do something* or they feel like they will burst.

That is the kind of desire James is describing.

Selfish ambition and bitter jealousy do not wait patiently. They churn. They itch. They demand action. The person driven by these desires feels constant pressure to speak, to act, to push, to assert, to win. Silence feels unbearable. Submission feels suffocating.

This is the hedonism James is exposing.

It is not about pleasure in the shallow sense. It is about **inner craving**—the need to satisfy the self:

- the need to win
- the need to control
- the need to be noticed
- the need to be right
- the need to get one’s way

That desire builds pressure on the inside.

James 3:16 shows what happens when that pressure is released: disorder and every evil thing.

James 4:1 explains why it happens: those desires are *waging war* inside the person.

The church conflict exists because the heart conflict came first.

Selfish ambition is like an Alka-Seltzer dropped into water. At first, it is hidden. Then it starts fizzing. The bubbles rise faster and faster. If nothing stops it—if there is no humility, no restraint, no submission to God—it will overflow.

And when it overflows, it does not spill peace.

It spills chaos.

James is teaching that when desire rules the heart, disorder is inevitable. What erupts on the outside is only the visible foam of a war that has already been raging within.

Genesis 11:4–9

At Babel, the people united around one goal:

“Let us make a name for ourselves.”

Their plan looked impressive:

- organized
- cooperative
- ambitious

But it was rooted in pride and self-exaltation, not submission to God.

God’s response was not admiration.

It was judgment.

He introduced **confusion**.

Language fractured.

Unity collapsed.

The project ended in scattering.

Babel proves James's point centuries in advance:

Human wisdom aimed at self always produces chaos.

Application:

When a church or a family operates on human cunning rather than humble obedience, they are not building something strong. They are building something unstable. What looks like progress is actually preparation for collapse.

Galatians 5:15

“But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

This is not persecution from outside the church.

This is destruction from within.

When people compete for:

- influence
- control
- recognition

Relationships become predatory. Everyone defends territory. Everyone is suspicious.

Everyone is ready to strike.

This is the natural end of earthly wisdom.

Application — The Illustration of the Poisoned Well:

You can have the finest bucket imaginable—education, eloquence, money, influence. But if the well itself is poisoned with jealousy and ambition, every drink brings harm. The problem is never the tool. The problem is the source.

James teaches that selfish ambition does not merely affect individuals. It destabilizes entire communities.

James 3:16 shows the wreckage.

James 4:1 exposes the cause.

Where worldly cunning rules, confusion follows.

And once confusion takes hold, **no evil is off-limits**.

III. The Character of Heavenly Wisdom

(James 3:17)

James now turns from what earthly wisdom **produces** to what heavenly wisdom **reveals**. The contrast could not be sharper. Earthly wisdom agitates, competes, and consumes. Heavenly wisdom settles, heals, and builds.

Exegesis of Purity (James 3:17)

James begins with a word that governs everything that follows:

*“But the wisdom from above is **first pure**...”*

The word *pure* (*hagnē*) means clean, unmixed, uncontaminated. It carries the idea of moral clarity and single-minded devotion. Heavenly wisdom has no hidden agenda. It is not trying to win, manipulate, or position itself. It is not calculating how to come out on top.

Purity comes **first** because if wisdom is not pure, nothing else that follows is trustworthy. Peace without purity becomes compromise. Gentleness without purity becomes weakness. Reasonableness without purity becomes people-pleasing.

Heavenly wisdom starts with a heart that wants God's will more than personal advantage.

Because it is pure, it is then:

- **Peaceable** — it seeks harmony, not dominance.
- **Gentle** — it refuses harshness and intimidation.
- **Open to reason** — it can listen, learn, and yield without feeling threatened.

This wisdom is not defensive. It does not panic when questioned. It does not lash out when challenged. It does not need to protect an image.

James adds that it is:

- **Full of mercy** — it remembers how much grace it has received.
- **Full of good fruits** — it produces visible, practical righteousness.
- **Unwavering** — it does not shift with moods, crowds, or convenience.
- **Without hypocrisy** — it is the same in public and private.

Earthly wisdom performs.

Heavenly wisdom **is consistent**.

Psalm 19:7

*“The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.”*

Explanation:

True wisdom is not discovered by cleverness. It is revealed by God. Scripture does not merely inform the mind; it restores the soul. God’s Word stabilizes the inner life, giving clarity where confusion once ruled.

James’s heavenly wisdom is inseparable from God’s revealed truth. You cannot separate wisdom from submission to God’s Word and still call it “from above.”

Application:

If you want to grow in wisdom, stop chasing the world’s experts and start trusting the Shepherd’s instructions. Wisdom does not begin with opinions. It begins with obedience.

Matthew 5:9

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

Explanation:

Heavenly wisdom does not merely avoid conflict—it works toward reconciliation. Peacemakers are not passive. They step into tension with humility, patience, and truth. They reflect the character of their Father.

Earthly wisdom asks, “*How do I protect myself?*”

Heavenly wisdom asks, “*How do I restore peace without sacrificing truth?*”

Application — The Illustration of the Prism:

When God’s light shines through a soul shaped by heavenly wisdom, it does not come out harsh or blinding. It breaks into beautiful colors—gentleness, mercy, sincerity, and peace. The light is the same, but the heart it passes through changes how it is seen.

James teaches that heavenly wisdom produces a life that is steady, honest, merciful, and peace-building. It does not fizz, churn, or explode. It rests in purity and spreads peace wherever it goes.

IV. The Harvest of Righteousness

(James 3:18)

Exegesis of the Seed (James 3:18)

James ends this section with an agriculture picture. He is telling you how spiritual outcomes are produced.

“And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

The **harvest** is *righteousness* (*dikaiosynē*)—right living that matches God’s will, and right relationships that reflect God’s order. But James is clear: righteousness does not appear by accident. It grows from a seed, and that seed is planted in a certain way and by a certain kind of person.

- The seed is **sown** — meaning righteousness is cultivated over time.

- It is sown **in peace** — peace is not the reward at the end; it is the environment at the start.
- It is sown **by those who make peace** — peacemaking is not passive; it is active work.

James’s point is blunt:

You cannot harvest righteousness from a field you keep setting on fire.

If jealousy and selfish ambition create disorder and “every evil thing” (3:16), then peace is the opposite soil. Peace is the climate where righteousness can actually grow.

So the question is not merely, “Do we want righteousness?”

The question is, “Are we sowing the kind of seed and maintaining the kind of soil where righteousness can grow?”

Isaiah 32:17

*“And the work of righteousness will be peace,
And the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever.”*

Explanation:

Isaiah states the same principle: righteousness produces peace. Not fake peace, not peace at the expense of truth, but the settled stability that comes when people do what is right before God. When conduct is right, relationships begin to heal. When conduct is wrong, conflict multiplies.

Righteousness is not merely personal morality; it has social consequences. It creates quietness, stability, and confidence because it aligns life with God.

Application:

If you are constantly at odds with the church, the issue is not always “everybody else.” Look at the seed being sown. Peace does not grow in soil that is constantly being disturbed by pride, suspicion, and competition.

Philippians 1:11

“having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

Explanation:

Paul names the source of this harvest: it “comes through Jesus Christ.” That means righteousness is not self-made. It is not a personality trait. It is not the result of being “more mature than others.” It is produced through union with Christ—His teaching, His example, His authority, His power, His cleansing.

When Christ is the source, the result is not self-glory but “the glory and praise of God.”

Application:

You cannot manufacture this harvest by sheer willpower. If you stay rooted in pride, you will keep producing strife. If you stay rooted in Christ, you will produce the fruit of righteousness. Peace-making is not a trick; it is the outflow of a heart submitted to the Lord.

James closes the section with a final reality:

Peace-makers are not weak. They are farmers of righteousness. They plant peace on purpose—so that righteousness can grow on purpose.

Conclusion

The wisdom you live by will always show up in the fruit you produce.

- If the root is **jealousy and selfish ambition**, the fruit will be **disorder** and “every evil thing.”
- If the root is **wisdom from above**, the fruit will be **peace** and a harvest of **righteousness**.

James does not let us hide behind claims, titles, or religious talk. He forces the issue down to reality:

What kind of wisdom is shaping your choices, your words, your relationships, and your influence in the church?

If your life is marked by constant friction, constant suspicion, constant power struggles, and constant “war,” the problem is not that everyone else lacks wisdom. The problem is the seed you are sowing and the master you are serving.

But God has not left you trapped in the bitter well. There is a wisdom from above. It is clean. It is peace-producing. It is full of mercy. It does not manipulate. It does not weaponize truth. It does not “win” by destroying others.

That wisdom is not found in a system. It is found in a Person—Jesus Christ.

If you are tired of the confusion, tired of the striving, tired of the inner war that keeps spilling into outer conflict, the answer is not another strategy. The answer is surrender. Bow to Christ. Let Him cleanse the source, not just adjust the behavior.

Invitation

The Call

Come to Christ and leave behind earthly wisdom. Stop defending selfish ambition. Stop feeding the pleasures that wage war within. Stop living in a way that produces disorder and then acting surprised when relationships collapse.

Come to the Lord who gives wisdom generously, and who brings order out of chaos.

The Plan of Salvation (Separate)

- **Hear** the word of Christ (Romans 10:17)
- **Believe** that Jesus is the Son of God (John 8:24)
- **Repent** of sin and worldly pride (Acts 17:30)
- **Confess** Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9–10)
- **Be baptized** for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38)
- **Remain faithful** until death (Revelation 2:10)

Come now. Leave the wisdom that destroys, and take hold of the wisdom that saves.

Greek Word Study

Scripture Index

Historical/Cultural Context

Further Study Recommendations

Slide Deck

Slide 1 — Title

Wisdom That Builds or Wisdom That Destroys

James 3:14–18; 4:1

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Slide 2 — Thesis

Heavenly wisdom is clean and right.

It seeks peace and produces good fruit.

Earthly wisdom is driven by selfish desire
and always ends in harm.

Slide 3 — The Issue James Exposes

Two kinds of wisdom

- One from above
- One from below

The test is not how smart it sounds
but what it produces in the church.

Slide 4 — Point I

The Roots of Earthly Wisdom

(James 3:14–15)

James targets motive, not intelligence.

“But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart...”

The problem begins inside.

Slide 5 — Greek: Bitter Jealousy

πικρὸς ζῆλος — *pikros zēlos*

- *pikros* = sharp, bitter, poisoned
- *zēlos* = zeal, rivalry, jealousy

Meaning:

A resentful drive that cannot stand to lose.

Result:

Ministry becomes competition.

Brothers become threats.

Slide 6 — Greek: Selfish Ambition

ἐριθεία — *eritheia*

- Originally: office-seeking, partisan ambition
- Gaining power by manipulation

Meaning:

Ambition without conscience.

James's verdict:

Earthly. Natural. Demonic.

Slide 7 — Lying Against the Truth

(James 3:14)

Not denying Scripture —
using spiritual language to hide selfish motives.

Truth becomes a tool.
Religion becomes a mask.

Slide 8 — Point II

The Destructive Fruit of Worldly Cunning

(James 3:16)

“Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist,
there is disorder and every evil thing.”

James moves from cause to consequences.

Slide 9 — Greek: Disorder

ἀκαταστασία — akatastasia

- Instability
- Confusion
- Chaos

- Breakdown

Used for riots and social upheaval.

Meaning:

Nothing stays in its proper place.

Slide 10 — “Every Evil Thing”

Once selfish ambition rules:

- Truth becomes flexible
- People become tools
- Sin becomes justifiable

There is no moral ceiling.

Slide 11 — James 4:1 Explains James 3:16

“What causes quarrels and conflicts among you?

Is it not your pleasures that wage war in your members?”

The chaos outside comes from a war inside.

Slide 12 — Greek: Pleasures / Hedonism

ἡδονῶν — hēdonōn

(root of hedonism)

Not just sensual pleasure —
self-centered craving.

The need to:

- win
 - control
 - be right
 - be recognized
-

Slide 13 — Illustration: The Fizzing Heart

Selfish ambition is like Alka-Seltzer in water.

It fizzes.

It churns.

It builds pressure.

When it overflows,
it spills chaos, not peace.

Slide 14 — Point III

The Character of Heavenly Wisdom

(James 3:17)

“The wisdom from above is first pure...”

James now shows the contrast.

Slide 15 — Greek: Pure

ἀγνή — hagnē

- Clean
- Unmixed
- No hidden agenda

Purity comes first

because everything else flows from it.

Slide 16 — What Heavenly Wisdom Produces

Because it is pure, it is:

- Peaceable
- Gentle
- Open to reason
- Full of mercy
- Unwavering
- Without hypocrisy

It does not compete.

It heals.

Slide 17 — Point IV

The Harvest of Righteousness

(James 3:18)

“The seed whose fruit is righteousness
is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

Slide 18 — Greek: Righteousness & Final Call

δικαιοσύνη — dikaiosynē

- Right living
- Right relationships

Peace is the soil.

Righteousness is the harvest.

You cannot grow God's fruit
in a field of war.

Slide 19 — The Call of Divine Wisdom

Earthly wisdom produces conflict.

Heavenly wisdom produces life.

If you are tired of the inner war
that spills into broken relationships,
the answer is not a new strategy.

The answer is submission to Christ.

True wisdom begins when the heart bows to God.

Slide 20 — The Plan of Salvation

God's wisdom calls for a response.

- **Hear** the word of Christ
(Romans 10:17)

- **Believe** that Jesus is the Son of God
(John 8:24)
- **Repent** of sin and selfish ambition
(Acts 17:30)
- **Confess** Jesus as Lord
(Romans 10:9–10)
- **Be baptized** for the forgiveness of sins
(Acts 2:38)
- **Remain faithful** until death
(Revelation 2:10)

Leave the wisdom that destroys.

Come to Christ and receive the wisdom from above.