

# The Humility of Heavenly Wisdom



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *James 3:13–4:10; Deut. 4:6; Gal. 5:17; Jer. 3:6–10, 20; Acts 19:13–16; Ps. 24:3–6.*

**Memory Text:** “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you” (*James 4:10, NASB*).

In many midsize and larger companies, a “middle-manager mentality” exists. This attitude happens when workers feel entitled to something they do not yet have: more respect, a higher salary, a more advanced position, and so on. This unhealthy attitude develops over time as the person strives to get ahead. Symptoms may include flattering remarks served up to decision makers and complimentary revelations made about coworkers, all seasoned with a spirit of selfish rivalry. When one major television news anchor advanced to the top without destroying others to get there, a colleague admiringly observed: “There were no dead bodies.”

It would be nice to think that selfish rivalry is confined to secular organizations and that the church operates quite differently. Unfortunately, Scripture indicates that all too often worldly “wisdom” also operates among believers.

This week, let's see what the Word of God has to say about this unfortunate reality.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 22.

## The Meekness of Wisdom

**“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom”** (*James 3:13, ESV*). **“The meekness of wisdom”?** What might that mean?

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Some commentators think that the entire third chapter of James has to do with what qualifies (or disqualifies) people to be teachers. Naturally, the “wise and understanding” would seem to be good candidates, but the scope seems to be broader, encompassing the whole congregation. The wisdom James describes here and throughout the epistle is not primarily the intellectual variety so esteemed by the ancient Greeks and many Western countries today. Rather, wisdom is seen in one’s conduct and lifestyle, as indicated by the Greek word for it, *anastrophe*, translated “conduct” (*used also in 1 Tim. 4:12, Heb. 13:7, 1 Pet. 1:15, 2:12*). Our actions and conduct testify as to how wise we are. Jesus taught the same, saying that “ ‘wisdom is justified by her children’ ” (*Matt. 11:19, NKJV*).

Interestingly, the only place in the Old Testament where the phrase translated “wise and understanding” is found is in Moses’ admonition to Israel to observe all the laws that God had commanded: “Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a *wise and understanding people*’ ” (*Deut. 4:6, ESV; emphasis added*).

In contrast, the “bitter” water spring referred to in James 3:11 produces “envy and selfish ambition” (*vs. 14, NIV*) in the church. The latter translates from the Greek word *eritheia*, which refers to “the exclusive pursuit of one’s own interests.”—Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers), vol. 2, p. 70. That’s an attitude that sounds more like Satan in heaven than like what Christians should be on earth. Unless we make a conscious choice to die to self and surrender our wills to the Lord, all of us could be in danger of displaying precisely the attitudes here that James warns about.

**Dwell more on the phrase “the meekness of wisdom.” What are some of the situations in which, right now, some of this wisdom on your part would be very helpful?**

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## Two Kinds of Wisdom

**Read** James 3:15, 16. What is his description of worldly wisdom? What are the common ways we see this “wisdom” manifested in the world, or even in the church?

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The wisdom that we have naturally is “earthly,” even “demonic” or “devilish,” and devoid of the Spirit. This should not be too surprising. Long ago Solomon spoke about the “way that seems right” as being “the way of death” (*Prov. 14:12, NKJV; 16:25, NKJV*). This wisdom is destructive to its core. If jealousy and selfish ambition are cultivated and expressed, the natural result will be disorder and dissension, similar to the situation in Corinth (*see 2 Cor. 12:20, where several of the same words are used*).

**Read** James 3:17, 18; John 3:3–7; Colossians 3:1, 2. Together, what are these texts telling us about “heavenly” wisdom?

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While James never refers to the Holy Spirit directly, the idea of the new birth is clearly present. The apostle seems to prefer, instead, the agricultural metaphor of sowing and bearing fruit, perhaps based on Jesus’ parables that refer to the Word being “sown” in people’s hearts as they hear the gospel message (*see Matt. 13:3–9, 18–23*). Heavenly wisdom is “full of mercy,” as well as “good fruits.” As we have seen, despite the emphasis in James on obedience and good works as the fruit of faith, mercy triumphs even in the judgment (*James 2:13*). In other words, the truly wise will not only be meek and humble like Jesus but also peaceable, gentle, merciful, and forgiving, willing to overlook the faults of others, not critical or judgmental of them.

**It’s so easy to fall into the ways of the world, isn’t it? Examine yourself: how much does worldly wisdom, in contrast to wisdom from heaven, influence how you live?**

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## Cause of Conflict and Quarrels

“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?” (*James 4:1, NKJV; compare Gal. 5:17*). What basic conflict do both of these passages describe?

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The opening verses of James 4 describe believers torn asunder by internal, bitter strife. There is an inward cause of the outward quarrels in the church: the cravings for pleasure (the word in Greek gives us our word *hedonism*). These sinful desires, which Paul metaphorically refers to as “the flesh,” are actively making war against our higher, spiritual motivations. The Christian life involves a protracted battle which, if not governed by the “wisdom from above” (*James 3:17*), spills out to the church itself and causes spiritual trauma among believers.

**Read James 4:2, 3.** What specific sinful desires are mentioned, and how are they affecting the church?

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These verses contain direct references to the Ten Commandments: “You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain” (*James 4:2, NKJV*). The repeated references to the problem of envy, coveting, and cravings or passions (*compare James 3:14, 16*) reflect a perspective similar to the one expressed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, in which the inner motivations, not just outward actions, are in view. Therefore, the reference to murder is probably meant, in this broader sense, to include anger. The earliest congregations probably did not have members killing one another. On the other hand, as we learn from the book of Acts, there were times, particularly in Jerusalem where James was based, when betrayal could easily have led to the arrest and putting to death of church members.

“It is the love of self that brings unrest. When we are born from above, the same mind will be in us that was in Jesus, the mind that led Him to humble Himself that we might be saved. Then we shall not be seeking the highest place. We shall desire to sit at the feet of Jesus, and learn of Him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 330, 331.

## Friendship With the World

**Read** James 4:2–4. Why does James call his readers “adulterers and adulteresses”? See Jer. 3:6–10, 20; Isa. 54:5; Jer. 2:2; Luke 16:13.

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Alluding to the biblical concept of Israel as God’s bride, James likens believers’ going along with worldly customs and being influenced by worldly attitudes to spiritual adultery. In reality, they are choosing a different master and lord.

The next verse, James 4:5, is not easy to understand. Some have called it the most difficult verse in the New Testament. The ambiguity of the Greek text is reflected in the major translations. Some consider the “spirit” to be the Holy Spirit (“the Spirit . . . in us yearns jealously,” *NKJV, HCSB*; “He jealously desires the Spirit . . .,” *NASB*). Others consider it to be the human spirit (“God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us,” *NRSV*; “he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us,” *NIV*). The latter rendering by the NIV fits the grammar and context best, but regardless of the translation, the meaning of the verse is not very clear. Based on a careful study of the verse’s syntax and the immediate context, verses 5 and 6 could be translated as follows: “Or do you think that the Scripture speaks in vain against envy? The spirit which He has caused to dwell in us yearns, but He gives more grace. Therefore He says, ‘God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (*James 4:5, 6, author’s translation*).

As verses 1–4 make clear, the human spirit (or “heart”) is permeated with desires that, while not originally or in themselves evil, have been twisted by sin into wicked pathways. Grace is the only real solution to our plight. The proud, however, have placed themselves in a position where they can’t easily receive that grace. Someone wrote that we get grace as do beggars holding out a tin cup before a waterfall. Only a person humble, meek, and aware of his or her utter need and dependency is open to grace, to the unmerited favor bestowed upon those who are, in every way, unworthy. As Ellen G. White wrote, “Our great need is our only claim on God’s mercy.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 317.

**Look at yourself. What in you makes you worthy of salvation? How does your answer help you realize the great need of grace in your own life? How does the Cross, and the Cross alone, answer that need?**

## Submission to God

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (*James 4:7, NRSV*). Notice the order of the commands here. If we try to resist the devil in our own strength, what chance of success do we have? When seven Jewish exorcists tried to get a demon out of a possessed man by using the names of Jesus and Paul as a kind of magic formula, the demon-possessed man so overpowered the exorcists that they ran away naked and bleeding (*Acts 19:13–16*). Thus, we need to submit to God and His will in order to resist the devil. In fact, by taking that very step, we are resisting the devil.

At the same time, we should not suppose that the first readers of James’s letter had never submitted themselves to God before. James is clearly writing to professed believers. So, perhaps we need to think more in terms of submitting ourselves to God daily and resisting the devil whenever his temptations assert themselves.

**Read James 4:8–10. What commands does James give, and how are they interrelated? How are they connected with submission to God, as well?**

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The appeal to change in these verses is the culmination of all that James has been saying since 3:13. In the passage we have been studying this week, there are contrasts between heavenly wisdom and devilish wisdom, and between the proud who exalt themselves as the devil did (*see Isa. 14:12–14*) and the lowly who submit to God and humble themselves. There is also a charge of infidelity to the covenant with God (*James 4:4*), and the charge of being double-minded is repeated (*vs. 8; compare 1:8*). Therefore, the call to submit to God goes beyond moralistic admonition; it is calling sinners to repentance, as Jesus did (*Luke 5:32*).

How should one repent? James supplies the steps (based on Psalm 24:3–6): (1) draw near to God, and He will draw near to you; (2) cleanse your hands and purify your hearts (that is, actions as well as thoughts); (3) lament, mourn, and weep for your shortcomings, realizing again that your need is your only claim to God’s grace.

**“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up” (*James 4:10, NKJV*). What does that mean? How do you learn to humble yourself? How can we learn to emulate the humility that Jesus revealed?**

**Further Study:** “There are many whose hearts are aching under a load of care because they seek to reach the world’s standard. They have chosen its service, accepted its perplexities, adopted its customs. Thus their character is marred, and their life made a weariness. In order to gratify ambition and worldly desires, they wound the conscience, and bring upon themselves an additional burden of remorse. The continual worry is wearing out the life forces. Our Lord desires them to lay aside this yoke of bondage. . . . He bids them seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and His promise is that all things needful to them for this life shall be added.”  
—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 330.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think more about the two kinds of wisdom discussed in Monday’s study and make a list of the thoughts associated with each. Now think about times during this week where you made important decisions or took important actions. Which kind of wisdom was involved?
- 2 As we saw on Sunday, God promised Israel that, as a result of their observing His laws, surrounding nations would come to admire them as “a wise and understanding people.” But did this not lead Israel to become proud? This is, of course, contrary to heavenly wisdom, which leads to humility. What happened to them, and how can we learn to avoid their mistakes? How could a proper understanding of the true meaning of the sanctuary service have been their best defense against pride? How should the Cross, for us today, be the ultimate defense against pride?
- 3 Read again the Ellen G. White statement above. How many of the world’s standards do we strive for? Are those standards always, of necessity, wrong? So often, too, we can read of people who, by the world’s standards, seem to have everything; and yet, their lives turn out to be wrecks. What should that tell us about just how deceptive so much of what the world offers really is? Most important, though, how can we learn to resist the world and help our young people, who can be easily caught up by the false promises of the world, not to fall into this trap?
- 4 Dwell more on this idea of humility. Why is that so important in the life of a Christian? Why is pride so deadly for anyone who wants to follow Jesus?

## *The Lesson in Brief*

► **Key Text:** *James 3:13–18*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Discern that wisdom is more than simply the power to differentiate between good and evil but the right understanding of how to treat others.

**Feel:** Cultivate a desire to act and speak wisely.

**Do:** Serve God with an undivided heart.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: True Wisdom**

**A** What is the difference between the wisdom that comes from above and the wisdom that comes from below?

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**B** What is the precondition of receiving true wisdom?

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**II. Feel: Speaking and Acting Wisely**

**A** What can you do to cultivate a desire to speak and act wisely?

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**B** How can you nurture a spirit of humility in the soul?

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**III. Do: Serving God With an Undivided Heart**

**A** What must we give up to ensure we serve God with an undivided heart?

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**B** How may we remain calm and humble in difficult situations?

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► **Summary:** True wisdom reveals itself through a life of humble, loving words and actions.



## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *James 3:13–18*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** According to James, true wisdom reveals itself through a life of humble, loving words and actions.

**Just for Teachers:** Reinforce the idea in the minds and hearts of class members that wisdom is more than simply the power to discern between good and evil. It is having the right understanding of how to treat others and applying it.

**Opening Activity:** Ask class members to define wisdom in their own words. Then ask them to give examples from history of people valued for their wisdom. Discuss contributions to society or history, medicine or science, and art or music that demonstrate their wisdom.

**Consider This:** What is the difference between someone who is wise versus one who is merely knowledgeable? Why are both kinds of intelligence important, and why, especially, do we need wisdom? Of the examples of wise men and women given, how did their lives demonstrate wisdom? Specifically, what words or actions did they display that showed this truth? How do their destinies help shape our understanding of what wisdom is?

### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** Help students to understand the following: (1) the difference between heavenly and earthly wisdom; (2) what true wisdom is and how it acts; (3) how one cultivates wisdom in life; and (4) why God desires us to serve Him with an undivided heart.

**I. The Wisdom That Descends From Above** (*Review James 3:13–18 with your class.*)

James speaks of the crucial need for wisdom, an attribute that every Christian must possess. But what is this wisdom, and how does one obtain it?

Before he defines wisdom, contrasting it with what it is not, James lists the vital prerequisite for receiving the wisdom that “descends from above.” He asks, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom” (*vs. 13, NKJV*).

The prerequisite, then, of receiving wisdom is meekness, or humility. But why does James assert the importance of meekness ahead of, say, love or even knowledge? Digging deeper into the word's etymological roots illuminates the matter. Meekness comes from the Greek word *prautēs*, a word that means “mild” and, by extension, “humility.” One dictionary defines meekness as “humbly patient or docile, as under provocation from others” and “gentle; kind.” It is unfortunate that the word *humble* also has negative associations, making it somewhat unsavory, an undesirable characteristic in our time, as it is also used to imply inferiority, subservience, or unimportance. But the biblical denotation of the word is closer to “courteously respectful.” It suggests remaining calm under pressure or provocation, courteous and gentle in the face of opposition or argument. Humility is the aspect of love that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 13:4 that is “not easily provoked.” It is also a prerequisite to seeking the Lord, as Zephaniah tells us (*Zeph. 2:3*). And as Paul beseeches, meekness, along with “lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love” (*Eph. 4:2, NKJV*) is proof of Christ in us.

The opposite of this meekness is a boasting heart, filled with “bitter envy and self-seeking” (*James 3:14, NKJV*). James warns that this “wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic” (*vs. 15, NKJV*). Strong language. James uncompromisingly exposes the source of this wisdom as satanic. What causes it? James locates it in the heart: “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there” (*vs. 16, NKJV*). The panacea for such self-seeking is also the condition for receiving true wisdom: humility.

James defines true wisdom—“the wisdom that is from above”—as having the following characteristics: it is (1) “first pure,” (2) “then peaceable,” (3) “gentle,” (4) “willing to yield,” (5) “full of mercy” and (6) “good fruits,” (7) “without partiality,” and (8) “without hypocrisy” (*vs. 17, NKJV*). James sums up all these qualities in the next verse as “the fruit of righteousness,” admonishing that such fruit is sown only “in peace by those who make peace” (*vs. 18, NKJV*). Only the soul at peace with God is the fertile orchard, as it were, capable of producing such fruit.

**Consider This:** According to James, what are the attributes of true wisdom? In contrast, what are the attributes of the wisdom that ascends from below? What is the prerequisite for receiving true wisdom? How do we grow this righteous fruit?

## II. The Jealous Yearning of God (*Review James 4:1–10 with your class.*)

A Native American piece of folklore tells the story of a man who says to his grandson: “There are two wolves fighting inside the heart of every man.” His grandson asks, “Which one wins?” The grandfather answers, “The one you feed.”

James also speaks of the war going on in the heart of every man, and asks, Where do such “wars and fights come from?” (4:1, *NKJV*). “Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?” He goes on to explain what feeds this war: “You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. . . . Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” (*vss. 2, 4, NKJV*). As we’ve seen, James isn’t afraid to use strong language to make his point. Here he accuses God’s people of spiritual infidelity. They have broken their “marriage vow” to God. How? By friendship with the world. Note how James speaks of being a friend to the world, rather than lover. When we think of adultery, we think of someone breaking the marriage vow through illicit sex. But here, James’s warning against the friendship of the world is akin to Jesus’ warning about adultery. One need not have relations with a man or a woman to commit adultery but simply to look on him or her with lust.

Befriending the world—lusting after its pleasures and embracing its values—is enough to break our vow to God. God is an amorous husband; as James tells us, “ ‘the Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealousy’ ” (*vs. 5, NKJV*). God’s love is an all-or-nothing love: we cannot serve Him or be His with a divided heart. The sin of ancient, adulterous Israel was that “their heart [was] divided” (*Hos. 10:2*). The cure to healing a divided heart is the same now as then: God’s grace, through which He “resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (*James 4:6, NKJV*). And that grace bestows the rebellious soul with meekness.

James outlines how this grace gives us the victory over the divided heart, knitting it as one with the Father’s: We are told first to (1) “submit to God.” And then (2) “resist the devil,” and the result is that he will flee (*vs. 7*). Notice the order of things, which is very important. We are not told to resist until we surrender. Why? We lack the strength to defeat the devil on our own. What does it mean to submit? James clarifies this process point by point: (1) “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and (2) purify your hearts, you double-minded” (*vs. 8, NKJV*). (3) “Lament” and (4) “mourn” and (5) “weep!” (*vs. 9, NKJV*). (6) “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up” (*vs. 10, NKJV*). Clean hands refer to clean actions, a clean heart to pure emotions and thoughts. God gives His grace only to the humble, transforming a divided heart into an undivided one.

**Consider This:** James speaks of a war waged in the soul of every human.

What is this war, and what is the cause of it? Why does James pinpoint “lust” as a perpetrator of this war, and what can be done about it? How does James define the friendship of the world? What is the danger to one’s spiritual life of being a friend of the world? Why does James call God’s people adulterous? What does James mean by submission to God and resistance to the devil? Why is the order in which we engage in these things so vitally important to success? What role does humility play in the final outcome?

### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** Help students to imagine ways to apply the knowledge James gave regarding humility and wisdom as strategies for resolving conflict in their own lives.

#### Application Questions:

Every day we are confronted by situations, from the mildly annoying to the truly cataclysmic, that test our fidelity to God:

- ❶ Someone cuts us off in traffic, and we fight to stay calm.
- ❷ A family member threatens to cut us off because of a dispute, and we struggle to maintain fearlessness and courtesy.

Sometimes we fall—we lash out and regret it. How can we keep from giving in to reactions that demonstrate the “wisdom from below” in each of the given situations?

### ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Convey to students that preparedness beforehand can help us to resolve conflict or, at the very least, to lessen the damage when it comes.

**Activity:** Devise a list of strategies to help you maintain your fidelity to God’s love in difficult situations that demand humility.

How do the following strategies help, as well?

1. Personal prayer.
2. Having an intercessory prayer partner, who is committed to praying for your spiritual growth and strength.
3. Memorizing Scriptures that can be called on in times of duress.
4. Reading a book on conflict/resolution strategies and/or how to handle difficult situations.