



James 3:13-18
 FaithWorks: The Book of James
 Wisdom From a Genie in a Bottle?

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The story is told of a man who went on a trip to the desert, where in the midst of his journey he stumbled upon an old lamp. It was rather old and dingy-looking, so he started polishing it up. As he rubbed it, a genie popped out! The genie told him that he would grant the man one wish. He can either be the richest man in the world, the most popular man in the world or the wisest man in the world. The man said, “Well, we all know that money does not bring happiness, and that popularity just makes you a slave to all the people. But wisdom is everlasting. I want to be the wisest man in the world.”

The Genie heard what the man said, then disappeared in a poof of smoke. Suddenly the man had a very serene expression upon his face. He sat down, stroked his chin in deep thought, and then said, “I should have taken the money.”

I know we’ve probably all heard variations of that story. I may have even told a version of it in a sermon once before. But it really depicts our attitude about wisdom pretty well. **We know there’s truth in the man’s analysis of the three options; and if we’re honest, most of us probably resonate with his final conclusion.** We know that, as the Beatles sang, “[You] Can’t buy me love.” Money has its limits. Popularity is fleeting and not all it’s cracked up to be. We could pick other things we might crave such as power or position...but we know that like money and popularity, these things are also fleeting and bring as many problems with them as the ones that they solve. Wisdom is held up as the thing to strive after. Maybe we even know a verse like Proverbs 16:16 that says, **“To get wisdom is better than gold” (Proverbs 16:16).** Many of us want to buy into that. Or maybe you don’t and your life is all about pursuing money, or personal achievement, or fame, or pleasure or some other end goal you think will satisfy.

Even if you do believe wisdom is the better virtue, the other options keep tugging at our hearts! **We can’t help but wonder: Even if I were the wisest person in the world, would *that actually* be enough?** Or would our great wisdom lead us to the conclusion that it would be better to be the richest

person in the world or most popular or something else? Rather than working hard for money and having wisdom be handed over to us, probably most of us would rather become wise through life experiences, and have our money handed to us...while we sat on the beach of some tropical island...even though we know that isn't really the "right answer."

And today, as we continue our series in the book of James titled "FaithWorks" we have a passage that helps us with this dilemma. Let's dive into **James 3:13-18** this morning – God's Word to you and me today.

So in this passage there are two kinds of wisdom described. **One is wisdom from God – "wisdom from heaven" as he calls it here; the second is the wisdom of the world – which he says is really no wisdom at all.** It's pseudowisdom or imposter wisdom. We can seek after one or the other. This is not the first time James has highlighted the differences between seeking after what the world offers and what God offers – he did so in the first half of chapter one and the last half of chapter two, and the first half of chapter three that we looked at last week. It's a constant theme throughout the book of James. James is like the Star Wars of the Bible: it articulates the ongoing battle inside ourselves between what we know to be right and the Dark Side.

And now he articulates the same choice in regards to wisdom. He gets into this topic with a question, **"Who is wise and understanding among you?" (James 3:13).** You know, it's a really good question to ask, and probably not one we ask enough. Who is wise among the people you spend time with? Of course, you may not be spending much time with anyone lately, and if you are, it's probably a pretty small group. But who among those people you hang out with have wisdom? Who has wisdom in your family? In your work life? In your neighborhood? Your church? Your school? It's a great question to consider because you want people with wisdom to influence you. I'll just leave that as a question for you to consider, just as James does.

We might then wonder: How do you know who has wisdom? James does answer that question for us: **Wise people are those who live life well: filled with deeds done in humility.** The humility piece is important because even that is a sign of wisdom. The wise person knows that their deeds aren't about

themselves, but about those who are blessed by their good deeds. Wise people have right motivations for doing the things they do.

He expands upon this in verse 14 with some insight about false wisdom. **“If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth” (James 3:14).** I don’t know if “boasting” about bitter envy is quite what any of us might think or say about our envy...but we can definitely do it. And we certainly have a tendency to deny that we are envious of anyone.

Right now, many of us are probably a little envious of our own “PC lives” – our pre-coronavirus lives. Maybe we even have “*bitter* envy” as we reflect on what we’ve lost. We’ve all lost something in this time – whether it’s loved ones who died, jobs lost, graduation ceremonies cancelled, lost time with friends and family, no sports, music groups, arts, theater, or other entertainment... **We’ve all lost something, and at some level, we long for the way life was a few months ago.**

It’s easy to let that envy of our own former lives take root in us, and to end up wallowing around in it – like a pig in the mud. That’s what “boasting” about bitter envy is – it’s just sitting in that envy wishing that the current situation were different, longing for what we once had...or what someone else has. But when we do that it robs us of the present where God is doing something in our lives. The story of brother John illustrates it very well for us. Brother John entered the 'Monastery of Silence' and the Chief Monk said, "Brother, this is a silent monastery, you are welcome here as long as you like, but you may not speak until I direct you to do so." Brother John lived in the monastery for a full year before the Chief Monk said to him, "Brother John, you have been here a year now, you may speak two words." Brother John said, "Hard Bed."

"I'm sorry to hear that" the Chief Monk said. "We will get you a better bed." The next year, Brother John was called by the Chief Monk. "You may say another two words Brother John." "Cold Food," said Brother John, and the Chief Monk assured him that the food would be better in the future.

On his third anniversary at the monastery, the Chief Monk again called Brother John into his office. "Today you may say another two words." "I Quit." said Brother John. "Well...It is probably best." said the Chief Monk. "All you have done since you got here is complain."ⁱ

Even when it's a willing choice to do something, like enter a monastery, let alone something forced upon you like coronavirus: **If all we do is focus on what we once had and what we've lost...then bitter envy of our former selves will set in.** Constant complaining can be one sign of that, and if we aren't careful it can lead to apathy and depression. So in this time, don't let envy of what you once had become dominant in your thinking and feeling. Acknowledge the losses...don't deny them and pretend they haven't happened, but don't "boast" in them either. Look for how God is sustaining you and the opportunities He gives you for growth and to be a blessing.

Then there's "selfish ambition." This is something we can more easily grasp the idea of boasting about...but we can also very easily deny our selfish ambition. And to complicate matters: we can both boast and deny selfish ambition almost at the same time; it just depends on who we're talking to. If we're talking to our boss who we want to impress, then we might be tempted to boast about our accomplishments with selfish ambition as the motivator that leaves out the credit due to others; on the other hand, if we're talking with our Bible Study or small group friends about that same work scenario, but we know selfish ambition will be seen for what it is in that group, we might minimize our accomplishments as a way of denying the ambition that lies within us. Both are extremes we want to avoid. Boasting about our selfish ambition gives ourselves more credit than we deserve and pulls credit away from others; and denying our selfish ambition – much like denying bitter envy – dismisses that there's a problem.

So what's the solution? Well, even though James isn't as explicit about it here, the solution is not that different than what we looked at a couple weeks ago where we want the pendulum to be in the middle. **Boasting is too far to one side, and denying is too far to the other. There is a middle ground that is filled with wisdom.** We can acknowledge the tendency to boast or deny, and then deal with the envy or the selfish ambition...or maybe it's

something else that you need to acknowledge and seek a healthy way forward. So, we can turn to God in prayer and ask Him to help us with whatever it is; turn to some wise friends for help and accountability and to share their own wisdom. Turn to Scripture and let it dwell richly in you: maybe part of this passage, or teachings from Jesus that are similar, should be memorized or put up on the bathroom mirror or inside the kitchen cabinet or as the lock screen on your phone...so you'll be encouraged not to let the pendulum swing to one side or the other and you can work through whatever it is you're facing.

The point of all this is that: This is true wisdom. This is not earthly pseudowisdom. Earthly, so-called "wisdom" tells you to run with the selfish ambition or run with the envy...but **James says in verse 16 that they only lead to disorder and "every evil practice."** It's like he starts to make a list beginning with "disorder"...you kind of expect several more specific things to follow...but then it's as if he decided that list was just going to get too long and he just summarizes everything with "every evil practice." That's what the fake wisdom of the world will get you.

Contrast that with what he says in verse 17 about true wisdom that comes from heaven: **Heavenly wisdom is: pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere.** Those are good qualities to have in our lives. Those are the kinds of words we want to be described by and the people we spend time with. How do we get this wisdom? Earlier in James, in 1:5, he writes that if a person lacks wisdom, he or she should ask God – believing that God will hear and answer your prayer. Ask God for wisdom. Knowing and being in relationship with God is the beginning of wisdom – and remember: wisdom is not head knowledge. The picture of a philosopher sitting around stroking his beard is misleading. Wisdom is about how a person lives. Look at Jesus: he didn't sit around much at all. He was constantly on the move, helping people, teaching them, ministering to them, praying for them and more. And the beginning of wisdom is knowing God. **Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."** And it's not a fear that is about being scared and running a way; it's a fear that is about reverence and recognizing the awesome power and omniscience of God and being drawn to that. That's the

beginning of wisdom.

So here is a word of wisdom for us all, from whippersnappers to old salts. And this isn't my wisdom – I'm not wise enough to come up with this. But I try and spend time with people who have more wisdom than me – which isn't difficult. So here it is: Wisdom is usually gained from experience. And so here's the thing: **You don't have a long enough life to learn everything by "experience." So heed the wisdom of others based on *their* experience.** The truly wise person lets the wisdom of others become their own wisdom. Admittedly, it's not as easy as a genie in a bottle, but it will protect you from some of the scars of "experience," and that is wisdom itself.ⁱⁱ

Over the last 2-3 weeks I have been working on a small home project of doing the finish work on a couple of wood doors and then hanging them on a metal rail I mounted on the wall.

(Picture) And so they slide open and closed between a couple rooms in our house. Against all odds, it has all come out looking pretty darn good, if I dare say so myself. Sorry if that's boasting when James cautions us against that! But at one point just this past Wednesday night, after yet another tweak of the doors where I adjusted the hardware mounted on the door, hung the door back up and realized I'd adjusted the wrong hardware so had to take the door down, fix the first one then make the adjustment on the other mounting hardware...after I realized my mistake I said to one of my daughters: "I'm preaching on wisdom this Sunday but I have no wisdom when it comes to construction." And after all the work I've done on our house the last 6 years, that's probably not actually entirely true...but this project was all new territory. I've tried to lean on the wisdom of others and let their wisdom be my wisdom, rather than learning through experience. I don't have time to gain all my construction wisdom through trial and error. I need the wisdom of others.



And that's true in the rest of life, too: we need the wisdom of others.

Being granted wisdom by a genie in a bottle would do the trick...but the odds of that happening just aren't very good. So consider James' question that this started with: Who is wise among you? Trust their wisdom, and make it your wisdom.

And the place to start, as Proverbs 9:10 says, is with God. And then Jesus comes along and says, **“Whoever hears my words and puts them into action is wise.”** It’s a subtle claim to his divinity, because to his Jewish audience, God and His word was the source of all wisdom. Jesus is putting his words on par with God’s word. So the first wise person to be in relationship with so as to gain wisdom is Jesus. And he’s better than a genie in a bottle, because he didn’t disappear in a poof of smoke and leave us to our own devices.

He lived, he died, and he rose from the grave, and he’s left the Holy Spirit with us. Jesus says that the Spirit will guide us into all truth (John 16:13). Truth is the foundation of our wisdom. We live with wisdom when we take truth and apply it to our lives. So start with Jesus, the truth of His word, and then surround yourself with others who will help you live with this heavenly wisdom. And then, if you ever come across a genie in a bottle, you won’t have to ask for wisdom, because you’ll already have it. Let’s pray...Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.smilegodlovesyou.org/jokes.church.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.waltonsun.com/news/20170714/keeping-faith-dont-wait-for-genie-to-grant-you-wisdom>