

# Ministry of Grace Church

## James 3:13-18 - Speaker Notes

### Introduction

James started this chapter with a warning:

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body. (James 3:1-2)

In other words, anyone in the church who has the responsibility to teach others must take this responsibility very seriously. But let me ask you, “What judgment is James talking about when he says teachers in the church will receive a stricter judgment?” You may recall from our study of the book of Revelation that there are three judgments spoken of in the Bible: 1) The Sheep and Goat judgment at the end of the tribulation (also known as the judgment of the nations), 2) The Great White Throne Judgment, for all unbelievers, at the end of time, and 3) The Bema Seat Judgment (also called the Judgment Seat of Christ) which is part of the Rapture and is for Christians. It is at the Bema Seat that we will receive our rewards for things done in the body. This is the judgment that James is talking about.

Now, let’s compare what James said with what Jesus said according to Luke in his gospel account. As Luke tells it, Jesus had just warned us to be ready for His coming at any moment. He told us that we should be busy doing the work that He called us to. Then He gave this warning:

... For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more. (Luke 12:48b)

Coupling what Jesus said with what James said, we see both how blessed and how precarious the position of teacher is within the church. James just spent the first 13 verses of this chapter talking about the tongue. Now he appears to be moving on to a new subject. But even though it appears to be a different subject, he is still talking in reference to teaching in the church.

Just because someone knows a lot doesn’t mean they should be a teacher. We all have been gifted by the Holy Spirit with special abilities to be used in the church, but not all of us are gifted as teachers. If you have the ability to speak and teach and you think you know a lot about God and what is taught in the Bible, James says there are still more things that are necessary before you will be considered a good teacher. Not only do you need to have mastery over your tongue, you also need to have mastery over what you know, and that mastery must be demonstrated, not just proclaimed.

Many who desire to be teachers don’t qualify. But it’s not due to lack of knowledge or understanding. According to James, strong and bitter feelings towards others and loud, boastful proclamations are not the marks of a gifted teacher. Those who are truly called by God to teach in the church are constantly humbled before God because of the awesome responsibility that has been placed on them to rightly instruct the truth of God’s Holy Word.

Unfortunately, the wisdom possessed by some teachers in our churches today is earthly wisdom. Unlike godly wisdom, it has no heavenly source. Heavenly wisdom is “others” focused while earthly wisdom is “self” focused. Those who teach with earthly wisdom reap a harvest of contention and discord. Those who humbly teach through the Spirit of God reap a harvest of peaceful righteousness.

### **James 3:13**

**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.**

James now goes on to give us some examples of what godly wisdom looks like. In order to fully understand what he is telling us; however, we need to look at a couple of these words in the original language. “Wise” is translated from the Greek word *sophos*. In classical Greek, this word described respected philosophers and other truly learned men. However, in the New Testament it implies *much more* than just knowledge and wisdom. Specifically, it refers to “the ability to skillfully apply what one knows (especially religious truth).”

The word translated “understanding” is particularly interesting. It is translated from *epistēmōn*. We encountered this word recently when we talked about the angel who appeared to the shepherds in the fields. This word is made up of *epi*, meaning “upon” or “over” and a form of *histēmi*, meaning “to stand.” In the Christmas message the angel was standing “over” the shepherds, which may be why they were so afraid. However, as it’s used here, in the Greek vernacular one would say that it refers to “someone who overstands.” Today we would say, “one who understands.” This word refers to the intelligence and knowledge of an expert.

James says if you have a lot of knowledge (understanding of facts) and wisdom (proper skillful application of those facts), then let your humble actions prove it. Although James has a clear, “politely in-your-face” style in most of his writing, here he is making a very subtle statement to people who want the prominence and power of the position of teacher in a church. James is saying, “Don’t put yourself forward as a great teacher; let others recognize it in you from your humbly demonstrated wisdom, righteous living, and ability to apply what you know.” If this is clearly demonstrated, you will be asked to be a teacher.

In other words, James tells us that this wisdom needs to be possessed in meekness. Some of the most intelligent and educated people are very proud of their position and/or the letters that appear at the end of their names. That is a problem according to James.

### **James 3:14-16**

**But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.**

Even if you have great talents for teaching and have vast knowledge of the Word of God, James says if you are contentious, you have a tendency to argue, you harbor bitterness, or you have an elevated impression of who you are in God’s church, then you are not called to teach. In fact, this type of teacher is teaching against the truth of the Word. These things are contrary to humility and righteous living. You are not yet ready to be a teacher.

The key attributes for a close walk with God which apply to every Christian, not just teachers, are “submit and commit.” Submit to the will of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, not your own will. And - commit to obeying and serving Him and Him alone. If these things are not true of your own walk with the Lord, then how can you possibly expect others to believe your teaching and to submit and commit themselves?

One of the ways that “self-seeking” shows itself is by a teacher of the Bible putting all his or her effort into disproving what someone else is teaching. This is not teaching God’s way. By simply teaching what the Bible says, we reprove the works of darkness. Our job is to build up the saints with the knowledge of the truth, not to equip them for a contentious verbal battle against teachers of error. This is not to say that we should ignore bad doctrine. The way to combat error and lies, however, is not to fight against them; rather it is to proclaim God’s truth in humility, backed by a life of meekness and faith.

Keep in mind that James is talking about teachers in the church. In verse thirteen he implied that teachers need to be the wise ones in the church. But it is a heavenly wisdom which he is talking about, not an earthly wisdom. It

is a wisdom that is demonstrated by meekness and works; the kind of works that James talked about in chapter two. These are works which come from a heart that is blind to riches and is honoring to all.

But, James says, if you are bitter and argumentative, you don't have the wisdom you need to be a teacher. Instead, he says, your so-called wisdom is contrary to heavenly wisdom (it is earthly), contrary to spiritual wisdom (it is soulish and sensual), and contrary to Holy wisdom (it is demonic). James says that this type of wisdom does not come down from God, rather it is a wisdom steeped in the present world system. Boy, talk about in-your-face!

This type of wisdom produces behavior which is envious, and which causes strife. It is earthly and self-seeking, rather than heavenly and God-honoring. Here's how Paul described this behavior in his first letter to the Corinthians:

for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:3)

The teaching that comes from a teacher who is filled with pride or bitter emotions will manifest itself in instability within a church. It produces such instability because the teaching is not based on the Word of God. It is often based on what the current societal or personal inclinations might be. Similarly, such teaching produces worthless deeds because the teaching is based on earthly and humanistic wisdom rather than the wisdom which is from above.

When you sit under the teaching of anyone in church, or when you listen to preachers via the media, you should be constantly asking yourself, does this teacher demonstrate spiritual wisdom? Are his or her talking points based on what the Bible says or are they based on what he or she thinks or what someone else says?

Paul, writing to his beloved spiritual son, Titus, gave him instruction on how to effectively pastor a church. What he told Titus in the third chapter of that letter agrees completely with what James has been teaching:

... that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men. But avoid foolish disputes, genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless. (Titus 3:8-9)

In a church where the teaching is based on the Bible, there will be an abundance of workers and good works that bring glory to God. In a church where the teachers are zealous but self-seeking, there may be lots of workers and works which may appear to be profitable, but to God they are worthless.

### **James 3:17**

**But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.**

In contrast to the worldly wisdom that was spoken of in the previous few verses (with bitter envying and self-serving motives, causing confusion), James now describes what godly wisdom looks like. He tells us first it is pure. This does not mean first numerically, but first essentially. The other qualities of heavenly wisdom are secondary and necessarily follow from the quality of purity. Heavenly wisdom engenders peace, not strife. It is gentle and exceedingly reasonable. It is compliant, not argumentative. It is merciful, not vengeful. It produces good fruit, not rottenness. It is impartial, and it is sincere, without even a hint of pretense.

We can see from this list that heavenly wisdom is not focused on self, but on the good of others. This is essentially what Paul said in his letter to the Philippians:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. (Philippians 2:3)

## **James 3:18**

**Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.**

In the previous verse, James told us that heavenly wisdom makes peace and is full of good fruit. He now picks up on that idea, showing that the fruit he is talking about, the fruit of righteousness, which is sown in peace.

The result of proper teaching from God's word is to bear much fruit. It is the fruit of righteousness which is sown peaceably by godly teachers of the Word, not by selfish, contentious teachers. The effective preaching and teaching of God's word is done with conviction (sometimes fervent conviction), but it is not done to produce strife. It is done to produce peace, peace within each heart that is submitted to God and to His Word, and peace within the body of Christ.

When Christ told his disciples that he was going away, He told them that He would send a helper (the Holy Spirit) to teach them. He also said that He would give them peace.

**But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. (John 14:26-27)**

Proper teaching of the Word of God is only accomplished through the Spirit of God. Its end result is to produce peace. This is the most important quality of those who teach in the church. Improper teaching of the Word of God, teaching with earthly wisdom from a self-serving attitude, does not produce peace. It produces confusion and every evil thing, as James has just taught us. And - the final result of this type of teaching is conflict and self-serving attitudes among the people.

In the next chapter of this letter, James will talk about just such conflicts and fighting within the church. He will explain why these things come about and how to resolve all these issues. I'll give you a hint: resolution involves humbling ourselves before Almighty God.

## **So what?**

I have listened to sermons where the preacher spent forty-five minutes spinning a tale and making powerful claims about what God wants for Christians without making a single reference to God's Word. It sounded good and it felt good, but it wasn't God's truth that was being proclaimed.

It is a good thing to want to be used by God. Our highest calling is to be His most humble servants. But that means serving God in the manner, and in the position, which He chooses for us. It doesn't matter how hard you are working in God's kingdom if you are doing what *you* want and doing it for *yourself*. You need to be doing what *He* has called you to and doing it for *His* glory! Remember, "Submit and Commit!"

Let's remember this when we share the gospel with others. We should be sharing the Word with godly wisdom, not worldly wisdom, and godly wisdom is first pure, then peaceable, overly reasonable, and compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. In other words, it acts the same way that Jesus did.

Do you have a desire to teach the Word of God to others? If so, study hard and prepare diligently, seek the Spirit fervently, then deliver humbly as a fellow sinner saved by the grace of God! Remember, when you teach God's Word you do it for Him.

Let's pray.