What was it like to be a brother of Jesus? Would you respect your older brother who never got into trouble? Never was disrespectful of Mary and Joseph? Would you see him as some goody two-shoes who was too virtuous to be true? And then there was the time he was lost for three days only to be found in the temple in Jerusalem deep in discussion with the religious leaders? How did he get that kind of knowledge? We could speculate all day long what it was like to be his brother but let’s skip ahead to a historical event in the life of James, one of Jesus’ four brothers.

You wonder if the sight was familiar to him. Maybe James once watched his brother up there on that pinnacle—hesitating, talking to someone. Now he was there himself.

This was the end of life for the apostle James. He was led here by an angry mob—to the same pinnacle of the temple where Jesus was led by Satan years before.

James was forced to the temple spire and told to tell the people to stop believing in Jesus. He, of course, used this as opportunity to preach the gospel loudly to the crowd.

The mob pushed him from the tower, and he crashed to the ground. He didn’t die. They started to stone him. He still didn’t die. He rose to his knees, praying for Jesus to forgive his attackers. Someone hit him with a club, and then he died and was buried right there at the steps of the temple.

This is the tradition of the martyrdom of James, the brother of Jesus. Traditions aren’t nearly as reliable as scripture, so we don’t know the exact details, but we know most of the apostles faced similar deaths, and the idea of James, the brother of Jesus, enduring to the end and praying for the forgiveness of his attackers fits what we know of James and the other apostles.

James was in charge of the Jerusalem church, which was one of the epicenters of the early church but also the most embattled and troubled. Despite their initial reluctance to welcome Gentile believers, the Jerusalem church was eventually supported financially by Gentile communities (see Romans 15 and other letters of Paul). They had some acute needs and were often in tension with their Jewish neighbors.

As the details of this martyrdom story show, James was tough, focused and Christ centered. If Paul was your philosophy professor, and Peter was your hothead friend always getting in trouble, James was your football coach. The wisdom of connecting true faith and actions is his theme, and he rings it throughout his short letter.

He starts with two topics we can all relate to: the danger of showing favoritism and the taming of the tongue. It’s interesting that he starts with universal and “acceptable” sins. He doesn’t jump straight to murder or sexual sin. James’ target audience is everyday people struggling with everyday sins. In a word: us.

In chapters 3 and 4, he digs into this wisdom theme, seeing godly wisdom as the place that right action grows from. He compares heavenly wisdom with its cheap, earthly copy. For James, wisdom means living life the way God made it—living according to the grain of reality.

Let's start with a quick read of our text for today.

**James 3:13-18 (ESV)**

***13****Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.****14****But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.****15****This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.****16****For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.****17****But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.****18****And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

**James 4:3 (ESV)**

***3****You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

**James 4:7-8 (ESV)**

***7****Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.****8****Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

**S.P.S.** Let’s look at three things James teaches us about wisdom. Wisdom from above:

* Comes from peace
* Arrives with gentleness
* Brings wholeness
1. **Comes from peace**

*James 3:18 (ESV**)*

*And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

It’s no secret that we live in noisy times—from the alarm that wakes us up to the manufactured white noise we need to sleep. More than any other era in history, our center of peace is crowded with sound.

An observation from an article on the noise of our modern age says the following:

*Scientists define “noise” as unwanted sound, and the level of background din from human activities has been doubling roughly every three decades, beating population growth. Road traffic in the United States has tripled over the last 30 years.[[1]](#footnote-2)*

It’s often hard to find a center of peace, yet James encourages us to be the center of peace for others. James’ point speaks to us, telling us that righteous action and the results of it come from that center of peace. That may run against instinct for a lot of us. When we think about faith and faith instruction, we might automatically think of busyness and work—changing our habits, watching our interactions, serving difficult people. We may also think of the hard work it takes to go against the flow of culture and stand up for righteousness.

James doesn’t disagree with that—he is clear that the evidence of faith is action. But he says the beginning of it is peace. That peace is behind it all, and that’s where the power of living the Christian life comes from.

In our noisy, over-busy world, this kind of inner peace is the exception, even in the church. The word James uses for peace means that things are the way God made them and working together the way God made them. It corresponds to the Hebrew word “shalom.” Jewish and Muslim people greet each other with this word “shalom” (“salaam” in Arabic), wishing integration and rest to the person they meet.

Do we act out of this center of shalom?

Shalom is the state of people who know who they are in Christ and have hope and trust that God will take care of them. Shalom is this state of clear-headed quiet within this noisy world—the place where the true strength comes from.

You might be familiar with the third step in the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous:

*Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.*

The operative word hiding in here is “care.” The antidote to addiction is believing that God will take care of you—that you don’t have to self-care through addiction anymore.

We can learn from this as Christ followers—this kind of centered peace comes from believing that Christ will take care of us. We don’t have to protect ourselves with scorching cynicism; we don’t have to live in constant distraction by devices and entertainment—God will take care of us. We don’t have to steal the spotlight and live in the constant hunger for attention—God loves us, we are his royal children.

It is out of this peace that we sow the seed whose harvest is righteousness (verse 18). Think of the firebrand pastor who delights in scolding his congregation and decrying the evil of “the world.” He doesn’t come from peace, and he rarely sees a harvest of righteousness.

Think of how we might abstain from certain behaviors or conversations because of our commitment to Christ. Do we do so with an air of judgment? Or with the fanfare of showing off our righteousness? Or do we do so out of shalom?

Let’s consider just one contemporary example—vaccinations. Sometimes I wonder if separation ever occurs in our country, it won’t be between English Canadians and French Canadians. Rather it will be between the vaccinated folks and those die-hard individuals who assert that Covid-19 is one big hoax and vaccines are tantamount to injecting yourself with poison. So how do you handle the disputes and disagreements about vaccinations? Do we restrain our tongues when speaking to someone who has strong and contrary views to ours on vaccinations? Do we follow James’ admonition to seek the higher ground of peace rather than asserting our strongly held views on the subject? May the Holy Spirit lead us when we face the temptation to abandon peace for pugnacity.

The brother of Jesus shows us that the wisdom from heaven begins and ends in peace.

1. **And it Arrives with gentleness**

Truly strong people freely share their strength, but they don’t waste time showing it off.

If you’ve ever had the privilege to spend time with some great saints of the faith, you may be surprised by how gentle and humble they are in their interactions. They are not announcing their strength and their credentials every time they enter a room – they let their manner and actions speak for themselves. People who “announce their strength” constantly are usually tiring company.

*James 3:17 (ESV**)*

*But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*

Wisdom from heaven arrives with gentleness. This word James uses translates as “equitable, fair, gentle, reasonable.” Do we arrive with gentleness? Has anyone complained recently that Christians are “too reasonable” when we arrive on the scene?

An accomplished professional journalist and marketing executive tells a story of going to see Billy Graham speak at a rally as a young college student. She was positive she was called to the missionary field and could barely sit still through her college years so she could get out to the jungle to serve. There were thousands of people at the conference, and Billy gave his typical downhome style of preaching, ending with an altar call for those who felt moved by God to go to the mission field.

This young woman stayed rooted to her seat as all her friends went forward. She had no idea what kept her there.

As the crowd filtered out, Graham himself waved at her and asked her to come closer and talk with him. Baffled by the invitation, she went up to talk with him. He said he was sure she’d be the first one up to the front for the altar call. He said he’d been watching her while he preached—to thousands of people by the way—and thought she’d jump forward to make her call to the missionary field known.

She said she had no idea what kept her seated, and then Graham chatted with her for a solid ten minutes like they’d known each other for years. Hundreds of other people vied for the preacher’s attention, but he talked with a lost college student for one suspended moment, listening to her concerns.

He encouraged her, “You know, you don’t have to go to a foreign country to make a difference. I can tell by talking to you that you will touch lives in your community and in your work life.”

As they parted ways, he took her hand in his and winked, “Now go and do great things.”

This was in 1976, after Graham had traveled the world many times, written best-selling books and advised presidents and royalty. This was not Billy just starting his career. The gentleness of this moment is shocking—Graham taking time to talk with and listen to a confused college student—there are no shortage of these examples in his life and in the life of other godly people!

But the gentleness with which he moved in the world shows someone who, despite incredible busyness and pressure, was present and available to someone in need of his attention. Instead of the seriousness and severity we might think we should be known for, James calls us to be warm, kind, and real in our interactions.

Real gentleness is shown in the compassion of someone who has strength. Let me share an example from the summer I turned 20. I was working underground in a base metal mine that summer in Snow Lake, Manitoba. The shift boss took an interest in me and put in charge of driving a small electrically powered train to haul broken ore to the shaft where it would be lifted to the surface. It gave me the opportunity to earn some bonus dollars on top of my hourly wage. It was not difficult driving the small electric locomotive. There was a simple throttle that regulated the power sent to the drive wheels. Power was transmitted from an overhead cable through a trailing, flexible wooden arm. We were told to reverse the arm if we changed direction even for a short distance. I was warned that ignoring this step could cause the arm to buckle and break. This was a minor inconvenience, but it was tempting to try backing up without reversing the arm. On one occasion I was impatient and did not reverse the arm like I had been told. The result was an embarrassing incident in which I snapped the arm in two and halted production. The shift boss came on the scene shortly after and assessed the damage. He could have disciplined me but instead he was gentle. He arranged for a replacement arm to be sent down from the surface to the level where I was working. It only took a couple of minutes to remove the broken arm and replace it with a new one and I resumed my normal duties. My boss was in a position of strength. He chose to be gentle with me when my foolishness merited his anger and rebuke. Do we show the same gentleness under power with those we lead—children, grand children, staff, others?

1. **Wisdom from above Brings wholeness**

Let me go back to the beginning of James’ letter for a moment.

*James 1:4 (ESV**)*

*And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

The word that James uses for “perfect” describes a fullness or completeness, a person who is fully integrated with their faith, values, and actions, not someone who never makes mistakes.

This is that state of heavenly wisdom—fully integrated with yourself, knowing yourself and having a keen ear for God’s direction. Most of us live in such a fragmented state that we don’t even know it. We say we believe God will take care of us, and then we try to control every situation. We say we want God’s peace on our lives, but we fill our days with noise and entertainment. We say we trust God’s provision, but we work constantly to the detriment of our relationships and worry about money compulsively.

We are out of harmony. We call ourselves Christians and say we have faith in God, but our actions and thoughts look more like an unbeliever’s.

James describes this lack of harmony:

*James 3:14-15 (ESV**)*

*But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.*

Earthly, unspiritual, demonic? Whoa, James, that is pretty strong language! James describes the noisy, fragmented life we live without wisdom. Driven by lack, self-addicted and exhausted, he calls us to relief from this, refocusing on the life of wholeness God gives us.

*James 4:7-8 (ESV**)*

*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

Submit yourself to God. Let him take care of you rather than trying to rule your life yourself. Where there is wholeness and integration, where there is peace, that’s where you will find God.

I wonder if James had in mind a familiar verse from the book of Proverbs.

*Proverbs 3:5-6 (ESV)*

***5****Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.****6****In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

I suppose that I have read these verses from Proverbs scores if not hundreds of times, yet I find that I still have to fight the temptation to solve everything on my own. It has been nearly 50 years since I was baptised as an adult. That means almost a half century trying to follow Jesus Christ in all I do. Yet when I face challenges in life which I still do, do I trust in the Lord with all my heart? Do I lean on my own understanding? Do I acknowledge him in all the situations that arise in daily life? Perhaps the first question should be Am I being honest with myself? If I am honest then I must admit that my normal tendency is to trust in my education, training, and lifetime of experience. Hey, I have a degree in engineering. I have been trained to solve problems. The motto of our engineering college was “thorough”. In four years of training we never dipped into the Bible even once. Now retired and facing different issues do I acknowledge him when leading our strata council or serving on the executive of our local Rotary Club? If I don’t, then I will be like a one-armed boxer in the ring with the world champion. There will be a lack of wholeness and integration since I have neglected the wisdom of the omniscient God in whatever problem or challenge that lies before me.

**Conclusion**

The wisdom of heaven….

Comes from peace—Peace is the starting point and the energy of heavenly wisdom.

Arrives with gentleness—Like the story of Billy Graham, truly powerful saints are known for their gentleness.

Brings wholeness—Jesus takes us from a fragmented state to a true state where we are in harmony with ourselves and others.

James, even in his final moments, showed this Christ-centered wisdom. He was tough, strong, and faithful while showing his peace, and praying for forgiveness for his killers as he passed from this life.

May God allow us to be instruments of his peace to everyone he places in our path.

As our time together concludes what is the Holy Spirit saying to you? Is there something in your life that He is prompting you to address? Is it Peace, Gentleness, Wholeness? Don’t ignore his leading.

**\*\*\* Close in prayer \*\*\***

Word count: 3200

Estimated time: 25 minutes.

1. Williams, Florence Is Your Noisy Neighborhood Slowly Killing You? – Mother Jones accessed 06 Sep 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)