

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Illus.: I suppose most of you have seen *It's a Wonderful Life*. You remember how the town is controlled by a greedy banker, Mr. Potter, and how George Bailey, the son of the bank's founder takes him on. One scene is a bank board meeting and Mr. Potter is playing hardball when George speaks his mind.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4ne13Zft9Q>

“You know how long it takes a workin’ man to save five thousand dollars? Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you’re talking about, they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn’t think so. People were human beings to him, but to you, a warped, frustrated old man, they’re cattle.”

You, you said that they — What’d you say just a minute ago? They had to wait and save their money before they even thought of a decent home. Wait? Wait for what?! Until their children grow up and leave them? Until they’re so old and broken-down that — You know how long it takes a workin’ man to save five thousand dollars? Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you’re talking about, they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn’t think so. People were human beings to him, but to you, a warped, frustrated old man, they’re cattle. Well, in my book he died a much richer man than you’ll ever be.

Potter: *I’m not interested in your book. I’m talkin’ about the Building and Loan.*

Bailey: *I know very well what you’re talking about. You’re talking about something you can’t get your fingers on, and it’s gallin’ you. That’s what you’re talking about, I know. Well...I’ve said too much. I — You’re...the Board here. You*

do what you want with this thing. There's just one thing more, though. This town needs this measly one-horse institution if only to have some place where people can come without crawling to Potter. Come on, Uncle Billy!

- B. In that scene, who are we supposed to identify with as the audience? Who are you more like? Here's the thing: The Bible—in the book of James—says we may have a lot more in common with Mr. Potter than we'd like to think. Turn to **James 3:13-18**. You'll remember that James is writing to Christians under pressure. He challenges us to meet pressure by *doing* what our faith calls for us to do—to go against the grain of our nature by drawing on our faith in order to obey God. Last week, the first part of Jas. 3 warned us how volatile and brackish our words can be, *especially* when we're under pressure.
- C. Earlier James said that “faith without deeds is dead.” Now in **3:13** he says, in effect...

I. WISDOM WITHOUT DEEDS IS DEAD (3:13)

- A. We don't generally think of wisdom as something we *show* but as something we *know*. Wisdom is a way of summing up life succinctly—of boiling things down to their basics. There's truth in that, so it is a little surprising to see here that James isn't thinking about sages, about old bearded men with their index finger in the air; the community mother who has a way of putting the cookies on the bottom shelf. But James says that wisdom and understanding are evident in deeds. And specifically, “*deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*” So wisdom isn't just knowing *what* to do but *how* to do it.
- B. The secret sauce in Christian wisdom is humility, and humility is evident in our deeds. Paul had exactly this same thing in mind in **Phil. 2:3**, “*in humility value others above yourselves.*” That's what meekness is—valuing others above ourselves. So James says that godly wisdom produces humility which, in turn, feeds the kinds of good deeds we do. He's going to explain that for us.

You get the impression that Mr. Potter in the movie thought himself wise. James warns next that that conniving, self-centered tyrant could be a kind of broad caricature of us: **vv.14-16...** Let's sum up those verses this way:

II. **DON'T FOOL YOURSELF! (3:14-16)**

- A. Humility is bullied out of the situation by our bitter envy and selfish ambition (v.14). *Who, me??* Bitter envy and selfish ambition. That's Mr. Potter, not me! Oh, but they almost never dress themselves up to look like him.
1. Envy and jealousy are feelings of being short-changed, of being deprived. We can't get what we desperately want. It seems to me that in the conflicts I know best it is *respect* that we envy the most. The *bitter* envy is a kind of sour, infectious grasping.
 2. Selfish ambition is when we will push someone else down in order to be heard, to get what we want.
When we do these things, they always are dressed up in such presentable clothes. We *never* think of ourselves in these terms. That's what so dangerous. "*Who is wise and understanding among you?*" *Ahem, [modest chuckle], well I would never say that exactly, but in this meeting I want what I want, and you're not going to stand in my way.*
- B. This counterfeit wisdom within us is fed by three polluted streams (v. 15).
1. *Earthly* – of this world system. Machiavellian; worldly wise; Not character driven, but personality driven. "I did it my way." "You can't let them run over you" (as if that's the only possibly outcome of meekness).
 2. *Unspiritual*—meaning that there's nothing of God in it; for that matter, it doesn't even reckon on the spiritual side of people. It's all pragmatic. Nothing sacred or Spirit-led
 3. *Demonic*—the Devil is in it. It is antichrist. It is lying, destructive. No glory at all for God. At Satan's will.
- C. Our counterfeit wisdom always causes "disorder and every evil practice." We're being cynical with our friends, or arguing over the dinner table, or doing combat in a committee meeting and we *think* we're just angling for

what's smart. But all those terrible things are actually at work in and through us, and the fruit of it all is *disorder*—chaos, everything out of whack, wheels coming off. And we are the breeder of every kind of sin in the book. There's no telling what bad behavior will come out of us and others.

We have a lot more in common with the tyrannical, selfish, grasping Mr. Potter than we ever imagined. Well, I don't want to be like that, do you? So if you're under pressure, and you agree with God that envy and selfish ambition lurk dangerously in your heart, what should you do? **Jas. 1:6**, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*" That's the Christian's life-giving alternative.

III. SOW WISDOM. REAP RIGHTEOUSNESS. (3:17-18)

- A. **V.17a...** Heaven-sent wisdom is pure. Which means that it isn't tainted. There's nothing brackish about it. There's nothing smoldering. You don't have to worry that it's got envy or ambition bacteria in it. You and I can receive, speak and act out of wisdom that is pure. We can act so that we actually bring *order* and *all kinds of good practices* into volatile or confusing situations. Illus.: I visited with a friend recently who was trying to make a big decision. He really wanted to do what's wise, but he was deeply suspicious of his motives. Several times he quoted the verse, "*The heart is deceitfully wicked.*" But I heard how much he wanted God's will. How sternly he was examining his motives. He was positioned for wisdom. So the first thing we do when we're praying for wisdom is to check for purity—is what we *think* and how we're going to *act* tainted, polluted, by our envy or ambition; by the world, the flesh or the devil?
- B. **V.17b...** What do all those attitudes have in common? They're all **relational**, for one thing. Wisdom is relational. It isn't real wisdom till it is engaged with other people. There's another thing: Heaven-sent wisdom infuses all we do with humility. All those words have humility in them.

Remember **Phil 2:3**, “*in humility value others above yourselves.*” These all describe what that looks like.

- *Peace-loving* – humility eviscerates combativeness and contentiousness. We may not avoid conflict but humility keeps us from poisoning it with envy and selfish ambition.
- *Considerate* – Humility prompts us to be kind and courteous, thoughtful and sensitive.
- *Submissive* – Humility helps us to accept the one-down position, to be a servant even when we lead.
- *Full of mercy and good fruit* – Humility is forgiving. It doesn't keep score about who deserves what. And humility creates a climate for good to grow.
- *Impartial* -- Humility enables us to think and act without the corrupting influences of selfishness.
- *Sincere* -- Humility is not hypocritical. It brings a vulnerability and authenticity to our relationships.

C. **V.18**, “*Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*” Anytime a Christian sows humble attitudes in a situation—especially a pressured situation—righteousness takes root and grows in your heart.

Let me paint a picture for you. You are in some relationship situation: a bunch of friends hanging out after school, a meeting with your boss, a family dinner, a committee meeting. As a Christian you are there to plant a seed of righteousness.

To do that, you get humble. Again, as Paul put it, “*in humility value others above yourselves.*” Say to yourself, “I’m here to serve. And the biggest danger in this meeting is *me*—my lurking, conniving envy and selfish ambition, so by God’s help I’m going to put a gag in their mouths.”

You step into that situation with the humility that you and God have worked on in prayer, and that makes room for God-sent wisdom. That’s the seed. It will *look* like one of these words James uses. Your humility will dress like kindness and courtesy, submissiveness and sincerity. It will be mercifully willing to cover over a multitude of sins. It

will be good. That's how you plant the seed of humble wisdom. **It isn't primarily what we say that shows wisdom but how we display humility.** Humility gives life and vitality to all else that we say and do.

Instead of contributing to a climate of disorder and evil deeds we plant God-given wisdom. And look what comes up! *“Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.”* We may very well bring fresh, living righteousness to our friends, to our kitchen table, to the class or conference room, but I think James' main idea is that righteousness grows up in us. So that takes us back again to **Jas 1:2-5...** The wonderful thing for Christians facing trials is that when we don't know how to act wisely, we can ask for and receive God's wisdom. **That's the first thing we must do.** *“Lord, this pressure is getting to me and, to be honest about it, I'm about ready to release the hounds of my bitter envy and selfish ambition. Please give me wisdom instead.”*

“I would love to,” says God, *“but if I do, you need to do the wise direction I give or you'll end up always the fool.”*

“If you grant me wisdom I will do it,” we say. *“But the Holy Spirit must help me.”*

“I promise you he will,” the Lord replies.

SUMMARY: In our prayers God will help us get small, though it may take some serious praying! Then, when we're about the size of a seed, God plants us in relationships—sometimes in difficult and dirty relationships. He puts us in pressure situations and trials of every kind. Then that humble, wise seed takes root and righteousness grows to full flower.

Illus.: Jeff Collins worked at a Christian ministry that was committed to helping people in need. Several years ago he wrote this story in the *Christian Reader*:

It had been a trying week at our Love & Action office. At five o'clock on a Friday, I was looking forward to having a quiet dinner with friends. Then the phone rang.

"Jeff! It's Jimmy!" I heard a quivering voice say.

Jimmy, who suffered from several AIDS-related illnesses, was one of our regular clients. "I'm really sick, Jeff. I've got a fever. Please help me."

I was angry. After a sixty-hour workweek, I didn't want to hear about Jimmy. But I promised to be right over. Still, during the drive over, I complained to God about the inconvenience.

The moment I walked in the door, I could smell the vomit. Jimmy was on the sofa, shivering and in distress. I wiped his forehead, then got a bucket of soapy water to clean up the mess. I managed to maintain a facade of concern, even though I was raging inside.

Jimmy's friend, Russ, who also had AIDS, came down the stairs. The odor made Russ sick, too.

As I cleaned the carpet around Russ's chair, I was ready to explode inside. Then Russ startled me. "I understand! I understand!"

"What, Russ?" Jimmy asked weakly.

"I understand who Jesus is," Russ said through tears. "He's like Jeff!"

Weeping, I hugged Russ and prayed with him. That night Russ trusted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior—a God who had used me to show his love in spite of myself.

Now there's a wise Christian.

[Jeffrey Collins, *Christian Reader*, March/April 1998, Vol. 36, No. 2, Page 74]