

# Wiseguy

Studies in the Book of James

Text

James 3:13-18

Topic

Do you have a zeal for the Lord that is heavenly and good, or one that is earthly and bad?

Title

*"I Zeal Good; I Knew that I Would"*

Introduction

If you could go back in time and kill baby Hitler, would you?

Before you think I've lost my mind, let me remind you that this question came up in the Republican presidential primaries.

It really did; I've seen the videos.

Jeb Bush was asked the question, and he unhesitatingly answered, "Yes!" adding, "You've got to step-up."

He then qualified his zeal saying, "The problem with going back in history and doing that, as we know from the series - what's the name of the Michael Fox movies? - It could have a dangerous effect on everything else."

In a twist on the question designed to trip him up, Dr. Ben Carson was asked if he would be in favor of *aborting* baby Hitler. He answered, "I'm not in favor of aborting anybody."

Donald Trump was asked the question by Jimmy Kimmel. He first stated that he thought Jeb Bush was too nice to kill baby Hitler. His own answer to the question was, "No comment."

Let's go from syfy to history. By most counts, from 1934 until 1944 there were more than twenty attempts on Hitler's life.

Given the opportunity, I think a lot of people would say, "Yes, I would have killed Hitler."

In first century Israel, it wasn't Hitler people wanted to kill; it was Caesar. And it was Jews who worked with the Roman government to keep the peace. There were other patriotic Jews whose desire for independence led them to kill both the Roman usurpers and their Jewish sympathizers.

One such group was the Zealots. The Zealots promoted armed rebellion against Rome. They believed that God would deliver Israel with the sword.

They were called Zealots on account of their zeal to serve God. These guys were willing to kill, and to die, for their national pride.

Jesus chose, as one of His twelve apostles, a Zealot - Simon the Zealot. He also chose a tax collector - Matthew. A tax collector was just the kind of high-value target Simon would have wanted to kill - a Jew in league with the Roman oppressors.

I wonder how long it was before Matthew could sleep through the night, knowing Simon was among them?

After Jesus ascended into Heaven, and the apostles and disciples started spreading the Gospel, Zealots were getting saved. There were Zealots among the believing Jews who had been dispersed by persecution.

Should they continue to rebel? To promote the sword? To encourage, through violence, their countrymen to rise up?

It was an important question among Messianic Jews.

James answers it, albeit indirectly, in our verses. In verses fourteen and sixteen, when he says "envy," the root word is *zeal*.

I'm not saying he was talking only about the Zealots, but he was describing what real zeal for the Lord looked like; and it didn't look anything like what the Zealots were doing. They were wrong.

I'm sure we each, in our own way, want to be described as zealous for the Lord. But there are at least two different types of zeal - one earthly, the other heavenly.

I'll organize my thoughts around two questions: #1 Is Your Zeal Defended By Earthly Wisdom?, or #2 Is Your Zeal Dependent On Heavenly Wisdom?

### #1 Is Your Zeal Defended By Earthly Wisdom?

(v13-16)

I uncovered this fascinating fact of Jewish history. The Zealots were founded by Judas of Galilee in the year 6AD in resistance to the census and taxation ordered by Quirinius.

He encouraged Jews not to register, and those that did register had their houses burnt and their livestock stolen by his followers.

Do you recognize this census? This is the exact census that caused Joseph to travel with his very pregnant wife, Mary, to his ancestral home in Bethlehem to register with Rome.

Do you see what was going on? There were two very different approaches to the same event:

- We can certainly sympathize with the Zealots. We might even agree with them. After all, our own great nation was born from a revolution involving taxation.
- But aren't you grateful that Joseph did not join the Zealots? Aren't you grateful that he wasn't killed by them for cooperating with Rome?

It was God's heavenly wisdom for Joseph to submit to the ruling authorities, and journey to Bethlehem, where Jesus was long-destined to be born.

There could be no argument. The Zealots were operating on an earthly level, appealing to a wisdom that James will describe as "sensual" and "demonic."

That kind of wisdom is always competing for our attention, and we must learn to recognize it so we can reject it.

**Jas 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.

"Wise and understanding" is a phrase that describes someone we today might call "mature," or "spiritual."

The mature, spiritual believer revels in "the meekness of wisdom." Let's stick to the historic example we've presented:

- Judas of Galilee and the Zealots were *not* acting in meekness. They were fomenting rebellion, and doing violence to their fellow countrymen who disagreed with them. I'm sure they thought anyone acting meekly was a coward.
- Joseph, on the other hand, acted meekly not just in submitting to the census. He was willing to accept God's will that he remain married to a woman whom everyone believed to be an adulteress. Joseph was no weak coward; at least, not morally, where it counted the most.

As Adrian Rogers used to say, "Meekness is not weakness. If you think meekness is weakness, *try being meek for a week!*"

By his "good conduct" it was obvious Joseph's "works [were] done in the meekness of [heavenly] wisdom."

In almost every situation you encounter in your life, you are presented with a heavenly wisdom that suggests conducting yourself in meekness; AND you are presented with an earthly wisdom that sounds spiritual but is really sensual and demonic.

I'm sure it was easy to justify the Zealot approach. After all, Israel was a sovereign nation, occupied by foreign invaders. They used the Old Testament, and King David, as their defense, noting that he rose-up to deliver Israel with the sword against Gentile oppressors. It seemed solid wisdom.

With hindsight, we see that Rome was overcome using an entirely different wisdom. There was a lot more at stake than political freedom. Men needed to be saved.

James describes earthly wisdom so we can learn to recognize it.

Jas 3:14 But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.

The word “envy” is *zeal*. It is a neutral term and may have either a good sense or a bad sense.

"Bitter" qualifies this zeal as something bad. If you use the Zealots as your example, I'd say burning down your house was "bitter envy" in action.

"Self-seeking" denotes a willingness to use unworthy and divisive means to promote your own views or interests.

The Zealots were definitely an example, but this same conduct is possible among believers in fellowship with one another. Almost any church split involves self-seeking from those at odds. Both sides believe their position to be godly. They excuse their methods, thinking godly ends justify earthly means. They do not.

Manipulation is another manifestation of this kind of earthly wisdom. Whether it is subtle or severe, to manipulate other believers through guilt and shame, or by using the techniques of the world, is earthly wisdom at work.

We can "boast" all we want that we are right, but it is a "lie against the truth" that we have a sin-problem in our "hearts."

Jas 3:15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic.

There is Someone above us. Jesus ascended into Heaven, where He is said to be seated at God's right hand. From that place of authority, He sent the gift of the Holy Spirit, to descend upon His church.

The church age is an ongoing Pentecost as we continue to ask, seek, and knock for this outpouring of the Spirit from above (Luke 11:9-13); and Jesus, Who is the giver of good gifts, grants Him to us; and we go on receiving Him by faith.

We are told,

Col 3:1 ... seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

Col 3:2 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

Have you ever heard it said, "Christians are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good?" C.S. Lewis once commented in print on that criticism:

A continual looking forward to the eternal world is not a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in." Aim at earth and you will get neither.

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James 3:13-18

*"I Zeal Good; I Knew that I Would"*

The kind of "wisdom" James was describing could never have descended from the purity and majesty of Heaven. It is "earthly, sensuous, demonic."

You may recall the story of Lot. Both Lot and Abraham had large herds of cattle, and their herdsmen quarreled over their diminishing pasturelands.

Abraham suggested that the two separate. Being the godly man he was, he gave Lot his choice of land.

The Bible tells that Lot chose the lush, fertile, land of the Jordan River valley. Was it the wise choice? It was if you were using earthly wisdom.

The pasture may have looked better but Lot failed to consider the consequences when he "pitched his tent toward Sodom." He kept moving closer to the notoriously wicked city, until he lived in it, and became one of its leaders.

When God destroyed Sodom, Lot barely survived. If it wasn't for him being mentioned by the apostle Peter as a "righteous man," you'd doubt that he was saved.

Abraham exemplifies heavenly wisdom. Certainly it was meekness in action, seeing he was the elder and had every right to tell Lot what to do.

Earthly wisdom isn't simply inferior to heavenly wisdom. It is "sensual, demonic."

"Sensual" isn't describing the lusts of the flesh. It means *unspiritual*. It describes life apart from God; it is life without God's Spirit.



It describes all nonbelievers, who have not been born again, and it should therefore never describe a believer.

Earthly wisdom is "demonic." It has its source, ultimately, in the devil. His seemingly wise council to Eve in the Garden of Eden broke mankind's connection with God. It doomed mankind to an earthly existence that would have ended in dust and death and eternal destruction but for God's gracious intervention.

We said that the Zealots started in about 6AD with Judas the Galilean. By 66AD Menahem, a son of Judas, was one of the leaders.

Menahem raised a powerful band of cutthroats. He overpowered his opponents who preferred peace with the Romans and made a triumphant entry into Jerusalem dressed as a king. Menahem then took control of the Temple and had the high priest Ananias put to death. One day, when he was entering the Temple dressed in royal robes, an angry mob seized and killed him.

Late in 67AD John of Gishala rose to power. He was even more brutal than Menahem. He had tens of thousands of Jews put to death. Anyone who supported the Romans or desired peace was worthy of death in John's eyes. At one point he seized the Temple and killed the high priest. So fierce was the fighting that 8500 died on the Temple grounds.

Judas the Galilean, and Menahem, and John of Gishala, seemed zealous for the Lord, but in reality they conducted themselves with earthly wisdom that was sensual and demonic.

Jesus seemingly did nothing for almost thirty years after the Roman census.

After three-and-one-half years of ministry, He looked defeated, having been rejected by the Jews and crucified by Rome.

But three days after He was crucified, Heaven's wisdom exploded onto the scene. He was risen, and alive. His followers would spread His Gospel to the whole world - a mission we continue to this very day - as we await His return to establish the kingdom on the earth.

Let me quickly address something you may be wondering about. Does James mean by this to teach Christian pacifism?

The answer is "No," he is not teaching Christian pacifism. In using the history of first century Israel, we must keep in mind that her destruction had been prophesied by Jesus:

Mat 24:2 And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."

Jesus wept over Jerusalem, knowing her destruction was nigh.

Christian pacifists will sometimes cite Jesus' statement, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).

Jesus wasn't giving a universal command. He was talking in the context of Israel's immediate future. In 70AD the Romans would crush those, like the Zealots, who were living by the sword. The situation of first century Israel was like that of Israel in the sixth century BC. Jeremiah was prophesying that Jerusalem's destruction was at hand, and that their captivity in Babylon would last for the next seventy-years. He was counseling surrender.

It was too late for any personal repentance to save them from national judgment.

Jesus is Himself described as wielding the sword, at His Second Coming. He is a warrior. In the mean time, the New Testament instructs us about governments and their power to wield the sword, and about our responsibilities toward government.

To even talk about revolution or pacifism from these verses would be a misapplication.

Don't get distracted by what our verses are *not* saying. What they are saying is that there is an earthly wisdom that is always sensual and demonic. Don't apply it to your situation.

You know where we see this the most? We see it the most when, in their heart, a spouse lies against the truth of God and decides to pursue an unbiblical divorce. I've heard all kinds of earthly wisdom to justify the destruction of a marriage.

Earthly wisdom *only, always* destroys. Instead, seek the wisdom that is from above.

## #2 Is Your Zeal Dependent On Heavenly Wisdom?

(v17-18)

We've seen some examples of what zeal for the Lord looks like when it depends on heavenly wisdom. James next lists some of its main characteristics.

Jas 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.

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James 3:13-18

"I Zeal Good; I Knew that I Would"

Since it is "from above," **it is immediately available to you in any and every situation.** It is available to you if you've been a believer for ten minutes or ten years.

Growing and maturing are an important part of the Christian life. We should practice the disciplines of biblical Christianity to enhance our growth. We should read the Word... Pray... Give to the work of the Lord, both of our treasure and time. We should fast... And share our faith.

But when it comes to making right choices, wisdom is yours *whenever* you need it, *wherever* you are in your walk.

The words James uses to describe the characteristics of wisdom are pretty straightforward. They don't need definition so much as they need a context in which to see them in action.

I mentioned that we see so much earthly wisdom in the tragic dissolution of Christian marriages. Let's use the institution of biblical marriage as our context and example for these words that describe wisdom.

James wasn't giving a marriage study, but we can see how applying heavenly wisdom affects marriage.

"Wisdom that is from above is first pure." Whatever God clearly says about marriage must be yielded to. I should not mix my own ideas about marriage with what God has said. To do so is to add earthly wisdom, which makes everything instantly impure.

A biblical marriage is heterosexual, monogamous (between one man and one woman), to last their lifetime. Any other definition of marriage is earthly, sensual, and, yes, it is demonic.

Grounds for divorce include sexual sin and abandonment. But that's not why most Christian marriages end. There are usually no grounds other than personal feelings.

In fact what happens is one spouse starts adding impurities to their thinking. They start feeling sorry for themselves; they convince themselves they are not happy; they start flirting with friends or co-workers; they get involved in pornography. Simultaneously, they begin to lower the biblical definition of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

The wisdom from above that is pure holds you to your wedding vows - the ones where you promised to stay together for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part.

Next James lists "peaceable." You may be thinking, "You don't know what my spouse is like! Peace is not possible."

It doesn't matter what your spouse is like. **You** are to respond by being "peaceable." Since it is a quality that comes "from above," **you** can have it in every situation.

Next, heavenly wisdom is "gentle." Such a person will submit to all kinds of mistreatment and difficulty with an attitude of kind, courteous, patient humility, without any thought of hatred or revenge.

I know; your spouse pushes you too far. You have limits.

Or do you? Again, this quality comes "from above." It is a gift to be received, not something to be learned or earned over time.

The Christian life isn't a matter of slowly overcoming your natural limits. It is life without limits, since you have help from Heaven.

Are you "willing to yield?" You can't always yield; sometimes your spouse is wrong, or in sin. But are you "*willing* to yield," when possible?

More importantly, if you find yourself somewhere along the path of thinking it would be better to get a divorce, if you read God's Word on the matter, "are you willing to yield" to Him?

You can be "full of mercy and good fruits" in your home. You want to draw your spouse closer to Jesus, not push them away from you.

"Without partiality," in the context of a marriage, means you see your spouse as a work in progress. You see him or her as God does. You don't compare them to some imaginary standard, or to someone else.

I know, I know; you can't do this either. Not naturally; but you can supernaturally.

Finally James says, "without hypocrisy." If you ultimately end up at an excuse to walk away from your marriage with no biblical grounds, it's a hypocrisy. You're a person who could depend upon heavenly wisdom, and have a zeal for the Lord; but, instead, you settle for earthly wisdom. You give in to that which is sensual and demonic.

These characteristics apply in every situation - not just marriage. But marriages are in trouble; they are under attack.

There may be someone here, today, who has come to conclusions about their marriage based upon earthly wisdom that is sensual and demonic, rather than pure, coming down from God.

[Jas 3:18](#) Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Like so much in James, translators have a difficult time with these words. I think James is talking about the effect depending upon God's wisdom has on observers.

He depicts you as a "sower." No matter where you are, or what you're doing, if you are a Christian, you are always sowing. People are taking note of your conduct.

You want to sow "the fruit of righteousness." That is immediately interesting, since normally we think of sowing seed, not fruit.

The "fruit of righteousness" is conduct that is consistent with having been declared righteous by God. It involves doing what is right from a biblical worldview. People watch you to see if your conduct is fruitful, rather than destructive.

"Those who make peace" would be those whose zeal is dependent upon heavenly wisdom. "Sown in peace" reminds us that our methods must be consistent with God's methods.

I'm not sure I get everything James was trying to say in verse eighteen. But here is something to ponder.

I can sow the seed of God's Word even if my conduct is poor. The Gospel is, in itself, the power of God unto salvation.

But I can only sow fruit if I'm walking with God. It's James' way of reminding us our walk must line-up with our talk.

Depending upon heavenly wisdom is no easy task. It is often - maybe almost always - counter to what we want to do, or think is right.

Doc Hudson tried to share his wisdom about driving on a dirt racetrack with Lightning McQueen. He said, "I'll put it simple. If you're going hard enough left, you'll find yourself turning right."

McQueen thought it counter to what he should do, saying, "Oh, right. That makes perfect sense. Turn right to go left. Yes, thank you! Or should I say, NO THANK YOU!!! Because in Opposite World, maybe that really means thank you."

If you seek wisdom from above, you'll often think you're in Opposite World, for sure.

The examples we have in God's Word are great in this regard. Almost everything in the life of Jesus seemed contrary to wisdom; yet, in the end, the wisdom of God was, and is, salvation to those who believe.

Whatever you're deciding today or soon, look up - for the wisdom that comes from above.