

**WISDOM FROM ABOVE: JAMES 3:17**  
**(According to the English Standard Version)**  
**by Alexander Strauch**  
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**Pure:** The first fruit of heavenly wisdom is moral and spiritual purity. Purity is the overarching characteristic of all the six qualities that follow. Godly wisdom leads to integrity, holiness, righteousness, and blamelessness of life. Holiness of heart and mind is necessary for people to trust each other and live together in harmony. Unholy, wicked conduct produces “disorder and every vile practice.”

**Peaceable:** Literally the term is “peacemaking.” Speaking of the blessedness of wisdom, King Solomon writes that, “all her paths are peace” (Prov. 3:17). Peace was desperately needed in these strife-ridden churches to whom James wrote. “Bitter jealousy” and “selfish ambition” (v. 14) does not produce congregational peace, only strife. James here is acting as a peacemaker for troubled churches.

**Gentle:** Unlike “selfish ambition” (v. 14), the word “gentle”<sup>1</sup> conveys the ideas of “forbearance,” “graciousness,” “considerate,” “non-combative.” “Graciously amenable,” says one commentator, “yielding wherever yielding is possible rather than standing up for one’s rights.”<sup>2</sup> A gentle person exhibits a willingness to yield, and patiently makes allowances for the weakness and ignorance of the fallen human condition. Such is the precious quality of heavenly wisdom. This virtue comes from God, who is gracious and forbearing, and is an essential quality needed to maintaining peace in the church of God. Marshall Shelley’s remarks on gentleness and forcefulness in leadership bear repeating:

Not many situations are solved by a forceful leap onto people. Most churches have plenty of strong personalities but a shortage of gentleness. Often the pastor gains more influence by being a gentle friend than by grabbing for control.<sup>3</sup>

**Open to reason:** This beautiful quality of wisdom connotes “reasonableness,” an ability to change when appropriate, a desire to listen to others, a willingness to be persuaded by reason, to learn and submit, and to be compliant. As the saying goes, “My mind is made up. Don’t confuse me with the facts” (see Prov. 26:16). Pride does not allow for such sweet reasonableness. Of Paul, it has been said, “Where the principles of the gospel were not at stake he was the most conciliatory of men.”<sup>4</sup>

**Full of mercy and good fruits:** The book of James is eminently practical. He insists on a faith and wisdom that unites verbal profession with observable, practical works. So here too “mercy” is practical, undeserved kindness, especially for the poor and needy (James 1:27; 2:14-17). We see Christlike mercy illustrated in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:37). A Christian characterized by Godly wisdom will be “full of mercy” toward needy people. As a result, the merciful person will have a life marked by “good fruits,” that is, precious deeds of kindness and love, a life of active serving on behalf of others.

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<sup>1</sup>“Gentle” (*epieikēs*) “not insisting on every right of letter of law or custom, *yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, tolerant*” (BDAG, 371).

See Phil. 4:5; 1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 3:2. Jesus Christ was gentle (2 Cor. 10:1; *epieikeia*)

<sup>2</sup>J.A. Motyer, *The Message of James*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1985), 136.

<sup>3</sup>Marshall Shelly, *Well-Intentioned Dragons* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany, 1994), 89.

<sup>4</sup>F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 186.

**Impartial and Sincere [not hypocritical]:** These last two qualities of wisdom are especially necessary to harmonious human relationships. It is very difficult to deal with people who are discriminatory and hypocritical. There is always an air of suspicion, mistrust, and ambiguity surrounding such people. The truly wise are fair, honest, and sincere in their relationships. What they appear to be, they are. What they say can be trusted. They will act on principle and truth, not personal prejudice. A famous pastor was put on trial for financial misconduct. The lawyers prosecuting the pastor said about the pastor to the news reporters, "This man is a slippery fellow."