

The background of the entire cover is a vibrant blue with a fine, grainy texture. Overlaid on this are several stylized, flame-like shapes in bright red and yellow, with some darker, charcoal-like outlines. These shapes are arranged in a way that suggests movement and intensity, resembling fire or perhaps the petals of a flower.

HANNAH ANDERSON / JADA EDWARDS / RACHEL GILSON
ASHLEY MARIVITTORI GORMAN / JASMINE HOLMES / REBECCA McLAUGHLIN
JEN POLLOCK MICHEL / MARY WILEY / ELIZABETH WOODSON

WORLD ON FIRE

WALKING IN THE WISDOM
OF CHRIST WHEN EVERYONE'S
FIGHTING ABOUT EVERYTHING

WORLD

ON

FIRE

HANNAH ANDERSON / JADA EDWARDS / RACHEL GILSON
ASHLEY MARIVITTORI GORMAN / JASMINE HOLMES / REBECCA MCLAUGHLIN
JEN POLLOCK MICHEL / MARY WILEY / ELIZABETH WOODSON

WORLD ON FIRE

WALKING IN THE WISDOM
OF CHRIST WHEN EVERYONE'S
FIGHTING ABOUT EVERYTHING

B&H
PUBLISHING
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Copyright © 2021 by B&H Publishing Group
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America

978-1-0877-5374-4

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 226.93
Subject Heading: BEATITUDES / SERMON ON THE MOUNT /
SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the
Christian Standard Bible, copyright © 2017 by Holman
Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard
Bible®, and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of
Holman Bible Publishers, all rights reserved.

Also used: English Standard Version (ESV). ESV® Text Edition: 2016.
Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing
ministry of Good News Publishers.

Also used: New American Standard Bible (NASB), copyright © 1960,
1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman Foundation.
All rights reserved.

Also used: New International Version®, (NIV) NIV® copyright
©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission.
All rights reserved worldwide.

Also used: New Living Translation (NLT,) copyright © 1996,
2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of
Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All
rights reserved.

Also used: King James Version (KJV), public domain.

It is the Publisher's goal to minimize disruption caused by techni-
cal errors or invalid websites. While all links are active at the time
of publication, because of the dynamic nature of the internet, some
web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed and
may no longer be valid. B&H Publishing Group bears no responsibil-
ity for the continuity or content of the external site, nor for that of
subsequent links. Contact the external site for answers to questions
regarding its content.

Cover design by B&H Publishing Group.
Cover illustration CSA Images/gettyimages.
Interior icons by bluebright/vectorstock.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1	World on Fire Hannah Anderson	1
Chapter 2	Poor in Spirit and in the Right Kingdom Rebecca McLaughlin	13
Chapter 3	Mourning Sin in a World That Forgets It Elizabeth Woodson	29
Chapter 4	Meekness in a World of Pride Hannah Anderson	43
Chapter 5	Holistic Righteousness in a World That's Selective Jada Edwards	55
Chapter 6	Mercy in a World of Scrooges Ashley Marivittori Gorman	69
Chapter 7	A Singular Focus in an Unfocused World Jasmine Holmes	87
Chapter 8	Making True Peace in a World of False Peace Rachel Gilson	101
Chapter 9	Persecution in a World of Comfort Mary Wiley	117

CONTENTS

Chapter 10 Salt and Light in a World of Decay and Darkness	131
Jen Pollock Michel	
About the Authors	143

Chapter 1

WORLD ON FIRE

Hannah Anderson

Consider how a small fire sets ablaze a large forest.

And the tongue is a fire. The tongue, a world of unrighteousness . . . sets the course of life on fire.

—James 3:5–6



“I just don’t know what to believe anymore. I mean, who can you trust?”

Her face fell as she said the words. She wrapped her hands around the cup of coffee and slumped back into her chair. I didn’t say anything in response because there wasn’t anything to say. Words felt unequal to the moment. So instead, we sat in silence, feeling the weight of it all.

The past year had brought a world of suffering and chaos. A global pandemic shuttered churches, schools, and businesses and left families mourning lost loved ones. Hurricanes pummeled the coasts while wildfires raged across millions of acres. Racial hatred, once again emboldened, emerged from the shadows in all its grotesque forms. Millions found themselves un- and under-employed while others worked under the threat of professional consequences for stepping out of line or voicing unpopular opinions. To top it all off, a fraught election cycle climaxed in a deadly attack on the seat of government while elected officials were in the process of governing.

And it all was delivered via the screens that sat on the table between us, just inches from our fingertips. Each update, each statistic, each poll, each political scandal had flashed across those small

devices—devices that we somehow believed we needed to carry with us everywhere. Like my friend, I too found myself guarded and wary, fluctuating between anger, anxiety, and ironically enough, loneliness. I walked on eggshells, uncertain of what I could say and to whom. And despite my best efforts, I'd invariably offend someone, miscommunicating with friends and family. Then I'd watch helplessly as the bonds that had once held us close strained under the stress of it all, threatening to break for good if we couldn't perfectly agree on everything.

It felt like the world as we had known it had gone up in flames.

How Great a Fire

When I think of a raging fire, I think of my father-in-law who worked as a forester for four decades. Throughout his career, he managed hundreds of acres, partnered with landowners to steward and cultivate their properties, and battled the forest fires that would inevitably break out. In fact, my husband tells of a childhood punctuated by “fire season”—a period of several months in spring and fall when forest fires are common due to environmental factors like dryness, bare trees, and high winds. During fire season, my father-in-law couldn't travel outside a prescribed radius, needing instead to stay close to his work truck, ever ready, ever vigilant, should a fire break out.

Because all it took was one spark. One match, one flame could set the hills ablaze.

In many ways, this cultural moment is a kind of “fire season” with conditions just right for fire to break out. Technological advances (while in many ways a blessing) have also brought significant challenges and even dangers. Where we once had too little information, we now have too much. It's impossible for one person to sort through all the data points, opinions, and facts, so we often end up relying on other people to interpret the information for us, telling us what we should and shouldn't think.

Add to this the fact that social media is designed to reward interaction. Ever wonder why clickbait is so popular or why you only see

certain posts in your time line? By prioritizing content that is likely to grab our attention, social media algorithms keep us active and engaged. Unfortunately, they also create information silos that stoke division and tribalism.

But the challenge is greater than just identifying our biases or making sure we follow folks on both sides of an issue. Technology has also given us the ability to manipulate images and manufacture data so that it's increasingly difficult to know if what we're reading is factual or not. We have moved far beyond the question of "How can I get knowledge or information?" and find ourselves asking "How can I know this knowledge or information is *true*?" One study reveals that answering this question might be harder than we'd think, as it found that false information spread six times faster than accurate information.¹ Forget the information age—we're living in the disinformation age.

All of this makes for a combustible environment, rife for disagreement, conflict, and fragmentation. But fires don't break out just because conditions are right. They must be lit, if only by accident.² So what was the spark that sets this tinder alight? What is the spark that has set our world on fire?

The Spark

The 2020 documentary *The Social Dilemma* traces the effects of the digital age on individuals and communities, highlighting how social media has led to a breakdown of trust and larger social instability.

¹ Peter Dizikes, "Study: On Twitter, False News Travels Faster than True Stories," MIT News, March 8, 2018, <http://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>.

² While arson is suspected in several of the 2020 wildfires, the El Dorado fire was traced back to a gender reveal party in which an expectant couple had set off fireworks to celebrate.

WORLD ON FIRE

In it, computer scientist and design ethicist Tristan Harris makes an important observation: technology itself is not necessarily the threat.

“We’re all looking out for the moment when technology would overwhelm human strengths and intelligence,” Harris says. He goes on:

When is it going to . . . replace our jobs, be smarter than humans? But there’s this much earlier moment when technology exceeds and overwhelms **human weaknesses**. This point being crossed is at the root of addiction, polarization, radicalization, outrage-ification, vanity-ification, the entire thing. . . . It’s technology’s ability to bring out the worst in society and the worst in society brings the existential threat.³

In other words, while technology may create the conditions, the spark that sets the world on fire is . . . us.

Although he probably doesn’t realize it, Harris is echoing what the apostle James knew in the first century. In James 3:14, he writes that “bitter envy and selfish ambition” fuel “disorder and every vile practice” (v. 16). In the next chapter he says it this way: “What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don’t they come from your passions that wage war within you?” (4:1). Bitterness. Envy. Vile practices. Wars and fights among us. Sounds a lot like the present moment, doesn’t it? But just a few verses prior, James also says this: “How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness . . . setting on fire the entire course of life” (3:5–6 ESV).

According to James, *we* are the ones who light the fires with our knee-jerk reactions and our constant need to be right. But James isn’t addressing simply what we *say*. He’s addressing the deeper realities of our heart, because what we say, write, and profess reveal what’s happening within us. We wage war on the outside because we have

³ Jeff Orlowski, dir. *The Social Dilemma*, Exposure Labs, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/title/81254224> [emphasis added].

passions waging war on the *inside*. “The source” of all the fighting, of all the fires, isn’t “out there” with some person or group we disagree with. It is “in here.” The spark is the sinful passions and desires within the human heart, both yours and mine. Our mouths simply give them voice. As Jesus put it in Luke 6:45, “[the] mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart.”

The danger isn’t simply that we struggle to know and say what’s true, but that too many of us don’t want the truth in the first place. The problem is that we’re interacting with other people from fleshly hearts that are full of “bitter envy and selfish ambition.” Technology has created a combustible environment, sure. It has made it easier for us to be terrible to each other. And that is something to mourn and resist (many tech-experts will tell you that was done on purpose). But what James holds up in front of us is this: the desire to be terrible in these ways, regardless of environment, has always been smoldering within us. Our environment can only fan the flame of destruction because the flame is there in the first place.

Fire Safety and Heavenly Wisdom

While my father-in-law’s work demanded vigilance during fire season, he spent the rest of the year reducing the risk of fire through things like reforestation, prescribed burns, and teaching fire safety to the larger public. (When the moment called for it, he wasn’t above donning a Smokey the Bear costume to remind folks that “Only you can prevent forest fires!”)

The idea behind fire safety is simple: you can’t control the elements. You can’t control how much rain will come and how dry the forest will be. But you can control *your* behavior. You can choose to make wise choices about when and where you start fires and whether you’re careless with matches. You can conduct yourself with wisdom instead of foolishness.

After warning us about how the tongue can set the world on fire, James asks this question: “Who among you is wise and understanding?”

By his good conduct he should show that his works are done in the gentleness *that comes from wisdom*" (3:13, emphasis added). And with this, James sets up a contrast between those who pursue wisdom and those who indulge their sinful tendencies. "But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart," he continues, "don't boast and deny the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic" (3:14–15). Simply put, there are those who fight the fires and those who start them. There are those who seek heavenly wisdom and those who act out of earthly wisdom.

So what would this heavenly wisdom look like? How can we tell the difference between the wisdom that is from above and "wisdom" that is simply enabling, excusing, and encouraging our human weaknesses and fleshly desires?

First, heavenly wisdom is counterintuitive. Biblical wisdom has a way of confusing us at first because it challenges the assumptions that emerge from our sin nature. This is what Proverbs 14:12 means when it says that "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death." Our instinct or gut feeling about how to respond to a situation or issue is not enough—neither is "feeling peace" or a "lack of peace." Instead, we are pursuing the "renewing" of our minds (Rom. 12:2). We are inviting God's Word and God's Spirit to make us into the image of God's Son, to conform our thoughts and words and deeds to his likeness. So, as we explore what wisdom looks like in these times, expect to be surprised. Welcome the experience of feeling challenged. Why? Because this is exactly what the Scripture tells us will happen when we're being changed.

Second, heavenly wisdom is knowable to all who seek it. Wisdom is not the exclusive property of a select few who have discovered a secret memo, a secret meaning, or a secret cabal. In fact, in James 1:5, the Scripture invites "*any* of you" who lack wisdom to come to God, promising that he will give it to all truly seeking him. The challenge of wisdom is not that only a few can "know" what is true or real. The challenge is that wisdom requires hard things of us. It disrupts and confronts us, so many of us simply choose to look away from it. We

don't want to look at "the source" of the wars being waged among us, namely, our own sinful passions and desires. We resist the invitation because doing so would also mean admitting that we are part of the problem. To face our inner arsonist and drag it into the light would take an enormous amount of both courage and humility. This is why James warns us that coming to God for wisdom will require singleness of heart. Anyone can come to God for wisdom; but only those humble enough to believe that God's ways are better than our own will find it.

Third, heavenly wisdom is countercultural. Those seeking the heavenly wisdom are seeking the "narrow way" that leads to life and flourishing—a narrow way that many other people won't necessarily understand (Matt. 7:14). Even other Christians. Even their fellow citizens. In fact, heavenly wisdom will likely disrupt the status quo because it seeks the kingdom of God rather than a kingdom on this earth. In this way, heavenly wisdom challenges both our personal assumptions and our cultural and social assumptions. So don't be surprised if, in pursuing heavenly wisdom, you find yourself swimming against the current in unexpected ways. Don't be surprised when what you once thought to be *common* wisdom turns out not to be wisdom at all.

Fourth, heavenly wisdom points to the gospel. Rather than reinforcing our sense of righteousness and self-reliance, heavenly wisdom challenges us while leading us to repentance and grace. After all, if Jesus is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24), his ways, works, and words will align, teaching us how to live out the gospel in practical ways. Even more, lives based on heavenly wisdom will bolster our claims that Jesus himself is the way, the truth, and the life. Living in foolishness, on the other hand, will undermine our gospel witness because the disconnect between what we say and what we do will be glaringly obvious to anyone watching. Consider how Paul calls out the partiality and segregation that was occurring in the church at Galatia—when certain Christians separated themselves from their brothers and sisters. He says that "their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14 ESV). The way they were mistreating those of a different background reflected earthly values and earthly wisdom.

Heavenly wisdom, on the other hand, calls believers to behavior that embodies Christ and his cross.

And finally, heavenly wisdom seeks union and reconciliation. Listen again to the words of James: “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (3:17–18 *ESV*). The goal of heavenly wisdom is not simply to separate those who are right from those who are wrong. The goal of heavenly wisdom is to identify and heal the brokenness in our midst. The goal of heavenly wisdom is *reconciliation*. And while it’s true that some may resist that reconciliation, those seeking heavenly wisdom will not. Those truly seeking to live like Christ understand that the goal of the gospel is reconciling us to God and each other.

Facing a Choice

Sitting across the table from my friend that morning, I felt helpless. And if I’m honest, I’ve felt that way many days since. The problems are too large, the divides too great. The cultural environment around us is dry kindle, rife with misinformation and manipulation. Any little spark will light it ablaze and engulf the whole.

But the truth is that we aren’t hopeless or helpless. We may not be able to change what’s happening around us, but we can change who we are in the midst of it. We can respond to the invitation to move toward heavenly wisdom, asking the Holy Spirit to make us people who learn to tame the fire.

For Christians, cultivating this heavenly wisdom cannot be separated from Jesus of Nazareth who the Scripture declares to be the wisdom of God himself.⁴ For us, becoming wise ultimately means

⁴ According to John 1, Jesus of Nazareth is not simply a wise prophet but the embodiment of wisdom itself. He is the *Logos* or thought of God. First Corinthians 1:24 also calls Christ the power and “wisdom of God.”

becoming mature disciples of Jesus who learn to love God with our whole heart, *mind*, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30). Or as Philippians 2:5 puts it, becoming wise means having “the mind” of Christ—learning to think and respond and act as he would.

So through the next nine chapters, we’re going to explore heavenly wisdom as Jesus presents it in the Sermon on the Mount. Focusing specifically on the Beatitudes, we’ll see how Jesus leads his followers to embrace a way of living in the world that leads to life and peace and blessing. The chapters and topics will be as varied as the writers themselves, and hopefully we’ll all learn more because of multiple perspectives.

But one thing will be consistent, whether we’re thinking about what it means to be poor in spirit or how our good works give glory to the Father, instead of taking us out of the fire, the wisdom of Jesus teaches us how to tame it—starting with our *own* hearts first. Instead of changing our circumstances, this heavenly wisdom changes *who we are within them*. And above all else, this heavenly wisdom will point us back to the One who is the hope of the world.

Application

Looking In

James tells us that the division and strife we experience externally begins internally, with “bitter envy and selfish ambition.” In order to pursue peace with others, we must honestly assess our own hearts and the role we play in the larger conflict.

1. How have your relationships shifted over the last few years? In what ways have they gotten better and in what ways have they become strained? Do you view social media and the internet as contributing to the change?

2. How would you describe the larger social and political climate? Where are you seeing fragmentation and division? Before reading this chapter, who did you think was primarily responsible for this?

3. Do you agree with Tristan Harris’s assessment that technology has “exceed[ed] and overwhelm[ed] human weaknesses”? Do you find your own emotions and responses harder to control in the present climate? Do you find yourself either “walking on eggshells” or “flying off the handle”?

4. Share a time when your responses or actions accelerated an already difficult situation. Looking back, what was happening inside you? Why did you respond the way you did and what would you change if you could do it over again?

Looking Up

Thankfully, James also tells us that God welcomes all who come to him for wisdom. According to James 1:5, he “gives to all generously and ungrudgingly” and does not belittle or condemn us in our weakness.

1. As you consider your own reactions and responses, where do you find yourself “lacking wisdom”? When do you most feel your need for heavenly wisdom?

2. Read James 1:5–6. What do you think it means that those who come to God for wisdom must come “in faith without doubting”? How does being “double-minded” hinder our ability to receive wisdom from God (v. 8)?

3. We often think of Jesus in his role as the Redeemer or Savior of the world. How does it change your understanding of who he is to also think of him as “the wisdom of God”?

4. The goal of the gospel is to reconcile us to God and each other. How does pursuing wisdom continue the work that Christ began at the cross?

Looking Out

James also contrasts earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom, showing how they affect our relationships and communities. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does something similar with the phrase, “You have heard it said, but I say unto you.” With these words, he draws people’s attention to the fact that the wisdom of God surpasses and challenges “common wisdom.”

1. Name a commonly held belief that runs counter to heavenly wisdom. In what ways does this “common wisdom” shape peoples’ choices and reactions? In what ways does it lead to fragmentation and division?

2. Our responses and actions either confirm or contradict the message of the gospel. Can you think of a person or situation in which the gospel was undermined because of how someone responded to challenge? How might nonbelievers perceive the gospel if Christians are driven by fleshly passions?

3. Think of someone in your community who embodies heavenly wisdom. Describe how this person acts and relates to others. How do their actions and choices stand in contrast to those around them? How do they bring peace to conflicts?

4. If you lead a community of Christians, whether online or in person, how do you handle disagreements between members? In what ways do you see the group leaning into earthly wisdom instead of heavenly wisdom? Do members have the freedom and vulnerability to speak into one another’s conduct if it is out of step with the gospel?

Looking Ahead

Given our current environment, it's hard to imagine how we can move forward together. But James promises that heavenly wisdom is “pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, and without pretense. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace” (3:17–18). Heavenly wisdom promises a harvest of healing and restoration that will one day be fully realized when Jesus himself reigns over all things.

1. Read Colossians 1:15–20. The apostle Paul writes that the goal of Christ's death is “to reconcile everything to himself . . . by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (v. 20). How does this change your understanding of the gospel and the return of Christ?

2. To what degree do you think God is calling Christians to embody heavenly wisdom in their communities right now? In what way might he be calling you to tame the fire and “cultivate peace”? How would this look forward to Christ's coming rule?

3. What role do you think confession and repentance play in our pursuit of heavenly wisdom? What would it look like to commit our present challenges to prayer, praying “Thy kingdom come”?

4. What do you hope to personally gain from this study? How do you hope to be equipped to recognize and pursue wisdom and live a life that testifies to the coming peace of Christ?

Prayer of Confession and Commitment

Father, I confess that I am often driven by earthly wisdom and react out of my sinful desires. I need you to teach me true wisdom. Please give me a heart wholly devoted and submitted to your ways. Make my life a witness to the wisdom and goodness of Jesus Christ. In his name, Amen. 🙏



Does it feel like no matter where you look
or what the issue is, everyone seems to be

FIGHTING ABOUT EVERYTHING?

We live in the information age, with more access to knowledge than ever before, flowing to us in a never-ending digital stream of updates, statistics, polls, opinions, news, and narratives from those on opposing sides of any issue. And while we'd assume this influx of information would help us find a good, informed way forward in our culture, it actually stirs up all sorts of anger, anxiety, and even loneliness. **This all contributes to an increasingly defensive society that feels like it's not only fracturing, but could go up in flames at any moment.**

If you're anything like the contributors to *World on Fire*, you've realized that all this knowledge isn't the same thing as wisdom. While our world relies on expected, reflexive, status-quo, earthly wisdom to make a way forward or take a side on any given issue, **Christ would rather us rely on his unexpected, counterintuitive, going-against-the-grain, heavenly wisdom** as outlined in his famous Beatitudes. This surprising wisdom is not a call to be removed from the fire we feel blazing around us, but one to engage and tame it—beginning with our own hearts.

Whatever those nearest you seem to be arguing about today, and no matter what the fire looks like in your neck of the woods, Jesus has an answer for the ways his kingdom citizens should walk as they navigate the flames in his power and posture. In their own unique voice and in their own unique way, each contributor in *World on Fire* welcomes you to **come explore not only some of the polarizing issues of our day, but how the unexpected wisdom of Jesus might help us be more discerning and Christlike amidst them.**

BH
BHPUBLISHING.COM

RELIGION/Christian Living/Social Issues
978-1-0877-5374-4 \$17.99 USD

