

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

THE TONGUE AND WISDOM III

Read James 3:13-18

Introduction

James shows the difference between men's pretending to be wise, and their being really so. He who thinks well, or he who talks well, is not wise in the sense of the Scripture if he does not live and act well. True wisdom may be known by the meekness of the spirit and temper. Those who live in malice, envy, and contention, live in confusion; and are liable to be provoked and hurried to any evil work. Such wisdom comes not down from above, but springs up from earthly principles, acts on earthly motives, and is intent on serving earthly purposes.

May the purity, peace, gentleness, teachableness, and mercy shown in all our actions, and the fruits of righteousness abounding in our lives, prove that God has bestowed upon us this excellent gift of wisdom.

Wisdom and the Wise

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. (v13)

At the beginning of James 3, the author addressed those who were teachers or wanted to be teachers among Christians. There he told such teachers how they should talk; here he speaks about how they should live. James addresses the person who is ‘wise and understanding.’ The word sophos (‘wise’) was the technical term among the Jews for the teacher, the scribe, the rabbi. It appears that the author is still speaking to those who would be teachers (cf. James 3:1); here it is not what they say that he is concerned with, but rather how they live.

Wisdom is not mere head knowledge. Real wisdom and understanding will show in our lives, by our good conduct. In this sense wisdom and understanding are like faith; they are invisible, inner qualities. If a person considers himself to be wise or understanding, it is fair to expect that this invisible inner quality would show itself in regular life. Here James told us how to judge if a person really is wise and understanding. True wisdom is also evident by its meek manner. Those who do their good works in a way designed to bring attention to themselves show they lack true wisdom.

Character of Earthly Wisdom

“But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.” (vv14-16)

James lists the opposite of the meekness of wisdom mentioned in James 3:13. These words actually refer to someone who has a critical, contentious, fight-provoking manner. Anyone who shows bitter envy and self-seeking should not deceive anyone — especially themselves — about how wise they are. They show a wisdom that is earthly, sensual, and demonic. Their wisdom is more characteristic of the world, the flesh, and the devil than of God.

“This wisdom” that James referred to was not really wisdom at all. It is the wisdom claimed by the would-be teachers of James 3:14 whose lives contradict their claims. Such ‘wisdom’ evaluates everything by worldly standards and makes personal gain life’s highest goal.

Earthly, sensual, demonic: These terms are defined as:

- Earthly: “Having this life only in view.”
- Sensual: “Animal-having for its object the gratification of the passions and animal propensities.”
- Demonic: “Demonic-inspired by demons and maintained in the soul by their indwelling influence.”

Set against humility is "bitter envy and self-seeking" (James 3:14). The Greek word *eritheia* in verse 14 is translated as "selfish ambition" (NIV, ESV, NASB) and "strife" (KJV). Before NT times the word is found only rarely, "where it denotes a self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means." In a nutshell, it is ambition. Is ambition a bad thing?

First, I don't believe that ambition itself is a bad thing. If we didn't aspire to something better, something higher, no progress at all would be made in society. Ambition is a dogged persistence towards a goal to accomplish something. We are ambitious for our families, to make a better life for them. We are ambitious for noble causes of all kinds. We should be ambitious for God, to see his Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Ambition is essential. Ambition is a good thing.

But second, ambition is too easily entwined with other motivations. We wrap ambitions in our own sense of self-worth, and so achievement of our goals is no longer pure. It is no longer to accomplish lofty goals. It is also to vindicate our own selves, and to highlight our own achievements. And so, it becomes selfish, self-serving. Lofty ambitions become convenient blinds from which to further our own objectives of popularity, power, and prosperity.

Why are we working so hard to achieve? How much of this is pure selfish gain? If we would be honest, a good deal of the noble causes we're involved with have selfish tentacles wrapped around our souls feeding the pride, the fear, the lust, the greed that lies within.

Confusion and every evil thing: This is the fruit of human, earthly wisdom. The wisdom of the world, the flesh, and the devil may be able to accomplish things, but always with the ultimate fruit of confusion and every evil thing.

Character of Heavenly Wisdom

“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. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” (vv17-18)

God's wisdom also has fruit. James here defined exactly what he meant by the meekness of wisdom in James 3:13. The character of this wisdom is wonderful. It is full of love and a giving heart, consistent with the holiness of God.

- This wisdom is first **pure**: The reference is not to sexual purity but to the absence of any sinful attitude or motive.
- This wisdom is then **peaceable**: This is one of the great words of character description in the NT. In the LXX it is used mostly of God's disposition as a King. He is gentle and kind, although, he has every reason to be stern and punitive toward men in their sin.
- This wisdom is **gentle**: The man who is *epieikes* is the man who knows when it is actually wrong to apply the strict letter of the law. He knows how to forgive when strict justice gives him a perfect right to condemn... It is impossible to find an English word to translate this quality. Someone

called it 'sweet reasonableness' and it is the ability to extend to others the kindly consideration we would wish to receive ourselves.

- This wisdom is willing to **yield**: Not stubborn nor obstinate; of a yielding disposition in all indifferent things; obsequious, docile. Conciliatory (only here in N.T.) is the opposite of stiff and unbending. Euphithes can mean easy to persuade, not in the sense of being pliable and weak, but in the sense of not being stubborn and of being willing to listen to reason and to appeal... true wisdom is not rigid but is willing to listen and skilled in knowing when wisely to yield.
- This wisdom is **full of mercy**: It does not judge others strictly on the basis of the law but will extend a generous hand full of mercy. This wisdom knows that the same measure of mercy we grant to others is the same measure God will use with us (Matthew 7:2).
- This wisdom is **full of... good fruits**: This wisdom can be seen by the fruit it produces. It isn't just the inner power to think and talk about things the right way; it is full of... good fruits.
- This wisdom is **without partiality**: Without partiality; or, without judging, i.e., a curious inquiring into the faults of others, to find matter for censures.
- This wisdom is without **hypocrisy**: Without pretending to be what it is not; acting always in its own character; never working under a mask. Seeking nothing but God's glory and using no other means to attain it than those of his own prescribing.

These last two words [without partiality and without hypocrisy] rule out the habit of using speech to half reveal and half conceal the mind of the speaker, who has something (as we say) at the back of his mind all the time.

Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace: This fruit is like a seed that will bear fruit as it is sown by those who make peace. The fruit of righteousness; either the fruit we bring forth, which is righteousness itself, Luke 3:8, 9; Romans 6:22; Philippians 1:11; or the fruit we reap, which is the reward of righteousness, viz. eternal life.

