

SESSION SIX

Living with Great Wisdom (*James 3:13-18*)

“Someone who lives in a humble and wise way will give more evidence of his standing before God than any number of words could ever do.” ~ Venerable Bede (AD 673-735)

I. Overview

Earlier in this epistle, James stressed the importance of wisdom in the life of a believer. It is a wisdom that involves insight into God’s purposes and ways in order that the believer might walk in godliness. James’ understanding of wisdom is far from foreign to the Old Testament. “Throughout the biblical tradition wisdom is linked with God, the creator of the world and of humankind.” (Schnabel, “Wisdom,” in *NDBT*, 847).

In this section, James directs our attention to the true meaning of wisdom. In so doing, we will contrast this godly wisdom with the so-called wisdom of the world.

II. The Content

A. Wisdom Results in Good Works and Humility (v. 13)

While vv. 1-2 addresses leaders within the Church, these verses seem to be all inclusive of the whole community. As aptly noted by Moo, “We therefore think that James invites any of his readers who might pride themselves on their wisdom to consider seriously what he is about to say.” (*James*, 169).

“wise and understanding” - These qualities not only applied to leaders (cf. Deut 1:13, 15), but also with application to all of Israel (Deut 4:6).

Two of the by products of godly wisdom are good works and humility. In many ways, this verse becomes the header for the rest of the paragraph.

As indicated in the Old Testament, true wisdom begins with the “fear of the Lord” and walking in “paths of righteousness” (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 2:9, 20).

B. Christians Avoid Worldly “Wisdom” (vv. 14-16)

v. 14 - Bitter envy and selfish ambition are contrary to humility and, thus, these traits demonstrate a lack of true wisdom.

“bitter jealousy” or “harsh zeal” - The Greek term is always viewed as “a particularly ignoble and disruptive vice.” (Johnson, “James 3:13-4:10,” *NovT* [1983], 335). Socrates used the image of a stomach ulcer to describe this vice. This term is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in reference to the response of Joseph’s brothers after hearing their brother’s dream (Gen 37:11). Their “bitter jealousy” led to a desire to kill Joseph (Gen 37:18). Stephen also highlights the role of envy in the betrayal of Joseph in Acts 7:9.

“selfishness” or “personal ambition of rival leadership” - This Greek term indicates “a self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means” (BAGD, 309). However, its meaning within the New Testament is far greater than seeking a political position (cf. Gal 5:20; 2 Cor 12:20).

“boasts and tells lies” - Literally translated: “do not crow!” Human wisdom is far from humble, but seeks self-advancement. As noted by one commentator: “those full of a haughty spirit and bitter zeal ought at least to be honest and stop claiming to be inspired by God’s heavenly wisdom.” (Davids, *James*, 151).

v. 15 - True wisdom does not stem exclusively from one who is intellectual, possesses business savvy, or is financially successful; true wisdom is granted as a gift from God (cf. Prov 2:6; James 1:5). In other words, true wisdom is not rooted in a coping mechanism for life, but rather, it demonstrates how to walk effectively with God (Job 28:28; Mic 6:8-9). McCartney writes, “But James’s ‘wisdom from above’ is not the wisdom of how to ‘get ahead’ in life or how to achieve worldly success, nor is it special insight into divine secrets; it is about how one displays godly character patterned after the life of the one who identified himself as meek and lowly. (Matt 11:29).”

Observe the sources of ungodly wisdom:

- *earthly* = James is indicating the lack of heavenly inspiration.
- *unspiritual* = devoid of the Spirit
- *demonic* = “inspired” by Satan

These three adjectives form a crescendo of “mounting distance and alienation from God.” (Songer, *James*, 125).

v. 16 - A lack of wisdom produces two things:

- “disorder” - The Greek term was used earlier to describe the “double-minded” person or tongue (1:8; 3:8). God is one of order and peace (1 Cor 14:33).
- “every evil practice” - Self-centeredness fails to give honor to the Lord or show love for one’s neighbor. Part of the original sin was seeking to obtain wisdom apart from God (Gen 3:5-6).

C. Christians Demonstrate Godly Wisdom (vv. 17-18)

v. 17 - True wisdom comes from heaven. Characteristics of godly wisdom include the following:

1. *Pure* - (Phil 4:8; 1 Pet 3:2; 1 John 3:3). The term suggests innocence and moral blamelessness. Note that James seems to suggest that “purity” is the chief characteristic of true wisdom (i.e., “first”).
2. *Ready for peace* - (Heb 12:11). James will revisit this trait in verse 18.
3. *Gentle or considerate* - (cf. Phil 4:5; Tit 3:2; 1 Tim 3:3). This is a willingness to yield to others and a corresponding unwillingness “to exact strict claims” (Hort). A wise person does not get angry, combative or defensive. Jesus encouraged his followers to come learn from Him because He was “gentle and humble in heart” (Matt 11:29).
4. *Compliant* - The wise person is not stubborn or autocratic. Rather, he is open to discussions, negotiations, and requests. This Greek term is not found elsewhere in the New Testament.
5. *Full of mercy and good fruit* - (Matt 7:17-18). Earlier, James called for these traits within the life of a believer (2:13).

6. *Impartial* - The term suggests someone who is straightforward, without uncertainty, or unwavering. This Greek term is not found elsewhere in the New Testament.
7. *Sincere* - (cf. Rom 12:9; 2 Cor 6:6; 1 Pet 1:22). Hypocrisy is absent from godly wisdom.

Note that the first three traits are the exact opposites of demonic wisdom (vv. 15-16). Ultimately, this list indicates that the concept of wisdom pertains to conduct rather than merely a knowledge or insight. This list recalls the attributes of wisdom listed in Proverbs 8:22-36.

v. 18 - "harvest of righteousness" - This could mean (1) a fruit that produces righteousness or (2) the fruit that is righteousness (cf. NRSV, NET).

James' reference to peace is not in relationship to the Lord, but primarily in relationship with others (cf. Matt 5:24; 2 Cor 13:11). This does not necessarily mean a righteous person keeps the peace. In fact, the righteous individual may bring division and disruption for the good of the community. Instead, the righteous individual is known as making or accomplishing peace.

Ephesians 4:3 - "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Matt 5:9 - "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

III. Intersect

- A. Take a "wisdom" inventory of your own life. Are you known as a person of peace and righteousness OR are you seen as a man who is characterized by jealousy and strife? A proper behavior does not come naturally. We are dependent upon heavenly wisdom from God.

Proverbs 16:16-17 -

- B. God's ways, which sometimes defy explanations from a rational, human point of view, require wisdom. We can take comfort in knowing that true wisdom is accessible from the Lord (James 1:5). He is more than willing to grant wisdom to those who request it.

Proverbs 2:1-8 -

- C. To obtain true wisdom, we must come humbly before the Lord.

Proverbs 11:2 and 15:33 -

"Not until we have become humble and teachable, standing in awe of God's holiness and sovereignty, acknowledging our own littleness, distrusting our own thoughts, and willing to have our minds turned upside down, can divine wisdom become ours." ~ J. I. Packer