

Lesson Eight
THE TEST OF TRUE WISDOM

3:13-18

“Who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom.”

James now addresses the seventh test to determine the sincerity of one’s faith. In this section, he deals with the issue involving the nature of true wisdom. He describes and contrasts two kinds of wisdom. Both the Old and New Testaments make clear that wisdom is of two basic kinds, the wisdom of man and the wisdom of God, the wisdom from below and the wisdom from above. In the Old Testament, the words wisdom and wise appear some three hundred times, and one hundred of these times in Proverbs alone. Proverbs 4:7 says, ***“Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom.”***

The assembly of believers to which James is writing obviously had their share of problems. Their attitudes, their actions, their speech was all unbecoming to the cause of Christ. Chapter 4:1 reveals that serious fusses and fights were dividing their fellowship. ***“From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?”***

The root of their problems seemed to be their inability to apply the word of God to their everyday lives in a practical manner. Many were thrusting themselves into places of leadership which revealed they had a very high opinion of their wisdom. James invites those who think they have been gifted with special wisdom and understanding in spiritual matters to step forward, so that he could determine the legitimacy of their claim. Those who respond to the invitation quickly find themselves the object of a searching scrutiny of which they were not expecting or desiring. For James evaluates their claim to wisdom not in theological terms of how much doctrine they know, or by how much Greek and Hebrew they can diagram. But he uses a practical yardstick: “Let me see how much wisdom you have by your good life, by deeds done in the spirit of humility that comes from wisdom.”

I. WORLDLY WISDOM - vs. 14-16

“But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.”

James now proceeds to describe the wisdom which comes from the natural desires and reasonings of man apart from the teachings of God.

1. The Operations of Worldly Wisdom - v. 14

In verse 14, James lists four characteristics which help to identify worldly wisdom in operation. They are:

a. Jealous Anger - ***“bitter envying”*** (jealousy).

The wisdom of this world operates from the basis of self promotion. It involves pushing oneself up by pushing someone else down. The desire to come in first or be number one is the energizing force which drives this wisdom. What was operating in this church was the same spirit or attitude which produced the argument which went on among the apostles over who was to receive the highest place of honor in the kingdom. How do you know if this is operating in your life? Do you rejoice when others succeed, or do you have secret envy and criticism? Do you feel sad or glad when others fail? When this spirit invades a church, there will be a great deal of fleshly promotion and human glorification. Look out!

b. Selfish Ambition - ***“strife”*** or selfish ambition.

This word was used in New Testament times to describe a politician who was campaigning for his job. It later came to mean, “a party spirit or faction.” It seeks to manipulate people and things for personal advancement. Paul would oppose this attitude by saying in Philippians 2:3 - ***“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”***

- c. Proud Arrogance - **“glory not”**.

The word “glory” means to “boast”. Pride loves to boast and nothing is prouder than the worldly wisdom of men. It sets forth a spirit of superiority over others. To the factions that existed in the Corinthian church, Paul would say in II Corinthians 10:12, **“For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.”** Then in II Corinthians 10:17, 18 he would state, **“But he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord. For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth.”**

- d. Deceitful Actions - **“lie not against the truth.”**

Boasting always leads either to exaggerating the truth, or out and out lying. Notice the sequence of how worldly wisdom operates. A jealousy toward others develops a selfish ambition that produces a party spirit or an attempt to elevate oneself. In order to be elevated, arrogant boasting is needed which inevitably leads to deceit and lying.

2. The Origin of Worldly Wisdom - v. 15

In verse 15, James gives us the origin of the worldly wisdom which he has described in v. 14. He makes it clear that it is not from God. He says that it is:

- a. Earthly or **“earthbound”** wisdom.

A jealous, selfish, arrogant wisdom does not come down from the Father of lights (1:17). It springs forth from a fallen world of earthbound humanity. In rebuking the quarreling Corinthians, Paul makes a clear distinction between the “wisdom of this world” and the “wisdom of God.” (I Corinthians 2:5-7).

b. Sensual or **“natural”** wisdom.

The word means “pertaining to the life of the soul.” The words psychology and psychiatry are derived from this word. It is set in contrast to that which is spiritual. It originates in the soul of man totally apart from the Spirit of God. It is translated in I Corinthians 2:14 as the “natural man” - **“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”** Paul lists four things which are always true of the natural man.

First, he cannot respond to God.

Second, he does not desire the things of God.

Third, his judgments are warped.

Fourth, he lacks the ability to understand spiritual things.

c. Demonic or **“devilish”** wisdom.

The word “devilish” refers to a demonic or lying spirit; a spirit of deception. Behind the selfish ambitions, party spirits, and egotistical boasting, lies the work of demons, seeking to corrupt and disrupt the life and harmony in the church of Christ.

The Outcome of Worldly Wisdom - **v. 16**

James lists two outcomes or results which are produced by worldly wisdom. The first is confusion which means “to disturb.” It is sometimes used to describe anarchy. It is translated “unstable” in James 1:8 and “unruly” in James 3:8. Wherever the wisdom of the world operates it results in instability, chaos and confusion. Secondly, the stage is set for “every evil deed.” “Evil” here means “worthlessness.” It is like the wood, hay and stubble of I Corinthians 3:12. A ministry built on the wisdom of this world will prove worthless in the day of judgment. The many battles among Christians, the church splits, the absence of purity and peace, all suggest there is something wrong. Could it be the wisdom of God is missing?

II. HEAVENLY WISDOM - vs. 17, 18

“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.”

James now turns to the wisdom which comes from God. He deals first with:

1. The Origin of Heavenly Wisdom - v. 17

It comes from above, from a source that is distinct from the worldly wisdom that is earthbound here below. David Jeremiah notes that:

“Heavenly wisdom is continually coming from above, as evidenced in James’ use of the present tense in 3:17. God’s supply of wisdom never runs dry, but keeps coming to us to meet the demands of each hour (James 1:5). This wisdom is manifested through God’s Son, made available through God’s Holy Spirit, and written down in God’s Holy Book, the Bible.” (Jeremiah, *Turning Toward Integrity Study Guide*, p. 71).

Heavenly wisdom is the ability to take the teachings of God’s word and apply them to the daily events which occur in life.

As James has asserted that true faith is more than intellectual assent to the truth of God’s word, in that it will manifest itself in good works; he now has affirmed that true wisdom will likewise reveal itself in a lifestyle that is different from that of the world.

The Operation of Heavenly Wisdom - v. 17

James now lists seven characteristics of heavenly wisdom in operation. They are:

a. Heavenly Wisdom is Pure:

It is undefiled, undiluted, and unmixed with the wisdom of this world. It is free and untainted with jealousy, self-promotion, boasting, and deception.

b. Heavenly Wisdom is Peaceable:

It demonstrates a desire to promote peace between struggling factions or parties. It is not competitive.

c. Heavenly Wisdom is Gentle:

It is fair, forbearing and considerate of the feelings of others as opposed to the arrogant spirit produced by worldly wisdom.

d. Heavenly Wisdom is Reasonable:

It is “easy to be entreated.” It is open to new information, and ready to cooperate when a better way is shown. It has a conciliatory attitude which is the opposite of being stubborn and unyielding. It recognizes authority and submits to overseers.

e. Heavenly Wisdom Is Full of Mercy and Good Fruits:

Good works flow out of heavenly wisdom. It has compassion for the suffering and the needy. It produces good deeds in contrast to the evil deeds of worldly wisdom. (3:16).

f. Heavenly Wisdom is Impartial:

It does not play favoritism or discriminate in its actions toward others. It doesn't act like a shifty politician out after votes.

g. Heavenly Wisdom is Sincere:

It does not put on a mask of hypocrisy and try to pretend it is something which it is not. It is not a phony. It is a “what you see is what you get!”

3. The Outcome of Heavenly Wisdom - v. 18

Verse 18 concludes this section with a description of the results which come out when Heavenly Wisdom is operating. James lists two such results. One, it produces and grows a harvest of righteousness. That is, a conformity to the will of God. That which pleases God. Two, it lets us experience peace, or the enjoyment of harmonious relationships between human beings. Oh, how much our churches need this wisdom from above.

Thus, true wisdom consists not in how great an argument one can set forth, but in how well one lives up to their argument!