

Earthly and Heavenly Wisdom
James 3:13-18

1

Introduction

Wisdom is more than simply possessing knowledge. It involves properly and effectively applying truth to life.

Solomon in Proverbs 4:7 writes, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all your getting get understanding.” The Old Testament Jews understood that true wisdom was not intellectual, but behavioral. Thus, the biggest fool was one who knew truth and failed to apply it. To the Jews, wisdom was skill in living righteously.

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Introduction

There are two different kinds of wisdom. The wisdom of man and the wisdom of God. King Solomon knew that above all else he needed wisdom to help him rule Israel (1 Kings 3:5–6, 9–12; cf. 4:29–31; 5:12; 10:23–24). God gave him wisdom in great measure. Much of that “divine wisdom” is found in Solomon’s writing in Proverbs. The book of Ecclesiastes was also believed to have been written by Solomon. The wisdom in this book is clearly human in its perspective. It declares the vanity of man’s wisdom without God.

3

Introduction

In this passage of James, wisdom is given as another test of true and living faith. The kind of faith a person possesses will be evidenced by the kind of life they live. Those who possess earthly wisdom will demonstrate that wisdom in their worldly choices and their life style. Those who possess God’s wisdom will evidence it by a Spirit controlled life.

4

James 3:13-18

Who *is* wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct *that* his works *are done* in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

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The Test of Wisdom

James 3:13

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

James is attempting to identify who is truly skilled in the art of righteous living. James is asking us, “In what way are you wise and in what way are you understanding?”

“Wise” and “understanding” are used as synonyms here, but they do carry a shade of difference in meaning. To the Jew, “Wise” carried the meaning of careful application of knowledge to personal living. “Understanding” appears only here in the New Testament and carries the idea of specialized knowledge, such as that of a highly skilled tradesman or professional.

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“Let him show” is a command. James is saying, “If you claim wisdom and understanding show it first by your good behavior, your exemplary lifestyle.” As with faith (2:17), wisdom and understanding that are not demonstrated in righteous, godly living are devoid of spiritual value.

Second, and somewhat more specifically, James admonishes readers to show their wisdom and understanding by their good conduct (works). Since wisdom is the ability to live life skillfully, the proof of wisdom is seen in how we live.

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The Test of Wisdom

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The third aspect that demonstrates wisdom and understanding is by an attitude of meekness. People who are wise in their own eyes are generally arrogant about it, which would be expected, because an elevated self-view is based on pride. This is made clear in the following verse, selfish ambition is a common companion of arrogance. “Meekness” carries the idea of tenderness and graciousness. It does not imply weakness but rather power under control. For believers, meekness is to be willingly under the sovereign control of God.

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The Test of Wisdom

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Proverbs 9:10 states, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding”. Since wisdom involves correct living, it also involves an understanding of God. Successful living involves knowing God and His precepts. But mere knowledge will condemn a person, if it is not put into practice. We need to gain a healthy fear of the Lord and of His holiness to live our lives in proper wisdom.

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False Wisdom

James 3:14-16

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic. ¹⁶ For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there.

The wisdom that is of the world, is based on man’s own understanding, standards, and objectives, is false and ungodly. In false wisdom, man is supreme. False wisdom does not recognize God’s sovereignty, God’s will, or God’s truth (1 Cor. 3:18-20).

Motivation is always determined in the heart. That is where both unbelief and belief, sin and righteousness originate (Luke 24:25; Acts 8:37; Rom. 10:9; Matt. 15:19; Prov. 4:23).

Of the several sinful motives behind human wisdom, James mentions only two here

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The Motivation of False Wisdom – Bitter Envy

James 3:14

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.

The first is “bitter envying”. “Bitter” has the basic meaning of pointed, sharp, prickly, or pungent, and James has just used it in that literal sense in relation to bitter water coming out of a fountain (v. 11). Here he uses it to describe jealousy, that is sharp, destructive, and having no concern for the feelings or welfare of those who are its objects.

Those whose lives are based on and motivated by human ungodly wisdom are self-centered. They are living in a world in which their own personal ideas, desires, and standards are the measure of everything. Whatever and whoever serves those ends is considered good and friendly; whatever and whoever threatens those ends is considered bad and an enemy. Those who are engulfed in self-serving worldly wisdom resent anyone or anything that comes between them and their own objectives.

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The Motivation of False Wisdom – Self-seeking

James 3:14

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.

The Greek word for “self-seeking” is often translated as “strife” denotes contentiousness, and extreme selfishness. The term originally referred to spinning thread for hire, then more broadly to sewing for hire, then more broadly still to any sort of work or undertaking that was done for personal gain. The idea of ambition is implied here by the context. The word became closely associated with those who sought high political office or other positions of influence and power. It was used of personal gratification and self-fulfillment at any cost, which are the ultimate goals of all fleshly activities. It has no room for others, much less genuine humility. It is the antithesis of what the humble, selfless, giving, loving, and obedient child of God is called to be.

The person whose motives are based in worldly wisdom will glory or boast in themselves. The Christian is not to have such arrogance. Such an attitude characterizes the absence of divine wisdom. Rather this person is living their life in their own strength and power.

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The Characteristics of False Wisdom

James 3:15

This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic.

False wisdom “does not descend from above”. True wisdom is given by revelation by God’s Spirit. False wisdom is all that which is other than God’s.

There are three characteristics of false wisdom and they correspond to the three great enemies of the believer. They are the world, the flesh, and the devil. These correspond to false wisdom in that it is earthly (of the world), sensual (of the flesh), and demonic (of the devil).

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The Characteristics of False Wisdom - Earthly

James 3:15

This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic.

The wisdom of this world is limited to the present, material world of time and space. It is restricted to things that man can theorize, discover, and accomplish by himself. It has no place for God or the things of God. It has no place for spiritual truth or illumination.

Earthly wisdom is motivated by pride and centers on self. It spawns a society whose cry is “Do your own thing,” “Have it your way,” and “Look out for number one.” It pervades philosophy, education, politics, economics, sociology, psychology, and every other dimension and aspect of contemporary human life.

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The Characteristics of False Wisdom - Sensual

James 3:15

This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic.

False wisdom is sensual, natural, fleshly. It relates to fallen unredeemed man, who corrupted by the Fall and separated from God. “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Those who rely on this wisdom are worldly-minded, devoid of Spiritual understanding (Jude 19). All of their feelings, desires, appetites, standards, and impulses are grounded in this world.

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The Characteristics of False Wisdom - Demonic

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This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic.

False wisdom is demonic (1 Timothy 4:1). Although it is human, earthbound, and fleshly, its root source is Satan himself, working through his demonic forces. Satan has always promised wisdom to those he tempts, asserting that God’s Word should be doubted and his own accepted. This was the essence of his temptation in the Garden of Eden. It was born the lie that man can be his own god. To the world’s philosophers, religion in general and biblical Christianity specifically are relics of a superstitious, prescientific age that relied on fantasy to explain what had not yet been discovered by man’s own efforts.

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The Results of False Wisdom

James 3:16

For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there.

Reiterating the two motives behind false wisdom, namely, “envying and self-seeking (strife)”, James says that wherever they exist, “confusion and every evil thing are there”.

“Confusion” has the basic meaning of instability. It includes an idea of disorder and can be used to refer to rebellion and anarchy. It is the same word used in James 1:8 for the unstable double-minded man, and James 3:8 for the “unruly” tongue full of poison!

“Every evil work” is the broadest possible category of the bad results produced by human wisdom. In its better sense “evil” means worthless and contemptible. It is used to contrast the works of those who are saved and obedient from those who are unsaved and disobedient (see John 5:29; Rom. 9:11; 2 Cor. 5:10).

“Thing” means “work,” “deed,” “event,” and “occurrence”. The idea is that absolutely nothing of any ultimate good results from human wisdom.

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So What ...

James is warning that if a person professes saving faith in Jesus Christ and claims to have wisdom from God, but has a heart that is proud, arrogant, and self-centered and lives a life that is worldly, sensual, and self-serving, his claims may be false.

One needs to ask, “What does it mean to be a Christian?” For many it is cultural, or how they grew up. It needs to be more than a label!

True Christianity involves admitting that we are sinners and our inability to save ourselves. It is surrendering our lives to who Jesus is (God in flesh and our LORD), and asking Him to save us. It is not based in ourselves, or what we do or think, but in Who Jesus is and what He has declared.

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

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