

Fact Sheet for **“What Is Wisdom?”**
James 3:13-18

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07/21/2019

ESV James 1:2-5 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. ⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

Today we will be looking at James 3:13-18, and will see what James has in mind by “wisdom”. When we think of “wisdom” Proverbs 1:1-7 often comes to mind. But how would you define wisdom? Let’s go to James 3, beginning in verse 13.

^{13a} Who is wise and understanding among you?

The word “wise” was a technical term among the Jews for the teacher, the scribe, the rabbi. Verses 13-18 are actually a continuation of James’ words that began in 3:1.

ESV James 3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

That greater strictness includes, as James would go on to say, how those who are teachers use their tongues. Now James uses the words “wise” and “understanding”. “Wise” describes a person with moral insight and skill in the practical issues of life. It describes a person’s conduct. “Understanding” refers to intellectual knowledge. It would naturally apply to those who are experts, who have been trained. These two words include both truth and application. The wise person knows the good and does the good. It reminds us of what James wrote earlier (1:22-25). Here is the second half of verse 13.

^{13b} By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.

Wisdom is not measured by college or seminary degrees. It is measured by deeds. It is not a matter of acquiring truth in lectures but of applying truth to life.

“meekness of wisdom” – The word “meekness” means gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness. This meekness should not be confused with weakness. It is strength under control, the control of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22-23). The truly wise person is described by this.

¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.

This verse begins with a word that points-out the opposite of wisdom... **“but”**.

“bitter jealousy” - passion for one’s own interests in what appears to be a competitive situation, hence jealousy

“selfish ambition” - an attitude of self-seeking, self-interest, rivalry

You can easily imagine that James' readers were exhibiting this bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. There is a grammatical point here. The way in which James uses "if" shows that he assumes this situation to be true. To boast while you are exhibiting such attitudes is to "**be false to**" (literally "lie against") the truth. On the one hand we would be *saying* that we have God's wisdom that other people need, but our words and actions would be putting the lie to it. On occasion churches have resorted to such earthly wisdom for pragmatic reasons. But expediency is never a neutral maneuver. There are always spiritual and moral consequences. Worldly management, if not checked by the wisdom from above, will lead to a myriad of evils.

¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

This wisdom in word only that is not evidenced by the virtues of life is not from above.

"**unspiritual**" – This word comes from the word for "soul" and refers to an attitude that arises from within us, not from above.

James was not saying that there were some in their fellowship who were demon possessed. Instead he was bringing to light how these wrong attitudes served satanic interests. This was similar to a situation with Peter (Matthew 16:21-23). These wrong attitudes James wrote about are clear indicators that such so-called wisdom is not from above. That phrase "from above" is seen in a previous verse (1:17). The wisdom that James wrote about is actually the good application of what is true to life. And we should pray for true wisdom (1:5). Contrary to this wisdom which is from above this behavior is from below. It is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. The earthliness of this "wisdom" stands for philosophical or other kinds of rational approaches that do not truly take the revealed will of God into account. Here are two verses from Proverbs that are right up this alley (Proverbs 14:12; 28:26). And the results of such earthly wisdom are not what you would hope for.

¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

"**pure**" – Look at 1:27.

"**peaceable**" – not the disorder of verse 16

"**gentle**" - kind, forbearing, willing to yield... This is not passivity but an active choice of the will. It involves a willing responsiveness to authority. It is directed not only to mature leadership but also to God. This quality is the opposite of self-seeking.

"**open to reason**"

"**full of mercy and good fruits**"

"**impartial**" – without making distinctions (*Some versions translate this as "unwavering" but the original word is the same.*)

"**sincere**" – without hypocrisy

¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

"**Righteousness**" refers to spiritual maturity and practical holiness.

Here's the upshot. Godly wisdom is the application of God's truth to our lives. I once heard the president of my seminary say, "Your actions are the blossoms of your thought." James would say, "Your actions are the blossoms of your application of God's truth, or the lack of it."