



INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been on an airplane when a flight attendant comes over the intercom and urgently asks, “Is there a doctor on the plane?” What is everyone’s immediate thought? Obviously, someone is in serious need of medical attention. As we begin this final section of James chapter 3, an urgent question is being posed, “Who is a wise man and endowed with knowledge among you?” Through his question, James exposes a serious need for wise leadership among God’s people. James answers his own question by presenting the characteristics of a biblically wise person (Pettit, “Wisdom from Above”).

Biblical wisdom is the most important thing any leader, teacher, parent, or individual can have. King Solomon understood the inestimable value of wisdom. He wrote, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (Prov. 4:7). Wisdom should be considered to be the highest and most noble of all possessions. It is more precious than monetary possessions (Prov. 3:13-17). It is more valuable than military prowess (Ecc. 9:16). And it is better than mental powers (Prov. 4:4-8; II Chron. 1:10-13).

What is wisdom, how would you define it? We could answer that wisdom is “the ability to use knowledge correctly”. Some have defined it as “knowledge correctly applied to life”. The OT word for wisdom carried the idea of having skill or expertise. So, wisdom is “skill in living righteously”. Steve Pettit has defined biblical wisdom as “the practical application of Bible principles to real-life situations”.

James is often considered “wisdom literature”, and its author understood the importance of wisdom. In this third chapter he is searching for a wise man “endued with knowledge” (3:13). The term *wise* means “the careful application of knowledge to personal living”. *Knowledge* is used to refer to one who has “specialized knowledge, an expert, professional, or highly skilled tradesman”. By using the both of those words, James is looking for a person

whose understanding is accurate and sufficient to enable him to be a reliable guide to others.

How would we know if we found such a rare individual? James says that this true wisdom and expertise will be displayed through one’s conduct (3:13). You can tell a wise person by the way a person lives. Wisdom is not just a matter of intellect, but of volition. True wisdom is not solely intellectual it is behavioral. Wisdom involves both actions and attitudes in living.

Transition: James will contrast the two kinds of wisdom that can govern one’s life. We will uncover the source of both earthly and heavenly wisdom. We will identify the characteristics of human and divine wisdom. And he will examine the results of Madam Folly and Lady Wisdom.

1. The Roots of Wisdom Contrasted

James begins by pointing out a contrast in the source of wisdom. He speaks of the true wisdom that comes “from above” (v.17), and the wisdom “not from above” (v.15) which is of earth. These are two different kinds of wisdom which find their root in two different places. So there is divine wisdom and worldly wisdom. There is wisdom from above and wisdom from below. There is heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom. Along with James, let’s compare and contrast the two.

A. Wisdom from below (v.15-16)

James begins with the wisdom that is not from above. In speaking of this type of wisdom, he gives an almost climatic order to its opposition to God with the final stage denoting the greatest opposition.

i. Wisdom from below comes from the secular (v.15)

Secular wisdom may be clever and shrewd, but it is void of any spiritual basis in its philosophy and practice. Wisdom from below is sourced in the world, flesh, and devil. James says it is “earthly, sensual, and devilish” (v.15). The term *earthly* means “of the earth, earthbound, or belonging to the world”. It is the mindset of today that says “do your own thing”, “look out for #1”, “have it your way”. Secular wisdom is *sensual* meaning “from natural human reason and feeling”. This is the opposite spiritual understanding and is completely humanistic in its perspective. It is the mindset that says, “if it feels good, do it”. James says that the wisdom from below is *devilish*, meaning it is sourced in unclean spirits and originated in the heart of Satan. Even in the Garden, Satan promised “wisdom” to our first parents if they would go against the command of God (Gen. 3:5-6). He still tempts today with the lie of secular wisdom.

ii. **Wisdom from below comes through selfishness (v.16)**

Along with secular wisdom comes “envying and strife” (v.16). The word *envy* speaks of a “disturbance, disharmony, or instability which comes through selfish ambition”. One who is worldly wise is motivated by selfish ambition. Furthermore, James says there will be *strife*. This means a “party spirit”, like a greedy politician pursuing office by unfair means. Secular wisdom is completely selfish in its motivation and nature.

B. Wisdom from above (v.13, 17)

James will contrast the secular wisdom that is not from above with a spiritual wisdom that is from above. Heavenly wisdom has a completely different source, motivation, and manner about it.

i. **Wisdom from above comes from heaven (v.17)**

The fact that this wisdom is “from above” means its source is not of this earth, it is heavenly. Spiritual wisdom comes from God alone. He is the source and root of all true wisdom. Successful living flows from divine wisdom. Proverbs 9:10 states, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.” There can be no true wisdom without a saving relationship with Christ. We must come to the cross, that’s where wisdom begins. James reminded us in 1:17 that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” Wisdom is a good gift that finds its source in the Giver of all good gifts, God. While we may know the root of spiritual wisdom, we long to know the realization of that wisdom. How do I acquire true wisdom?

ii. **Wisdom from above comes through humility (v.13)**

In stark contrast to the selfish ambition and pride of secular wisdom, spiritual wisdom is known through humility. This attitude of humility is seen in a dependence upon God. We demonstrate that dependence through prayer. In fact, James commands us to pray for wisdom (1:5). True wisdom does not come through intellectual effort but through humble and prayerful dependence. Wisdom is given by God to those who humbly ask in faith (1:6). The wonderful reality about spiritual wisdom is that it is available to every Christian and is not dependent upon academic education or intelligence. God’s requirement is simply to have the humility and faith to ask.

Illustration: In 1 Kings 3, God gives Solomon a blank check when He says “ask what I shall give you” (1 Kings 3:5). The young king did not ask for health,

wealth, or prosperity, but an “understanding heart” (1 Kings 3:9). In doing so, Solomon demonstrated both humility before and dependence upon God. He said, “I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in” (1 Kings 3:7). God gave him a “wise and understanding heart” (1 Kings 3:12).

The attitude that accompanies true wisdom is meekness (3:13). Some have called meekness the “cardinal virtue” of spiritual leadership. Meekness is having a gentle spirit. Many today equate meekness with weakness; however, meekness is actually great power under control. Someone has said, “If you think meekness is weakness, try being meek for a week”. Meekness is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), and therefore it characterized our Savior (Matt. 11:29; II Cor. 10:1). Like a mighty horse that can be controlled by the bit and bridle, meekness is the right use of power. A genuinely wise individual is known by their meek humility.

Transition: It is easy to claim to have wisdom, but James once again demands “show me” (3:13). Like the man who claimed to love children until they wrote in the wet cement of his new driveway. When questioned how he could respond so unkindly after affirming his love for kids he said, “I love children in the abstract, but I don’t love them in the concrete.” Sometimes we love wisdom in the abstract, but true wisdom is revealed in the concrete. Wisdom can be identified in action and attitude, our works and words. Since its root is completely different, so its fruit is completely different.

2. The Revelation of Wisdom Contrasted (v.14, 17)

James continues contrasting secular and spiritual wisdom by how it is revealed one’s life. If you want to know what kind of wisdom is internal, look at the external evidence. These characteristics of wisdom identify the source of wisdom. The root is about to be revealed through the fruit.

A. Wisdom from below (v. 14)

i. **Wisdom from below is critical**

The words *bitter envying* refer to a harsh zeal, or a resentful in attitude that is critical of others (v.14). As was noted earlier, *envy* is also found in verse 16 and refers to selfish ambition. By adding the word *bitter* to it, James is identifying a person whose heart is filled with anger and ambition. This person is jealous and aggressive in their action demonstrating the worst form of self-centeredness. Secular, worldly wisdom is harsh and critical of others. It tears others down to build itself up. Do you struggle with jealousy of others’ success?

ii. **Wisdom from below is contentious**

As in verse 16, the term *strife* refers to one who carries a “party spirit” (v. 14). This spirit of rivalry comes from a heart that is self-seeking. It is the individual who will do whatever it takes get their way or prove their point. This contentious attitude fractures relationships and causes much friction with those who will not “see things my way”. Is your life motivated by personal pursuits at the cost of peace?

iii. **Wisdom from below is conceited**

A contentious spirit is always rooted in a conceited spirit. For selfishness finds its source in pride, and pride will inevitably cause contention. Proverbs 13:10 warns, “Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised is wisdom”. James says “glory not”(v. 14). The individual practicing secular wisdom is arrogant, a braggart, and one who assumed superiority of those around him. He is not interested in the glory of God, only the glory of self. Is it any wonder that James calls this kind of wisdom “devilish” (v.15)? We hear the attitude of arrogance and conceit in Satan’s rebellion against God (Is. 14:13-14). Wisdom from below is conceited.

iv. **Wisdom from below is concealing**

James concludes his revelation of secular wisdom with the phrase “lie not against the truth” (v.14). He is referring to a deceit that defies the revealed truth of Scripture. It is wisdom and counsel that is in direct conflict with the Christian faith and seeks to conceal the truth of the gospel. Again, we see the demonic side of this secular wisdom personified in Genesis 3. After Satan questions and contradicts God’s Word, the lie is believed and rebellion is practiced. We must carefully weigh the counsel we receive from others by the standard of God’s Word. Don’t allow secular wisdom to lead you in opposition against God.

B. **Wisdom from above (v. 17)**

James now reveals the characteristics of God’s heavenly wisdom. Like an elegant strand of pearls these qualities are strung together in beauty. He even uses a form of alliteration in the original language. It is also intriguing to see the parallels between these qualities and those of the Beatitudes (Matt. 5).

i. **Wisdom from above is cleansed**

Wisdom from above is “first pure” (v. 17). The word *first* is not just referring to first in order, but also rank for it is the overarching attribute. It points to purity

as the primary quality of heavenly wisdom and the key to all the qualities to follow. The term *pure* means to be “free from contamination or ceremonially clean”. We might use the word *holy* as a synonym. Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God (Matt. 5:8). Purity is an inward quality both morally and devotionally. As one author has put it, “the authenticity and intensity of one’s purity determines the outworking of all other qualities of wisdom”. God is the source of true wisdom, but through humility and prayer we can be the channel. May our hearts be cleansed so we are free from contamination and able to purely impart divine wisdom.

ii. **Wisdom from above is conciliate**

From inward purity flows outward peace. Wisdom from above is conciliate, it is peace-loving and peace-making. In this world there are troublemakers and peacemakers, those who work to bring peace and those who war to break peace. Heavenly wisdom is *peaceable* (v. 17). It seeks to settle disputes not instigating them. Remember Matthew 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” Are you one who brings peace or problems when applying knowledge?

Illustration: In 1934, Heinz was an 11 year old Jewish boy living in the Bavarian village of Furth. Hitler’s Nazi thugs had overrun the town and were notorious bullies, instigating conflict. Yet Heinz had learned the value of being a peacemaker. He practiced and perfected the skill of using wise words to avoid conflict. Fortunately, Heinz’s family escaped Bavaria and took up residence in America. Later in life, Heinz’s name became synonymous with peace negotiations, and his legacy is that of a bridge builder. During his life, he served as National Security Advisor as well as the U.S. Secretary of State. In 1973, after tirelessly working to negotiate a ceasefire in Vietnam, he received the Nobel Peace Prize. You don’t know him as Heinz. He is known by his Anglicized name, Henry. Henry Kissinger.

iii. **Wisdom from above is considerate**

Next in the list of outward evidences of true wisdom comes the word *gentle* (v. 17). Gentleness is also found in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Someone has called gentleness a “sweet reasonableness”. It is having respect for feelings of others. The person who practices being gentle will avoid being severe or stern when dealing with others. They are courteous, fair, and considerate. Another word for gentleness is kindness. It is also closely associated with meekness. Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). Is your life characterized by gentleness and humility?

iv. **Wisdom from above is compliant**

James continues by saying that wisdom from above is “easy to be entreated” (v. 17). This phrase speaks of being open to reason, or willing to listen. We might say they are teachable, submissive, agreeable, easy to live with, or compliant. It does not mean that a wise person is a naïve pushover. Rather, it refers to those who put aside stubbornness and willingly yields to the truth. They do not view themselves as “above the law”, but are subordinate in their relations with those above them. The person who is stubborn, insubordinate, and disobedient is practicing secular, not heavenly, wisdom. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).

v. **Wisdom from above is compassionate**

True wisdom is “full of mercy and good fruits” (v. 17). James links these together and points to the quality of compassion as practiced by the one who has heavenly wisdom. This means they are kind to others, seeking to help. The wise person is compassionate to needs of other and acts with mercy to those in distress. Matthew 5:7 says, “Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy”. James has already reminded us that those who have received mercy give mercy (2:13). Cut throat politics and back-stabbing in the home, church, or workplace demonstrates that secular wisdom is in control. Compassion is a hallmark of genuine wisdom.

vi. **Wisdom from above is consistent**

The final two qualities are also linked. Wisdom from above is “without partiality and without hypocrisy” (v. 17). James has addressed the problem of partiality head-on in chapter 2. The phrase here points not only to someone who avoids practicing favoritism, but also one who is straightforward, consistent, and unwavering. Biblical wisdom is decisive, certain, and single-minded. It does not vacillate and is unwilling to compromise on the truth of Scripture. It is consistent in its beliefs and therefore consistent in its behavior. It is “without hypocrisy” (v. 17). This means to be free from pretense and have no hidden agendas. A wise person does not manipulate others to accomplish their own goals. They are sincere and do not hide behind a mask. They are the same in public as they are in private. What you see in church pew is the same at home on the couch. James warns against being double-minded (1:8). Jesus commended those who were single-minded, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matt. 5:6). Consistency of life characterizes the one who possesses wisdom from above. Do people know you as a person of mercy, authenticity, and peace?

Transition: We have contrasted the root (source) of wisdom. One is completely secular, the other wholly Scriptural. One originates from below, the other from above. We have seen the contrast in the fruit (revelation) of wisdom. Finally, we need to understand the results of earthly and heavenly wisdom are opposites as well.

3. **The Results of Wisdom Contrasted**

Not only are the origins and operations of worldly and godly wisdom completely different, but so is the outcome. When secular wisdom has finished its work it leaves behind one product. When divine wisdom is complete it leaves a uniquely different one.

A. **Wisdom from below (v.16)**

James boils down worldly wisdom and allows us to see its bottom line. Worldly wisdom only yields trouble. Nothing of any ultimate good results from human wisdom. Confused thinking and faulty conduct are proof that wrong wisdom has been operating.

i. **Confused disorder (v.16)**

James is saying you can tell where secular wisdom has been practiced because of the destruction it leaves in its wake. There will be *confusion* (v. 16). The word means “instability, disorder, tumult, or chaos”. Where confused disorder reigns, God is not present, “for God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints” (I Cor. 14:33). Worldly wisdom destroys peace by creating disputes. And disputes bring with them disorderly conduct. Do disorder and pettiness mark your life?

ii. **Carnal deeds (v.16)**

The result of wisdom from below is that “every evil work” will be seen (v. 16). This phrase points to a lack of moral or spiritual value. It is a craving for controversy that brings worthless works. It pictures one who puts forth much effort but never gets any traction. We might say it is like spinning your wheels, never getting anywhere. Worldly wisdom yields nothing that is eternal or lasting.

B. **Wisdom from above (v.18)**

In stark contrast, God’s wisdom produces that which is right, that which is pleasing and honoring to God, and that which is good for the people of God. Earthly wisdom brings division and devastation, heavenly wisdom brings

blessing and bounty. Godly wisdom leads a person to live in a way that leads towards eternal life. Worldly wisdom, clever as it may be, is only successful at attaining temporal goals (selfish). Wisdom from above comes to fruition in peace and righteousness.

i. Relational harmony (v. 18)

The word *peace* appears twice in verse 18. It refers to relational harmony, peace with one another. Peace is what God desires in our relationships, our homes, and our churches. The principle for peace is the same as the principle for crops: Never underestimate the power of a seed. Sow seeds of peace not discord. The result of true spiritual wisdom is a life that reflects the life of Jesus. Godly wisdom preserves unity and peace. Do you leave harmony and joy in your wake?

ii. Righteous harvest (v. 18)

The result of sowing heavenly wisdom is a harvest of righteousness. The word *righteousness* means to be “upright or good”. By practicing true wisdom, Christians ease tensions, avoid strife, and encourage righteous living in others. Godly wisdom produces a cycle of righteousness, which is planted and harvested in peaceful, harmonious relationships. Do you build others up, rejoice in their successes, and place the needs and interest of others ahead of your own?

CONCLUSION

Self-centered ambition is at the root of all relational turmoil. This includes marital struggles, workplace quarrels, and church disunity. When we begin to ask, “what is best for me?” conflict will inevitably arise. Jesus told us to “deny ourselves” (Matt. 16:24). Self-centered ambition is at the heart of worldly wisdom, it is filled with envy, always comparing itself with others. In a home that is marked by selfish ambition, there will be disorder and evil. In a church that is filled with men and women driven by self-centered ambition, you will find a recipe for disaster. Worldly wisdom produces anger, bitterness, resentment, divisions, and divorce. Godly wisdom yields peace, love, intimacy, trust, fellowship, and harmony with others. May we, with purified heart and on bended knee, ask God to give us “wisdom from above” that peace and righteousness might be enjoyed.