

The Right Kind of Wisdom James 3:13-18

James 3:13-18 Introduction

- What if God appeared to you and told you to ask for anything you wanted?
- This is exactly what happened to Solomon soon after he became king.
 - See 1 Kings 3:4-15.
- Solomon asked for – and received – wisdom.
- And God was extremely pleased with his request.

- The Old Testament has several books known collectively as the *Wisdom Literature*. Solomon wrote much of the text. These would include:
 - Job
 - Proverbs
 - Ecclesiastes
 - Song of Songs
 - Several of the Psalms, known as “Wisdom Psalms”

- James is no stranger to the Old Testament’s love of wisdom.
- In the passage we look at today, he helps us to understand what wisdom is by showing us how it looks.
- He also contrasts it with the wisdom of this world, a lying form of wisdom, which the world wants us to believe is the real thing.

Heavenly wisdom is that uncommon quality that makes smart people good and good people easier to get along with.

James 3:13-18 Outline

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Show the world true wisdom. 3:13

- 3:13 Biblical wisdom, while requiring knowledge, is never purely intellectual.
- Wisdom is, first of all, shown by good conduct.
- James uses *kalos*, the word for “good” which implies something like moral beauty.
- Thus, the wise person’s conduct, according to James, ought to be “beautiful.”

- 3:13 “Good ... expresses beauty as a harmonious completeness, balance, proportion.” Also, “Good in a moral sense, virtuous.”
- “One should never lose sight of the fact that the Greeks believed that which is good is also beautiful. Thus ..., *kalos* meant beautiful ... *kallos*, although not in the NT, meant beauty. It is used even today in [Modern Greek].” (Zodhiates)

- 3:13 Secondly, wisdom is meek.

- The biblical trait of meekness is frequently misunderstood and normally undervalued.
- It is a Christlike quality. Jesus said 'I am meek,' in Matthew 11:29 (KJV), also translated as "gentle" (NKJV, ESV)
- When it is expressed toward others, meekness is "self-subduing gentleness" (Adamson), certainly a beautiful quality.
- 3:13 But ancient Greeks did not always think so. British church historian and social researcher Sophie Laws points out that
 - *"... the dominant morality of the day associated [meekness] with meanness and grovelling. It is linked with adjectives like ignoble, abject, servile ... [the Stoic philosopher] Epictetus names it first in a list of moral faults.'*
- 3:13 In this sense the Greeks were similar to us. Our culture values people who know how to assert themselves.
 - We encourage one another to "stand up for our rights."
 - "Self esteem" and "self worth" are viewed as unquestionably positive qualities.
 - We celebrate athletes and entrepreneurs who engage in obvious self-promotion.
- 3:13 We then tend to equate meekness with weakness. Thefreedictionary.com illustrates meekness with the following examples:
 - *(Quivering and) abject ... like some unfortunate dog abasing itself before its master —Jean Rhys*
 - *Complied like hostages with a gun trained on them —Louise Erdrich*
 - *Exist unthinkingly like a slave, like a working animal —Iris Murdoch*
 - *He's like a bell, that will go for everyone that pulls it —Thomas Fuller*
- 3:13 Yet there is a meekness, mildness or humility that may be self-effacing, yet also possesses a certain strength of character.
 - This is especially relevant in a chapter that James begins with a discussion of potential Bible teachers.
- 3:13 Albert Barnes, in his *Notes on the New Testament*, wrote:
 - *"It is remarkable that the truly wise man is always characterized by a calm spirit, a mild and placid demeanor, and by a gentle, though firm, enunciation of his sentiments. ... In an eminent degree, the ministry of the gospel should be characterized by a calm, gentle, and thoughtful wisdom—a wisdom which shines in all the actions of the life."*
- 3:13 So biblical wisdom will be shown by conduct which is good and morally beautiful.
 - Its attitude will be meek – not arrogant, boastful or self-promoting
 - It will lead to serious integrity, goodness or moral beauty that is completely lacking in self-righteousness.

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This is the wisdom of this world. 3:14-16

- 3:14 The clearest qualities of the wisdom of this world reveal that it is envious and self-promoting.
- It is bitter, meaning sharp or prickly.
- It engages in blatant self-seeking.
- It easily, therefore, becomes a disruptive, divisive, competitive quality.
- Paul lists it among the “works of the flesh” in Galatians 5:19-21.

- 3:14 The following entry for *Self-seeking* is from *Thayer’s Greek Definitions*:
 - *electioneering or intriguing for office*
 - *apparently, in the NT a courting distinction, a desire to put one’s self forward, a partisan and fractious spirit which does not disdain low arts*
 - *partisanship, fractiousness*
- In an election year, this biblical definition of a severe vice seems especially sad.

- 3:14 Again, our culture doesn’t quite get the gist of certain scriptural qualities.
- We live in a society that can see a biblical virtue as a personal fault and a biblical vice as a personal asset.
- God help us to grasp the difference.
- Is it any wonder, then, that rivalry, division and quarrels sometimes run rampant in church?

- 3:14 J. Alec Motyer makes this insightful observation:
 - *“Church history would have a very different tale to tell—as would, indeed, the bit of church history that is being written in our own day—if Christian people had paid attention to the fact that James contrasts division and truth.”*

- 3:14 We, on the other hand, find it fairly easy to divide “for the sake of the truth.”
- Perhaps sometimes this is necessary, but consider that when Paul confronted Peter on an issue directly pertaining to “the truth of the gospel,” the overall unity of the church never seems to have been seriously at risk. (Galatians 2:14)

- 3:14 We who have never known anything but a divided church environment, filled with Christians who are prone to division, can easily see unity as something secondary or optional.
- And we may fail to see the power of James’s key point:
- Division, rather than being required to uphold the truth, may in fact work directly against it.

- 3:15 James goes on to describe the wisdom of this world.
- It is earthly as opposed to heavenly, meaning it is human as opposed to divine.
- It is sensual, meaning it arises from the soul, is instinctive, something animal as opposed to spiritual.
- Finally, it is demonic. Need he say more?

- 3:15 C.S. Lewis grasped this.
- In his classic, *The Screwtape Letters*, he gives a whole chapter to how the church can act as a blatant means of undermining faith.
- Lewis’s older demon Screwtape advises his young nephew Wormwood:

- *“If your patient can’t be kept out of the Church, [then] he ought at least to be violently attached to some party within it.”*
- 3:15 James wants us to understand that certain qualities instinctive to our human nature may be directly opposed to the divine.
- Further, demons can actually exploit our natural human tendencies to their own advantage.
- A Christian’s witness is neutralized by envy.
- The church weakens when it is divided.
- People are predictably hurt by such things.
- 3:16 This verse aptly describes a situation in which Christians have been misled to follow their natural human instincts – to the delight of demons, no doubt.
- The Corinthian church was a deeply divided church, and Paul reminds them how a godly church environment looks.
 - See 1 Corinthians 14:33

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This is the wisdom from above. 3:17-18

- 3:17 James clearly contrasts heavenly wisdom with our instinctively human tendencies.
- pure This word is related to that which is holy or sacred – thus, free from any sinful attitude or ulterior motive.
- willing to yield = easily obeying or easily persuaded, compliant; “open to reason”
- 3:17 Gentle Matthew Arnold called this “sweet reasonableness.”
- It carries the meaning of moderation without compromise, gentleness without weakness.
- Carl Sandburg described Abraham Lincoln as a man of “velvet steel,” a good description of biblical gentleness.
- 3:17 Peaceable Completely unlike the bitter spirit and rivalry of the self-seeking described in 3:14.
- Bible commentator Donald W. Burdick says about this feature:
- *“God’s people ... are to be marked by this godlike quality, not insisting on their legal rights but exercising love’s leniency instead.”*
- 3:18 Jesus promises that the peacemaker will be blessed (Matthew 5:9).
- It is a serious thing to be a mischief-maker in the family of God.
- Proverbs calls it a sin that God explicitly hates.
 - See Proverbs 6:16-19.
- God’s people should be especially skilled at bringing peace to situations disfigured by division.
- 3:18 Righteousness grows best in an environment of peace.
- In Acts there are two chapters in which we see James at work. Both show that he was a peacemaker.
 - In Acts 15 he is the moderator of the Jerusalem Council, attended by Peter, Paul, Barnabas, et al.

- In Acts 21, Paul had just arrived in Jerusalem. James advises him about how to combat the lies that were being spread about him in his absence.

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James 3:13-18 Conclusions

- Seek God's wisdom in every situation.
- Remember Solomon? God loves it when we ask for this.
- According to James this will involve:
 - Not demanding your rights
 - Not seeking your own advantage
 - Not promoting yourself or putting others down
 - Being willing to yield for another's benefit
 - Working towards unity – being a peacemaker – especially in groups with other Christians.
- Admit the areas in which you struggle with jealousy, arrogance or pride.
 - First to yourself, because we love to fool ourselves and see ourselves only in the best light.
 - Then to God, asking His forgiveness and help.
 - Then to others whom you may have hurt.
 - Be the first, in an attitude of meekness, to initiate or cultivate a climate of peace.
- Importantly, don't make it your goal in life to part of "Inner Circles."
- This desire, though unhealthy, is one of the chief motivators of the whole worldly system of destructive rivalries.
- Such Inner Circles will always exist – we may even find ourselves inside them – they just shouldn't be our goal.
- If we fall prey to this temptation – the desire to always be one of the "insiders" – we are likely to do things that we later regret.
- And being inside the Inner Circle will never be very enjoyable in the end.
- In 1944, C. S. Lewis gave a lecture at King's College in London in which he addresses this very issue. He entitled it *The Inner Ring*.
- In it he makes this point:
- *"... when promiscuity is the fashion, the chaste are outsiders. They are ignorant of something that other people know. They are uninitiated.*
- The desire to be one of the Inner Circle has an overall corrupting influence on our personalities.
- And it is driven by the wisdom of this world.
- Lewis concludes that if we simply make it a goal to do whatever we do as well as we possibly can, we will find ourselves inside all of the inner circles that will ever really matter.
- But they won't feel like they matter to us.
- We'll simply be doing what we love with people that we love and enjoying the fact that our lives are rich and productive.

- James exemplified this kind of humility.
- Midway through the book of Acts, we find that he was the single most influential Christian in Jerusalem – more prominent than Peter or Paul or any of the original apostles.
- He didn't get there through self-assertion, through bragging about his gifts, or the fact that he was directly related to Jesus.

- James achieved a key position of influence by being a peacemaker, a man who was known for his righteousness, wisdom and prayer.
- And he died for it, because sometimes – when you are especially influential for all the right reasons – you end up with powerful enemies.
- These enemies may not possess your heavenly wisdom and may be jealous of your influence.

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