

Series on James

What is Wisdom from Above?

James 3:13-18; Jerry Truex; October 10, 2010

A. Introduction

Today, we continue our series on James. James has three major themes: how to face trials or temptations, how to respond to the poor and rich, and how to be wise in our use of speech.

Last week, Nita talked about the first part of chapter three and “taming the tongue.” This week, I will talk about the second part of chapter three and “what is true wisdom.” For James, how we use our tongue displays whether we have true wisdom.

I am going to propose that 3:13-18 is commentary on 1:21.

James 1:21. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with humility [*prautēti*] the implanted word [*logos*] that has the power to save your souls.

James 3:13. Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with humility [*prautēti*] born of wisdom [*sophias*].

Notice that (i) word/logos parallels wisdom/sophia and (ii) “saving your souls” parallels “your good life/conduct.”

James is saying that when we discover and cultivate the word/wisdom within us through gentleness, we experience salvation (1:21) or the good life (3:13). This is a very here-and-now view of salvation. Salvation is present (or absent) in our relationships in this world.

B. Who is wise?

¹³ Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life [*anastrophē*] that your works are done with gentleness [*prautēti*] born of wisdom.

¹³ Τίς σοφὸς καὶ ἐπιστήμων ἐν ὑμῖν; δεῖξάτω ἐκ τῆς καλῆς ἀναστροφῆς τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ ἐν πραύτητι σοφίας.

James is saying that people who are wise—who have discovered and received the Divine Wisdom—are able to show it by the way they live their lives.

The phrase, “the good life” (*kalēs anastrophēs*; τῆς καλῆς ἀναστροφῆς) refers to the way in which a person lives, their conduct or behavior. It is demonstrated by certain deeds or works done in humility/gentleness that comes from wisdom/Sophia.

So the way a person lives their life—very observable things that a person does—can demonstrate Divine Wisdom.

James is setting up a contrast between two types of wisdom. It is a contrast between wisdom from above and wisdom from below.

- **Wisdom from above** results in the good way of life (results in “peace” and “righteousness” in 3:18).
- In contrast, **wisdom from below** results in conflict, social strife, disorder, wickedness (“law suits” or *pragma* in v. 16). In its extreme form, wisdom from below results in violent, combativeness, and war.

C. What is wisdom from below?

¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy [*zēlon pikron*] and selfish ambition [*eritheian*] in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵ Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶ For where there is envy [*zēlos*] and selfish ambition [*eritheia*], there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

¹⁴ εἰ δὲ ζῆλον πικρὸν ἔχετε καὶ ἐριθείαν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν, μὴ κατακαυχᾶσθε καὶ ψεύδεσθε κατὰ τῆς ἀληθείας. ¹⁵ οὐκ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ σοφία ἄνωθεν κατερχομένη ἀλλὰ ἐπίγειος, ψυχικὴ, δαιμονιώδης. ¹⁶ ὅπου γὰρ ζῆλος καὶ ἐριθεία, ἐκεῖ ἀκαταστασία καὶ πᾶν φαῦλον πρᾶγμα.

1. What causes disorder or conflict?

In this paragraph, James mentions two things that cause disorder. Two things cause disharmony, conflict, and general misery among people: “having or holding on to” (present continuous tense) “bitter envy” and “selfish ambition” in your hearts.

This is not an occasional feeling of envy or selfishness. James describes a person, or a congregation, for which “envy” and “selfishness” has become core values or even obsessions—our culture is obsessed with envy, greed, self-promotion, self-aggrandizement—envy and selfishness are core values in American culture. So the church is vulnerable here.

Unfortunate, envy and selfishness cause social or relational disorder, which is a miserable existence. It’s the opposite of experiencing salvation (1:21), which is synonymous with righteousness and peace (3:18).

2. How do we know when Divine Wisdom is not present?

When there is conflict, fighting for position or status, general social disorder, then we know Divine Wisdom is absent. This type of social upheaval is caused “bitter envy”

and “selfish ambition,” which James characterizes as earthly (ἐπίγειος), unspiritual (ψυχική), and demon-like (δαμονιώδης). Simply put, this type of so-called “wisdom” excludes God. It shuts God out. It is false wisdom; the wisdom of the world.

3. Where does Divine Wisdom come from?

James says that it “comes from above.” That is, it comes from God. It is transcendent wisdom—it is the logos/word—that is available to all human beings.

John’s Gospel calls this wisdom the logos, the life, and the light. John’s Gospel says that this wisdom/logos/life is available to every human being on the planet.

John 1:9. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Because this wisdom is available to every human being on the planet, it is often called perennial wisdom. Perennial is a botanical term. It means something that recurs again and again. It refers to flowers that come up again and again: Crocuses, Daisies, Irises, Poppies, Roses, and Sunflowers to name a few.

Like a perennial flowers, Divine Wisdom is available to all people and all cultures. It recurs over and over again. The Divine Wisdom that is available in the Christian tradition parallels the Divine Wisdom found in non-Christian traditions. God is generous and has not left him/herself without a witness.

Unfortunately, not all human being recognize or receive it Divine Wisdom.

John 1:10-11. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

Of course, we identify this Wisdom with Christ, “who is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30)

4. What is “bitter envy,” *zēlon pikron* (ζήλον πικρόν)?

The word for “envy” is *zēlon*. It comes from *zēlos*, which is often translated “zeal,” a tenacious devotion to something, often for God. Although zeal for God is good, “bitter envy/zeal” is not a good thing. So James is referring to zeal *for something* (perhaps to God) that is characterized by envy, resentment, cynicism, or painful emotions.

Perhaps James is referring to “religious extremists”—they have zeal for God, but are so bitter and resentful, they use violence to show their misguided devotion. Either way, “bitter envy” is not from God, but from below.

5. What is “selfish ambition,” *eritheian* (ἐριθείαν)?

Aristotle used this term (ἐριθείαν) to refer to “the self-seeking pursuit of political power by unjust means.”¹ It is “partisan politics”—if you want to experience partisan politics, which is fueled by *eritheian*, just watch the talking heads on Fox News or MSNBC. Or listen to “hate radio.” Selfish ambition causes dissention and hatred and it is not from God, but from below.

“Bitter envy” and “selfish ambition” are unable to look out for the welfare of others. And, for that reason, they ruin friendships, families, churches, all things relational.

6. What is the antidote to bitter envy and selfish ambition?

James already mentioned the antidote in 2:18: Have compassion or mercy toward others, which he calls the “royal law of love.”

And, in a few verses, in 3:17, James lists a series of virtues that, if practiced, cure envy and self seeking. Finally, in 3:18, James restates the antidote by saying “a harvest of good relationships (righteousness) are sown in peace” in 3:18.

Practicing love and facilitating peace are the two antidotes to bitter envy and selfish ambition.

D. What is wisdom from above?

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

¹⁷ ἡ δὲ ἄνωθεν σοφία πρῶτον μὲν ἀγνή ἐστίν, ἔπειτα εἰρηνικὴ, ἐπιεικὴς, εὐπειθής, μεστή ἐλέους καὶ καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν, ἀδιάκριτος, ἀνυπόκριτος.

At this point, James describes the results of Divine Wisdom. He gives us a list of virtues similar to “Fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22-23.

First, James says that Wisdom is “**pure**” (*hagnē*, ἀγνή). Pure refers to something that doesn’t have impurities; it is free of moral or spiritual defects. Being pure means not being “double-mined” or have “unmixed motives” (4:7-8). This type of Wisdom is singularly focused on God without any tugs of loyalty elsewhere.

Next, James lists seven virtues. James employs a literary technique called “assonance,” which means he begins each word with the same vowel sound. So, in

¹ David P. Nystrom, *James*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 207.

Greek, the first four virtues begin with an epsilon (ε) and the last three begin with an alpha (α). This was probably a mnemonic tool that helped people remember all the various elements of wisdom.

Wisdom from above is everything that earthly “wisdom” was not; so the list of virtues are the complete antithesis of the self-seeking, self-serving, attitudes of verses 14-16.

1. Peaceable (*eirēnike*) (εἰρηνικη). Peace (Shalom in Hebrew) is the opposite of the false “wisdom,” which is full of strife, violence, and combativeness. Shalom covers a broad area of meaning. It is not just the absence of conflict. It refers to prosperity (Ps. 73:3), physical health (Ps. 38:3), and salvation (Isa 43:7). It is peace, wholeness, justice, right relationships, and covenant faithfulness. It is sometimes synonymous with the word righteousness (Psalm 34:14).

2. Gentile (*epieikēs*) (ἐπιεικής). It refers to someone who is considerate or administers justice and does not abuse that position of power.

3. Willing to yield (*eupeithēs*) (εὐπειθής). It refers to someone who is open to persuasion; someone who is reasonable, who listens to grievances and different opinions, and who is not closed minded or pigheaded.

4. Full of mercy (*eleous*) (ἐλέους).

5. Good fruit (*agathōn karpōn*) (ἀγαθῶν καρπῶν).

6. Without partiality (*adiakritos*) (ἀδιάκριτος). This is someone who is impartial and values every individual without prejudice. This is a nonjudgmental attitude.

7. Without hypocrisy (*anupokritos*) (ἀνυπόκριτος). True wisdom lacks hypocrisy or double-mindedness—saying one thing and thinking or doing another. The person who has discovered and received Divine Wisdom is not a poser or pretender, but genuine and authentic in what they say and do.

E. Righteousness and Peace

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

¹⁸ καρπὸς δὲ δικαιοσύνης ἐν εἰρήνῃ σπείρεται τοῖς ποιούσιν εἰρήνην.

James concludes with a proverb based on a farming metaphor of sowing and harvesting.

Up to this point, James' argument has been that false or worldly wisdom thrives on "bitter envy" and "selfish ambition" and they create strife, discord, disharmony, and conflict. That's the world!

In contrast, Divine Wisdom creates a world of righteousness—a world of just, peaceful, and harmonious relationships.

Where does the peace come from? James seems to be saying that it comes from those who practice peace—"for those who make peace" (dative of agency).²

F. Conclusion

James' argument is this:³

1. Where there is divisiveness, there is no wisdom
2. Wisdom is peaceable
3. Therefore, peacemakers are the ones who possess wisdom
4. The one who create discord and strife do not have wisdom

² Although it could be dative of advantage, "for those making peace."

³ David P. Nystrom, *James*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 210.