

## 20. Governed by Heavenly Wisdom

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*Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*

*(James 3:13-18)*

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### What Is Meant By Wisdom?

We may recall how James began the third chapter of his letter by stating that not many in the church should presume to be teachers. From there, he went on to write about the “world of evil” produced by the tongue. James’ language is so impressive and strong that the readers might never again want to strive for a position of leadership, i.e. an office, in the church. Who is able to control his tongue always?

The purpose of James, however, is not to discourage leadership in the churches. He wishes to promote only *good* leadership. The main feature of such leadership is wisdom. This word is used three times in James 3:13-18, and so we see that the maturity of faith becomes evident in a life governed by heavenly wisdom. We will look at the destructive nature of earthly wisdom and the edifying power of heavenly wisdom.

In many places, the Bible teaches that we require wisdom. In James 1:5 we read, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault.” We need wisdom, and God will gladly give it if we ask in faith. The question is, however, what is meant by this wisdom? From the

verses we are now looking at in James, we learn that there are two kinds of wisdom (although one does not rightly deserve the name): earthly wisdom and heavenly wisdom.

We must remember that many of those whom James was addressing in his time were impressed by the idea of having a certain level of wisdom. They admired teachers who came to them with a claim of wisdom and who showed a semblance thereof. These teachers said that having the right wisdom would enable one to escape the surly bonds of earth and climb spiritually to great heights, ultimately becoming one with God.

How shall we then properly define the word “wisdom”? James uses many words to describe it, but is there one descriptive word that takes precedence over others? It is clear that the word “humility” plays a great role here, over against “selfish ambition”. A humble person looks for the betterment of others, but a selfish and ambitious person looks only after his own welfare.

We may keep it simple. Wisdom means that we know and show how to live in peace and harmony with our neighbor in the covenant with the LORD. The beginning of this wisdom is the fear of the LORD (Ps 111:10). If we fear the LORD and serve him with reverence and love, we will certainly gain the wisdom that is needed. In turn, this wisdom shows that our faith has become mature, for it has grown and now functions as it should.

### **Wisdom Must Be Shown**

There are always people who *think* that they have wisdom. James even writes in 3:14 that such people are not at all afraid to boast about their wisdom, despite the fact that they are denying the truth. Such people are usually seen for what they really are, people with “bitter envy and selfish ambition in [their] hearts.” Something bothers them, maybe from the past, and their lives have become embittered by it. They are not happy with their position and place, and begrudge others what they have. One thing is clearly evident in such people: they are always out to divide others, cause disorder, and break the peace that should govern the church.

James calls this “wisdom” because it has the appearance of wisdom. He asks the question, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” This question may refer back to the desire to become a teacher in the church. It is almost as if James calls out, “Okay, who qualifies?” It depends on the criteria and

who meets these criteria, does it not? Many may think that they qualify, but who really does?

James says that wisdom must be *shown*. This is an important aspect. Wisdom is not something theoretical, like philosophy. It does not become evident in many deep thoughts and learned words. Wisdom is a matter of daily living. What kind of a life do we lead? What kind of people are we in our relationships from day to day?

Indeed, wisdom is a matter of maintaining relationships. It is shown by a “good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.” A “good life” does not mean here a life with riches and relaxation. That is a more modern idea of “the good life.” A good life is one that accords with God’s commandments. It means doing good, and thus the next words are “by deeds”. What do we concretely do to make life better and easier for others? There should be no excuses, no ifs, ands, or buts; what do we do to give joy to others?

For this, we need “the humility that comes from wisdom.” We can tell from this phrase that we are dealing with the Gospel of salvation and renewal. In the world, wisdom is used for self-betterment. Wisdom is about getting one’s own way, no matter what method is employed. There is no humility, except maybe a false humility, a pretense of seeking first the benefit of others when, in fact, one’s own agenda is of primary importance.

## **The Destructive Nature of Earthly Wisdom**

In 3:15, James writes that the wisdom of the world is “earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.” It is earthly in its origin and purpose. It is based on human reasoning, on knowing all the loopholes of the law and the codes of society, and using these to get ahead. It is unspiritual because it is directed towards material goods or earthly recognition. And, worst of all, it is of the devil. The wisdom of this world is the wisdom of hell. That is why the theme of this wisdom is: “Anything goes, as long as I benefit. I may lie, cheat, slander, steal, wound, and even kill, if that is in my best interest.” Satan says, “Go ahead, because you have to look after yourself first.”

Many people are wise in the ways of this world. They know exactly how to operate. They are street-wise, able to instantly recognize opportunities and dangers, and they can take advantage of any weakness presented to them.

From where do they get this wisdom? They learn it from their parents, friends, and from life in general, but the source of it all lies with the devil.

The guiding principle in the lives of many is bitter envy. I mentioned this earlier, so I will not explain it again, but let me ask at this point, “What is the guiding principle of *our* life? Are we bitter? Are we filled with envy?” The text speaks about “harboring”. Bitterness and envy can only live within us if they are given a safe harbor, and are nurtured by us because we will not let go of them. They will stand in the way of the maturing of faith.

We see that earthly wisdom has a destructive nature. It has to break down and destroy. It is hopelessly flawed. It must suppress the truth and replace it with a lie. It must ruin the good name of others by malicious talk or other means of communication. Earthly wisdom has this nature because the devil is the great destroyer, the arch-liar, and the murderer from the beginning. The devil and all who belong to him can only feel good and climb higher when it is over the backs of others.

They have no other way to climb. They will not wait on the Lord, and therefore must do everything on their own and in their own manner. Some are always on a “search and destroy” mission, to find a target and demolish it. Their goal is to bring disorder, for chaos is the best way to get away with a crime. They use every evil practice, for “all is fair in love and war” as long as they get what they want.

### **Showing Forth Heavenly Wisdom**

James is not writing about the destructive powers in the world, but he is writing to the churches of Christ, and so also to us. Worldly wisdom has greatly affected the church through the ages, and much destruction has been caused by people filled with zeal yet flawed by selfish ambition. Zeal without wisdom is fanaticism, ugly and deadly, for it takes no prisoners but only creates casualties.

James does not say that there may never be discussion, or even debate, among the members of the churches. Zeal and ambition are not wrong in themselves. If we have good grounds, we may disagree with others, even with those who are lawfully called to be teachers and leaders. It must, however, be debate without bitterness, discussion without wounding, and it may never become personalistic. It is okay to be fully convinced that we are right, as long as we give the same opportunity to others in the church who are equally convinced that they are right. We must be careful not to condemn and so to cut the

bond of fellowship in the Lord. We must show forth heavenly wisdom in all of our dealings with one another.

We see in 3:17 that heavenly wisdom has an edifying character. James now sharply contrasts heavenly wisdom to the earthly wisdom he has just written about. How is this “wisdom that comes from heaven” imparted to us? We do not have this wisdom of ourselves, rather, by nature we have worldly wisdom. How then do we receive heavenly wisdom?

This has to do with the maturing of faith. An example I once read goes as follows: A person may pass his driver’s examination and get his licence, but that does not automatically make him a good driver. He has much to learn and unlearn, and needs to mature as a driver. So it is when we make profession of faith. We still need to grow in the faith and become mature in it. It is a lifelong process.

### **The Source of Heavenly Wisdom**

Life has a way of getting us off track. We always have to go back to the beginning. And what is that beginning? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Only those who truly fear the Lord, who take his Word and commandments seriously, and who know that he is an awesome God will receive wisdom. We have to go back to the Word and the commandments time and again. We must continuously start over. If somebody says, “I cannot start over. Too much has happened, and things have changed,” we must respond by saying, “*God* has not changed. His Word is still the same, so get back on track. Do not go with the flow, but go to the Lord.” If we do not do this, our wisdom will unravel.

We need to repent daily. Conversion is always required. It means going to the Lord Jesus, “who has become for us wisdom from God,” as Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:30. We have to go to the cross that is folly to many and a stumbling block to others, and there we may lay down our sins, receive again the sense of God’s grace, and so learn anew what wisdom really is.

Let us remember what James wrote in chapter 1: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault.” Of course, we must believe in God, otherwise prayer is futile, but God does not say, “Wait a minute, I gave you wisdom last week, and that should be enough for a long time.” He does not say, “Why come to me, you fool, for I have given you the Bible, and you should know better.” He *has* given us the Bible and we *should* know better, but we are weak and prone to stumble. The Lord does not berate

those who come to him in faith, but he gives wisdom and helps us to know how we must deal with the trials of life.

The wisdom that comes from above is constantly available to us. We have to tap into that wisdom through faith, meditation on the reading of Scripture, and prayer. And this wisdom is truly edifying, which means that it builds us up, gives us strength, helps us onward, and allows us to be a blessing to all around.

## **The Edifying Power of Heavenly Wisdom**

The wisdom from heaven is very special. James writes that it “is first of all pure.” This is very crucial. It is straight talk and clear direction. There is no hidden agenda with the Lord, and he has no secret motives. There is, especially, no evil purpose lurking somewhere. We can be so cold and calculating when we have a plan of our own, but God’s wisdom is pure because he is pure. James can therefore also write that heavenly wisdom is “peace-loving”. Whatever is true and pure, straightforward and clear, simple yet deep, always leads to peace. Peace does not just mean that we no longer fight for our own position or convictions, but that our fellowship is restored.

God loves peace. He loves harmony. That is why he sent his only-begotten Son to make peace between him and us, and also peace among all who belong to Christ by faith. True wisdom does not separate or divide, but always brings together on the one basis of Christ Jesus, of Scripture, and of our confessions. Think of what Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two (Jew and Gentile) one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14). Our Lord hates barriers, walls, and hostility by which we divide and separate what he has brought together. Christ himself said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matt 5:9). They resemble their Father, who is a God of peace. They resemble the Son, who came and made peace by shedding his own blood.

James then follows the description of wisdom as “pure” and “peace-loving” with a number of other characteristics, which have to do with teaching or the striving to be heard.

“Considerate”: The wisdom that is from heaven leads us to be considerate, to take others into consideration, and to care rather than condemn. The original word is difficult to translate because it has so many aspects. Someone who is considerate takes everything into account before responding, even to harsh language.

“Submissive”: this word may give the wrong impression, but it simply means that we are willing to submit by giving others the full opportunity to speak and be heard, not just formally but also existentially. This means that

we will really listen, and even be open to persuasion by others. Such a characteristic is not often found among us, for we all have our opinions and convictions, and we will not change them. We think, “Nobody can make me change my mind!” People who are not submissive are always right in their own minds, and they instinctively react in anger when someone else does not agree with them.

“Full of mercy and good fruit”: James uses here a wonderful combination. In this context, mercy or compassion means that we are really able to understand the predicament of others, and respond to it with kindness, by giving good fruit. How often do we not come away from an encounter, even with loved ones, feeling that we were not truly understood? Do we really try to understand someone else, and have compassion when they tell us their problems and needs?

“Impartial and sincere”: This means that everyone, no matter who he is, gets an equal and fair hearing. Remember that James is very concerned with impartiality in this letter. This is very difficult for us, also in the church, for we often prejudge others to the point that no matter what they say, we will not accept it. Sincerity is lacking, for we only pretend to listen, and in fact will not give others the chance to explain themselves. This is most commonly done by interrupting someone’s train of thought in mid-sentence, as if his opinion counts for nothing.

All of these characteristics belong to the heavenly wisdom, whereby we let our Lord Jesus Christ determine how we respond to one another. The result is edification. Indeed, the wisdom from heaven has a specific *power*: it brings people together on one foundation and builds them up. It has the amazing power whereby we see people starting to agree in the Lord and then starting to work together and amongst each other.

In order to really work together, we must agree with each other. We must have holy zeal for the same goals and direction. This does not mean that we will agree on every matter. There remains much need to exercise heavenly wisdom, time and again. The maturing process will never be complete in this life, but it must continue. We must learn to work together in the vineyard of the Lord, for the glory of his Name and the salvation of many. One day, our maturity will be perfect. That is our goal. We will be one in faith, one in praise, and one in understanding. We will be one in the joy that never ends, and in eternal peace.