

Series James

This Message Faith Without Disciplined Behavior is Dead part 2

"Let the wise man show his wisdom by deeds done in humility "

Scripture James 3:13-18

James began chapter 3 with a warning to would-be teachers. He was especially concerned about the negative influence that unqualified teachers were having within the fellowships of believers. The main emphasis in chapter 3 was the use of the tongue. According to James, the tongue was the most difficult part of the body to keep under control.

In the middle of chapter 3 James described in rather graphic terms the consequences of an uncontrolled tongue. It could be like the spark that sets on fire a great forest. He wrote that uncontrolled use of the tongue would adversely affect the course of a person's life. At the conclusion of the message last week, James pled with his readers to consistently speak in ways that would be pleasing to God.

Throughout this letter, James has hammered away at one key thought: that it is the actions of believers which reveal their inner faith. For James, genuine faith was a "working faith," that it was faith toward God which enabled the believer to endure trials and persecutions, to resist temptations, escape the pollution of the world, avoid favoritism, provide physical necessities to those who were impoverished, and control the words which were spoken. In short, the believer was expected to demonstrate the quality of his/her faith by actions.

The passage for today is a logical continuation of the examples of actions that James had previously written about. The new topic concerns the inner attitudes of believers.

Read James 3:13-18

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (*Luke 6:45*). As I suggested last week, one of the best ways to understand people is to listen to what they say. Their words will eventually reveal what they are like on the inside.

The question at the beginning of this passage indicates that James was reaching back to those individuals who presumed to be teachers. Those were the individuals he had in mind when he launched into his comments about the use of the tongue at the beginning of chapter 3. Today we will think about the more basic underlying problem of people like these teachers — their inner attitudes. As Jesus indicated, it was “out of the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks.

The word “wise” was often used to refer to a “teacher” or “expert,” someone with the knowledge and reputation to teach others. Such a person might also be called a “scribe” or “rabbi.” In previous verses, James was focused on what teachers said, but here in this passage he was concerned about how they lived. They were to demonstrate their wisdom and understanding by a “good life.”

Within their culture, the Jewish people tended to view wisdom in a practical sense. Because of their background in the Law, they assumed that wisdom involved appropriate actions based on the knowledge of God. In contrast, non-Jews were influenced by Greek thought. For them wisdom was more philosophical and theoretical. James was showing his Jewishness when he instructed his readers to show their wisdom and understanding “by their good behavior and conduct,” their manner of living.

The evidence of the “good life” would be “deeds done in humility.” The central theme in this letter is “faith without God-pleasing deeds is no faith at all,” or, to turn that statement around, “God-pleasing actions are evidence of the faith and motivation of the believer.” The “good life” would be a life that “God the Father accepts as pure and faultless” (*James 1:27*), and this meant that God-pleasing actions had to be performed with an acceptable attitude, an attitude of humility.

Many translations use the word “humility” in verse 13, but the meaning of the word in the Greek language is much more comprehensive, with connotations of “gentleness” and “meekness.” The most important aspect of the word was “strength under control.” In non-biblical literature the word was used to describe horses that had been trained to submit to a bridle. According to James, truly wise believers would be strong in their faith, but humble, gentle, and submissive in their relationships. Although they might be strong in their convictions, they needed to have the appropriate inner attitude of humility, considering others as more important than themselves.

James did not explain how to have this appropriate inner attitude, and the reason was that he was writing to individuals who were already believers. They had experienced the truth of the Word of God concerning salvation. They knew about the indwelling Holy Spirit. They understood that they were under divine authority. They understood that “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart,” and that it was “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” James knew that they knew all this, but at the same time he recognized that they were not living as “wise and understanding” believers.

Apparently some of James’s readers were driven by impure motives in their efforts to be church leaders. They had “bitter envy and selfish ambition” in their hearts. *[The sentence structure in the Greek language assumed this was true.]* These words described a fanatical zeal to gain advantage over others and to obtain personal prestige, without a concern for the welfare of others. These people were examples of unloving, arrogant, and combative attitudes. Practically speaking, they were “hypocrites. They wanted to be spiritual leaders even though their faith was dead and worthless. The result was strife and disorder in the fellowships.

In the last phrase in verse 14 James stated that their activities were not something they should be proud of. The phrase was a warning against self-promotion and the denial of the truth. Through their efforts to gain influence, these would-be leaders were in reality working against the purposes of God. In verse 15 James referred to their attitudes as “earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil.

The word “wisdom” in verse 15 has quotation marks. Obviously, James was using the word in a facetious way. The “would-be” leaders probably claimed to be “wise and understanding,” but James wanted them to recognize that they were worldly and not heavenly in their orientation, and that their “wisdom” was not from God but rather was “of the devil.”

Once again we can see that James was hitting the ungodly behavior of his readers with as much oratorical force as possible. James was very disappointed about the spiritual direction of the Jewish followers of Jesus. Undoubtedly, while these believers were in Jerusalem, before their forced dispersion to far-away regions, they were solid in their beliefs and displayed the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit. While they were together, they were on fire for Jesus, but separated and scattered, they had become like dying embers. James was trying to reignite their passion and faith.

In verse 16 he stated the obvious consequences of their “envy and selfish ambition” (compare verse 14). The result was “disorder and every evil practice” in the church fellowships — strong words meaning “commotion” and “tumult,” and referring to good-for-nothing activities which produced no positive benefits.

James wanted his readers to seek “the wisdom that comes from heaven.” The characteristics of this heavenly wisdom were in contrast to the evils of the world and the inclinations of worldly minded people. Verse 17 is similar to another verse 17, in chapter 1, which states, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (*James 1:17*). Wisdom was one of those “good and perfect” gifts that come from above.

James wrote that the “wisdom that comes from heaven” is “first of all pure,” that is, “free of defilement.” By listing it this way, James was declaring that purity was the basic characteristic of wisdom. A close synonym is the word “holy,” which is, not incidentally, the most outstanding attribute of God. The word, “pure,” represented the opposite of the expression, “every evil practice,” which was mentioned in the preceding verse. In the context of this passage, “purity” meant being free of “envy and selfish ambition,” of not having tarnished motives. The motive of the would-be leaders should have been nothing less than the glory of God and the edification of others, rather than to call attention to themselves.

From this basic inner quality of “pure motives” flowed the other characteristics of wisdom given in the remainder of the verse. Wisdom was next identified as “peace-loving.” In other words, the truly wise individual could not be contentious or cantankerous. Instead, he had to do everything possible to establish and maintain good relationships with all people, especially those in the fellowship of believers.

James and the Apostle Paul agreed that combative attitudes which stirred up controversies among believers were not part of godly wisdom. Paul stated that believers were to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” He said that believers should “be completely humble and gentle, be patient, and bear with one another in love” (*Ephesians 4:2-3*).

Allied with peace-loving is the willingness to be “considerate.” This is a word which is often translated into English as “gentle,” but which has a much deeper meaning than either of these terms. James was here referring to the believer’s willingness to make allowances for others, to yield to the wishes of others, to not demand personal rights, to temper justice with mercy. In order to manifest this characteristic, the believer would have to show leniency and mercy to others out of love for them.

The next characteristic of wisdom mentioned by James was “submissive.” This quality is the opposite of obstinacy, stubbornness, and self-justification. James wanted his readers to listen to other believers, to calmly and thoughtfully consider their ideas, and be willing to yield to reasonable requests. Submissiveness requires each believer to be “quick to listen and slow to speak” (*James 1:19*), which was James’ advice in chapter 1.

Several of the qualities mentioned by James echoed the Beatitudes spoken by Jesus at the beginning of the Sermon of the Mount, such as, “Blessed are the pure in heart,” “Blessed are the peacemakers,” “Blessed are the meek,” and “Blessed are the merciful” (*Matthew 5:3-10*). In order to be merciful, the believer must have compassion for others. Being “full of mercy” implies that believers must be actively involved in meeting the needs of others. It is appropriate for us to have this attitude because God has been merciful to us. If we have experienced the mercy of God, then we are expected to extend mercy to others.

By adding “good fruits” to mercy, James is probably thinking back to what he emphasized in chapter 2, that faith reveals itself in practical good deeds. You will remember that James wrote about the “brother or sister who was without clothes and food.” His point was that the believer with genuine faith could not do nothing (*see James 2:14-17*). In the same way, godly wisdom requires practical application. It requires believers to have a consciousness of the needs of others, then to roll up their sleeves and swing into action.

Next James pointed out that wise believers must not be guilty of discrimination. The word “impartial” can also mean “undivided” and “unwavering,” thus implying consistency of both intentions and behavior. James had previously condemned the practice of “favoritism and partiality.” Remember, he wrote about the ungodly biases toward those who were rich and the snubbing of those who were poor. Godly wisdom requires believers to treat everyone the same way, with kindness and mercy.

“Impartiality” is closely linked with “sincerity.” The word for “sincere” was associated with actors who hid behind masks and costumes when on stage in the theaters. They were pretending to be someone that they were not in person. James did not want believers to live behind masks. They were not to try to disguise their aims and motives. They needed to be “transparent” and “honest” about their feelings and attitudes. “Sincerity” is the opposite of hypocrisy. As believers, we must be true to our claims of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Our loyalties must not be split between the ways of the world and the ways of the kingdom of God. What we do must be in agreement with what we say about our faith.

It would be wonderful if we all would seek to live by these seven qualities of godly wisdom. Interpersonal conflicts would be greatly diminished, and harmonious relationships would blossom and grow. But, unfortunately, we all battle the influences of the world around us, and our fleshly and selfish desires sometimes dominate our thoughts, and the devil tempts and deceives us. We must not allow ourselves to be drawn into the wisdom of the world, like the Jewish believers who received James’ letter. They needed to be in tune with the “wisdom which was from above.”

The final verse in the passage quite effectively summarizes all that James had been teaching about godly living. He used the illustration of sowing and reaping. Peacemakers, who are among those truly wise and understanding believers, produce “a harvest of righteousness.” Verse 18 is contrasted with the “disorder and evil practices” of verse 16. Too many of the Jewish fellowships in the mid-1st Century were not at peace. Too many of the believers were following the ways of “worldly wisdom,” and they were reaping the consequences of what they were sowing. James wanted to make clear to his readers that the “harvest of righteousness” would only be produced in a climate of peace — when the cultivation was handled by “peacemakers.”

Some Thoughts for Reflection

The Bible identifies four ways that we find wisdom. First, wisdom comes by developing a reverence for God. The verse which is in Proverbs, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," is a truth echoed throughout the Scriptures.

Second, in order to access the wisdom of heaven we must have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul declared that in Jesus Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (*Colossians 2:3*). Apart from the regenerating work of God's Spirit we will never be able to tap into spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Third, practically speaking, the wisdom from above is revealed to us in the Scriptures. Paul exhorted believers to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom " (*Colossians 3:16*). Godly wisdom is found in the Word of God. There is no substitute for regular Bible reading, study, and meditation.

Finally, we receive wisdom as a gift of God through prayer. James wrote about this in chapter 1, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all" (*James 1:5*).