



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Wisdom: A Matter of Control

James 3:13

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### Introduction

1. At first glance, James appears to be a collection of comments on a variety of topics. More study shows that it is a carefully structured writing designed to help communities of real disciples deal with troubles, temptations, and questions that remain quite relevant.
  - a. Themes introduced early in the writing are given closure later.
  - b. Likewise, problems elaborated later in the writing were introduced earlier.
2. We see how this works when we begin to analyze James's treatment of wisdom. At first, 3:13-18 appears to be just the fourth of eight topics that comprise the body from 2:1-5:12.
  - a. Favoritism toward the rich (2:1-13).
  - b. Faith that works versus a mere profession of faith that is useless (2:14-26).
  - c. The dangers of failing to control the tongue (3:1-12).
  - d. The nature of true wisdom (3:13-18).
  - e. Worldliness seen in strife, accommodation of the devil, and slander (4:1-12).
  - f. Boasting about future plans without accounting for God (4:13-17).
  - g. Oppression of the poor by the rich; call for faithfulness by the suffering (5:1-11).
  - h. A final admonition not to swear falsely (5:12).
3. In fact, the sections are connected by the repetition of ideas which James also uses in connection with the wisdom from above. We will notice those connections and then see how his main statement about wisdom is vital for resolving the other problems.

### Body

- I. Connected Ideas in 3:1-4:12.
  - A. James connects modern sounding problems by repetition of words and ideas.
    1. "Bitter[ness]" (πικρός, *pikros*) afflicts the untamed tongue and jealousy (3:11, 14).
    2. "Bitter jealousy" (ζήλος, *zēlos*) (3:14, 16) is exhibited in "passions" (ἡδονή, *hēdonē*) that "desire" (ἐπιθυμέω, *epithymēō*) (4:1-2).
    3. Bitterness is tied to "selfish ambition" (ἐριθεία, *eritheia*) (3:14, 16), demonstrated in "quarrels" (πόλεμος, *polemos*) and "fights" (μάχη, *machē*; μάχομαι, *machomai*) (4:1-2).
    4. He uses the same word for the "disorder" (ἀκαταστασία, *akatastasia*) of worldly wisdom (3:16) as for "restless" (or "unstable," ἀκατάστατος, *akatastatos*) evil of the tongue (3:8; cf. 1:8).

5. Worldliness (4:4), impurity and double-mindedness (4:8; cf. 1:6-8), and the call to resist the devil (4:7) echo the “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” traits in 3:15.
  6. Their devilish attitudes led them to judge one another, having set themselves up as judges over the law instead of submitting to God (4:11-12).
- B. The “wisdom” section (3:13-18) is not just another topic (remember the call for it in 1:5), but an integral part of his teaching to correct the people’s problems.
1. 3:13-18 bridges the warning about the tongue (3:1-12) and its bad fruit (4:1-12).<sup>1</sup>
  2. 3:13 “functions as a topic sentence” (Davids, 150) for the paragraph and section.
- II. Meekness: James’s Principle of Choice.
- A. The topic sentence in 13b makes two points.
1. Wisdom is practical and will be shown in the good conduct typical of the works (ἔργον, *ergon*) associated with true faith (cf. 2:18).
  2. This wisdom is that which accepts the call for “meekness” (πραῦτης, *prautēs*) (“humility that comes from wisdom,” NIV; “gentleness born of wisdom,” NRSV).
- B. English dictionary definitions do not present what most would associate with meekness.
1. “Humbly patient or docile, as under provocation from others.
  2. “Overly submissive or compliant; spiritless; tame.
  3. “*Obsolete.* gentle; kind.”<sup>2</sup>
- C. In the language of James’s background, the OT and Judaism, meekness was understood differently.<sup>3</sup>
1. In classical Greek prior to the New Testament period:
    - a) It was used of a calm, soothing disposition (in contrast to rage and savagery) and implied the moderation that made reconciliation possible (Aristotle).
    - b) Plato referred to the man who remained serene in misfortune and calamity.
    - c) These ideas were grounded in the word’s use to refer to taming mules, horses and other animals, or of “taming” the barbarians.
  2. In the OT and later Jewish writings, the word took on the idea of submission.
    - a) The LXX usually used it for אָנִי (*ani*), to express humility and abasement.
    - b) Moses (Num. 12:3) illustrates “a religious quality involving radical submission to God and modesty in dealing with other people” (Spicq, 167).
    - c) It was also used for “the humble of the earth” (Spicq, 167), the poor who would be shoved aside (Job 24:4), but would find refuge in the Lord as their sole deliverer (cf. Zeph. 3:12; Psa. 12:5).
  3. Two Old Testament passages illustrate and set the stage for the New Testament.
    - a) In Zechariah 9:9-10, the promise of Israel’s future deliverance centered in a coming king, not in a proud procession “on a noble war horse” (Spicq), but humble (*ani*), mounted on the colt of a donkey – a poor man’s ride.

<sup>1</sup> See Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 149.

<sup>2</sup> meekness. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/meekness> (accessed: August 19, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> I can only briefly summarize this background. For a helpful analysis, see Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. James D. Ernest, vol. 3: 160-171. Also useful is W. Bauder, “πραῦτης,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 2: 256-259.

- b) Psalm 37:11, part of a reassurance that the Lord will not forget his people, recalled the land promises in Deut. 4:1, 16:20, and would have reminded the Jews of God's promise to reward the faithful in the new age.
- D. "OT *praytēs* is perfect submission to the divine will (Ps 132:1), and the Lord loves the combination of faithfulness and meekness (Sir 1:27; 45:4) that characterizes his people" (Spicq, 167).
1. It is not being spiritless or docile, but is gentle and controlled, the "respectful attitude of a servant toward his master, always ready to submit" (Spicq, 167).
  2. It is not *self*-mastery or restraint, but comes because one has surrendered to God.

### III. Wisdom Starts and Ends with God.

- A. James is never more Christian (i.e., like *Christ*) than at this point.
1. Jesus echoed Psalm 37:11 in Matthew 5:5, one of four traits (vv. 3-6) that stress complete dependence on God as if there was nothing else. In the new age, surrender to God's taming was "the condition of entering the new land of God's kingdom" (from Colin Brown's editorial comment in Bauder, 258).
  2. Entering Jerusalem on a donkey colt again showed his rejection of the "use of force to bring about the rule of God" (Matt. 21:5 = Zech. 9:9; Matt. 11:29) (Bauder, 258).
- B. In James, "meekness" is controlled surrender, used interchangeably with humility.
1. Recall James 1:21 and its context.
  2. See the references to humility: *ταπεινός* (*tapeinos* in 1:9 and 4:6), *ταπεινῶ* (*tapeinoō* in 4:10); cf. *πενθέω* (*pentheō* in 4:9; Matt. 5:4), and *ὑποτάσσω* (*hypotassō* in 4:7).
- C. He carried forward and deepened the main ideas of Jewish wisdom in light of Christ: Since wisdom ultimately resides in God alone, we have it only as his grace reveals it and are wise when we obey the instructions he gives.

### Conclusion

1. What kinds of challenges do we face? Trials, made more troubling by questions about how God works? Temptations to immorality, the worldliness rooted in false standards? Failures to properly esteem others? Dissensions sparked by people with personal agendas?
2. James faced them all, and shows that, as helpful as it is to hear discussions of God's ways, reminders of his standards, calls to see his image in others, and instructions on better relationship techniques, none will work without grounding our good works "in the meekness of wisdom."
3. To find our true direction, we must let God bring us under his control and tame us. That's the way of wisdom and is the life filled with blessings. Is it the life you are pursuing?

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