OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Submitting to Wisdom

David Anguish

The well-known practical nature of James is readily apparent in 3.7–10, 13–18, and 4.1–4. From those texts, it is evident that the community that formed his audience was experiencing quarrels and fights and that the sources of their tension were human passions, self-centered goals, bitter jealousy, and sectarian ambition. Since all those problems were ultimately traceable to demonic anti-wisdom, James exposed its evil and commended instead "the wisdom that comes down from above" (vv. 15, 17). His understanding of wisdom reflected the characteristics revealed in the OT and expounded in later Jewish writings: (1) God is wisdom's ultimate source; (2) people have wisdom only because of God's grace; (3) wisdom should be practical, not abstract or merely theoretical.

Two questions come to mind in light of his confrontation of community tensions. First, did James possess sufficient experience with quarrels and the attitudes behind them to really understand the problem and be qualified to recommend a better way? Second, what practical difference will it make if we pursue the wisdom from above?

James Experienced Church Fusses

It is noteworthy that when we encounter James in Acts, he is a leader in Jerusalem who facilitates peace between church factions. In Acts 15, we are introduced to some Christian Pharisees who arrived in Antioch and said that unless the Gentiles were circumcised according to the custom of Moses, they could not be saved. In the meeting in Jerusalem convened to discuss the

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question, they were opposed by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas (Acts 15.1–12). After everyone had their say, James reaffirmed that the inclusion of the Gentiles among the saved was God's idea and that in fact the prophets had predicted it. He concluded that the Gentiles must pay attention to the matters of monotheism and morality but should not be required to be circumcised (vv. 13–19; cf. Amos 9.11–12).

In Acts 21, James took the lead when Paul was criticized by some who were "zealous for the law" for allegedly saying that the Jews living among the Gentiles did not need to circumcise their children or follow Jewish customs (Acts 21.20–21). James urged Paul to prove that he lived in observance of the law by joining and sponsoring four men who were under a vow in their purification rite (vv. 22–24). He followed his recommendation with an endorsement of the earlier decision and letter to the Gentiles (v. 25).

These episodes demonstrate that James did have experience in dealing with sectarian attitudes and quarrels, that he understood what was necessary to resolve them, and that he could facilitate a resolution for disputes whether they revolved around essential matters or incidentals.

James Appealed to the Wisdom from Above

In James 3.18, James used what sounds like a well-known proverb to show the goal and positive outcome of pursuing the wisdom from above: "And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." Notice that he uses the word *peace* (εἰρήνη, *eirēnē*) twice in this statement. As with the words *meekness* and *heart* discussed previously, the contemporary view of peace differs from the biblical understanding. While people today commonly think of peace merely as the absence of unrest, in Scripture "the idea of peace centers on the idea of 'wholeness,' an idea that is 'thoroughly Hebraic, meaning much more than the mere absence of disquiet. The prime notion is positive, embracing prosperity, contentment as well as security.' This concept of peace goes far beyond a shallow avoidance of problems and uncomfortable issues" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 177, citing Adamson 1976, 157). It is instead the state of a person or community when things are as they should be with God.

That understanding adds texture to what verse 18 shows about the breadth and depth of wisdom. We see the *method* of wisdom: "righteousness is sown in peace," a farming figure quite different from James's previous images of fire, instability, and chaos. We see the *results* of wisdom, evident in the "doing [of] peace" (τοῖς ποιοῦσιν εἰρήνην, *tois poiousin eirēnēn*). That in turn leads to the "fruit [καρπὸς, *karpos*] of justice/righteousness [δικαιοσύνη, *dikaiosynē*]" a common expression in biblical language to refer to the realization of God's aims and purposes (cf. Isa 32.16–18; Amos 6.12; 2 Cor 9.10; Phil 1.11; Heb 12.11). Verse 18 is thus a summary of the section's point: since true wisdom comes from above, submission to its guidance will lead to the good behavior that is helpful for healing ruptured relationships.

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James Showed what True Wisdom Looks Like

Verse 17 lists the attitudes and behaviors that characterize the wisdom from above. It "is first pure" (πρῶτον μὲν ἁγνή ἐστιν, *prōton men hagnē estin*). The word *pure* (ἁγνός, *hagnos*) "implies sincere, moral and spiritual integrity" (Rogers and Rogers 1998, 561). The moral blamelessness depicted by the word is "like the unsullied chastity of the virgin bride (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2). Wisdom which is free from any stain or blemish would be incapable of producing anything evil" (Moo 1985, 135). The OT background of the word speaks of God's pure words, or of the righteous one who is pure in contrast to the wicked (Ps 12.6; Prov 15.26; 21.8). A repetition of the idea in the phrase, "unstained from the world" (Jas 1.27), purity is the trait of a person who is "free from moral and spiritual defects that are the marks of the double-minded" (Martin 1988, 133). Thus, James's point is that the wise person is one who "partakes of a characteristic of God … with unmixed motives. This person serves God alone" (Davids 1982, 154).

The other traits mentioned in verse 17 flesh out the primary trait of purity, a conclusion suggested by the insertion and emphasis on the word *first* (*prōtos*) before *pure*. "Peaceable" (εἰρηνικός, *eirēnikos*) is an expected trait of God's children (cf. Matt 5.9) and a natural starting place to describe the spirit that is opposite the one producing fights and quarrels. "Gentle" (ἐπιεικής, *epieikēs*) describes one who is willing to yield, unwilling to exact strict claims. It refers to the person who "does not get angry, combative, or defensive under provocation" (Davids 1982, 154). "Open to reason" (εὐπειθής, *eupeithēs*) refers to one who is willing to yield, compliant, the opposite of disobedient. Though similar in meaning to "gentle," "open to reason" refers to one who is in a position of weakness whereas the person who is "gentle" is in a position of strength (Rogers and Rogers 1998, 561). But the person who is open to reason is not one who lacks conviction and vacillates (cf. Jas 1.5–8); instead, he "gladly submits to true teaching and listens carefully to the other instead of attacking him" (Davids 1982, 154).

Previously illustrated in the rich-poor and faith-works discussions in 2.1–13, 14–26, the phrase "full of mercy and good fruits" (μεστὴ ἐλέους καὶ καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν, *mestē eleous kai karpōn agathōn*) exactly describes the traits we would expect to characterize a person who is learning from and imitating God. "Impartial" (ἀδιάκριτος, *adiakritos*) has likewise been foreshadowed in James; it's a variation of the word used in 1.6 and 2.4 (διακρίνω, *diakrinō*) to describe the person who wavers in convictions and actions. Baker and Ellsworth (*Preaching James* 2004, 101) note that, as the antonym of *diakrinō*, *adiakritos* means we should not be judgmental or divisive. Rather we display "'actions that embrace other people without cultural, economic, or social prejudice'" (in Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 176, n. 43). The ESV's "sincere" (ἀνυπόκριτος, *anypokritos*) is better translated "free of hypocrisy" (NASB 2020) or "without pretense" (CSB). It is the opposite of the sincerity implied in "purity" (cf. 1 Pet 1.22; Rom 12.9; 2 Cor 6.6; 1 Tim 1.5; 2 Tim 1.5). True wisdom is "without show or pretense" (Moo 1985, 136).

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Conclusion

The how-to practicality assumed in the biblical understanding of wisdom is evident in the fact that the life described James 3.17–18 is obviously to be preferred over the one characterized by bitter jealousy, sectarian ambition, fights, and quarrels. As Douglas Moo writes, "In a society that tends to elevate intelligence and cleverness, Christians need to assert that the values James lists here are the truly enviable, enduring ones" (Moo 1985, 136). Let us, then, "show [our] works in the meekness of wisdom" (Jas 3.18).

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