



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## “Where Is the One Who Is Wise?”

### Background Study

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#### Introduction

1. Humorist Dave Barry wrote: “Another possible source of guidance for teenagers is television, but television’s message has always been that the need for truth, wisdom and world peace pales by comparison with the need for a toothpaste that offers whiter teeth *and* fresher breath.”
  - a. Whatever else Barry intends, he reminds us that people hope someone will have wisdom and that it will be heard amidst all the world’s trivial concerns.
  - b. His concern is hardly new. Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) may have been hoping as much as stating a truth when he wrote, “Knowledge comes, but wisdom lingers.”<sup>1</sup>
2. Given humanity’s historical and universal longing for wisdom, we should not be surprised to find the Bible, and especially the practical James, talking about wisdom.
  - a. He uses the word in 1:5-8 where it is the gift to be sought from God as we face trials, and in 3:13-18 (3 times) where it is something from above that produces virtues.
  - b. In truth, the theme is woven throughout the writing.
    - 1) The same “from above” (ἀνωθεν, *anōthen*) language is used of wisdom in 3:15, 17 as is used for gifts in 1:17 (in the “trials” context begun in 1:2).
    - 2) Elsewhere, his themes and the illustrations used to elaborate them echo the themes and illustrations in Jewish writing (both canonical and apocryphal).<sup>2</sup>
3. In order to understand James, we need to learn more about wisdom as Scripture defines it.

#### Body

##### I. Defining Wisdom.

A. With wisdom defined as “the quality or state of being *wise*,”<sup>3</sup> we look up “wise.”

<sup>1</sup> Dave Barry, *Kids Today: They Don’t Know Dum Diddly Do*, via <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/29721.html>. Accessed August 12, 2011. The Tennyson quote is also from [www.quotationspage.com](http://www.quotationspage.com).

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Martin cites the three illustrations James uses to warn about the dangers of the tongue (3:1-12) as examples of this point (*James*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 48, xc). For more discussion about how wisdom terminology is woven into James, see Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 51-56; also Dan McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, pp. 280-292.

<sup>3</sup> wisdom. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/wisdom> (accessed: August 12, 2011).

1. "... the power of discerning and judging properly as to what is true or right; . . .
2. "possessed of or characterized by scholarly knowledge or learning; learned; . . .
3. "having knowledge or information as to facts, circumstances, etc. . . .: We are wiser for their explanations."<sup>4</sup>

B. Another source uses "experience, understanding, common sense, and insight" in its main definition, and says wisdom is "accumulated knowledge,... or enlightenment."<sup>5</sup>

C. Definitions like these date back centuries; for example, as the meaning of the Greek σοφία (sophia) evolved, it "concentrated on theoretical knowledge."<sup>6</sup>

D. From the Bible's perspective, there is more to wisdom, as a mere cursory look at James 3:13-18 shows.

1. It is obvious that, for James, wisdom is not "simply a matter of the knowing of facts (theoretical knowledge) or even of know-how (practical knowledge)" (McCartney, 286).
2. Scripture points to the source and result of the knowledge that matters.

## II. The Jewish Understanding of Wisdom.

A. In summary, for the Jews, wisdom "is intensely practical, not theoretical, . . . the art of being successful, of forming the correct plan to gain the desired results."<sup>7</sup>

B. We see why that is correct when we learn how they viewed wisdom's source and nature.

1. Wisdom in the most comprehensive sense belongs to God alone, his wisdom being the complete knowledge that informs every area of life.
  - a) Daniel 2 illustrates: when the Babylonian wise men (with their accumulated knowledge) could not tell Nebuchadnezzar's dream, Daniel could because God revealed his wisdom (2:20-23).
  - b) How completely God's wisdom informed everything is seen in the focus on its involvement in beginning and sustaining creation (cf. Psalms 104:24).
    - (1) Proverbs 8:22-31 personifies Wisdom as not only being prior to creation, but also as being the intelligent agent that created.
    - (2) It's no surprise, then, that wisdom is often used interchangeably with God's Spirit (Genesis 41:38-39; Exodus 31:3-4).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> wise. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/wise> (accessed: August 12, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> wisdom. Dictionary.com. *Collins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition*. HarperCollins Publishers. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/wisdom> (accessed: August 12, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> J. Goetzmann, "σοφία," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 3, 1027.

<sup>7</sup> David Allan Hubbard, "Wisdom," *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* vol. 3, 1650. The word for "wisdom" (חֵכְמָה *chokmah*) is used for the specific abilities of craftsmen who made materials for the tabernacle (e.g., Exodus 36:1).

<sup>8</sup> This theme is developed even more in the intertestamental literature, as, for example: <sup>1</sup> "Wisdom praises herself, and tells of her glory in the midst of her people. <sup>2</sup> In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth, and in the presence of his hosts she tells of her glory: <sup>3</sup> "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, and covered the earth like a mist. <sup>4</sup> I dwelt in the highest heavens, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud. <sup>5</sup> Alone I compassed the vault of heaven and traversed the depths of the abyss" (Sirach 24:1-5; NRSV; see also Wisdom 1:5-8; 7:21-24; 8:1, 6)

2. For people to truly understand it, wisdom must be revealed as an act of God's grace (Prov. 2:6; cf. 1 Kings 3:5-14).
3. True wisdom is evident when people respond in obedience to God's will.
  - a) The idea is seen as early as Deut. 4:6, in the wisdom books (Psa. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10), and later where wisdom is equated with Torah in the rabbinic literature to the extent that it virtually disappears as a separate category.<sup>9</sup>
  - b) "The single human response that brings wisdom within the reach of attainment is *obedience*. It is those who hearken to Yahweh's law and seek to apply it to the multifarious ways of life who will gain wisdom and know how to walk before Yahweh with humility and devotion, especially in time of testing" (Martin, lxxxix).

### III. An Introduction to Wisdom in James.

- A. True wisdom is "from above" (3:15-17), a gift granted when requested (1:5).
- B. True wisdom is spiritual (3:15-17); indeed, in James, wisdom does what the Spirit does in Paul's writings (compare Jas. 3:17 with Gal. 5:22-23).<sup>10</sup>
- C. True wisdom is ethical, i.e., concerned about obedience.
  1. This is evident in James's list of the virtues that result from true wisdom (3:17).
  2. It's also evident in his focus on being more than merely hearers of the word (1:18-25).
  3. See the parallels in 2:18 and 3:13 where true and false faith match true and false wisdom (see McCartney, 285-286).

### Conclusion

1. Writing to a Greek church in a city where wisdom was especially esteemed, Paul echoed Isaiah 19:12 to ask "Where is the one who is wise?" (1 Cor. 1:20).
2. The Bible generally, and James in particular, answers that the wise man will be the one who knows that *he* doesn't really understand, but *God* does. Therefore, he will trust God and follow his ways completely.
3. With that standard as the measurement, are you one of the wise?

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<sup>9</sup> See Davids, 52. Cf. Sirach 24:23-26; Wisdom 6:17-20; and 2 Maccabees 1:16-17.

<sup>10</sup> "If some [NT] works have a wisdom Christology, James has a wisdom pneumatology, for wisdom in James functions as the Spirit does in Paul: wisdom helps one stand, delivers one from 'the flesh' (i.e., ἐπιθυμία, *epithymia* in James), and produces the fruit of the Christian life" (Davids, 55-56).