



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Submitting to Wisdom

James 3:17-18

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Introduction

1. Consider James 3:7-10, 13-18; 4:1-4. It is obvious that:
 - a. The communities to which James wrote were experiencing fights and quarrels.
 - b. Their fights stemmed from human views, self-centered goals, and vocalized bitter jealousy and sectarian ambition that were demonic in nature.
 - c. James exposed the evil of this anti-wisdom and commended the “wisdom that comes down from above” (3:15, 17) as the solution to their problems.
2. James reflects the three traits of wisdom found in the OT and later Jewish writings.
 - a. God was the ultimate source for wisdom.
 - b. We have wisdom only as gift of grace from God.
 - c. Wisdom is to be practical, not abstract or merely theoretical.
3. As we think about these things, some questions come to mind.
 - a. Does James really understand? Did he have enough experience with such fights and attitudes to qualify him to recommend a better way?
 - b. What difference will it make if the wisdom James recommends is practiced?
 - c. What will it look like in real terms to practice that wisdom?

Body

- I. James Understood Church Fights (Acts 15, 21).
 - A. When we encounter James’s leadership in Acts, he is seeking peace “between warring factions in the church” (Blomberg & Kamell, 180).
 1. The better known example is in Acts 15.
 - a) Christian Pharisees, who said the Gentiles must be circumcised to be accepted as saved, were opposed by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas (15:1-12).
 - b) After both sides spoke, James noted that outreach to the Gentiles was God’s idea, the prophets had predicted it, and the Gentiles should give attention to matters involving monotheism and morality, but not be required to be circumcised (15:13-21; citing Amos 9:11-12).
 2. In Acts 21, James steps in when Paul is criticized and misrepresented by some who were “zealous for the law” and were saying that he had told Jews not to circumcise their children or follow Jewish customs (21:20-21).

- a) James urges Paul to prove his Jewish loyalty by joining and sponsoring four men who were under a vow in the purification process (21:22-24).
 - b) James endorsed the earlier decision and letter to the Gentiles (21:25).
 - B. James showed experience with sectarian attitudes and quarrels, how to deal with them by stressing what mattered, and helping find a resolution on the things that didn't.
- II. James Calls for Wisdom that Makes a Difference (James 3:18).
- A. Using what sounds like a well-known proverb, James shows the goal and result of the wisdom from above.
 - B. The emphasis is on "peace" (εἰρήνη, *eirēnē*), used twice in the verse.
 1. The Bible's view and the current meaning differ (Blomberg & Kamell, 177).
 - a) People commonly think of "peace" as "a mere absence of disquiet" but the Hebrew word "centers on the idea of 'wholeness.'"
 - b) "This concept of peace goes far beyond a shallow avoidance of problems and uncomfortable issues," being the state of a person or community when things are as they should be with God.
 2. That breadth of concern helps us mine verse 18 for its full meaning.
 - a) The *method* of wisdom: righteousness "is sown in peace," a farming image very different from the earlier images of fire, instability and chaos.
 - b) The *results* of wisdom: the "doing [of] peace" (τοῖς ποιοῦσιν εἰρήνην, *tois poiousin eirēnēn*).
 - c) The "fruit (καρπός, *karpōs*) of justice / righteousness" is a common expression in biblical language for the realization of God's aims / purposes (cf. Isa. 32:16-18; Amos 6:12; 2 Cor. 9:10; Phil. 1:11; Heb. 12:11).
 3. The verse summarizes the section's point: since it comes from above, wisdom results in good behavior which is helpful in healing breaches in relationships.
- III. James Shows What Wisdom Looks Like in Action (James 3:17).
- A. The attitudes/behaviors are what we would expect of wisdom "from above."
 - B. It "is first pure" (πρῶτον μὲν ἀγνή ἐστιν, *prōton men hagnē estin*).
 1. "Pure" "implies sincere, moral and spiritual integrity" (Rogers & Rogers, 561).
 2. The idea is moral blamelessness 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 (cf. v. 16)" (Moo, 135).
 3. The OT background speaks of God's pure words, or the righteous being pure in contrast to the crooked (Psa. 12:6; Prov. 15:26; 21:8).
 4. It's the trait of a person "free of the moral and spiritual defects that are the marks of the double-minded" (Martin, 133); "unstained from the world" (1:27).
 5. Thus, the wise "person partakes of a characteristic of God . . . with unmixed motives. This person serves God alone . . ." (Davids, 154).
 - C. The other traits build on and develop this purity, as suggested by the insertion of the word "first".
 1. "Peaceable" (εἰρηνική, *eirēnikē*), a trait of a child of God (cf. Matt. 5:9), and a natural starting place to describe the opposite of the spirit of fights and quarrels.

2. "Gentle" (ἐπιεικής, *epieikēs*): willing to yield, unwilling to exact strict claims, cutting some slack. It could be translated, "noncombative," the one who "does not get angry, combative, or defensive even under provocation" (Davids, 154).
3. "Open to reason" (εὐπειθής, *eupēithēs*): willing to yield, compliant, the opposite of being disobedient (Rogers & Rogers, 561).¹
 - a) This is not a person with no conviction who vacillates (cf. 1:5-8), "but the person who gladly submits to true teaching and listens carefully to the other instead of attacking him" (Davids, 154).
4. "Full of mercy and good fruits" (μεστὴ ἐλέους καὶ καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν, *mestē eleos kai karpōn agathōn*): in keeping with chapter 2:1-13, 14-26, and exactly what one would expect of the one learning from and imitating God.
5. "Unwavering" (ἀδιάκριτος, *adiakritos*), a variation of the word used in 1:6; 2:4 (διακρίνω, *diakrinō*: doubting / wavering, distinctions), this describes the person who wavers in convictions and actions.²
6. "Without hypocrisy" (NASB) (ἀνυπόκριτος, *anypokritos*) 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 (Mayor)" (Moo, 136).

D. How much better is the wise life? How appropriate for dealing with bitter jealousy, sectarian ambition, and the fights and quarrels that grow from those attitudes?

Conclusion

1. "Wisdom from above" – like the nature of God, given by grace, and eminently practical. Peter Davids is right: "... such a person ... would indeed be inspired by God and be a binding force in the Christian community" (Davids, 155).
2. Therefore, "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, 136).
3. The best way to assert it is to live it. Examine yourself. What matters most? God or something else? For what are you living? God or something ultimately demonic? Show the world a better way. Assert the values of wisdom by the way you live.

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¹ It likely differs from "gentle" in that the former refers to one in a position of strength and the latter to a position of weakness where "the wise one is not stubborn but reasonable, yielding and obedient" (Culpepper, 415) (the word was used to refer to submission to military discipline; Rogers & Rogers, 561).

² Baker and Ellsworth (*Preaching James*, 101) call particular attention to the contrast between the word's use in 2:4 and 3:17, noting that "'without a trace of partiality' is the antonym of . . . 'made distinctions' in 2:4. It means to not be judgmental or divisive. . . . It calls for actions that embrace other people without cultural, economic, or social prejudice" (in Blomberg & Kamell, 176).

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