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# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

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## Seeking Wisdom? Where to Begin

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A friend who taught high school history once posted on Facebook a picture from 1913 of the 50<sup>th</sup> reunion of Union and Confederate veterans of the Battle of Gettysburg. Each man in the picture was reaching forward to shake hands with his counterpart on the opposing side.

The picture reminds us of the time in U. S. history when political differences erupted into four years of fratricidal violence. Of course, political differences are not the only source of violent strife. Others include violence within or between religious communities, and some think James 4.1–2 refers to literal fights and murder among the readers (cf. Martin 1988, 141–147). Whether or not that was true, James is clear that the strife they were experiencing was rooted in attitudes that failed to properly curb individual passions and desires. People on different sides were pursuing their own agendas under the direction of earthly, unspiritual, and demonic influences. James calls them to account, but not before he exposes the kind of wisdom that produces strife and identifies where to begin to find authentic wisdom.

Before unpacking his thoughts about that issue, it's important to [recall](#) his theme statement for verses 13–18 and its focus on the attribute of meekness (*πραύτης*, *prautēs*; v. 13) which has been defined as “a healthy understanding of our own unworthiness before God and a corresponding humility and lack of pride in our dealings with our fellow-men” (Moo 1985, 132). The humility involved is not just a general feeling of worthlessness, however; it entails “a yielding of oneself in ready teachability and responsiveness to God’s word” (Stulac 1993, 134).

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## Anti-Wisdom

In 3.14–16, James clears the ground for defining and commending “the wisdom [σοφία, *sophia*] that comes down from above” (v. 15) by exposing the nature and cause of false wisdom. Some have identified what he describes as “anti-wisdom” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 174, n. 27). We will examine his teaching in terms of what anti-wisdom declares, how it is described, and the disaster that results from its pursuit.

Verse 14 shows that anti-wisdom’s essence is found in the declaration, “It’s all about me.” The self-centeredness at its root becomes evident in “bitter jealousy.” “Jealousy” (ζήλος, *zēlos*) refers to passionate interest, intense feeling, zeal, or ardor (Danker 2009, 160). Though at times used positively (cf. John 2.17; 2 Cor 11.2; Num 25.11–12 LXX), it is also often used in a negative sense, and James’s use of the adjective “bitter” (πικρός, *pikros*) indicates that he has the negative idea in mind here. This is confirmed by his reference to “selfish ambition,” the ESV’s translation of ἐριθεία (*eritheia*) which was “used in settings of sectarian rivalry or partisan politics” and evokes an “image ... of people in angry competition, undermining one another and each fighting for their own rights” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 172). While the proximity to the warning to teachers in 3.1 suggests to some that James has them in mind as particular offenders—and jealousy among teachers is certainly possible—the politicking described here is not limited to up-front leaders; community strife is often rooted in the actions of people working behind the scenes. As indicated by James’s subsequent reference to boasting and being false to the truth (v. 14), the bitter jealousy envisioned here is traceable to people who are zealous about promoting their own opinions and interests above those of other people or the church as a whole. They exhibit the opposite of the humility inherent in meekness.

Verse 15 describes the source of anti-wisdom in terms of an unholy triad. First, because it does “not come down from above” (ἀνωθεν, *anōthen*), it is “earthly” (ἐπίγειος, *epigeios*), or earth-bound. *Epigeios* is typically used in the NT to refer to that which is inferior (Davids 1982, 152) (cf. John 3.12; 1 Cor 15.40; 2 Cor 5.1; Phil 3.19). In its very nature, it “shuts out God and limits its scope to things on the earth” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 173). Second, it is “unspiritual” (ψυχικός, *psychikos*). Used in contrast to “spiritual” (1 Cor 2.14; 15.44, 46) or to refer to being “devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 19), *psychikos* describes an attitude that does not submit to God’s direction. Third, it is “demonic” (δαμονιώδης, *daimoniōdēs*), demon-instigated. Used only here in the NT, this is the strongest of the terms, pointing to the ultimate source of anti-wisdom.

In verse 16, James illuminates the disastrous results of being guided by anti-wisdom: “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.” “Disorder” (ἀκαταστασία, *akatastasia*) is a form of the words translated “unstable” in 1.8 and “restless” (or “uncontrollable”) in 3.8. It ranges in meaning from “turbulent” to “seditious” and approaches anarchy, “the breakdown of order bordering on unruliness” (Martin 1988, 126). The corresponding outcome, “vile practice” (φαῦλον πρᾶγμα, *phaulon pragma*), is a strong phrase used to describe what is evil, wrong, bad, and vile. Taken together, these terms tell us that, even if the outcomes

do not reach violent extremes, when anti-wisdom characterizes people who profess faith in God, their credibility in claiming allegiance to him suffers. As Blomberg and Kamell observe,

When we fight for power in Christian circles, evil establishes a foothold. When we operate with worldly values, seeking our own honor and status, we even offer Satan an entrance into the house of God! Our actions no longer demonstrate our faith (as throughout ch. 2), but rather show our commitment to the world and its standards of behavior (setting up ch. 4) (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 175).

## Finding Wisdom—Where to Start

A word that seems to be used in passing in verse 14 shows where we must begin to counter anti-wisdom: we must check what is “in [our] hearts” [καρδία, *kardia*] (Jas 3.14). Because Scripture understands the word “heart” differently from its primary contemporary use, we must examine how it was used then before we seek to apply it now.

Before the Jews adopted their language, the Greeks (e.g., Homer) had added to the physical and emotional meanings of *kardia* to bring “together the heart and reason without clearly separating thought and feeling” (Sorg 1976, 180). The Israelites also went beyond the literal meaning of heart (לֵב, *lēb*) as the physical organ, using the word “in the metaphorical sense [as] the seat of man’s spiritual and intellectual life, the inner nature of man.” It was “the seat of the emotions”; “the seat of the understanding and of knowledge, of rational forces and powers”; and the place where “the will ... [and] carefully weighed intention originated” (Sorg 1976, 181). We see evidence of the more developed sense of the term in the LXX which most often translates *lēb* with *kardia*, but also at times with διάνοια (*dianoia*, mind) and ψυχή (*psyche*, soul). Of interest is that the kidneys (Hebrew כִּלְיָהִים, *kilyāh*; Greek νεφρός, *nephros*) were “frequently mentioned in close connection with the heart,” used metaphorically to refer to “the seat of the deepest spiritual emotions and motives” (Sorg 1976, 1981).

This range of meanings meant that “heart” was used in Jewish thought to refer “the person in its totality.” Accordingly, it encompassed the ideas of:

- Responsibility, the way people relate to God as either godly, inclined “in faithfulness to the law of God,” or disobedient, “hardened and far from God.”
- “The seat of awe and worship.”
- And as the place where conversion to God occurs (Sorg 1976, 181).

The NT use of *kardia* corresponds to the OT understanding, referring to the inner life that includes the intellectual, spiritual, volitional, and at times emotional components of a person, that is, to the entirety of a person as opposed to only one part of his nature. Evidence of the heart’s condition thus goes beyond tenderness of emotions to include decisions of the will, responsibility, faithfulness, response in worship, and obedience (for the latter, cf. Rom 6.12–18). To follow God with our hearts therefore means that we draw conclusions from God’s revelation (intellect),

decide to follow his way (volition), conform our lives to his glory (spiritual), and do the things he says (obedience).

Which brings us back to James. Few who profess to be God's friends (4.4) are so callous and insincere as to consciously set out to please ourselves and let "bitter jealousy and selfish ambition" rule the day. But because those traits keep showing themselves, we must perform regular heart check-ups, examining our conclusions, decisions, and motives. Whose will do we really seek? Our answer shows whether we are pursuing wisdom or its opposite.

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