



True Wisdom

James 3:13-18



Wise & Understanding?

- ❑ In his letter, James talks about different kinds of “wisdom.”
 1. From the perspective of people in general, what are the characteristics of “wisdom?” How do people gain wisdom?¹

- ❑ Read James 3:13-18. Verse 13 begins, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Apparently, some of the recipients of James’ letter considered themselves to be wise and understanding, but they lacked the characteristics of true wisdom.²
 2. To those who claim to be wise and understanding, James challenges them to “show” it. Based on verse 13, how is true wisdom shown?³

- ❑ Verse 14 says, “But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don’t brag [about being wise] and deny the truth.” A person may claim to be wise, but having bitter envy⁴ and selfish ambition proves that the claim is false. Such a person is not truly wise.

Two Kinds of Wisdom?

- ❑ In verse 15, James talks about two kinds of “wisdom.”⁵ The first kind of “wisdom” is tied to the false claims of wisdom mentioned in verses 13 & 14. Thus it is not *truly* wisdom. But we may call it “false wisdom” as opposed to “true wisdom” as described in verse 17.
 3. Based on verse 15, what is the most important difference between these two kinds of “wisdom”?⁶

¹ One definition of ‘wisdom’ is ‘the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment.’

² Perhaps these people are the same people who wanted to be teachers (James 3:1) but its application is broader.

³ True wisdom is shown by a person’s ‘good conduct.’ True wisdom produces good works and also ‘gentleness.’ Gentleness (*prautēti* – ‘meekness,’ ‘humility’) was not usually prized by the Greeks. However, Jesus claimed to be ‘gentle’ (Matthew 11:29) and he said, ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’ (Matthew 5:5).

‘Gentleness’ is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). Meekness is not weakness; it is the gentleness of strength.

⁴ The Greek word translated ‘envy’ is *zēlos*, from which we get the English word ‘zeal’ (eagerness or fervor in the pursuit of something). Zeal can be good (2 Corinthians 9:2; John 2:17), but when zeal is combined with selfish ambition, it is bad. Thus, in verse 14, *zēlos* is translated ‘envy’ and is modified by the word ‘bitter.’ This bad kind of zeal is characterized by a self-centered desire to possess things that are not rightfully ours. The attitudes of ‘bitter envy and selfish ambition’ are contrary to ‘wisdom’s gentleness’ and are contrary to God Himself.

⁵ Most translations (including the HCSB & NASB) see two kinds of ‘wisdom,’ though the ESV & NLT do not. The NIV is similar to the HCSB, but the NIV puts quotation marks around ‘wisdom’ to distinguish it from true wisdom.

⁶ The most importance difference is their source. True wisdom is ‘from above’ (v. 17). It comes from God; thus it is heavenly and spiritual. But false wisdom is ‘earthly, unspiritual, demonic.’ It is characterized by ‘the world, the flesh, and the devil’ (Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2000], 173).

“Wisdom” Characteristics

4. Based on verses 16-18, what are the characteristics of the different kinds of “wisdom”?

“Earthly, Unspiritual, Demonic” Wisdom (False Wisdom)	“Heavenly, Spiritual, of God” Wisdom (True Wisdom) ⁷

- ❑ “Peace” is central to this passage. True wisdom is gentle and “peace-loving” (vv. 13, 17). “And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (v. 18). True wisdom results in peace and righteousness, as opposed to disorder and every evil practice.⁸

True Wisdom



5. Based on this passage, how would you define “true wisdom?”⁹

6. What is needed in order to be truly “wise and understanding?” What do we need to realize? What do we need to do? (Consider Proverbs 9:10, 2:6, 2:9, 2:20.)

Reflection/Application

- What specific actions are needed in your life to grow in true wisdom? This week, reflect on Proverbs 1-4. Seek the true wisdom that comes from God through Bible reading and prayer (*James 1:5*). But remember that true wisdom involves doing, not merely hearing (*1:22*).
- To have true wisdom, we need to know God – the Source of true wisdom. To know God, we must enter into a relationship with Him through faith in Jesus Christ. Do you need to do that?

⁷ Characteristics of true wisdom: ‘pure’ – morally blameless; attribute of God; other qualities flow from this quality. ‘peace-loving’ – peaceable; peacemaking. ‘gentle’ – non-combative even when provoked (2 Corinthians 10:1 in reference to Christ). ‘compliant’ – trusting, deferring to others (but not gullible or compromising unalterable moral or theological principles). ‘full of mercy and good fruits’ – compassionate; love in action. ‘without favoritism’ – impartial, not divisive. ‘without hypocrisy’ – sincere, without show or pretense.

⁸ Peace and righteousness are related. The most important ‘peace’ is peace with God. The true peacemaker helps others have peace with God. In the context of this passage, the issue is peace with one another in the church. The peacemaker is not motivated by pride and selfishness, but rather by God’s desire for unity in the church (Ephesians 4:3). Thus the peacemaker has the characteristics of true wisdom. Still conflict is inevitable because there will always be people who are opposed to God in some way. If a person is opposed to God, he/she will be opposed to the person who is walking with God. A peacemaker may be ‘gentle’ but should not give in when unalterable moral or theological principles will be compromised. For a more comprehensive study of ‘peace,’ see ‘How Can We Have Peace?’ under ‘Articles & Archives’ on the ICF website.

⁹ One way to identify true wisdom is to identify its source (God), its characteristics (good conduct, gentleness, purity, and others as listed above), and its result (peace and righteousness).