

A Study in James
Part 10 – “True Wisdom”
James 3:17-18

Wisdom is a very practical thing to possess. In the Scripture to have wisdom is to know the right decisions and to live the right kind of life. Wisdom is always centered in the living of our lives. It is always practical, never theoretical or philosophical. True wisdom leads to a right kind of life that will in turn lead to a true kind of life. Successful men, at least in God's eyes, are those who are living by this true kind of wisdom.

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But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:17-18 ESV).

In these verses James contrasts the true and false wisdom that he saw in the lives of so many of those he knew. In them he saw two different life styles. Every one of us is living by one of these kinds of wisdom. Remember, one of these will lead to a life of success, and one to a life of failure. It is imperative that you know beyond any doubt by which wisdom you have patterned your life.

There is an old Indian legend which tells a story about a vicious snake that terrorized everyone in the village until he met a wandering holy man. Naturally, he couldn't hurt the holy man; and, the meeting ended with the snake listening to a stern lecture on being nice to people. The holy man left after the snake promised never to bite anyone again. The snake kept his promise, though his patience was sorely tested. Everywhere he went, others thought he was being good because he was too old to fight anymore. They would throw rocks at him and still he would not fight back. By the time the holy man visited again, the snake was battered and bruised. "You and your ideas!" he said. "My dear friend," said the holy man, "I told you not to bite anyone, but I didn't forbid you to hiss!"

Thomas Brown said, "The wise carry their wisdom as they do their watches, not for display, but for their own use." This is the impact of the teaching of James. How like our Lord he sounds. Jesus taught we, as the children of God, were to be gentle as doves, and wise as serpents." Wisdom is essential in the living of life. If you are to be successful in this life, the right kind of wisdom must be a part of your life.

There are three characteristics of this kind of wisdom.

First, True Wisdom Is From Above.

We saw in our last part in this series that false wisdom is earthly, natural and devilish. True wisdom is from above. This is James' way of saying that this kind of wisdom originates with God and comes from Him to us. James also indicated this truth in chapter one when he instructed his readers who lacked wisdom to simply ask God for it; God is the one who gives it to all "liberally."

The background for this truth can be found in the Wisdom of Solomon through Proverbs. In fact, it is for this reason it is called "Wisdom Literature" by most scholars. It is a way of acknowledging that the writings of Proverbs are practical instruction about the way we may love our day-to-day lives. We are told that Solomon's source for this wisdom was God. It occurred early in his reign as king of Israel. The Lord came to him and invited him to ask for anything he desired. The only request Solomon made was that he might have wisdom enough to lead the people of God correctly. God answered that prayer and gave him even more wisdom than he asked for. It is tragic that he did not always use the wisdom he had been given in his personal life.

James indicated that there is a wisdom implanted in the body of truth by God and revealed to man. He further indicated that if a man will only apply this wisdom to his life he will have a superior kind of lifestyle.

So many people today would say the principles of Scripture are colored by the circumstance and environment of the day in which they were written. I agree with James that we have in the Scripture wisdom that is from above; and, since it contains the eternal wisdom of God. It is just as valid today as it was 2,000 years ago. God has not changed in his moral judgment and character.

Second, True Wisdom Is Distinctive.

Here is the real heart of the description of true wisdom. James uses seven words to describe true wisdom. Each of these stands in stark contrast to the false wisdom earlier described in James.

1. **First, true wisdom is pure.** The teacher was checking the Sunday School class' knowledge of Proverbs. She asked, "Cleanliness is next to what?" A bright little boy quickly spoke up and answered, "Impossible!" Carlyle was correct when he wrote: "The greatest security against sin is to be shocked in its presence." James knew this and therefore first describes true wisdom as pure. **This purity is moral purity.** The one thing about the wisdom of this world is that it is soft on immorality. God puts a premium on moral purity. If you are practicing anything but moral purity you're getting your wisdom from somewhere other than God. God's way is the way of purity.
2. **Second, true wisdom is peaceable.** This means that it delights in and promotes peace. The man following God's wisdom will be a peacemaker. The true way of life is one which builds right relationships with your fellowman. It will make you a peaceable marriage partner, a peaceable employee, a peaceable member of the community, and a peaceable member of the church.
3. **Third, true wisdom is gentle.** William Barclay says this is the most difficult word in the Greek language to translate into English. **It refers to the man who is willing to give up his rights. It is a person who knows how to forgive, to forego a demand for immediate justice. Curtis Vaughn calls it "sweet reasonableness." It is to be forbearing and courteous.** In a world in which everyone else insists on his rights, this is certainly a quality to be developed. God's wisdom is such that it is gentle. It will make you a person of sweet reasonableness.

4. *Fourth, true wisdom is easily entreated.* Though we don't use this kind of language any longer; it is a concept that must be understood and practiced. It means that a person is "approachable." It is a person who is always open to reason and willing to change their mind. It is the opposite of "stubbornness." True wisdom is not rigid and unyielding. It is wise enough to listen to every side of an issue without being threatened. It is wise enough to know when it would be better to yield. Charles Simmons put it this way: "No man has a right to do as he pleases, except when he pleases to do right."
5. *Fifth, true wisdom is full of mercy and good fruits.* Mercy is that feeling of sympathy for the man who is in trouble, even when the trouble may be his own fault. This kind of wisdom would never say, "He made his own bed, now he must sleep in it." The inner attitude of a wise man is that of mercy. Jesus illustrated this often. John 4 reminds us of how he dealt with the Samaritan woman at the well. Though she was guilty of many sins, he was full of mercy.
6. *Sixth, true wisdom is without partiality.* There are two meanings in this word.
 - ✚ It is a reference to *being free of doubt and uncertainty.* When the wisdom of God influences your life you will be free from the fear of doubt and indecision.
 - ✚ It is also a reference to *being without distinction.* Already James has made this point. Faith in Christ should always result in delivering a man from making distinctions between people on the basis of their rank, wealth, or race. True wisdom will help us value a man for who they are in the eyes of God.
7. *Seventh, true wisdom is without hypocrisy.* This word is very interesting. It means to "play a role," or "act." Have you seen some the classic car bodies made to fit the chassis of Volkswagens? Bradley, the Automotive Division of Thor Corporation, sells a fiberglass body that fits perfectly on a VW chassis. The body is designed to duplicate very expensive European cars. On the outside it looks like a \$500,000 car, showy and modern; but, on the inside it's still a VW! That's hypocrisy. True wisdom is free from all such falsehood. It makes a man sincere and honest. It causes him to be himself with his fellowman. There is nothing to hide!

Third, Wisdom Is Fruitful.

And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (v. 18).

We come to another very difficult passage to interpret. The NIV is somewhat helpful: *Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.* The man who is living the life of true wisdom is the man who along life's road spreads the "seeds of peace." In so doing, he harvests a crop of peace. So, here you sow a deed of kindness, there a handful of forgiveness, and, at last there is a harvest of righteousness. Not long ago I read a wonderful little poem to illustrate this message. It fits our world well

There was a young lady from Niger.
 Who smiled as she rode a tiger.
 They came back from the ride
 With the lady inside
 And the smile on the face of the tiger.

Letting the wisdom of the world govern your life is like riding a tiger! You may smile for a while, however, in the end it will only be the tiger who smiles.

The Scripture says, *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.* (Proverbs 16:25 ESV). Which way are you walking today?