



# CAPITOL COMMISSION™

## The Book of James, Two Kinds of Wisdom

JUNE 13, 2011

Greg Beaupied / cell: (919) 710-9147 / Greg.Beaupied@capitolcom.org / 206 New Bern Place, Raleigh, NC 27601

### James 3:13-18

*<sup>13</sup> Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. <sup>14</sup> But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. <sup>15</sup> Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. <sup>16</sup> For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.*

*<sup>17</sup> But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. <sup>18</sup> Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*

### Introduction

Commentators have various opinions about the organization of the Epistle of James, but it appears likely that this passage is the thematic peak of the book. Several linguistic techniques highlight this possibility. This section begins with a question which indicates James is supplying a key answer. Another unique feature is the extensive use of adjectives piled up to help define wisdom. The abundant use of adjectives is a particular way to emphasize an important point. Also, this portion is in the middle of the epistle where the ancients placed climatic thoughts; unlike the modern and Western custom of placing the climax at the end.

The simple fact that James is writing in the style of biblical wisdom literature is another feature that would naturally lead to the conclusion that “wisdom” is his main concern. We have previously noted how James shares some features with the book of Proverbs which contains about one hundred references to wisdom.

Wisdom in the Bible has two main elements: One, the content of what is known; and two, the practical outworking of that wisdom. The Bible tells us that fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The idea “fear of the Lord” is theologically similar to the New Testament teaching of “saving faith.” In the Old Testament one who feared God trusted God with all things, and practiced an obedience that was born from this confidence. All along, James has been calling his readers to this kind of trust and obedience. He consistently exhorts us

to demonstrate true faith by godly works. This section encapsulates that idea, and connects the previous and later portions of the letter together to make a unified whole.

Both the Old and New Testaments are replete with instructions and examples of two opposing kinds of wisdom—earthly vs. godly wisdom. The contrast of these two kinds of wisdom has been James’ primary focus.

### *Who is wise and understanding among you?*

This question is designed to arrest our attention. Merely asking the question begs answers like: “Am I wise and understanding?” “Whom do I know that fits this description, and what makes them wise?” “What does it mean to be wise?”

The human tendency is to think of ourselves as wise and just a cut above our neighbors. But what does it really mean to have wisdom from God’s point of view? Is it even right that our measure of wisdom is other people?

James has already supplied us with the first step in 1:5, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God...” Wisdom and understanding is found in knowing God as He is revealed in His Word to us. In a sense James says, “Go back and read everything up to this point and make an honest estimation of where you stand according to his letter thus far.” This is the standard of wisdom. Wisdom and understanding produces a godly result, and James says this explicitly with his next words.

### *Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.*

Faith is demonstrated by good works, and it is found when one possesses the wisdom that comes from knowing and trusting God. James has taken us one step further back in the process to make it more explicit. Humility recognizes our dependence upon God’s direction for our lives. If a person is not doing good deeds, we have already learned he does not demonstrate true faith. If a person does not do good deeds that flow from real faith then that person cannot claim wisdom.

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### BIBLE STUDIES

LEGISLATORS: MONDAYS, 5:00 PM, ROOM 1425

STAFF: MONDAYS, 12:00 NOON, CHAPEL

# North Carolina

## James

James does not allow us to have a theoretical estimation of our wisdom, instead, he says let's test your so-called wisdom. Show me your *deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom*.

***But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.***

Here, James gives us one of many possible tests that demonstrate his point. Do you harbor envy or a selfish ambition? If you do, you cannot claim to be wise because you are not living in accordance with God's instruction. Notice the lack of concern for other people expressed in the ideas of envy and selfish ambition. Self-centeredness is inconsistent with true wisdom. Therefore, harboring these negative traits disqualifies us from boasting.

***Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.***

Here we find emphatic teaching about the wrong kind of wisdom. False wisdom is characterized as earthly, unspiritual, and of the devil. This is not a condemnation about knowing facts and basic logical truths. This is not saying that understanding  $2+2=4$  is somehow devilish. Nor is this a cause for anti-intellectualism, but the intellect must be built upon God's truth. The Bible is concerned first and foremost with God's glory, and next with how we live in accordance with His glory. Wisdom grasps the holiness of God.

***For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.***

James repeats the idea that envy and selfish ambition stand against God and His wisdom by the expression "disorder and every evil practice." We are reminded that God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33), and He desires we live orderly lives of simplicity and generosity. What God wants of us is not technically hard to understand, but it is very difficult to go against our desires to conform to the world's culture.

The phrase "evil practices" conveys the meaning "worthless practices." James again reminds us that practices that are anti-biblical have no value and are worthless. In our age of moral

subtlety, James writes with strong convictions as he contrasts good and evil, valuable and worthless.

***But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.***

True wisdom is not complicated by all kinds of impurities. The original word "pure" is related to the word "holy" or "sanctified." Wisdom from above is always consistent with the attributes of God. A wisdom that is pure, inevitably results in fruit. This section of James brings to mind both the Beatitudes and the Fruit of the Spirit (Matthew 5:3-12, Galatians 5:22-23).

The string of adjectives used here by James is one indication that this is the thematic high-point of his letter. The list is not meant to be exhaustive to the extent that this is the limit of fruit produced by wisdom, but he writes this list to add emphasis to the value of gaining true, godly, and pure wisdom. Biblical wisdom is evidenced by changes in character and lifestyle.

***Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.***

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God* (Matthew 5:9). The children of God know him, have His wisdom available to them, and minister the gospel to the world in peace. Peacemakers offer God's *shalom* to people. This is not merely a lack of violence or freedom from war, but the fullness of God's blessings as they are found in the Gospel.

### Ponder This...

1. How would an "IQ Test" be designed to reflect wisdom in the biblical sense? What would your IQ score be and how could you raise it?
2. Why are there only two basic kinds of wisdom?
3. In your opinion, why are evil practices disorderly and often complicated?