

JAMES 3:17, 18

DIVINE WISDOM

“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 by those who make peace”¹

James called for people of wisdom to identify themselves. Those who are unwise will expose themselves as fraudulent when their “wisdom” is examined. Those who are wise will be apparent through a similar examination of their lives. Learning to distinguish what honours God and what excites this dying world is the ongoing task assigned to each Christian. In order to fulfil this vital responsibility, join me in study of James’ explanation of divine wisdom.

WISDOM THE WORLD ESTEEMS — Though it appears valid, and perhaps even beneficial, the wisdom valued among earth dwellers cannot stand the test of eternity. There is, however, wisdom that does stand the test of eternity, reflecting as it does the smile of Heaven. Jesus addressed the issue of wisdom quite frequently, stressing the need for those who would please the Father to act with wisdom. The wisdom the Master espoused is assuredly countercultural, because it rejects the concept of self-preservation, exalts the ideal of self-sacrifice and leads the one possessing that particular wisdom to weigh every action against God’s approval.

As an example of the contrast between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of Heaven, Jesus contrasted those who heeded His teaching and those who pursued their own interests by means of a parable concerning two men building houses. He concluded the parable by making a pointed application: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock” [**MATTHEW 7:24**]. The wisdom of this world would approve of building one’s life on a philosophy that is insecure, justifying the action on the basis of ease and comfort, whereas the wisdom of heaven would be demonstrated through anticipating difficulties and planning accordingly. The Master taught us that building on a secure foundation was wise, whilst building on sand was foolish.

Similarly, when He sent His disciples out into the world Jesus urged them to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” [**MATTHEW 10:16**]. They were to anticipate how wicked people would act in response to the message of life. They would need to guard against acting out of malice or with a desire to hurt others, and yet they would need to patiently present the Good News and persistently obey the command of Him who sends His people to serve.

Because we have the promise of the Master concerning His return, we may be either wise or foolish when preparing for the fulfilment of His promise. Jesus spoke of this when He told a parable about ten virgins. In the Master’s parable, five of these virgins were foolish and five were wise [**MATTHEW 25:2**]. The foolish virgins failed to anticipate that the bridegroom would come when he said he would come, but the wise were prepared. The foolish did not invest a significant amount of their capital in preparing for the coming of the bridegroom, whereas the wise knew that they were responsible to be prepared for the moment when the bridegroom would appear. Those that the world would have said were wise were proved by events to be foolish, and those whom the world would have ridiculed as overly prepared were proven wise by events.

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On yet another occasion, the Lord addressed the matter of wisdom, comparing the failure of the children of the Kingdom to use the wisdom God provides to the avid use of earthly wisdom by those in the world. Listen to that parable. Jesus “said to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, “What is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager.” And the manager said to himself, “What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses.” So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he said to the first, “How much do you owe my master?” He said, “A hundred measures of oil.” He said to him, “Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.” Then he said to another, “And how much do you owe?” He said, “A hundred measures of wheat.” He said to him, “Take your bill, and write eighty.” The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light” [LUKE 16:1-8].

Jesus is not saying that deceit and theft are acceptable tools for advancing His Kingdom. He is, however, acknowledging that those who are inhabitants of this dying world are more adept at using what they value than are the sons of light. In other words, he is confronting His people with their failure to use the wisdom that is at their disposal. It is a tragic truth that the professed people of God are prone to ignore the wisdom that God freely offers while they eagerly try to use the wisdom of the world in a vain attempt to do God’s kingdom work.

Think that through! One major conservative denomination recently reported that virtually one hundred percent of their pastors are confident that the Bible is inerrant and infallible. That is, they hold that the Bible is authoritative for faith and practise. Yet, less than two-thirds of the membership of the churches believes the Bible to be authoritative for daily life. There is a disconnect between what is professed and what in reality guides the lives of those Christians. Remember, this is one of the more conservative denominations in our world today.

I fear that the vast majority of Christendom lives as though the Word of God is optional for faith and practise. It is as though the average professing Christian does not want to be bothered with thinking of how to please God in daily life. It is difficult to avoid drawing the conclusion that many, if not most Christians are content to reduce faith to a matter of ritual, holding God in reserve for times of crisis when they are incapable of otherwise mounting a cogent response. Certainly, the world can live as though the will of God is irrelevant, but it is impossible to reconcile the evident attitude of many Christians with the revealed will of God. Walking with Christ demands that we seek His will and act according to His wisdom.

According to what we have seen in previous studies in James’ letter, the world appears to esteem “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.” The wisdom of this dying world leads to boasting against the truth and justifying deceit. However, that is not the wisdom that God approves. Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of Heaven in his first letter to the Church of God at Corinth. Listen to the Apostle.

“The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’

“Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25].

Paul continued that line of thought by urging his readers to think. “Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” [1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31].

Clearly, God esteems values that are quite different from those esteemed by the world. Paul urged those who professed the Faith to think of what they were in the estimate of the world, asking why they thought the conclusion of earth dwellers who were perishing was valuable. Christians must struggle to avoid being influenced by the opinion of the world. However, it is easier to see the opinion of those dwelling in the world as inconsequential if we keep our eyes focused on Heaven rather than on the world.

How often have Christians made decisions concerning vital issues of righteousness—the conduct of worship, their witness, and even how they will live—based on a desire to gain the approval of people in the world! One hundred years from now, it will make no difference what people living in the world think. They are perishing, and if we permit them to inform our attitudes and actions, we are identifying with that which is perishing.

We must remind ourselves that this world and all that is in it is destined for destruction, and according to what we saw moments ago in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians that includes “the wisdom of the wise.” Paul reminds us that all that is associated with this world shall perish when he writes, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-54].

The Word of God identifies those who live for this present world as “those who are perishing” [2 CORINTHIANS 2:15]. Again, the Apostle cautions, “If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing” [2 CORINTHIANS 4:3], meaning that the inhabitants of this world live for the moment and as if nothing of eternal worth lies beyond this life. Therefore, if we choose to permit the inhabitants of this world to dictate our moral and ethical values, and if we adopt the wisdom they esteem as our own, and if we permit ourselves to live servile before their opinions, we are identifying with that which must perish.

In one of his earliest letters, Paul reminded the Thessalonian Christians of the coming of the Antichrist. “The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” [2 THESSALONIANS 2:9, 10]. It is those who are perishing, those who are of this world, who will be deceived. My fear is that many who profess the Faith will be included among those identified in this passage. By their failure to stand with righteousness and by their unwillingness to resist succumbing to “fleeting pleasures of sin” [HEBREWS 11:25] they give tragic testimony where their heart actually lies.

It is a given that that which is perishable must perish, while that which is imperishable shall endure forever. Therefore, all who have purified their souls by obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, have been “born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” [1 PETER 1:22, 23]. This body is destined for dust, and all the wisdom of this age must likewise perish with its use. Paul referred to the perishable quality of the things associated with this age when he wrote, “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” [COLOSSIANS 2:20-23].

Dear people, what appears wise in the eyes of those who think as the world thinks cannot stand the test of eternity. While it seems wise to promote one’s own agenda, or to run the church as though it were a business, know that such wisdom is “earthly, unspiritual, demonic.” On the authority of God’s Word I can assure you that such wisdom must, of necessity, result in “disorder and every vile practise.”

WISDOM GOD GIVES — “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.” Understanding the characteristics of “the wisdom from above” is necessary for us if we will seek what pleases God and eschew that which originates within this dying world. James gives us a panoramic view of divine wisdom by providing seven characteristics that are observable in those possessing this wisdom. The first characteristic describes a moral/ethical and theological attitude, followed by five characteristics that speak of relationships. Finally, James will provide two characteristics that are more an expression of one’s individual walk in the world as expressed through attitude and broad interaction with all peoples.

Notice that the wisdom under consideration, which is desirable for all Christians, is identified as coming “from above.” This wisdom is divine, originating from Heaven. There is no way to attain this wisdom except through accepting it as God’s gracious gift. It is available only to those whom God has received as His children, and it is given generously. We need to remember that God has promised through His servant James that when we realise our lack of wisdom we need but ask [JAMES 1:5, 6]. Asking implies that we recognise our need and that we are confessing the source of true wisdom is the Father. Moreover, in asking, we realise that we come into the presence of the Father “who gives generously to all without reproach.” In light of this information, we are assured that there is no excuse for exercising earthly wisdom rather than the heavenly wisdom that is promised to each believer. We need but ask, remembering that we dare not equivocate or doubt that God will provide what we ask.

The divine wisdom that is promised to each Christian is recognised by its impact in the life of the believer. James says that this wisdom is “first **PURE**,” indicating that of the seven characteristics of divine wisdom, purity is foremost. To be certain, those who honour the Lord will possess a pure religion—one that is readily identified because it is compassionate toward those who are vulnerable. However, too many of us who name the Name of Christ tend to focus on the needs of the vulnerable without considering the need for personal purity. James has said, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, **and to keep oneself unstained from the world**” [JAMES 1:27]. To be certain, we must be compassionate toward the vulnerable, but we must first ensure that we are morally and ethically pure in our own conduct, and that we hold a pure faith as we pursue hard after God.

Perhaps the reason James says that purity is first, is because every other characteristic is evident externally, but purity is a matter of the heart. One can hold deviant doctrine without necessarily exposing the error to casual observers. Purity is the result of living in anticipation of the imminent return of the Master, as John states in his first letter. “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is. And **everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies Himself as He is pure**” [1 JOHN 3:2, 3]. The one walking in the wisdom that comes from above rids himself of every manifestation of earthly wisdom while waiting for Christ’s return.

Dear people, purity—doctrinal, moral and ethical purity—is the foremost characteristic of divine wisdom. Speaking negatively, aberrant theology demonstrates that an individual is not wise toward God, and therefore unworthy of being heeded when he speaks. Likewise, an individual who is not ethical cannot be wise; her actions disqualify her from providing counsel. In the same fashion, an individual who is immoral is not wise. If a woman will not be true to her vows taken when she married, she will not keep her promises when elected or hired. James’ words are nothing less than an admonition to be holy, for holiness reveals the wisdom of God.

The purity expressed through heavenly wisdom is in marked contrast to “every vile practise” that results when earthly wisdom prevails either in a congregation or in an individual’s life. One thing should be evident: purity is not relative. One who is pure will be pure on every occasion. Heavenly wisdom is to be valued not just because it spares us from disorder and every vile practise, but because it leads the one possessing it to do what is morally and ethically right. This purity is reflected through devotion to God. Those who serve God only when it is convenient or when they have no better offer cannot be said to be pure.

James says that “the wisdom from above is first pure, then...”—the adverb is vital in pointing out a certainty that results from purity of life. There follow six characteristics of heavenly wisdom that are rooted in a pure life. These characteristics describe an individual who can yield status without being threatened, one who truly cares for others and who is willing to submit and learn from others—all in contrast to the bitterness, envy and selfish ambition of false spirituality. Then, completing the list of characteristics that mark the life that is guided by the wisdom from above, James says it is a life that is “full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.” Purity is the garden in which these beautiful graces associated with wisdom grow.

Purity is more important than peace, for purity ensures that peace will ensue. If we strive to have a pure church, we will have a peaceable church. Isaiah testifies:

“The effect of righteousness will be peace,
and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.”

[ISAIAH 32:17]

Christians can never have peace if they attempt to ignore sin or if they attempt to hide it. Earthly wisdom tells us to cover over our sin as it will be too painful if others know about it. Churches imagine that they honour God and show unity through ignoring sin, but all they do is ensure that the wickedness will fester and contaminate the entire Body. The wisdom from above says, “Confess sin so that God’s peace can maintain the unity of the Body in the beauty of holiness.”

The first evidence of a pure life is that one is *PEACEABLE*. This does not suggest, as some may hear it, an attitude of peace by abdication—like the couple who had just celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Someone asked the gentleman the secret of their marital bliss. “Well,” the old man drawled, “the wife and I had this agreement when we first got married. It went like this: When she was bothered about somethin’ she’d jus’ tell me and git it off her chest. And if I was mad at her about somethin’, I was able to take a long walk. I s’ppose you could attribute our happy marriage to the fact that I have largely led an outdoor life.”

There are indeed proper times to “take a walk,” but peace here, of course, does not mean mere tolerance. James sought to rid the church of rivalries and factions among the members. Indeed, he is commending a peaceful spirit. The hearts of those with such peace have met Christ, who is Himself their peace [EPHESIANS 2:14]. They have the peace He gives, which is totally unlike the peace the world gives [JOHN 14:27]. Their spiritual war is over; they are at peace with God. The person walking in heavenly wisdom longs for peace. At times he or she may make some “waves” because a Biblical principle is at stake, but ordinarily they refrain from turbulence and rejoice in making peace. Those who are peaceable are committed to the unity of the community of Faith and will do whatever is necessary to keep that unity. They are eager to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” [EPHESIANS 4:3] and they “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” [ROMANS 14:19]. They live out Paul’s injunction, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with everyone” [ROMANS 12:18]. True wisdom brings people together and draws people closer to God.

Heavenly wisdom is also *GENTLE*, that is, it is considerate, forbearing, courteous, kindly. All these terms are summed up in the word James uses. True wisdom does not insist upon its own rights, but is willing to consider others as it seeks equity and fairness in relationships. The idea conveyed is of a person who though wronged and possessing the right to not bend, nevertheless makes concessions in order to honour God. The gentle individual does not deliberately cause fights; however, neither will he compromise truth in order to keep peace.

The former term speaks of relationship to another who is not in a position of authority and who has nevertheless wronged the one possessing gentleness. In contradistinction, the next term, “*OPEN TO REASON*,” speaks of an individual’s relationship to a superior. In particular, it speaks of an individual who is submitted to military discipline. The word speaks not of a mere resignation to the word of one who is in a position of authority, but it describes a willing responsiveness to authority. It describes the response of church members to the Word of God—we choose to hear and apply what is taught. The individual who is open to reason is not only willing to consider what is taught by the elders, but recognises that the teaching has its origin in God Himself, and is thus willing to be persuaded by God and by His Word. The individual who is open to reason is “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” [JAMES 1:19].

James teaches us that true wisdom is “*FULL OF MERCY AND GOOD FRUITS*.” This wisdom makes itself aware of those in distress and seeks to do what is morally right toward such individuals. I must stress that Christian mercy is not an emotion, it is an action. Mercy does not merely feel bad for one that is suffering, but is willing to get its hands dirty relieving necessity.

Mercy in the life of the believer reflects the mercy that the Father has shown him. Jesus taught us to “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” [LUKE 6:36]. Thus, mercy forgives others, not holding sins against them in a judgmental way, rather lovingly correcting them. Mercy also acts generously, especially toward those in need of such as in acts of benevolence. The good fruits are the various applications of mercy to those who require such mercy.

Divine wisdom is “**IMPARTIAL**,” that is, it does not vacillate; godly wisdom is consistent. Perhaps another way of dealing with the concept James presents is to say that heavenly wisdom is decisive. The wisdom of the world pressures us to adapt to the situation; but the wisdom that comes down from above will lead us to be steadfast regardless of the circumstances, acting decisively as we seek the will of God and apply His wisdom to every situation. You can always count on the one exercising God’s wisdom to act in the same way each time.

Those in the world imagine that they are wise when they speak of having an open mind—that is they have not made up their mind concerning truth. However, the wisdom from above is confident because it has God for its source and it is founded by His revealed truth. Therefore, the one walking in divine wisdom stands firm, knowing both the source of his wisdom and the outcome of his stance. Heavenly wisdom ensures that we will also enjoy divine strength.

The wisdom from above is also “**SINCERE**.” It is never hypocritical. It is not deceptive. What you see is what you get with the wisdom from above. It does not play a part in order to achieve some personal end. When worldly wisdom prevails in a church, church politics ensure that there will be pretence and dishonesty. Where God’s wisdom rules over a congregation, openness and honesty will ensure that the people speak the truth in love. When God’s people pretend and hide their motives, you may be certain that the wisdom of this world governs their ministry. You may be equally certain that religious politics is an abomination to God.

The wisdom from above does not play-act, but it demands and demonstrates the sincerity of Christ. Paul, when writing the Corinthian Christians in his second letter, testified of the missionary team that had ministered to the church, “Our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you” [2 CORINTHIANS 1:12]. Would that each Christians could provide a similar testimony about their relationships with other believers.

WISDOM’S IMPACT — “A harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” This statement connects purity and peace, and demonstrates why the disorder James identifies in JAMES 3:16 is so abhorrent. The opposite of disorder is not a morally neutral order, rather, it is a morally significant peace. Just as peace grows out of purity, so peace is the context in which purity can prevail within a congregation. Underscore a negative truth in your mind: *righteousness cannot grow in an environment of conflict, jealousy and selfish ambition*. Stated positively, we know that *peace promotes purity, and purity ensures peace*.

Notice that James says we can anticipate “a harvest of righteousness” from the seed of peace. A church in conflict cannot perform works of righteousness. Hence, there will be no lasting fruit produced by such a congregation. Likewise, an impure church will experience disorder. It is not either/or that is in view when we think of peace and purity; it is both/and. Where one is found, the other will also be evident. And it is the responsibility of the congregation to sow righteousness in peace as we make peace.

As an aside of considerable significance, it is a serious matter for one to be a troublemaker among God’s people. Listen to the words of Solomon concerning this matter.

“There are six things that the LORD hates,
seven that are an abomination to him:
haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
and hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked plans,
feet that make haste to run to evil,
a false witness who breathes out lies,
and one who sows discord among brothers.”

[PROVERBS 6:16-19]

The Christian life is a life of sowing and reaping. The Christian who obeys God’s wisdom sows righteousness, not sin; he sows peace, not war. The life we live enables the Master to bring righteousness and peace into the lives of others through our service. What we *are* is what we live, and what we live is what we sow. What we sow determines what we reap. If we live in God’s wisdom, we sow righteousness and peace, and we reap God’s blessing. If we live in earthly wisdom, we sow sin and war, and we reap “disorder and every vile work.”

James is not encouraging Christians to be peacekeepers; rather, he is encouraging each of us to be peacemakers. Peacekeepers do nothing to lessen conflict; peacemakers bring an end to conflict. Peacekeepers are willing to compromise in order to keep combatants apart; peacemakers will not compromise principle for the sake of momentary cessation of hostilities. Peacekeepers do not ultimately have any stake in the outcome of their actions; peacemakers invest their very lives in making peace. Therefore, peacemakers ensure a harvest of righteousness precisely because they have sown peace which allows for the growth of purity.

This is nothing less than a practical application of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, when he urged His followers to, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all [that is required for life] will be added to you” [MATTHEW 6:33]. The reason so many of our churches are engaged in a mad pursuit for stature in the eyes of the world and credibility with the “doctors” of the church is precisely because they have jettisoned peace in a vain pursuit of prosperity and exchanged purity for popularity. Thus, James’ words are a resounding call for Christians to seek the wisdom that only God can provide.

Solomon represents wisdom as a woman who stands pleading with all who hear her,

“Whoever finds me finds life
and obtains favour from the Lord,
but he who fails to find me injures himself;
all who hate me love death.”

[PROVERBS 8:35, 36]

Heed the voice of wisdom and we will find life, obtaining favour from the Lord. That is what we want for one another, that is what we want for ourselves. Let us therefore pursue purity and seek peace with one another and with God. Let us determine that we will be a people displaying the wisdom of God through the way in which we conduct the work of the church.

If you will join us in advancing this holy cause, it will be necessary for you to be part of God’s family. There is no possibility that you will enjoy either purity or peace until you have received the life that is offered in Christ Jesus the Lord. He died because of your sin; and He lives in order to declare you righteous in the sight of the Father.

The message of the Saviour is to receive the life that He offers through His crucifixion and resurrection. The Bible declares, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” God moreover promises that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**]. Our prayer is that all who hear our message will receive the gift of life and be saved. Amen.