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Where to Get Wisdom James 3:13-18 Part One

We are continuing in our study of the Epistle of James. This epistle was written so that we might know whether we possess saving faith. This epistle was written so that we might know whether or not we possess living faith. As James develops this theme he gives us a number of different tests.

We have now considered five of those tests.

The first test we examined was the “Response to Trials test” in James 1:2-18.

The second test that we examined was the “Response to the Word test” in James 1:19-27.

The third test that we examined was the “Impartiality test” in James 2:1-13.

The fourth test that we examined was the “Works test” in James 2:14-26.

The fifth test that we examined was the “Speech test” in James 3:1-12.

This weekend we are now going on to the sixth test which we will call the “Wisdom test.”

Let us read **James 3:13-18**, “**Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. (14) But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. (15) This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. (16) For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. (17) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. (18) And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.**” Clearly the focus of this passage is wisdom.

There are really only two types of people in this world. Those who are wise in their own eyes or those who are wise in God’s eyes. What distinguishes the one group from the other?

In the OT Scriptures the simple answer would be that the fear of the Lord distinguished those who were wise in their own eyes from those who were wise in God’s eyes. Listen to the words of **Prov. 3:7**, “**Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the Lord and turn away from evil.**” In other words, based on the teachings of the Old Testament those who were seeking to be obedient to OT law were wise in the sight of God and those who were not seeking to be obedient to OT law were not wise in the sight of God.

Nebuchadnezzar may have built a great city and kingdom and looked upon himself as wise, but the truth was he was a fool because he failed to have a healthy fear of the Lord which was manifested in his lack of obedience to the law of God.

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Notice I said a healthy fear of God. When we think of OT saints being obedient because of their fear of the Lord, we should not think of them rendering that obedience grudgingly. Their fear was balanced with a healthy respect and the belief that obedience was the way of blessing. Their fear of God led them to trust Him. Certainly this is made clear in **Heb. 11.**

In early New Testament times, as the gospel of Christ was making its way into the lives of righteous Gentiles who were under the Law, they were often times referred to as “God fearers.” They had trusted the Lord and were seeking to be obedient to Him to the extent that their knowledge and understanding of revelation from God allowed. And that heart for the Lord became manifested in their response to the gospel. Consider the story of the Roman Centurion, Cornelius. Luke refers to him as “a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews” in **Acts 10:22**. And what happened to him when the gospel was shared with Him? He obeyed it. Just as he had obeyed the Lord in all other areas of his life. And he was born again.

As the church progressed and the gospel was proclaimed throughout the whole world, the response to the gospel became the determining factor in NT Scripture as to whether a person was wise in their own eyes or in the eyes of God. Listen to **1 Cor. 1:18-24**, “**For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (19) For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.” (20) Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (21) For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. (22) For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; (23) but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to gentiles foolishness, (24) but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**” God fearers will embrace the gospel of Christ and place their trust in Jesus. Those who are not God fearers will not.

If you are here and believe that you have responded to the truth of the gospel by making a profession of faith, you can be encouraged. Every truly saved person will at some point in their lives make a profession of faith. But we also need to be aware of the fact that not all those who make professions of faith are truly saved people. It is not saying that we have received Jesus as our Lord and Savior that saves us. What saves us is truly making Jesus, by faith, our Lord and Savior. And if we have in fact done this, then we can be assured that our lives will be characterized by wisdom. Not as the world defines wisdom but as the Lord defines it.

Are we wise in our own eyes or are we wise in the eyes of God? Are we characterized by the wisdom of men or the wisdom of God. Or in other words are we saved or not saved. James in **James 3:13-18** will help us answer this question as we now examine the wisdom test.

THE CHALLENGE

We find the challenge in v. 13, “**Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.**” James begins with a probing question: “**Who among you is wise and understanding?**”

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Some interpreters believe that the phrase “**who among you**” refers only to the teachers, or would be teachers, are addressed in **James 3:1**. But it seems more probable that, like the intervening section on the tongue (vv. 2-12), this section on wisdom (vv. 13-18) applies to everyone in the churches to whom James was writing, true believers and mere professing believers.

This question with its personal appeal aims at the conscience of each of his readers. His question does not imply that no one is wise, but challenges those who might rashly and falsely assume that they are wise to self examination, whether they are teachers or non-teachers.

Let me ask you this morning. “**Who among you is wise and understanding?**” I would think that each of you would like to think of yourself as wise and understanding. But are you? What does James mean by these words.

The two adjectives “**wise and understanding**” are used together only here in the New Testament. They appear in **Deut.1:13 (LXX)** as the needed qualifications of tribal judges in Israel; and then later these same terms are united in the very same way in **Deut.4:6** and **Hosea 14:9** to refer to desired qualities in all of God’s people.

In Jewish usage, “wise” (SOPHOS) described the individual who possessed moral insight and skill in deciding practical issues of conduct. The Jewish people understood that it was not enough to have knowledge; you had to have wisdom to be able to use that knowledge correctly. All of us know people who are very intelligent, perhaps even brilliant, who seemingly are unable to carry out the simplest tasks involving practical living. They can run computers but they cannot manage their own lives! Those who are wise know how to make their lives count.

The word “understanding” (EPISTEMON), which occurs only here in the New Testament was used of one having the knowledge of an expert, a specialist able to apply his fuller knowledge to practical situations. The two terms are basically synonymous.

Let me ask you again, “**Who among you is wise and understanding.**” Not who is skilled in certain academic or scientific disciplines but who is skilled in regard to the practical issues of life.

There are people who might quickly step forward and say, “I believe that I fit this particular description. I have parlayed my knowledge of computers into a thriving business empire.” Or another might say, “I believe that I fit this particular description because I have been able to use my social and communication skills to build a wonderful family.” They would say this because they cannot think of anything more important than those particular things they would hold up as practical. But again what do the Scriptures teach?

The Scriptures teach us that “fear of God is the beginning of wisdom” in **Ps.111:10**. This is the truth. What good is it to work at building a successful career, or a successful business, or successful family if we have no relationship with God or that these efforts are not for Him and done with the strength and grace that He provides. And answer to that question is, “Our efforts serve no good purpose, at least from the standpoint of God.”

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Consider the statement of Solomon in **Eccles. 12:13**. After Solomon has written an entire OT book to speak of the futility of human effort he concludes with this statement, **“The conclusion, when all has been heard, is “fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.”**

Why are you going to school? Hopefully it is not to get good grades, but rather to be righteous and to keep the Lord’s commandments. Why are you dating? Hopefully it is not to have some special person in your life, but rather to be righteous and to keep the Lord’s commandments. Why are you pursuing your career? Hopefully it is not to have success, but rather to be righteous and to keep the Lord’s commandments. Why is this so important? Listen to **Eccles.12:14**, **“For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”** A wise man fears the Lord and is seeking to be obedient, recognizing that there is a judgment that is coming.

When James is asking us the question “Who among you is wise and understanding” he in effect is asking, “Who among you is saved?” How could we ever claim to have moral insight or skill in deciding practical issues of life if we cannot get this right?

After asking this probing question he goes on to issue a challenge. **Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.”** The phrase **“let him show”** (DESATO) is a command. James demands that the possession of wisdom, like faith (James 2:14-16), must be proved by righteous conduct. We see this emphasis in two separate expressions.

“Let him show by his good behavior” The phrase “good behavior” (ANASTROPHES) denotes the life of movement and action, a turning here and there in the daily affairs of life. His social behavior must be recognized as good, noble, beautiful, and attractive. His winsome daily conduct should demonstrate his possession of the needed practical insight and understanding that comes from Christ who is the wisdom and power of God to deal with the daily problems of life.

The attractiveness of his life must be established by **“deeds in the gentleness of wisdom,”** or in other words from deeds done in the gentleness that comes from wisdom.

“Gentleness” (PRAUTES) carries the idea of tenderness and graciousness, and can be accurately translated “meekness.” Unlike the English word, the Greek word does not connote weakness but rather power under control.

This word has often been used of a wild horse that was broken and made useful to its owner. For believers, “gentleness” is to be willingly under the sovereign control of God. He focuses on what God would have him to be and trusts Him for whatever happens. A person who is **“gentle”** has given himself up, he is not concerned about himself but only the Lord and you. This was true of Moses. **Numbers 12:3 (KJV)** describes Moses as **“very meek (or gentle), above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.”** Moses was not concerned with himself but rather with the Lord and the nation of Israel. He was fully under the Lord’s yoke. Yet that same Moses could act very decisively and powerfully in his service to the Lord or others.

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Gentleness is a God-honored character trait, a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). It is never bitter, malicious, self-seeking, promoting, arrogant, or vengeful. James has earlier admonished believers in **James 1:21** with these words, “**Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remain of wickedness, in humility (PRAUTES)** receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.” Gentleness or meekness is to characterize everyone in the kingdom of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). Our Lord used it of Himself, saying, “**Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.**”

CONCLUSION

We are now considering the “Wisdom test” in James 3:13-18. And it begins with a challenge. A challenge to examine ourselves and to see if we are truly wise. We are not to carry out this examination based on the standards of the world but rather based on the standards of God.

And God’s standards are very clear. Those who are truly wise will fear God. For this is the beginning of wisdom. And those who choose to fear God will positively respond to the gospel of Christ and will embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Very much as the readers of this epistle had done.

But this profession must be tested. If we have in fact by faith received the Lord Jesus who is the power and wisdom of God, then His wisdom should be seen in our lives.

It will manifest itself in righteous conduct characterized by “gentleness.” A person who is gentle has given himself up and has willingly surrendered himself to the sovereignty of God. He is not concerned about himself as much as he is concerned about the Lord and others.

A lawyer once approached his brother who was a simple farmer. And he said to him, “Why don’t you go out and make a name for yourself and hold your head up high in the world like me?” The brother pointed to a field of wheat and made the point that the only stalks of wheat that held their heads high were the empty ones! And so with us. The more we are blessed, the lower we should bow seeking at all times to have our lives characterized by gentleness which is an expression of our wisdom.