

“The Wisdom from Above”

Texts: James 3:13-4:3;

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on the Book of James

In the opening chapter of his epistle, James exhorts us to be “doers” of the word and not to remain mere hearers only. In the second chapter, James tells us that good works are the necessary fruit of a justifying faith. But that, of course, raises the question, “just what, exactly, does it mean to be a “doer of the word?” What kind of good works give evidence of a justifying faith? In the third chapter of his epistle, James addresses a number of specific issues which were plaguing the churches to which he is writing. When James exhorts Christians to act in line with their profession of faith in Christ, James is actually informing his reader what it means to “do.” James also describes some of the good works which should stem from our faith in Christ. Doing the word means taming our tongues (control our speech), because our words can be so destructive. Doing the word means seeking true wisdom from above, because this wisdom enables us to live in peace with one another, and will help us in the struggle to get our sinful natures under control. In doing these things, we demonstrate that we are not “mere” hearers of the word, and we will also manifest those good works which James says are the sign of saving faith.

We are continuing our series on the Book of James, as we move into the last part of chapter 3 and the opening verses of James chapter 4, where James directs his readers to the importance of seeking heavenly wisdom from above. In order to “do” we need to know what to do, as well as “how” to do it. As James will explain to his audience, when Christians live in light of God’s wisdom—and stop relying upon our own passions—we will live in such a way that our lives will be characterized by what James calls a harvest of righteousness. We will be at peace with our brothers and sisters, and God will help us to keep our sinful passions in check. But should we insist upon following our own sinful passions, our behavior will remain unchecked, and our churches will suffer the consequences—quarrels, disputes, and chaos.

As James spells out some of the specific issues facing the churches to which he is writing, the brother of our Lord identifies one of the chief culprits for their troubles as earthly ways of thinking and doing (worldliness). From the circumstances to which James alludes, apparently, the churches of the dispersion were facing great internal disorder and chaos, they were quarreling and fighting with each other, there was jealousy among the members, there was discrimination against the poor, and favoritism shown toward the rich—and this in addition to a number of other things catalogued by James. So, while James will identify jealousy, ambition, boasting, along with a number of other sinful human actions as stemming from that which is earthly (worldliness), it is not a stretch to see that all of the sinful behavior which James describes, and which Christians must strive to correct, stems from a reliance upon that which seems to be right to us (and therefore based upon our own wisdom), but which conflicts with the law of God (in which the wisdom of God is on display).

As James has explained in the first two chapters of this epistle, a Christian who trusts in Jesus Christ (what James describes as a “living” faith) will manifest that trust in the form of true religion, which is evident through the performance of the kind of good works. But Christians need to know just what, exactly, those good works are. This should not be a mystery to us, since obedience to the law of God is a good work. The *Heidelberg Catechism* (Q & A 91) defines a good work as something done in faith, which conforms to the commandment of God, and which is done for God’s glory. This is the broad application we are to draw from this epistle. We cannot claim to be Christians, and yet show no interest in obeying the commandments of God, while allowing our sinful passions to go unchecked.

But in the historic context of this epistle—written in the mid 40's of the first century—James is making the case that the problems plaguing the churches of the dispersion, stem from sinful behavior which is inconsistent with saving faith and true religion. We need to keep this point in mind as we proceed to work our way through the final three chapters of this epistle. James is not writing some sort of theological treatise on the relationship between regeneration, faith and good works—although James has shown us that regeneration manifests itself in faith, which, in turn, produces good works. Instead, James is writing to persecuted, suffering Christians, who were then undergoing a very difficult period of trials.

In the midst of these difficult circumstances, some professing Christians were behaving in a manner which was completely inconsistent with their profession of faith in Christ. James now addresses this behavior and in doing so, describes the kinds of good works which spring from faith in Christ. To put it another way (as James does), many in these church are like those who look at themselves in the mirror, but who had immediately forgotten what they look like. While these people were naming the name of Christ (even at the risk of being persecuted for doing so), nevertheless they were acting as though they had never heard any of the things Jesus had instructed them to do. They “profess” but they do not “do.”

Therefore, James is writing to the churches scattered throughout Palestine and Syria to address specific behavior. In doing so, James exhorts the members of these churches to be more than mere hearers of God’s word, but to be doers of that word. According to James is a doer is one who endeavors to obey the commandments of God, because they have already been justified by faith. This explains why James addresses the specific issues that he does, and this is why James is so direct in his exhortations to his audience. The people in these churches (to whom the epistle was addressed) would know exactly that to which James was referring—they were in the middle of it—and so James’ exhortation to act is a very appropriate response to their particular circumstances. This also helps us understand why it is when James connects good works to saving faith, he addresses the specific issues that he does—how we treat rich and poor, the taming of the tongue, seeking divine wisdom from above, etc. These things were all issues in the churches of the dispersion.

With this context in mind, we now turn to our text, where James takes up the subject of divine wisdom, and explains how seeking such wisdom, will bring peace to these churches.

As he has done throughout his epistle, James begins by asking a rhetorical question. As we read in verse 3, “*who is wise and understanding among you?*” Since James is about to address the problem of jealousy and selfish behavior manifest in the lives of professing Christians, his question amounts to a challenge of sorts. James is asking those in the church who *think* they have wisdom, but who are still behaving in a sinful way, to step-up and explain just how it is—if they are so wise—that the behavior they now manifest is so destructive to the health of the churches.¹

Should anyone accept James’ challenge, the following will no doubt apply. “*By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.*” As James sees it, if anyone truly possesses wisdom, it will be self-evident in that person’s conduct. In this case, a person’s good works will demonstrate that their conduct reflects the wisdom of God. Meekness, as spoken of here, should not to be confused with timidity or shyness. Meekness is a deep sense of humility before God. Meekness is simply the awareness that God is very, very great, and that we are very, very small.

¹ Moo, The Letter of James, 168-169.

As we see in our Old Testament lesson, throughout the Old Testament wisdom is described as a gift from God. Jews were taught the importance of gaining divine wisdom from their earliest youth. As we read in Proverbs 2, *“if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding; he stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk in integrity, guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path; for wisdom will come into your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.”* In fact, in chapter 8 of Proverbs, the author speaks of wisdom personified. As we see in the New Testament, this personification of Wisdom is a reference to none other than Jesus Christ. In Jesus, all the hidden treasures of God’s wisdom have been revealed. So, there can be no question that James has passages like this from Proverbs in mind as he exhorts his readers to seek wisdom from above. Those who are truly wise are meek. They humble themselves before God, and especially before the supreme revelation of God, the person of Jesus, that one in whom the wise should be boasting.

In verses 14-15, James changes gears a bit by describing the destructive nature of worldly wisdom. *“But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”* If someone behavior is characterized by jealousy and selfishness, or if their heart is filled with bitterness, or they if are overly ambitious, then it is clear that they do not have the wisdom from above (which comes from God), no matter how wise they claim to be. People who behave in such a way are oriented toward sin and self. Their reference point is not the will of God, but the interest of self—and the self which serves as their reference point is sinful. This manifests itself in the life of the church through a pattern of behavior in which someone tries to run their own agenda at the expense of others. Or, it can be seen when people are critical and insensitive toward others. Or when people seek to ensure that things are done their way. James’ word of exhortation is to stop boasting and denying the truth. If people are not willing to acknowledge they are sinful, they’ll never stop acting in sinful ways and they will never seek wisdom from God.

Very likely, this kind of jealousy was something especially fresh in the minds of James and of others in the Jerusalem Church. We know this from an incident which occurred about ten years before James wrote this epistle, and which would have been common knowledge among those to whom James is writing. According to Acts 5, we read that after the apostles had performed a number of signs and wonders, many Jews—a sizable number of whom converted and were now members of the churches to which James was writing—were convicted of their sins, and many of those present became Christians. Soon people from the outlying areas were bringing in the sick and suffering into Jerusalem for the apostles to heal them. The Sanhedrin thought they had put an end to this when they summarily put Jesus to death in AD 30. But even after the death of Jesus, the miraculous was happening all over again.

In Acts 5:17-18, Luke tells us, *“the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.”* No doubt, James readers could recall the action of the high priest, who was so put off by the success of the apostles in gaining converts (jealousy) that he never even allowed himself to entertain the possibility that what they were doing might be the work of God. When James speaks of jealousy in the churches, his audience was very familiar with those who put their own interests above the purposes of God—like the high priest. There are some who see their own interests as far more important than the purposes of God.

Based upon James’ rebuke, it is clear that people in the churches were appealing to their own wisdom to

justify their actions, but in actuality they were manifesting a behavior which betrayed that this wasn't divine wisdom at all, but merely human sinfulness. Not only does this behavior include jealousy and envy, bitterness and ambition, James also adds boasting and falsehood to the list. These things are hardly the manifestations of the humility and meekness before God, which is the fruit of true wisdom, and the manifestation of true religion. No, says James, these things are the manifestation of earthly, unspiritual, demonic behavior. This behavior is not from above, it arises within the sinful human heart. The presence of these things is a manifestation of sinful passion, which should not characterize the behavior of people who have been brought forth by the word and in whom the word has been implanted. But the sinful actions James describes here, have nothing whatsoever to do with the true religion which arises from obedience to God's commandments. In fact, this kind of behavior reflects the behavior of the demons, which Jesus encountered in his messianic mission.²

The consequences of sinful human behavior are self-evident. Says James, "*for where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.*" Wherever jealousy and selfish ambition rear their ugly heads the consequence is chaos in the church these things open the door to even greater levels of sinful behavior in the church. James' comments are virtually identical to Paul's words to the Corinthians, written about ten years later. In 1 Corinthians 14:33 Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth, "*God is not a God of confusion but of peace,*" before exhorting the Corinthians in verse 40, "*but all things should be done decently and in order.*" When heavenly wisdom is manifest, there is peace and order. But when jealousy and ambition arise, peace gives way to quarreling and order gives way to chaos. Like Paul, James is greatly concerned when individuals put their personal needs and preferences ahead of what is best for the whole. Such people think nothing of causing disruption, division, and they will readily upset the peace and harmony of the congregation because of self-interest. Perhaps nothing demonstrates the "folly" of the wisdom of this age, like dissension, divisions, factions, and schism.

On the contrary, when Christians seek heavenly wisdom there is a far different set of consequences. "*But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*" Wisdom from above (wisdom from heaven) is a "God-given orientation that has profound practical effects on the way a person lives."³ Just as a living faith produces good works, so too, whether or not someone has drawn upon heavenly wisdom can be identified by their conduct. The list which James gives us here closely resembles Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.⁴ For Paul, the Spirit produces fruit, while for James, these things come from heavenly wisdom. Like Paul, James understands that these good things come from God.

The manifestation of heavenly wisdom can be seen in purity, which is a word meaning moral innocence and blamelessness. "Peaceable" is a reference to someone who loves peace and harmony within the church. "Gentle" refers to one who is considerate of the feelings of others, while "open to reason" refers to someone who carefully listens to others before making rash decisions. People who seek divine wisdom are *full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere*. These are people who put others ahead of themselves, they care for their neighbors, and they manifest the behavior Jesus which describes in the

² See the discussion in Moo, The Letter of James, 173, as to why this is a reference not to demon possession, but to demonic behavior, which is now imitated.

³ Moo, The Letter of James, 174.

⁴ Ralph P. Martin, James: Word Biblical Commentary, 48 (Waco: Word Books, 1988), 133.

Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.⁵

The result of this behavior is not chaos or disorder. Rather, the result is what James describes in verse 18, as *“a harvest of righteousness [which] is sown in peace by those who make peace.”* When Christians don’t seek wisdom from above, their conduct reflects sinful human behavior. When Christians seek the wisdom from above (revealed in the law—the “law of liberty”—and supremely in the person of Jesus Christ), the result is “the harvest of righteousness.” All of the virtues James lists here, flow out of the lives of those who have been brought forth by the word, who have the word planted within them, and who receive that word with humility. Those who “do” the word reflect the righteousness which they already have through faith in Christ. Those who produce the good works mentioned here, do so because their faith in Christ is a “living faith,” which produces the fruit of true religion. Instead of being characterized by the kind of behavior James has just described, those who seek heavenly wisdom are blessed to dwell in peace, where the peace-makers produce a harvest of righteousness which blesses everyone, and which is of great benefit to the entire body.

Well, what happens when people don’t seek heavenly wisdom, and when human wisdom prevails? You certainly don’t have a harvest of righteousness and the peace which results. Instead you have quarreling and fighting. You have the very conduct James is writing to correct. In the first verse of chapter four, you can almost see James throwing his hands in the air and lamenting *“what causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”* The answer James gives is virtually identical to a statement made by Jesus. In Matthew 15:19, Jesus told the Pharisees, *“for out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.”*

Paul has not only spoken of the fruit of the Spirit, but in Galatians 5:17 and following, Paul gives us a catalogue of what he calls “fruit of the flesh.” Says Paul, *“for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* The theological point James makes here, and which Jesus and Paul make elsewhere, is that even as Christians, the sinful nature remains after we are justified, so that the Christian life (the “doing” and “good works” now being discussed by James) takes place in terms of a struggle with the evil that remains within our hearts. In other words, the new nature brought forth by God through the word, desires to see a harvest of righteousness. But the evil which remains within us, resists such righteousness, and when left unchecked produces the quarreling and fighting James now describes.

James goes on to describe how our sinful passions—if left unchecked—create havoc in the church. According to James, *“You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”* The evil in our hearts is so pervasive, that when we desire something and do not get it, we kill our neighbor. While some take James to mean this in a more literal sense—arguing that many in this congregation were zealots, actively working to overthrow the Roman military occupation of Palestine—I think it is clear that James is speaking rhetorically here. We don’t get

⁵ Discussions of these terms can be found in: Moo, [The Letter of James](#), 174-177; Martin, [James](#) 133-135; Davids, [The Epistle of James](#), 154-155.

what we want, so we murder others in our hearts through hatred. This is certainly the root of violence against others, and would be the cause should we ever get so angry as to take another's life.

Next James mentions how we covet, but do not obtain, and so we quarrel and fight. Again the root of all strife within the church is the sin which resides in our own hearts. When someone gets something we want, and we miss out, then we seek our own way. Because we are sinful, we quickly turn on our brothers and sisters because we think they've wronged us, or done us harm. When we need things, we do not ask God, but instead seek them through our own sinful devices. Even worse, on those occasions when we ask and we do not receive, the reason is because we are asking God based upon selfish motives and ambitions. The Lord withholds these things from us, because he knows we'll only use what he gives us for our own pleasure, and not for the good of those around us.

The bottom line is that James gives us a very graphic contrast between what happens when we seek the wisdom of God (a harvest of righteousness and peace) and what happens when we rely upon human wisdom (fighting and quarreling). This is why we must seek the wisdom from above, so that we live in peace with one another, and so that our sinful appetites are restrained by the grace of God. Make no mistake about it, sin remains in the heart of every Christian. And if we are not seeking heavenly wisdom to aid our struggle against our sinful passions, we will bring about the deplorable conditions which James is writing to correct. Our sinful passions will be self-destructive and cause chaos in the church.

Again, the application for us is very simple. Where do we find that heavenly wisdom from above? And how do we apply it to our lives?

The good news is that God has not hidden his wisdom from us. He has revealed it in two places. The first place where God's wisdom is revealed is in the law, which is a revelation of God's will as well as a reflection of his holy and righteous character. James has already told us how the law exposes us to be law-breakers. Sin but a single time, and we are as guilty before God as though we had broken all of God's commandments. And yet, James has also described the law as a "law of liberty." How can that which condemns us, be said liberate us?

In order to answer that question, we must discuss the second place where the wisdom of God is revealed to us, and that is in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is nothing less than wisdom incarnate. In his messianic mission Jesus obeyed the law of God perfectly, as well as dying for all of those times we have broken God's commandments. When we come to faith in Christ we are justified. God declares us to be "not guilty" because Christ's death pays for our sins, and his perfect law-keeping is reckoned to us through faith. Because we are now "in Christ" and united to him by the Holy Spirit, we have been buried with him and raised to newness of life (of which baptism is the sign and the seal). This means the power which sin once held over us is broken. And since the guilt and power of sin is broken, that same law which proved that we are lawbreakers, now is our guide to being a "doer." And when we obey those commandments, we manifest those very same good works which James says are the fruit of justification.

And so, when we seek wisdom from above, we must start by looking outside ourselves to God's revealed will (in the law), and to a gracious Savior who has died for all of our sins, and who has set us free to serve him, as well as our neighbor. We seek the wisdom from God in the commandments of the law, and when we do so through the eyes of faith, we inevitably find that wisdom from God once we realize that Jesus Christ perfectly obeyed those commandments, and that his death and resurrection sets us free to fight against our sinful passions. The wisdom from above is ultimately found in the person and work of Jesus Christ, in whom we find all the riches of heaven, all the wisdom God has promised to give us, and

that one who has set us free from our sinful passions so that we might “do” what we “hear,” and so that we might produce those good works which are the fruit of saving faith.

For when we seek the wisdom from above, and find it in the person of Jesus, there we will enjoy a harvest of righteousness and live in peace.