

SOURCES OF WISDOM

James 3:13-18

The connection between these verses about wisdom and the preceding discussion on the perils of the tongue is very close. The Holy Spirit led the Apostle James to expose and condemn the sins of the tongue in the previous verses of this chapter. He was fully aware that there was a strong disposition on the part of various people to put themselves forward as teachers, when they were not qualified for the task by knowledge and Christian experience. Numerous and serious evils resulted from this.

Quite frequently the meetings of the congregation were occasions of most unseemly wrangling instead of being edifying services. These six verses indicate that James is still tinkering of the men who supposed that they had true faith but who did not practice it. As Dr. Dale said, "They were men who supposed that they had a deeper wisdom and larger knowledge than their brethren, and who were continually asserting their claim to be teachers." These ambitious teachers seemingly were not aware of the havoc wrought by them.

I. Wisdom From Beneath. James 3:13-16.

In this paragraph the subject changes somewhat although the author still deals with the futility of a form of religion which does not produce a good manner of life.

"Who is wise and understanding among us?" Four words in the Bible are closely related--knowledge, understanding, prudence and wisdom. Knowledge is having in our minds a variety of facts. Understanding goes further; it refers to keenness in discernment or the ability to see through a situation quickly. Prudence consists primarily in foreseeing and avoiding evil; therefore, a prudent man is cautious. Wisdom is the ability to use knowledge in the right way and to the best advantage.

It is possible to have a good knowledge of the Word and yet not be a wise Christian. There were those in the early church who thought they were wise. They thought they knew the Word better than others and that they were exceedingly clever in expounding it. They could fight for the right, especially their own rights. They were very wise in their own conceits. Where did their wisdom come from? James tells us that it came from beneath.

Many of those who thought they had a superfluity of wisdom, then as now, were frauds who easily duped the gullible populace. For example, Simon Magus announced that he was a great man, and the idle crowd accepted his estimate of himself. James is still directing blows at sham religion, and there is every reason for such attacks because hypocrisy flourishes in all ages and climes.

Wisdom and understanding are often linked together in God's Word. This combination implies personal acquaintance and experience. It is booklearning plus practical application.

James teaches us that true wisdom is always linked with faith in the Lord. The only really wise man is the one who places God in the center of his life, who serves Christ as his Lord and Master and who keeps his intellect in subjection to the will of God. There are plenty of both intellectual and ignorant fools. It is hard to tell which is the sadder spectacle, an educated fool or the ignorant fool. Certainly a premium is not to be placed on either class. If at all possible, both classes ought to be kept out of the ranks of teachers and preachers.

"Let him show by his good life his works in meekness of wisdom." The word "conversation," which appears often in the New Testament, is invariably translated "manner of life," or "behavior." When the King James Version was translated, conversation meant more than just talk. It referred to the whole behavior. The acid test is one of deeds, not words. One may talk like a wise person and in reality be the biggest sort of fool, even a scoundrel. People have learned to discount mere talk when it stands alone. Lincoln said with rare wisdom that a man may fool all of the people part of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but not all of the people all the time.

True wisdom is proved by a good life for God. Good words are splendid, but not enough; the deeds must be there also. Too often emphasis has been placed on knowing and talking and not enough on living.

A wise man is meek also. Heavenly wisdom shows itself in a good conduct and a gentle character. Meekness may be described as a submission toward God and a gentleness toward man. A meek man is not touchy; you do not need to use kid gloves in handling him. Meekness is not natural to man. We seldom see it in an unsaved man and in not very many who are saved. Man's natural tendency is to be easily disturbed and resentful. He is quick to be made angry and to retaliate. We should all seek the help of the Lord in cultivating this important virtue of meekness.

Christ said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart." He is our great example in meekness. He demonstrated every step of His journey down here. How mild, how patient, how calm, how gentle He was! No matter how they insulted or mistreated Him, He did not reply. Meekness may not advance one in the eyes of others or in the thinking of the world, but it surely does bring the favor of God. Through earnest prayer and constant watchfulness many of us Christians can become meek. We are neither wise nor well-pleasing to the Lord until we are meek. Any good teacher must be more than just a clever talker. He must live a life of good works and manifest a gentle character.

Absence of wisdom is a positive disqualification for teaching. The wrong spirit always shows the lack of wisdom. There were many controversialists who had jealousy and factionalism in their hearts. Jealousy causes a bitter taste, and it lasts a long time. Strife indicates a struggle to be on the top, to be the preeminent one. Rivalry and strife seem to have been quite prevalent in the early church. Strife is not a mark of wisdom, nor of Christianity; neither is it something about which to boast. "Glory not" about it. "Do not pride yourself on that."

Sometimes individuals will stir up trouble because they are not permitted to rule everyone and everything. They usually resort to underhand methods in the accomplishment of their goal. This all indicates unsubdued hearts and lives completely out of harmony with the Lord. Such conduct is a mark of an unregenerate spirit. It is the spirit such as that which demons have, not the kind which God gives. This earthly, sensual, devilish spirit will ruin any work for God. It comes from the three enemies of the Christian--the world, the flesh and the devil. Its sphere is the world, its nature is fleshly and its origin is diabolical. It is not a zeal for God that prompts some to battle for their ideas, but conceit and a desire for the preeminence. The Holy Spirit, through James, tells us that the ambition to be preeminent and the desire to wrangle come not from heaven, but from hell.

Desire to put self forward, and the strife that naturally follows, has brought

great misery to many hearts. Men and women have resolved to force their ideas upon others. They have been determined to have their own way. It was their intention to run things or to ruin them. In order to get various ones on their side, they campaign from house to house and had called secret meetings. This confusion is the devil's work. It is never of God. "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace." I Corinthians 14:33. Whatever produces confusion cannot be from Him. He is highly displeased with those who bring on this confusion.

II. Wisdom From Above. James 3:17-18.

It is a pleasure to turn from the last few verses that speak of wisdom from below to verse seventeen, which speaks of wisdom from above. True wisdom is one of those good and perfect gifts that come from above. True wisdom is not found in the natural man, nor in the carnal man, but only in the one who has communion with the Lord. Wisdom from God is primarily a matter of the heart, not the head.

To His disciples Christ said, "I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist." Luke 21:15. Stephen is an example of this. In Acts 6:10 we read, "And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." If we desire to have this sort of wisdom, we too must get it where they got it, from above.

James depicts for us the features of real wisdom from above, and all of them deal with man's heart rather than with his intellect. According to God's Word a man of wisdom is more than what the world calls a smart man. He is both moral and spiritual. The Bible does not belittle the intellect, but it certainly stresses the heart condition above the mind. Even Bible knowledge, as good as it is, is not as important as a right heart condition. Wisdom from above is here divided into eight great excellencies. If these eight great excellencies are in a Christian, he will be a great testimony for Christ.

1. Purity.

The first excellency in this wisdom from above is purity. It is free from defilement. Purity of character and motive are essential in wisdom. An impure person, though intelligent in other ways, in the estimation of the Lord has not begun to be wise. Impurity in a Christian will bring great mischief. It will destroy one's testimony. When the world hears of it, it will not listen to one's testimony. It always brings reproach on the name of Christ and on the name of the company of Christians with whom he associates. Since all impurity begins in the mind, it is important that we keep our thoughts clean.

Reading the Word of God will have a cleansing effect on our minds and lives. Like a pure stream carries away any impurity thrown into it, so the pure Word infiltrating through our minds will cleanse them from any defilement that may be there. To avoid the appearance of evil, shrink from anything that resembles impurity. One possessed of purity will not use dishonorable methods to satisfy personal ambitions. He will strive to please the Lord. He will bring joy and contentment in life and favor with the Lord.

Everything from beneath is defiled, but everything from above is pure. The Word of God came from above; it is pure. Christ came from above and "He is pure." Naturally, this wisdom from above is pure also.

2. Peaceableness.

The wisdom that is from above leads one to delight in peace. If one is quarrelsome and factious, he does not demonstrate wisdom from above. Many in the early churches were striving for preeminence, and that caused turmoil

and confusion rather than peace. If others insist on controversy and want to fight, let us strive to show a peaceable spirit. Peace in the heart makes one peaceable in character. If we are not peaceable it is because the Prince of peace is not enthroned in our hearts.

3. Gentleness.

How gentle Christ was with Nicodemus and with the woman at the well of Samaria. He never was hard on anyone except religious hypocrites. Paul also showed the spirit of love and kindness. Every servant of the Lord should be like that.

An obedient Christian is considerate and forbearing. Gentleness is the true mark of a Christian gentleman. A gentleman or gentlewoman is forbearing, courteous and considerate.

4. Approachability.

Our blessed Lord was "easy to be entreated." Anyone could come to Him at any time of the day or night, and He was ready to hear and to grant their requests if they were right. He responded to numerous cries for help. Unfortunately, some are hard to be entreated. They are as obstinate as a mule, and you cannot get them to change their minds or their ways. You wouldn't think of asking them to do anything, because you know that in their estimation what you want them to do would be wrong.

5. Mercifulness.

If one is born from above and has wisdom from above, he will be "full of mercy."

6. Fruitfulness.

If one is born from above and has wisdom from above, he will be "full of mercy and good fruits." A stream of good works will follow in his track.

7. Impartiality.

A man who has wisdom from above will be impartial. He will not favor the rich above the poor, or the wise above the ignorant. It is not right to be partial. The Lord will not honor us if we are. This word which is translated "without partiality" occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It is also rendered "without wrangling."

8. Straightforwardness.

The man who has received wisdom from above is sincere and hates pretense. He is a man with fixed principles. He is not one way today and another way tomorrow. He is not like the weather vane, turning which ever way the wind blows. You can know that he will be on the side of right, consistent, persistent and unfaltering, yet gentle.

In verse eighteen righteousness and peace are brought together. The seed is peace, the fruit is righteousness, which again produces peace.