

## HEAVENLY WISDOM



### James 3:13-18

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: Worldliness
- 📁 Over to you

### Introduction to the passage

As an introduction to these verses it is instructive to notice the leadership of James as seen in Acts 15:12-21; 21:17-25. A study of both these passages will reveal James as a man of authority, and yet of considerable tact and skill in seeking to avoid division. We see him exhibiting the very qualities he is calling for here. His theme is the need of spiritual wisdom, “the wisdom that comes from heaven”, on the part of Christian teachers and leaders, but what he says applies also to all Christian believers. James continues with the theme of 2:14-26, which are the key verses to the whole letter. This is that genuine faith is demonstrated by the person’s life. Now the test of real faith is to be measured against the possession of wisdom.

### What these verses mean

Verse 13

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

This could be a new subject without a necessary connection with the previous verses. But since James writes as one thought gives rise to another, we need to see these verses as a development of what he says in verse 1 about people taking care before they become teachers. That verse seems to deter anyone from taking on the task of teaching or leadership. But here

James gives some encouragement to those with suitable gifts, and then gives guidance as to how those gifts are to be used. The two gifts are wisdom and understanding. A teacher in the church needs to know the facts of the gospel and have a good grasp of the contents of the Bible, but this does not amount to wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to use knowledge helpfully and in a way that pleases God. Many people have an abundance of knowledge but their lives are confused. Wisdom in Christian teachers is the ability to apply the Scriptures to their own lives and those of their people. The word James uses for understanding has to do with skill, in this case the ability to handle the Scriptures and to make clear its teaching.

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

This illustrates how wisdom shows itself. First it will be by a good life, which means one that is attractive, without corruption and helpful. Barnabas was a teacher in the church at Antioch, and he is called “a good man” (Acts 11:24). The requirement of “deeds done in humility” would most probably have been a shock for many of James’ readers. The culture into which they had been born, and that which surrounded them was self-assertive, where strong masculinity was looked upon as normal standard. The whole idea of meekness was despised. Christian teachers, following their Master (Matt.11:29), were to be different; they must learn the very difficult art of exercising authority in a humble manner. Teaching and the way of life of the teacher must not be separated. What the teacher is affects the way he teaches and the way people receive what he says.

Verse 14

***But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts,***

Once again James leaves us in no doubt about what he is saying. The two attitudes described here are the very opposite to the goodness and humility of the previous verse. “Bitter envy” translates an idea of inner heat. It is a readiness to fight for one’s rights, or position. It is self-interest on fire! “Selfish ambition” is a determination to promote one’s self and one’s own ideas even at the cost of causing resentment and division in the church.

***do not boast about it or deny the truth.***

These words are a warning that we should examine ourselves. If what has just been said is true of us, we should admit it, and withdraw from the intention of becoming a teacher. We should not boast about these defects as though they were assets, and we should understand that when such people become teachers, they are, in themselves, a denial of the truth they proclaim. All who preach and teach need to be known by their hearers and students as practising what they preach and teach. There has to be a searching of heart to root out all envy and selfish ambition. Such seeking and confession will

stem from a close relationship with God, and bring the preacher to the very truths of God.

Verse 15

***Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven***

We now read of the source of this “false wisdom”. What a contrast with 1:5 where James reminds us that the source of true wisdom is God himself (Rom. 11:33-36). This wisdom was seen in Jesus Christ (Luke 2:52; Col. 2:3), and the character of “false wisdom” described in verse 14 is the opposite of what we see in him.

***but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.***

Self-centredness and self-promotion, far from reflecting wisdom from heaven, have their origin in the godless culture of the world. Paul warns about this in Romans 12:2. Such attitudes cannot arise from an application of Scripture to our thinking and are therefore “unspiritual”. Furthermore, a mind that is not under the mastery of Scripture is always open to the influence of Satan, and in this context Satan is very keen to create ill-feeling, division and discord in the church.

Verse 16

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

The opposite to self-centredness is Christ-centredness. If we do not have the ambition to please him in everything, Satan will soon drive us to wanting other people to please us (envy), and give way to us. The result will be restlessness and division in the church and the Corinthian problem of fragmentation (1 Co.1:10-12)<sup>1</sup> will soon arise. The force of the words “evil practice” seems to be worthlessness. A divided church does no good; it defiles the space it occupies!

Verse 17

But the wisdom that comes from heaven

This means wisdom from God (1:5). The source of true, spiritual wisdom is God and is so different from the earthly (false) wisdom described in the previous verses. When Jesus Christ came down from heaven (John 3:31-33), he brought God’s wisdom down to earth. This would have left an impres-

<sup>1</sup> The church at Corinth was divided. Rather than being an example of unity to the surrounding discordant society, the Corinthian church resembled it. The church should have been different, but instead was contaminated with the dirt of the world. The problem stemmed from the Christians losing sight of the grace they had in Christ and becoming obsessed with the mistrust and jealousies they had for each other. Paul in writing his letter, which we have recorded in the Bible as 1 Corinthians, has to deal with this problem. This takes up the opening chapters of that letter.

sion upon James as he witnessed the life of Jesus at home with the family. This kind of wisdom that James is going to describe arises only in the lives of those who are “born from above”. Such a life of wisdom is another essential confirmation of the genuineness of a profession of faith.

***is first of all pure;***

Impurity always leads to loss and misery. This is especially so in the case of sexual uncleanness, but it is the same with such impurity as dishonesty and drunkenness. What a good thing it is that the new birth enables us to be wise! Purity provides the foundation for what follows.

***then peace-loving,***

We are not likely to work for unity and harmony within the church if we enjoy chaos, discord or disputes. If we love peace we will work for it. Jesus indicated that peace-making was one of the outstanding signs that we are children of God (Matt.5:9), that is, those who are born again.

***considerate,***

This consideration is a tool in the hands of a peace-maker. It means going as far as we can in seeing other people’s points of view and doing things the way they would prefer. It is not the same as giving in to every whim or opinion of others, but is a willingness to please them as far as we can. Far from being weak, this requires considerable strength of mind.

***submissive,***

Closely linked to being “considerate”, being submissive is showing a willingness to listen to what others want to say to us and for our minds to be changed if what they say is reasonable. Unity in church life is hardly possible if no one is willing to admit (however reluctantly) to the possibility of being wrong.

***full of mercy***

This begins by remembering our own weaknesses and limitations, so that we realise that other people are just as human as we are. If we do this, we will be less inclined to criticise others, and more ready to forgive their faults and mistakes. A big cause of discord in church life (and family life) is to have too high an expectation of others. We look for a perfection in them that we fall short of in ourselves. God remembers that we are dust (Ps. 103:14), for which we are thankful. We should have the same attitude toward others that God has toward us.

***and good fruit,***

The meaning here is not absolutely clear, but James is well aware of Jesus’ teaching, so we must assume that by “fruit”, he means the same as Jesus in his teaching in John 15:1-17. The evidence of wisdom from heaven will be lives that remind others of the character of Jesus. Paul details what that

means in his description of the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23). (See Study 23, Book 3 of Galatians Preachers’ Study Papers for a detailed analysis of these verses.)

***impartial***

Leaders have to make judgements and they are always in danger of being influenced by their own prejudices or ambitions, and coming to unfair conclusions. We will gain the confidence of the people if they can be sure that we will deal with differences within the church without bias or favouritism.

***and sincere.***

The word here means being without hypocrisy or not trying to be two different people like an actor who is one thing at home and another on the stage. What we are in church and what we are in the family or at work can be two very different things. This is appropriate as the last word in this description of a life controlled by heavenly wisdom and in the context of James’ main theme. The life we live may not agree with the faith we profess. If this is so, we are trying to be two different people. So James agrees with Paul’s exhortation, “Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil.1:27).

Verse 18

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

Spiritual progress in the life of the church will depend very much on the quality of the fellowship, and it may well be that this is close to what James is saying here. Many other things are involved such as sound teaching and earnest prayer, but even when these exist in a large measure, if there is not a peacefulness in the church, spiritual progress is unlikely. With this in mind we can see the peacemakers in this verse as those described in verse 17. Such people will be like farmers who sow the seed that will produce the crop they desire. Here the seed is peace, and the harvest is righteousness. James is probably using the word “righteousness” in the sense of salvation, similar to its use in Isaiah 45:22-25. When a church is at peace in its life before God, then it may look for people to be saved.



## Summary

James is still working out his major theme of testing the genuineness of our profession of faith by the quality of what we say and do. Here he does this by contrasting two kinds of wisdom based on two different sources. If a professing Christian’s life is one of self-centredness creating discord in the church, then that life is based on the world’s wisdom and we have to question if it is possible for such a person to be born again. James’ description of a life based on God’s wisdom could be a mirror of the life of Jesus Christ on earth. If we are born again, that will be our aim and we will grieve at our falling short of it.



## A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

**Theme:** Ambition – can be wrongly or rightly directed

### Introduction

Ambition is part of what it means to be human.

- i. Without ambition, life has little meaning.
- ii. We need an aim to which we give our minds and energies.
- iii. Wrong ambition can ruin us – right ambition is a mark of a Christian.

### I. Ambition can be wrongly directed

In Scripture it is called selfish (Gal. 5:20; Phil. 1:17; 2:3; James 3:14,16). It belongs to earthly wisdom – a life without Christ.

1. There are ambitions that are obviously wrong – to become rich or famous; to achieve power or position out of pride.
2. There are ambitions that seem right – to live for our family, our work, to live as well as we can in order to earn favour with God and his salvation.

These end in failure or frustration and die with us.

### II. Ambition can be rightly directed

1. This comes as a result of being saved, not in order to be saved.
2. Because we are saved we want to please God out of love and thankfulness (2 Cor.5:14-15).
3. We do all we can and spend ourselves to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom.15:20; 1 Thess.4:11-12).

4. We work hard for the benefit of God's people (2 Cor.12:15).
5. We strive to be like Jesus Christ (Phil.2:3-11).
6. We prepare diligently for entry into our Lord's presence (Phil.3:12-14).

N.B. This ambition is the mark of a true believer.



## Focus Point: Worldliness

James' main concern in his letter was to make Christian believers see that their normal way of life was to be different from that of the non-Christian and that this lifestyle had to match the faith they professed. In this study we have considered the need for heavenly wisdom and not the earthly one instigated by the devil. As we continue our studies into chapter 4 we will deal with the problem of Christians fighting and quarrelling amongst themselves. Christian believers have the capacity to sin in the most awful ways and not just by accident. As we address these issues we will see that part of the problem lies in the way the believer looks upon the world and the influence it has upon him. The believer is now not of this world but still in it. In 4:4 James directs his comments at Christian believers whose thinking and lifestyles reflected much of the world and not their faith in Christ. James describes this as friendship with the world, which must be seen as hatred towards God.

The world we are here thinking about is that world which is opposed to God and his revealed will set out in the Bible. The word "worldliness" is used to describe the attitude and pattern of life which arises from open rebellion against God. The difficulty we have is that worldliness can be so easily narrowed down to a list of outward actions. In some Christian communities things like smoking, drinking, styles of dress, dancing etc. are used to categorise people between godliness and worldliness. Whilst such actions may provide some clues, especially if they are excessive, we have to look much deeper to start distinguishing traits of worldliness in a believer. We must not forget that James has been talking about all different kinds of sins that the Christian believer must attend to. A person may abstain from all the actions we have mentioned above and yet still be consumed by worldly desires and passions.

James views worldliness mainly as the spirit of a life and not its outward form. He understands worldliness to be when the inner desires and motives are in harmony with those of the world. The world does not know or does not want to know God. The things of this world are the riches that fade

away, seeking the praise of men, preferring the pleasures of fleshly lust. It is when a Christian believer goes after these things in his heart and would rather not be distracted or interfered with by the God of the Bible that we can describe such a person as having fallen into worldliness.

Worldliness is not an alternative lifestyle that is all right with God. It is a rejection of God's ways, infringing his will. It affects believers in every society of every age. Whether it is a rich society or a poor one struggling in harsh conditions, the world still has its ways of doing things which are contrary to God's will. Corruption, dishonesty, greed are to be found in all walks of worldly life and it is not difficult for the unwary Christian to be sucked into such a way of thinking and living.

Source used: Gordon J. Keddie, *The Practical Christian* (Evangelical Press)



## Over to you

Why do you think people should listen to our preaching?

- Because we preach the truth?
- Because we make them laugh?
- Because we shout?
- Because we tell interesting stories?
- Because they love us?
- Because we live what we preach?
- Because we use modern language?
- Because we explain the Bible?
- Because they know we love them?