

James 3:13-18

James 3:13-18 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. (14) But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. (15) This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. (16) For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. (17) But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. (18) Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Questions On The Text

How is the wise person supposed to demonstrate their wisdom?

Verse 13: The wise and understanding person is supposed to show their wisdom by good conduct and good works. One of the signs of that wisdom is meekness.

What is the alternative wisdom to God's wisdom?

Verses 14-16: There is another kind of wisdom that doesn't come from God. It is described as being earthly, sensual, and demonic in origin. The word translated as "sensual" can also be translated "soulish" or "unspiritual". It is derived from the Greek word for "soul" and emphasises the selfish nature of ungodly wisdom.

This kind of wisdom is also characterised by envy and self-seeking. The word translated "envy" actually means jealousy. In Greek, it can mean either jealousy or zeal. Both these English words can be used in a positive or negative sense, as zeal can negatively be fanaticism which leads to factions, and jealousy can obviously be good, since God is a jealous God (see Exodus 20:5). Jealousy is the desire to have what someone else has got. The word for "self-seeking" contains within it the idea of being motivated by self-interest, looking out for your own personal interests. Contrast this with what Paul says in Philippians 2:3-4.

James says that wherever these godless qualities exist, confusion and every evil thing are there too.

How is God's wisdom described?

Verse 17: God's wisdom is first pure, then peaceable. As important as it is to be a peacemaker, purity is more important, and it is given priority here. Truth should never be sacrificed for the sake of keeping the peace.

However, being the kind of person that seeks to make peace is one of the defining qualities of godly wisdom (see Matthew 5:9). It would hardly be fitting for those who have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (see 2 Corinthians 5:18-19) to fail to be peacemakers. Two other important qualities mentioned here would characterise the peacemaker: Gentle and willing to yield.

A person who is willing to yield is willing to give ground and compromise, as long as it doesn't compromise the truth. This is the quality that was demonstrated in Acts 11:18 when the apostles had taken issue with Peter for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. As soon as they heard how God had been instrumental in the process they backed down; they were willing to yield.

The word for "full of mercy" has the same root as the word for alms. This underscores the practical nature of Christian wisdom. It's not just what you know that counts; it's what you do.

The remaining three characteristics of godly wisdom are full of good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. So God's wisdom is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without

partiality and without hypocrisy. This helps us to identify genuine wisdom. Anything that doesn't fit this full description may be wisdom, but it isn't God's wisdom.

How is the fruit of righteousness sown?

James emphasises again the importance of peacemaking, mentioning the fruit of righteousness which is sown in peace by peacemakers. Hebrews 12:11 further tells us that this "peaceable fruit of righteousness" comes to those who have been trained by God's chastening.

Further Questions For Discussion:

How does God's description of true wisdom differ from the usual understanding of wisdom?

What is confusion evidence of? See vs. 16.

Why is it more important for wisdom to be pure than peaceable?

Is it possible that legalism could masquerade as purity?

Why is peacemaking such an important characteristic for a Christian to develop? Discuss this in the light of Jesus' ministry. See Romans 5:1.

How good are you at being a peacemaker in your personal relationships?