

James' Letter

6: Heavenly Wisdom vs Human Wisdom

We now move into the fourth main teaching of James' letter where he points out the power that heavenly wisdom has in this world and the problem that human wisdom tends to create in this world.

This is not to say that all human wisdom is inherently bad; James is simply pointing out our natural tendency to fall into all sorts of selfishness when we lack the spiritual wisdom that comes from knowing God and following Christ.

Living the way this world tells us to live will create more problems but living the way Christ teaches us to live will create more peace.

The Problem of Human Wisdom

James alludes to human wisdom in the context of people defending what they believe to be right and true but doing so in a spirit of bitterness and arrogance. He warns us of having jealousy and selfish ambition in our hearts which will lead us to try and assert ourselves and to act as if we're the ones who have got life figured out.

James writes:

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. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. (3:14-16)

Selfish ambition is divisive and within it there is a willingness to disrupt peace and unity if it helps us defend ourselves or promote ourselves. The wisdom of this world teaches a survival of the fittest mentality full of the passion to defend ourselves and assert ourselves by any means necessary.

How often do people passionately stand up for what they believe is the truth but do so in a way that creates more division and disorder?

How often do we feel the need to stand up for ourselves or defend ourselves when we have been criticized, challenged, ridiculed or disrespected?

When there is a hint of jealousy and envy in our hearts, we will constantly feel threatened by those around us and tend to view them as our competition. Any time we feel attacked, we will be quick to find a way to attack back. James declares this kind of mentality to be earthly, unspiritual and even demonic. Human wisdom tends to assume that winning the argument is the way to live, but this only creates more division, disorder and disruptive behavior. So what can help us overcome this tendency and natural way of thinking?

The Power of Heavenly Wisdom

James declares that true wisdom is characterized by a way of living that reflects the life of Christ. He writes:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. (3:13)

When James speaks here of displaying our works in the meekness of wisdom, he is challenging all followers of Christ to live a life of genuine humility like Jesus who is the embodiment of true wisdom. Meekness is the opposite of self-assertiveness and seeking your own self-interest. And it requires more strength, courage and confidence than our tendency to attack and retaliate.

Meekness is a temperament in which we trust God so much and are so surrendered to His sovereignty over our lives that we are completely free from the anxieties and concerns of trying to defend or assert ourselves.

Jesus never felt the need to defend Himself or His actions and often refused to promote who He really was as the eternal Son of God with any elaborate displays of the supernatural power that He actually possessed. Meekness is not weakness. Even though Jesus humbly experienced suffering from His creation, He could have just as easily executed the slaughter of His creation. Jesus was so surrendered to the will of the Father that His only concern was the glory of God. Heavenly wisdom reminds us that life is about the glory of God.

The Product of Heavenly Wisdom

James goes on to describe the type of conduct and character that heavenly wisdom produces. He writes:

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. (3:17)

In his most famous teaching, Jesus described the type of character that a true follower of His would possess. These character traits are often referred to as the Beatitudes and they are exactly the same sort of traits listed here by James.

Jesus said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.¹ (Matthew 5:2-12)

These character traits listed by James and Jesus show us very definitively what a Christian truly is. A *Christ-ian* is someone who is like our Lord Jesus Christ and who is increasingly becoming more and more like Him to the point of being rejected and even at times suffering like Him.

True citizens of God's Kingdom are those who look like and live like our King.

¹ Matthew 5:2-12

Christ is the firstborn of all creation and all things were created through Him and for Him. He is the Head of the body, High Priest of the church and the King of the Christians.

Though He was rich, He became poor in spirit deciding that He would live as a man though He was still God. He willingly put Himself in a position where He was entirely dependent upon the Father. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He mourned the sinfulness of man and wept over the state of the world. And yet, He committed no sin and no deceit was found in Him. He was perfect, spotless, blameless and pure in heart. He did not hunger and thirst for bread alone but for every word that comes from the Father. It was His constant desire and focus to please the Father and to seek reconciliation and restoration for the world. In His mercy, He was willing to come and save us from our misery and the miserable consequences of our sin. He is the Prince of Peacemaking who did not consider His own protection and comfort but came and actively died for us in order to grant us peace with God and peace among one another. He was rejected and suffered the ultimate persecution because His righteousness made Him so different and distinct that self-righteousness men and self-driven men had to get rid of Him. In His meekness, He stayed on that cross when He didn't have to and for the joy set before Him, endured the shame while mercifully praying for God to forgive His persecutors because they were victims of the curse and prisoners to sin.

This is the kind of King that we serve, and this is the kind of character He supernaturally creates in those who are truly His people.

And so, would you consider yourself a power-seeker or a peace-maker?

Human ambition creates more problems in this world, but the way of Christ creates more peace and a harvest of righteousness.

In the words of James, true wisdom is living a life that reflects the life of Christ. And let us not forget that if we ever feel we are lacking this wisdom, all we must do is ask God in sincere and persistent prayer, and it will be given to us.