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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“GET WISDOM”**

**James 3:13-18; Genesis 3**

- {Proverbs 4:7, NRSV; 8:11, TNIV; 16:22, NRSV; 10:21, NRSV}

**“The beginning of wisdom is this: *Get wisdom. And whatever else you get, get insight,*” “for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her.” “Wisdom is a fountain of life to the one who has it,” but “Fools die for lack of sense.”**

The words *wisdom* and *wise* appear many hundreds of times in 41 books in the Old and New Testaments. Only 25 do not include them. More often than not the Scriptures extol wisdom as a precious, life-giving virtue that is to be doggedly sought, highly valued, and tenaciously clung to.

- But not always. Consider the account of the Fall in Genesis 3. Why does Eve eat the forbidden fruit? She sees {Ge 3:6} **“that it [is] good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also *desirable for gaining wisdom.*”** She gives a piece of fruit to Adam who is with her and he eats it too, evidently for the same reasons.

The fruit’s desirability **“for gaining wisdom”** is the critical factor. When does Eve decide to disobey the LORD YHWH’s explicit command? Immediately after the devil says: {Ge 3:5} **“when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil,”** you will be wise as All-Knowing God is wise.

It isn’t absolutely deceptive. The humans’ eyes *are* opened. Not, however, to the knowledge of God – rather to the knowledge of the guilt, shame, fear, alienation, pain

and death which are the bitter fruit of sin. They *do* learn about evil, by directly involving themselves in it; the only thing they learn about good is what it is not.

As for becoming like God: by their action their capacity to bear his image is suddenly impaired. They are less like the Creator than they were before.

- Adam and Eve’s new {Is 47:10, KJV} **“wisdom and knowledge [pervert]”** them. {Eccl 1:18, TNIV} **“With”** it **“comes much sorrow. The [greater *this*] knowledge, the [greater their] grief.”**

- If **“Wisdom is,”** as Proverbs 16:22 declares, **“a fountain of life,”** it is a different kind of wisdom than the wisdom they have gained. The way of **“wisdom”** that seemed so right to them {Pr 14:12} **“leads,” “in the end,” “to death.”**

In this era of accelerated technological development, expanding information, hyper-connectivity, busyness, globalization, pluralism, worsening economic inequality, moral uncertainty, political unrest, and violence we need good wisdom more than ever, do we not?! We need the wisdom that gives us life, glorifies God and blesses our neighbors!

- Please turn with me to James 3. In verses 13-18 our author compares true and false wisdom.

- ▣ True and false wisdom have opposite sources.

- True wisdom **“comes from heaven”** (verse 17). A human mind enlightened by heavenly wisdom {Ro 12:2} is being renewed, and is **“able to test and approve what God’s” “good, pleasing and perfect will” “is.”**

■ But false wisdom (verse 14) **“is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”** It follows that a human mind which is darkened by worldly wisdom {Ro 8:7} **“is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.”**

▣ True and false wisdom are radically dissimilar.

■ Verse 17: true wisdom **“is first of all pure.”** It is holy, devoted to God’s purposes, untainted by immorality, idolatry, and injustice.

② **“Then peace loving.”** This wisdom makes us eager for relational harmony and emboldens us to take practical steps to achieve it.

③ True wisdom is **“considerate”** (literally, **“gentle”**). It makes us strong enough not to use force or violence to achieve our goals.

④ It is also **“submissive.”** Wisdom that **“comes from heaven”** helps us to be obedient to God and meek toward others.

⑤ True wisdom is **“full of mercy.”** It equips us to forgive those who sin against us, and to be kind to those in our power.

**“And”** ⑥ **“full of... good fruit.”** This is not mere head knowledge. It enlightens the mind, *and* it warms the heart, moves the feet, and empowers the hands.

⑦ This wisdom is **“impartial.”** It equips us to serve others, practice hospitality, develop friendships, and make moral judgments without self-interest or sinful discrimination.

And ⑧ the wisdom that **“comes from heaven”** is **“sincere,”** authentic, genuine. What we claim to know is consistent with how we speak and what we do.

■ False wisdom is quite different. In verse 14 James warns: **“if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.”** Greed, ego-centrism, pride, and deception are at the heart of the so-called “wisdom” that {Pr 14:12} **“appears to be right, but”** which is **“earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”**

○ This is very much at play in Genesis chapter 3. By misquoting the Creator and asking, {Ge 3:1} **“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”** the serpent gets the woman to focus on what is forbidden, igniting a feeling of envy.

○ By claiming that {Ge 3:4-5} **“You will not surely die... God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”** the serpent stirs up a selfish ambition to exceed creaturely limits, sows an arrogant aspiration to become God’s equal, and clouds Eve’s judgment with falsehood.

But we don’t have to go back to Genesis to see false wisdom in action, do we?! How many of us live as though *This is all there is so eat, drink, and be merry; and He who dies with the most toys wins; and You’ve got to look out for number one; and The ends justify the means?*

▣ And true and false wisdom have very different outcomes.

■ Verse 18 concludes our text: **“Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”** There is more to true wisdom than

peace. Still, James zeros in on this as its distinguishing mark.

Disciples who seek and get heavenly wisdom are “**peace loving**” (verse 17). They are “**peacemakers**” who seek to create peace (verse 18). What is more, they “**sow in peace**” (verse 18): not only is peace their end, it is the means by which they interact at home, at church, and out in the community. It is both their goal and the way they achieve it.

Consequently they “**raise a harvest of righteousness.**” They are not sinless; but they are learning to {Mt 22:37-40} “**Love the Lord...God with all [their] heart... soul and... mind**” and to “**Love [their] neighbor as [themselves],**” thereby fulfilling “**All the Law and the Prophets.**” They are not perfect; but they increasingly think, speak, and act rightly toward God, self, and neighbor. They live as those who are being saved {Eph 2:8, 10} “**by grace...through faith**” in the crucified and resurrected Jesus, “**to do good works.**”

■ Miss this and we miss the thrust of this passage. In verse 13, which introduces the text, James writes: “**Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.**”

○ As {Jas 2:26} “**faith without deeds is dead,**” so wisdom {Jas 2:17} “**by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.**” Our knowledge might be accurate, we might find the intellectual exercise to be stimulating, but apart from good deeds it is not true wisdom. Acts of

αγαπε (agape) love and holiness are both the substance and evidence of godly wisdom.

“**A good life,**” “**deeds done in...humility,**” and “**a harvest of righteousness**” are the outcome of “**the wisdom that comes from heaven.**”

■ As for false wisdom, verse 16 states that “**where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and every evil practice.**”

Consider the impact of the first sin {Ge 3:8-19}: the man and woman felt ashamed; they were afraid of God; they denied personal responsibility; the woman’s travail in childbirth intensified; the male-female relationship became competitive; the earth became much less fertile; what had been pleasurable work became burdensome labor; and our physical death was assured.

Worldly wisdom does not make us “**like God**”; it degrades us. Worldly wisdom does not unite us with God; it drives a wedge between us. Worldly wisdom does not fill us with life; it kills us. Worldly wisdom does not glorify God and manifest his kingdom; it promotes “**disorder and every evil practice.**” That is its outcome.

*Aren’t you sick of worldly wisdom? I am!*

But don’t we catch ourselves relying on worldly wisdom, again and again? We do not have to!

○ James 1:5: “**If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.**”

There are many things the LORD does not give when we ask – not because he is stingy but because he desires to give us something better.

○ But not the wisdom **“that comes from heaven.”** Ask for that in faith, and it will be given; **“But when [we] ask,”** James 1:6-7, we **“must believe and not doubt...Those who doubt should not think they will receive anything from the Lord; they are double-minded and unstable in all they do.”**

May we, by the grace of God, be **“wise and understanding.”** And may we **“show it by [our] good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.”**