

Introduction

“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.”

- James 1:5 -

We are to be a people who seek after wisdom. We are also to be a people who ask God for wisdom.

Here’s the thing – when it comes to ‘wisdom’ - not all ‘wisdom’ is equal.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

¹⁵ Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

-James 3:13-18-

I. Wisdom from Below

In chapter 3 verse 15, James says that the wisdom that does not come from heaven is “...earthly, unspiritual, demonic.”

“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?” -James 4:4a

Key words that characterize wisdom from below:

ζῆλος [zelos (pronounced ZAY-los)] (‘envy’/’jealousy’)¹; and

ἐριθεία [eritheia (pronounced eh-ree-thay'-ah)] (‘selfish ambition’)².

ζῆλος [zelos (pronounced ZAY-los)] – Could be defined as “...a particularly strong feeling of resentment and jealousy against someone.”³

ἐριθεία [eritheia (pronounced eh-ree-thay'-ah)] – Could be defined as “...a feeling of resentfulness based upon jealousy and implying rivalry”⁴

¹ Louw & Nida, *infra*. note 3

² Louw & Nida, *infra*. note 4

³ Louw, Johannes P. & Nida, Eugene. (1988). Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains. United Bible Societies. www.laparola.net/greco/parola.php?p=%CE%B6%E1%BF%86%CE%BB%CE%BF%CF%82

⁴ Louw & Nida, *supra*. note 3 at www.laparola.net/greco/parola.php?p=%E1%BC%90%CF%81%CE%B9%CE%B8%CE%B5%E1%BD%B7%CE%B1

“Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If someone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.”

- C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity⁵ -

This ‘wisdom’ that is “...earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (James 3:15) is also likely about retaliation and violence. ζήλος [zelos (pronounced ZAY-los)] as ‘zeal.’

II. Wisdom from Above

James 3:17-18 sound a lot like the beatitudes. Jesus says,

*“Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart...
Blessed are the peacemakers...”*

- Matthew 5:7-9 -

D.A. Carson says that the beatitudes are the “...norms of the kingdom...”⁶

What we discover, then, is that to embrace the “...wisdom that comes from heaven...” (James 3:17) means to embrace the kingdom way of life.

All the characteristics of this wisdom from above are ways of being that build up community; this is in contrast to envy and selfish ambition, which tear community and relationships apart.

III. Living with Real Wisdom

Real wisdom isn’t just about head knowledge; it’s the skill of living in a way that aligns with the values of the kingdom of God.

To live with real wisdom means to follow the way of peace and humility, in contrast to the way of envy and selfish ambition. We do what Paul tells us in Romans 12:18:

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

To live with real wisdom also means to live connected to the One who is wisdom.

“It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”

-1 Corinthians 1:30 -

⁵ Lewis, C.S. (2001). Mere Christianity. HarperOne. 122.

⁶ Carson, D.A. (1975) Sermon, “Kingdom of Heaven: Its Norms and Witness”.

www.thegospelcoalition.org/sermon/kingdom-of-heaven-its-norms-and-witness-matthew-5-1-16/

Life Group Discussion and Reflection

Open Up

1. Think of the wisest people that you know. What makes them wise? What are some words that you would use to describe them?

Read James 3:13-18

Dig In

2. What are some things that first stand out to you after reading this passage? Does anything that James says about wisdom surprise you?
3. Can you think of some contexts or examples in our world today where the way of ‘envy’ and ‘selfish ambition’ are thought to be the way of ‘wisdom?’ How can we be tempted toward this?
4. Read the quote from C.S. Lewis on pride (see above, under section I). What do you think about what C.S. Lewis says? How do you think we can find freedom from the comparison and competitiveness against others?
5. Look at the list of words that James uses to describe “...wisdom that comes from heaven...” in James 3:17. Which of those qualities do you find most challenging to live out? Why?
6. After reading and reflecting on this text, if someone asked you what it means to be a wise person, what would you now say?

Prayer

Take some time to share prayer requests and pray for each other. Pray that your group would grow in wisdom and that characteristics like those James lists in 3:17-18 would define those in your group.