



The Letter of James
Bible Study Session 8
James 3:13-18

Study By
Lorin L Cranford

Greek NT

<3:13> Τίς σοφός καὶ ἐπιστήμων ἐν ὑμῖν; δεῖξάτω ἐκ τῆς καλῆς ἀναστροφῆς τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ ἐν πραΰτητι σοῦας. <3:14> εἰ δὲ ζῆλον πικρὸν ἔχετε καὶ ἐριθειαν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν, μὴ κατακαυχᾶσθε καὶ ψεύδεσθε κατὰ τῆς ἀληθείας. <3:15> οὐκ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ σοῦα ἀνωθεν κατερχομένη ἀλλὰ ἐπίγειος, ψυχικὴ, δαιμονιώδης. <3:16> ὅπου γὰρ ζῆλος καὶ ἐριθεία, ἐκεῖ ἀκαταστασία καὶ πᾶν φαῦλον πρᾶγμα. <3:17> ἡ δὲ ἀνωθεν σοῦα πρῶτον μὲν ἀγνή ἐστίν, ἔπειτα εἰρήνικη, ἐπιεικὴς εὐπειθής, μεστή ἐλέους καὶ καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν, ἀδιάκριτος, ἀνυπόκριτος. <3:18> καρπὸς δὲ δικαιοσύνης ἐν εἰρήνῃ σπείρεται τοῖς ποιοῦσιν εἰρήνην.

Elberfelder

13. Wer ist weise und verständig unter euch? Er zeige aus dem guten Wandel seine Werke in Sanftmut der Weisheit. 14. Wenn ihr aber bitteren Neid und Streitsucht in eurem Herzen habt, so rühmet euch nicht und lüget nicht wider die Wahrheit. 15. Dies ist nicht die Weisheit, die von oben herabkommt, sondern eine irdische, sinnliche, teuflische. 16. Denn wo Neid und Streitsucht ist, da ist Zerrüttung und jede schlechte Tat. 17. Die Weisheit aber von oben ist aufs erste rein, sodann friedsam, gelinde, folgsam, voll Barmherzigkeit und guter Früchte, unparteiisch, ungeheuchelt. 18. Die Frucht der Gerechtigkeit in Frieden aber wird denen gesät, die Frieden stiften.

NRSV

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

NLT

13 If you are wise and understand God's ways, live a life of steady goodness so that only good deeds will pour forth. And if you don't brag about the good you do, then you will be truly wise! 14 But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your hearts, don't brag about being wise. That is the worst kind of lie. 15 For jealousy and selfishness are not God's kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and motivated by the Devil. 16 For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and every kind of evil. 17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no partiality and is always sincere. 18 And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of goodness.

The Study of the Text:¹

Context of our passage:

STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF TEXT
Of James²

PRAESCRIPTIO		1.1
BODY	1-194	1.2-5.20
Facing Trials	1-15	1.2-12
God and Temptation	16-24	1.13-18
The Word and Piety	25-37	1.19-27
Faith and Partiality	38-55	2.1-13
Faith and Works	56-72	2.14-26

¹With each study we will ask two basic questions. First, what was the most likely meaning that the first readers of this text understood? This is called the 'historical meaning' of the text. That must be determined, because it becomes the foundation for the second question, "What does the text mean to us today?" For any applicational meaning of the text for modern life to be valid it must grow out of the historical meaning of the text. Otherwise, the perceived meaning becomes false and easily leads to wrong belief.

²Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, *A Study Manual of James: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publications, Inc., 1988), 285. **Statements** indicate core thought expressions in the text as a basis for schematizing the rhetorical structure of the text. These are found in the Study Manual and also at the James Study internet site.

Controlling the Tongue	73-93	3.1-12
True and False Wisdom	94-102	3.13-18
Solving Divisions	103-133	4.1-10
Criticism	134-140	4.11-12
Leaving God Out	141-146	4.13-17
Danger in Wealth	147-161	5.1-6
Persevering under Trial	162-171	5.7-11
Swearing	172-174	5.12
Reaching Out to God	175-193	5.13-18
Reclaiming the Wayward	194	5.19-20

The literary setting of 3:13-18 can be seen from the above charting of the pericopes in James. It represents the second treatment of the topic of wisdom, the first being 1:5-8. There the issue was acquiring wisdom; here the issue is defining authentic wisdom. Wisdom, *ἡ σοφία* in the Greek, is much more than knowledge, *ἡ γνῶσις*. It is life-skill that understands how to cope with the trials and tribulations of daily living.

In James' world, two very distinct views of wisdom dominated. The Greek understanding of *ἡ σοφία* saw wisdom as cleverness and astuteness toward life. The wise person always knew how to get ahead of everyone else and find success where others found only failure. This view of wisdom promoted pride and elitist superiority. On the other hand, the Jewish understanding of *ἡ σοφία* was rooted in the Hebrew stem נכח with a complex of words coming from this root stem, as described in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*:

The verb נכח occurs 26 times (q 18, pi 3, pu 2, hi 1, hitp 2), נכח as adj. or noun occurs 135 times, the noun נכח 147 times and in the plur. נכח תומך 485 times. 73 instances are in the historical books (נכח 3, נכח 31, נכח 39), 41 in the prophets (נכח 1, נכח 24, נכח 16), 13 in the Psalms (נכח 4, נכח 2, נכח 7), 86 180 in the Wisdom lit. proper (נכח 18, נכח 76, נכח 86),⁸⁷ and 5 in the other books.

Jewish wisdom was grounded in religious commitment to God, as Prov. 1:7 asserts: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." Thus to be wise was to know God and His ways. Ultimately, this wisdom is the skill to look at life from God's vantage point, rather than one's very limited human perspective. The religious foundation of wisdom then shapes the definition of wisdom deeply.

To be wise and insightful means to see life the way God does, and then be guided by God's principles in coping. James saw this as the only true wisdom, and the Greek view of wisdom as false and dangerous.

Exegesis of the Text:

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

The semantic structure of these verses can be charted out as follows, from the Block Diagram in the internet study of James:

(94) ^{3.13} **Who is wise**
and
learned
among you?

(95) **Let him show his deeds**
done in the humility wisdom produces
out of his good conduct

^{3.14} But
if you possess bitter jealousy
and
selfish ambition
in your hearts,

(96) **stop glorying**
in it

and
(97) **---- lying**
against the Truth.

- (98) ^{3.15} **This wisdom is not coming down from above**
 but
- (99) **----- is earthy,**
sensual,
demonic;
- ^{3.16} For
 where jealousy
 and
 selfish ambition exist,
- (100) **there is disorder**
 and
every foul deed.
- ^{3.17} But
- (101) **the wisdom from above is first of all pure,**
 then **peaceable,**
gentle,
ready to obey,
full of mercy
 and
good fruits,
impartial,
unhypocritical;
- ^{3.18} and
- (102) **the fruit of righteousness is being sown**
 in peace
 for/by those practicing peace.

Summary of the Rhetorical Structure:

The rhetorical structure of this pericope is rather well defined. The first two statements (94 and 95) introduce the thesis position of the author. Then a contrast between false wisdom (statements 96 - 100) and true wisdom (statements 101 - 102) follows.

The thesis position (statements 94 and 95) is set up by a rhetorical question (94), followed by a challenge to prove the existence of wisdom (95). The evidence of true wisdom is found not in intellectual sharpness. Rather, it's presence is verified in attitude and action. These two criteria will be used to expose both false wisdom (statements 96 - 100) and true wisdom (statements 101 - 102).

This approach to wisdom reflects James' Jewish background and follows an ancient Jewish view found both in the Old Testament and the intertestamental Jewish wisdom literature. His position also reflects very negatively upon traditional understanding of wisdom in the ancient Greek tradition. The false wisdom section (statements 96-100) directly attacks traits (attitude and actions) that were viewed positively in some of the Greek tradition.

Exegetical Summary:

Wisdom is not evidenced by intellectual accumulation of information. Instead, the presence of true wisdom can be detected in one's actions emerging out of his/her life style. The most visible trait reflecting wisdom is humility. This stands in stark contrast to the Greek wisdom reflected by envy and strife. Such so-called wisdom arises from this world and has demonic tones. Its product is chaotic society characterized by a Pandora's box of evil.

On the other hand, true wisdom displays a series of virtues: purity, peaceableness, gentleness, obedience, mercy, impartiality, and lack of hypocrisy. Its righteous fruit is peace in society. The peacemakers reflect this wisdom.

2. What does the text mean to us today?

1) What kind of wisdom do your attitudes and actions reflect?

2) Describe your understanding of wisdom. Which of the two views of wisdom in James does it relate to more closely?

3) What can be concluded about a Christian community exhibiting the negative attitudes and actions described in 3:14-16?

4) How much peace do you attempt to sow?