

• True wisdom involves a good overall style of life

Now James brings this section to a close with a challenge. *'Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show, from a good style of life, his works done in meekness of wisdom'*¹. The Christian is to learn true wisdom – skill at living in a way that pleases God. It involves a good overall style of life, practical works of compassion, and meekness of attitude. It is this 'good style of life' that James goes on to explain. He does so by comparing two kinds of wisdom.

1 3:13

• Earthly wisdom is naturally sinful

First there is **the wisdom that is earthly**. He urges us not to show worldly wisdom. As he does so he tells us about **its characteristics**. *'But if you have harsh rivalry and selfishness in your heart, do not boast about it and do not lie against the truth'*¹. Then he tells us of its **origin**. *'This wisdom is not a wisdom that comes down from above, but it is earthly wisdom, naturally sinful, devilish'*². Then he explains its results³. Secondly, James will go on to tell us of an altogether greater kind of wisdom: the wisdom that is from above. Again he will describe its **origin**, its **characteristics**⁴ and its **results**⁵.

1 3:14

2 3:15

3 3:16

4 3:17

5 3:18

• Ungodliness may be clever but it is never wise

James begins by calling ungodliness 'wisdom'! It seems to be wise. It is the way in which worldly people live. It is the way we naturally and unthinkingly are 'clever'. Often our bitterness or our harsh rivalry feels as if it is clever; it is (we feel) the way things ought to be done. At the time we speak, we feel it is natural to defend ourselves. It seems to make us superior and skilful. But actually, James says, it is not true wisdom at all. It is clever ungodliness, skilful but wicked talk. It does not take any grace or any working of the Holy Spirit for us to act in such a way. It is the way the world lives.

1. James asks us to set about changing our ways

1. **James asks us to set about changing our ways**. Think of the **characteristics** of this wisdom. *'But if you have harsh rivalry and selfishness in your heart, do not boast about it and do not lie against the truth'*¹. The average man or woman falls easily into 'harsh rivalry'. It may get covered over with a thin appearance of niceness, but at bottom people are rivals with each other and it leads them into harshness. They like to show they are wealthier, more clever, more attractive, even more spiritual, than other people are. But, James says, we are not to regard this as wisdom! We should not boast about this kind of lifestyle. The truth of the Lord Jesus Christ will lead us in the opposite direction. If we live this way we are going **against** the truth of God's gospel. This is the way James' friends were living. They felt good about discriminating against the poor. They wanted to do well in life and pushing aside the poor seemed to them to be acceptable. But James says, No! This is not the way to live.

1 3:14

• Harsh rivalry and selfishness are not the way to live

2. James asks us to think about the origin of this kind of 'wisdom'

2. **James asks us to think of the origin of this kind of 'wisdom'**. It does not come from God. It is 'earthly' – the way the people of the world live. It is 'natural' coming from the remains of a sinful nature. It comes from our ordinary sinful desires, from 'the flesh'. It does not come from the Holy Spirit. The Greek word here means 'soulish'; I translate 'naturally sinful'. Worst of all this 'fleshliness' that we still have within us is roused and stirred up by

‘fleshliness’ that we still have within us is roused and stirred up by the devil. So the wisdom that does not come from above is actually ‘devilish’.

3. James asks us to think of the results of this kind of wisdom

• Leads to foolish acts

• James wants us to see things as they really are

There is an altogether greater kind of wisdom – from above

• It sees things as God sees them

3. James asks us to think of the results of this kind of ‘wisdom’. *‘For where rivalry and selfishness are found, there is chaos and every kind of vile deed’*¹. If we live this way we are falling into extreme confusion. We are not seeing ourselves as we really are. It will lead us into foolish acts that get worse and worse. Unless God intervenes to turn us around it will lead us into all sorts of wicked ways.

Why is James telling us all of this? It is to get us to see things as they really are. Christian godliness begins with repentance. It begins with a change of mind when we really see what is happening to us. We begin to see our cleverness as vile and disgusting. This is the beginning of amending our ways. James trusts that the Holy Spirit will take his words and bring his friends to see that their discrimination and quarrelsomeness is not clever. It is earthly. It is forgetting the Holy Spirit. It is being enticed away from godliness by Satan himself. Yet they are saved people. If they can see themselves as they are, they can turn around and live in a better way altogether.

So James goes on to point to an altogether greater kind of wisdom: **the wisdom that is from above**. *‘But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable’*¹. The outstanding mark of this heavenly wisdom is its purity. It is so clean. What does it mean to be ‘wise’ in this way? True wisdom is slow to act. It does not respond or retaliate without thinking. True wisdom thinks spiritually. It views things the way God views them. It says to itself: what does God think about this? What would God have me do here? What would God have me say? As we slow ourselves down and speak as God would have us speak we are discovering the pathway of wisdom and peace.

¹ 3:16

¹ 3:17a



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