



## **The Truth about Wisdom**

### **James 3:13-18**

#### **What kind of a leader should you follow?**

These vv. are about leadership. Specifically, they're about the kind of leader, or the qualifications of those who assume the responsibility for God's people. Craig Blomberg is helpful:

Someone who lives in a humble and wise way will give more evidence of his standing before God than any number of words could ever do . . . . One recognizes Christian wisdom from a person's mode of life. This means likewise, *not* from his or her intelligence, rhetoric, or relevance . . . . Many congregations need to apply this when they choose their leaders, preferring at the times the humble shepherd to the more charismatic orator. (Blomberg 2008, 180)

Because the persecuted church in Jerusalem was scattered outside Israel, keep in mind that the leadership James spoke of here was most likely leadership over smaller group dynamics—leaders over 10, 50, or 100. So we're not talking about stratospheric leadership dynamics. We're talking about boots on the ground, practical, every day influencers for Christ. What do these kinds of leaders need? What is most helpful for foxhole leadership? James says, "Wisdom!" What is wisdom?

#### **What wisdom is not . . . .**

Wisdom isn't fact possessing, book learning, degree-receiving knowledge. Biblically, wisdom is not an intellectual gift; but a spiritual gift. The Lord gives wisdom. If we lack it, He encourages us to ask for it (James 1:5), and He will generously give it! You know you have wisdom when . . . .

#### **Godly leaders possess wisdom from above**

Wisdom is shown in "excellence of conduct" in the active life of "good deeds." Sometimes the emphasis on "faith" by Protestants has killed "good works"—as if good works are bad. But for James, as there is no such thing as faith without works, so there is no such thing as wisdom without works. Wisdom without works is sterile knowledge; knowledge with good works manifests the very presence of God's goodness in this world.

The good deeds-that-show-wisdom for James are all wrapped up in humility, which in the book of James emphasizes the absence of self-interest, the suppression of self-will, and the denial of self-empowerment.

In particular, it shows up in how we talk to one another—and a good word for it today is "civility." The problem with teachers, as James is so prone to emphasize in 3:1-4:12, is self-aggrandizing power and the abuse of others with the tongue. The wise person suppresses the evil and makes way for what is good. (McKnight)

The result is peace. Wisdom always leaves peace in its wake. *Peacemaking* is not the same as *peacekeeping*. A *peacekeeper* merely avoids conflict and confrontation. *Peacemakers* find their way through the conflict and confrontation. Peacemakers often experience and absorb the violence of conflict themselves so that the community can enjoy the fruit of peace. Who cannot think of the Cross? Did not Jesus absorb the full penalty of our sin and disobedience so that we may enjoy peace with God?

### **Godly leaders shun wisdom from below**

Wisdom from below operates out of closed system. It is unholy trio of envious, selfish, and demonic thinking. Its premise is that there are only so many pieces of the pie to go around. More for you means less for me. You could call it scarcity mentality. It totally leaves God, the Father of every good and perfect gift, out of the picture.

Worldly wisdom assumes that being depends on having, that identity and worth derive from what is possessed . . . . To have less is to be less; less worthy, real, or important. To have more is to be more. Fundamental to envy also is the conviction that humans exist in a closed system, a finite world of limited resources. There is only so much to go around. The world is a zero sum game: for one to have more means for another to have less. To become more, therefore, one must somehow possess more. The logic of envy moves toward competition for scarce resources so that even prayer to God is carried out for the purposes of achieving desires (4:1-3). (Johnson 1995, 288)

### **Why wisdom from above matters**

So, what does it take to lead the community of redeemed, but persecuted people? And to lead in a way that they won't quit or become discouraged and disgruntled? This made me think about the scores of annual church leadership seminars on American soil. How many church leadership seminars are built on the assumption that the United States is the sole superpower? The sole shaper of culture? How many of these seminars are based on the assumption of the U.S. economy? My student ministry training in the 80s was based on a suburban, program-driven, white, middle-to-upper-middle class, baby boomer model—which incidentally, is an unsustainable model. What does it take to lead God's people through trials of many kinds? We need a seminar from James! We need a corps of pastors, teachers, and shepherds who are more than program managers; rather, we need Christ-saturated and spiritually undiluted sages, who will give their lives for the gospel and leave in their wake—not consumer-minded church shoppers—but Gospel-driven, peacemaking congregations. Furthermore, we need men and women of God who leave in their wake, peace—not turmoil. Psalm 23: 6 says, *Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life*. What is following you?