

**Altavista Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Attitudes of Faith,  
A Series on the Letter of James:  
A Wise Faith”  
Proverbs 24:23-26  
James 3:13-18**

**Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 30, 2018**

### **Proverbs 24:23-26**

These also are sayings of the wise. Partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the wicked, “You are in the right,” will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations, but those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them. Whoever gives an honest answer kisses the lips.

### **Introduction**

Before we continue in our mini-series on the Letter of James, I wanted to speak a little to the culture around the person of James. In Bible Study a couple of weeks ago, we had a good discussion about the cultural differences between Hebraic Jews, who were born and raised in Judea, and Hellenistic Jews, who were born and raised in the metropolitan areas such as Alexandria, Athens, and Chalcedon. Just like there are cultural differences today between folks raised in Campbell County and those raised in Richmond or D.C., similar cultural differences existed between Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews. James is very much a Hebraic Jew, while folks like Philip and Stephen were Hellenistic Jews. Today’s sermon is shaped around some of the vocabulary present in our passage. A lot of the words James uses appear often or uniquely in Deuterocanonical texts. If you’ve ever encountered a Catholic Bible, you likely noticed that they have extra books. There’s a third section called the Apocrypha, and it’s a collection of writings from the centuries between the Old and New Testaments. I don’t have the time to detail these books, but for our purposes it’s enough to know that they are Hebrew in theology but Greek in grammar. One of the reasons some theologians don’t think James’ Epistle should be in the Bible is because he draws very heavily from these Apocryphal texts, which would’ve been very familiar to any 1st Century Jew. His reliance on the wisdom literature actually adds a distinctive flavor to James that, in my opinion, makes him important for study today. So, without further ado...

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

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

### **“A Wise Faith”**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

James is building on the premise that a true and pure faith is active. In the latter half of chapter two, James boldly—and rightly—declares, “faith without works is dead.” Dead faith is what

corrupts and destroys the church. For James, an inactive faith easily leads to the sin of partiality. Having said that, I think he's fully aware that we are not perfect. We will make distinctions. We will fail to render aid. James knows we struggle to follow God's law. We see that he doesn't tell us to be impartial and just leaves it at that. No. He gives us a prescription to combat partiality. James prescribes that faith be wise.

He starts this section by asking, "Who is wise and understanding among you?" There are three ways of looking at wisdom from the biblical perspective. In the Bible, being wise can mean being clever or skillful. In this way, a person is shrewd or talented. This type of wisdom is physical or natural to human beings. Another meaning for wise is learned. Many ancients knew that wisdom comes with experience and many years of study. This type of wisdom is intellectual and while not natural to all humans, it can be taught and honed. And then there's a third type of wisdom, and this is the type that James is talking about. This type of wisdom is a divine gift. Paul says in Colossians 1:28 that we proclaim Jesus by "teaching everyone with all wisdom," so that they may mature in Christ. Maturation in Christ is truly a work of the Holy Spirit and therefore a wisdom that is alien to our nature. It's as if he asks, *Who has the wisdom that comes from God?*

He also asks about understanding. I think of the times when I use that word and I come up with the many instances of clarification. After espousing something I may close by asking, "do you understand what I just said?" Or sometimes I remember getting that question from my mother after she established some rule. "Do you understand me, young man?" To understand something, in the Greek language, is to literally "put one's mind upon it." So, when my mother was scolding me or when discussing complex theology, asking *do you understand* is like asking, "have you been able to wrap your mind around this?" That's what James is asking. *Who here has wrapped his mind around this thing we call the Christian life?* We may think this is a rhetorical question, but his answer leads me to believe James thinks we *are* capable of understanding and receiving true wisdom.

So much so, that he immediately prescribes functions to those who have this self-awareness. Calvin believed that we could understand what it means to be a Christian and to live the Christian life through the knowledge of God and a knowledge of self. James, too, asserts that if someone has this dual knowledge, let him bear witness through "good conduct and meekness of wisdom." I really like the word James uses for conduct. When we think of good conduct or good behavior, we may think of that demeanor parents demand from their children. "We're going to see the pastor, so put on your best behavior." "We're in public, so behave yourself." You know these chidings. This temporary or veneered conduct is not what James has in mind. When he says, "by his good conduct," James is saying "by his good *way of life*." Paul uses the same Greek word when describing his life as a former pharisee and persecutor of the Church. That was his way of life.

The Christian has a responsibility to bear witness to her salvation through a way of life that is pleasing to God. She must be set apart for God's glory. Not in a hypocritical sense and certainly

not boastfully. James says that she must live in good conduct showing her active faith “in the meekness of wisdom.” To 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, meek is a terrible word because we don’t use it often enough to understand it. The first thing I jump to is mousy or shy. This word is so much more than that! Humility is a better translation, but even that doesn’t bear the fullness of meaning. This word is also translated as gentle, courteous, and considerate. The Christian is to be considerate of Godly wisdom in the sense that she must give preference to divine wisdom over and against her own. Her life must be transformed by the knowledge of God and self so that she is different from the world in a logical way. If we are charged with bearing witness to God’s glory and grace, what better way to do that than by actually living that witness. I love preaching and I love studying the Word, but if I am just a hearer and not a doer, then I am failing in my Christian duty. We must live in courtesy of God’s wisdom, meaning we must allow him to go before us.

If we don’t give heed to God’s wisdom and don’t make way for his transforming grace, then we are likely to be filled with bitter jealousy and selfish ambition. Nearly every sentence in James reflects the Double Love principle. In bitter jealousy we compare ourselves to others, drawing distinctions, and desiring to be more and more like them. We want their wealth, their prestige, their power. That’s not the definition of love your neighbor as you love yourself. In selfish ambition we raise ourselves up as self-sufficient, self-reliant, and self-guiding. That’s not the definition of loving God with our whole selves. When we fail to even try to live according to the Greatest Commandment, we take on worldly counsel. The nature of human beings is to be guided by some principle. No one in this world is objectively without principles. Our nature requires some moral compass. If godly wisdom is not that compass, then earthly wisdom will be.

Paul artfully draws distinctions between the earthly and the heavenly in his discourse on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. Some theologians have argued that Paul and James clash in their theologies. Nothing could be further from the truth! Paul contrasts the heavenly and the spiritual to words like perishable, dishonor, weakness, and dust. Here we see James making similar distinctions. Earthly wisdom is unspiritual. The Greek word he uses is *psychike*, which is where we get the word “psyche.” It can mean soul but it can also mean natural life. In this usage, he’s talking about the life force of the natural world. Earthly wisdom is the product of natural reasoning and not spiritual or heavenly. Paul uses the word similarly in 1 Corinthians 2:14. He says, “The *natural* person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are *spiritually* discerned.” There are real and felt differences between the natural and the spiritual. In the same manner, James calls earthly wisdom demonic. It is influenced by ungodliness and unrighteousness. Paul reminds the Ephesians that Satan is the prince of the power of the air, and as such, he influences the wisdom of his realm, which is earthly wisdom.

When this earthly wisdom, which is unspiritual and demonic, becomes our moral compass, it ultimately leads us to disorder and wickedness. “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.” Let’s take some time and look at each of these adjectives. The Apostle tells us that heavenly wisdom is first and foremost pure. The Greek word here is *agne*, which is actually where we get the name

Agnes. Purity is an attribute of the divine and everything belonging to it. In this sense, pure means divine wisdom is free from worldly and wicked stains. The reason he says it is *first* pure is an altogether logical one. He's just described what earthly wisdom looks like and what it does, so logically, heavenly wisdom is the opposite. It is pure in that it is uncontaminated.

Next, heavenly wisdom is peaceable. Another great Greek word: *irenike*. From this word we get the name Irene. Peaceful, calm, harmonious; these are fine translations. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews uses this word when he describes righteousness as a "peaceful fruit" of discipline. When the church correctly administers discipline and when we faithfully practice spiritual disciplines, we build up peace within our community and within ourselves. Heavenly wisdom does not stir up or bring with it conflict. Rather, it instills harmony, comfort, and reconciliation. This is the type of peace that Peter speaks of when he is speaking at Cornelius' house. Godly peace opens the door for reconciliation within the human race; it brings believers into a peaceful state with God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; and as believers we have a blessed peace that we look forward to when we will join our Lord in heavenly bliss.

Then, he describes heavenly wisdom as gentle. There's another, more common word, used for gentle, and that is *agathos*, which is where we get the name Agatha. For some reason, James doesn't use that word. Rather, he uses *epieikes*, which is a compound word that literally means "without disorder." This word is also commonly translated as "forbearing," which is defined as patient when subject to provocation. I get the sense that, for James, heavenly wisdom is simultaneously gentle yet unbreaking. And when we are guided by this heavenly wisdom, we take on the same properties that instill both resilience and tolerance. Those guided by heavenly wisdom know the truth of the Gospel, fearlessly share that truth in love, and know how to walk with people as they mature in faith.

Now, we get to a word that's a little more challenging. The reason why I know this, is because that one word is translated at least six different ways. Depending on who you ask, James says heavenly wisdom is open to reason, easy to be entreated, willing to yield, compliant, obedient, or submissive. Each of those words is slightly different and slightly similar. As I repeat them, ruminate on the different word connections that come to your mind. Reasonable. Implorable. Yielding. Compliant. Obedient. Submissive. I see two distinct definitions. One suggests an openness to change while the other suggests a conformity to order. So which is it? The Greek here is a compound word that literally means "follows well" or "persuaded in a good manner." An openness to persuasion that leads to positive change and active obedience. The issue is not with the Greek but with our way of translating. What I think James is saying, is that heavenly wisdom is, by its nature, good, and that goodness is transferred to work of the church. When a person is instilled with heavenly wisdom, that wisdom opens a Christian to being persuaded by sound and godly judgment. And in that persuasion, is open to obedience to God's commands.

I'm going to gloss over James' description of "full of mercy and good fruits" to discuss the final two words. The word translated as "impartial" is *adiakritos*, a word in the negative that literally means "without hesitation." Unwavering, inseparable, and unshakeable. Heavenly wisdom

comes without discord and uncertainty. It causes no confusion and is clear and unchanging. Heavenly wisdom is a sound foundation on which to build the Christian life. The final word translated as “sincere” is another word in the negative, *anhypokritos*, which literally means “without hypocrisy.” Heavenly wisdom is genuine and sincere. It is neither false nor does it bear false witness, insincerity, or hypocrisy. I think James saves this word for last because hypocrisy is the very definition of false religion. True and pure religion can thrive only where heavenly wisdom is followed.

What James has given to us is a working definition of divine wisdom. But more than that, he’s given us a paradigm for the Christian life. It is unstained by sin, harmonious in doctrine, considerate of God, persuaded by the Holy Spirit, imitates Christ, wholistic in essence, and genuine in substance. All of these descriptions of wisdom ought also to describe us. Are we, church, are you, members of her, being guided by this wisdom? Is God our moral compass and Scripture our worldview? If so, are we bearing the fruit of this wisdom?

Let us pray. Most Holy God, you are wisdom itself and out of your great love for this world, you impart that wisdom unto us. Open our eyes to this heavenly gift. Open our minds to its eternal presence. Open our hearts to its transformational power. That we may be sowers of peace. In the wonderful and blessed name of Christ, we pray. Amen.