

Walking in Wisdom – Part 1

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – James instructs his audience to work out their faith in wisdom and understanding
2. aim – to cause us to put aside selfish ambition and to seek the wisdom from above in all things
3. passage – James 3:13-18

b. outline

1. The Place of Wisdom (James 3:13)
2. The Perversion of Wisdom (James 3:14-16)
3. The Purity of Wisdom (James 3:17-18)

c. opening

1. the **question du jour** – “*who is wise and understanding among you?*”
 - a. with this question, James turns to a *second* matter concerning the works of genuine faith
 - b. welcome and apologies (seating, shortened sermons)
 1. in some ways, a bit of *deja vu*: like starting at a new church **3 years later** ...
 2. when we separated (Mar 22), I started **James 2** with a series on *The Sin of Partiality* (x3), then *Faith Without Works Is Dead* (x3), finally **James 3**, *Taming the Tongue* (x4)
 3. those sections of the letter represent the *bulk* of James’ argument (**see website**)
2. the **changeover** to the second half of the letter
 - a. **chaps. 1-2** concentrated on the *definition* of faith (**i.e.** what is genuine saving faith?)
 - b. **chaps. 3-5** concentrates on the *transformative effects* of faith (**i.e.** what are the works of faith?)
 1. James started by giving insight into the nature of language – the work of faith being to speak *consistently* from our nature as those born-again by the Spirit – **i.e.** we show our faith flowing out of our regenerated nature *by the way that we speak* – **faith = transformed language**
 2. (**now**) James continues this “practical” side of the letter by moving into a discussion of the nature of *knowledge and understanding* – **i.e.** we show our faith by how we *apply* what has been revealed to us *in the way we relate to others* – **faith = transformed understanding**

I. The Place of Wisdom (James 3:13)

Content

a. the question of wisdom (v. 13a)

1. the question posed – a **rhetorical** question designed (**again!**) to make a point
 1. a common approach: ask a question with an *obvious* answer that solidifies a truth (**e.g. see 2:14ff** can someone just *say* that he has faith; can that faith save him? = a profession of faith, *without any personal transformation*, is useless when it comes to answering God for what we have done)
 - b. **question**: who is this question *targeted at*; who is the *object* of the question?
 1. or, is James asking his audience to “look around” and see which of the members of the church are truly “*wise and understanding*” over against those who are not?
 2. **note**: the way that the church is instructed in modern times *might* lead some reading this letter *today* to assume that the question *does* (in fact) target a specific group of “super-Christians”
 3. **answer**: the question *clearly* targets *everyone* reading the letter who *claims* to have faith
 - a. **IOW**: James is *assuming* that everyone *should* answer the question with: **me!**
 - b. the question is expecting an *obvious* answer that solidifies a truth = **everyone who claims faith in Christ must be guided by wisdom and understanding, a transformation of the mind that permeates our conduct, especially in our interpersonal relationships**
 - c. just as James considered “*the tongue*” (language) to be an area transformed by faith in the life of the believer, so (**now**) James considers “the mind” to be another area also transformed
 1. language is one of (if not the *most*) significant aspects of the *Imago Dei* in human beings; we are distinguished by God from the animal kingdom by being able to *articulate* complex concepts in words – therefore, *transformed* language is a “work of faith” in the believer
 2. rational (or moral) thought is another significant aspect of the *Imago Dei*; we are able to rationally consider complex concepts (**e.g.** morality) using our intelligence, and we can “connect” information in ways that move “beyond” just its existence as “data”

- a. **e.g.** birds can take in “data” – they can find food and avoid becoming food, but they cannot rationally consider what it means to be food
 - b. humans possess the ability to take in information and then **process** that information into logical conclusions that (then) become *effective* in living out their existence *well*
 - c. **of course:** like *every aspect* of the Imago Dei, our ability to rationally consider information is *deeply corrupted* – sin has made it *virtually impossible* for the rebel to properly process information in ways that are consistent and moral (**e.g.** some pandemic responses and riots) – thus the need for **regeneration**
 - d. the second area that James considers for “works of faith” is how the regenerated rationally consider the “data” that they receive *intellectually* – **i.e.** what we do with our *minds* (vs. our lips)
2. the question parsed
- a. **remember:** a word or phrase appearing multiple times in a section is typically the *theme* of that section – in this case, the word “wise” or “wisdom” appears **x4 (v. 13a; 13b; 15; 17)**
 1. the word “*understanding*” is treated by James as a *synonym* (it is not repeated), but **IMO** it deserves to be parsed, for it speaks volumes *on its own*
 - b. “*understanding*” (*epistēmōn*) = learned; knowing; intelligent; skilled – taking in knowledge such that one perceives its *meaning*; to *interpret* information as it is received
 1. **i.e.** more than just “taking in” information – not just “learning,” but processing information so that one understands its **ramifications** – what does this *mean*, and what does it mean *to me*?
 2. ironically, the word is used *only here in the N.T.* (there are more than a dozen words translated from Greek into “*understanding*”), yet it is the base word for an entire scientific area of study:
 - a. **epistemology** = the study of the nature of knowledge; the study of how human beings “know” things; the study of the distinction between knowledge and belief (or understanding)
 - b. although a modern “science,” the concept has been around since the days of Socrates
 3. understanding is the *uniquely human* ability to “extend” an analysis of information out to its logical and rational *conclusions* or *ramifications*
 - a. **e.g.** if Jesus *claimed* that he would rise from the dead, and *he did*, then what are the *logical ramifications* of that fact **when applied to everything else he ever said or did?**
 1. does his claim of *divinity* then have basis in reality (**i.e.** is he God?), does his call to discipleship then imply *submission* to his Lordship, does his appearance in human history imply that that history is actually *ordered* by a sovereign God, etc., etc., etc.?
 - b. **e.g.** (in reverse, *by the judgment of God*) the *epistemological change* of **relativism** = since all “truth” is relative (**i.e.** based only on personal “feelings”) then *nothing* has meaning – every “reality” can become whatever we want it to be (**e.g.** male doesn’t mean male)
 4. **IOW:** the whole of *systematic theology* is an attempt to discover the ramifications of what God has revealed – not just to understand “facts,” but to find *meaning* in this world
 - a. **which is why the study of theology is essential for the Christian**
 5. so, *knowledge* leads to *understanding*, which is what is necessary for wisdom ...
 - c. “*wisdom*” (*sophia*) = the proper application of *understanding*
 1. **reminder:** James addressed wisdom at the outset of this letter (**see 1:5**), and I did a series of sermons about wisdom at that time (*The Need for Wisdom and Humility*; in the face of doubt):
 1. biblically, wisdom is the central concept of *revelation* (**i.e.** what God has made known)
 2. it is *wisdom* that “differentiates” the righteous from the wicked (**Rom. 1:19-22; Psa. 111:10**)
 3. it is *wisdom* that “distinguishes” the true gospel from false righteousness (**1 Cor. 1:18-25**)
 4. it is *wisdom* that every follower of Christ should be pursuing in life (**Prov. 2:1-6**)
 - a. **i.e.** a proper application of the knowledge granted by God *should be* the pursuit of every believer – not just “information,” but a deep *understanding* of that information *applied to every aspect of living* (**read Eph. 1:15-21**)
 2. **IOW:** understanding = what are the **ramifications** of what I have come to know?; wisdom = what **am I going to do about** what I have come to know?
- b. the place of wisdom (v. 13b)**
1. **IMO: v. 13b** is simply a *restatement* of **1:5** that is now applied to how to do the *true* works of faith:
 - a. **i.e.** the believer is to walk “*in the meekness (humility) of wisdom*” – he is to *demonstrate* his faith by how he applies what he knows *about humility* before others (**see below**)
 - b. **application: the wise man (the man of genuine faith) learns what God has revealed, understands the ramifications of that revelation, and then applies that to a life of humility**