

The Humility¹ of Heavenly Wisdom



SABBATH—NOVEMBER 15

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: James 3:13–4:10; Deuteronomy 4:6; Galatians 5:17; Jeremiah 3:6–10, 20; Acts 19:13–16; Psalm 24:3–6.

MEMORY VERSE: “Be humble in the Lord’s presence, and he will honor you” (James 4:10, CEV).

IN MANY MIDSIZE AND LARGER COMPANIES, WORKERS WISH AND STRUGGLE TO BE PROMOTED TO THE “MIDDLE MANAGER” POSITION. They feel they have the right to be promoted when they have not earned it. This unhealthy attitude (thought or feeling) grows over time as the workers work hard to get ahead. They may flatter their bosses and make negative comments about coworkers. They are selfish when they compete to be promoted. One important television news broadcaster advanced to the top without destroying others to get there. A coworker admired this person and said, “There were no dead bodies.”

It would be nice to think that selfish fighting is limited to worldly organizations and that the church does not do this. Sadly, the Bible shows that worldly “wisdom” does its work too often among believers.

This week let us find out what God’s Word (the Bible) has to say about this sad problem.

DEFINITIONS

1. humility—acting, thinking, or feeling in a way that shows that you do not think of yourself as better than other people; not proud.

**THE MEEKNESS (HUMBLENESS) OF WISDOM
(James 3:13)**

“Are any of you wise and understanding? You should show it by living a good life. Wise people aren’t [are not] proud when they do good works” (James 3:13, NlrV). “Not proud when they do good works”? What might that mean?

Some Bible thinkers believe that the entire third chapter of James deals with good (or bad) teachers. Naturally, the “wise and understanding” would seem to make good teachers. But the subject seems to be broader. It involves the whole church group. The wisdom James describes throughout the letter does not only mean being smart in the way that the Greeks of Bible times and many Western countries today admire. In the Bible, *wisdom* means one’s conduct (behavior; actions) and lifestyle. The Greek word for wisdom is *anastrophe*, which is translated “conduct” (used also in 1 Timothy 4:12; Hebrews 13:7; 1 Peter 1:15; and 1 Peter 2:12). Our actions and conduct show how wise we are. Jesus taught the same thing. He said, “ ‘Wisdom is justified [shown; proven to be right] by her children’ ” (Matthew 11:19, NKJV).

Interestingly, the only place in the Old Testament where the wording translated “wise and understanding” is found is in Moses’ warning to Israel. He advised Israel to follow laws that God had commanded. “Be careful to keep them. That will show the nations how wise and understanding you are. They will hear about all of those rules. They’ll [they will] say, ‘That great nation certainly has wise and understanding people’ ” (Deuteronomy 4:6, NlrV).

But the “bitter” water spring in James 3:11 is about “envy [jealousy] and selfish ambition” (verse 14, NIV) in the church. The words “selfish ambition” come from the Greek word *eritheia*, which means “chasing after one’s own interests.”—Adapted from Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers), volume 2, page 70. That is an attitude (thought or feeling) that sounds more like Satan in heaven than like what Christians should be on earth. If we do not choose to die to self and surrender our will to the Lord, all of us could be in danger of showing the same attitudes that James warns about.

Think deeply about the wording “the meekness [humbleness] of wisdom.” What are some of the situations in which this kind of wisdom would be very helpful?

TWO KINDS OF WISDOM (James 3:15, 16)

Read James 3:15, 16. How does James describe worldly wisdom? What are the common ways we see this “wisdom” shown in the world, or even in the church?

The wisdom that we have is “earthly [worldly],” even “demonic” or “devilish,” and is without the Spirit’s leading. This should not be too surprising. Long ago, Solomon spoke about the “way that seems right” as being “the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12, NKJV; Proverbs 16:25, NKJV). This wisdom is very destructive. If jealousy and selfish ambition are encouraged, the natural result will be disorder and quarreling. This was what happened in Corinth (read 2 Corinthians 12:20, where several of the same words are used).

Read James 3:17, 18; John 3:3–7; Colossians 3:1, 2. Together, what are these verses telling us about “heavenly” wisdom?

James never speaks of the Holy Spirit directly. But the idea of the new birth is clearly in James’s letter. The apostle (teacher; leader) likes to use the farming symbol of sowing and growing fruit to make his point. Maybe it is based on Jesus’ parables² about the word being “sown” in people’s hearts as they receive the gospel message (read Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23). Heavenly wisdom is “full of mercy” and “good fruits.” James focuses on obedience and good works as the fruit of faith. But mercy has an important place in the judgment (James 2:13). In other words, truly wise believers will be humble like Jesus and also peaceable, gentle, merciful, and forgiving, willing to overlook the faults of others. They are not critical or judgmental of them.

It is so easy to fall into the ways of the world. Examine yourself: How much does worldly wisdom, not wisdom from heaven, influence how you live?



Heavenly wisdom is “full of mercy” and “good fruits.”



The truly wise will be humble like Jesus, willing to overlook the faults of others.

DEFINITIONS

2. parables—very short stories that teach a lesson.

CAUSE OF DISAGREEMENT AND QUARRELS (James 4:1)

“Why do you fight and argue among yourselves? Isn’t [Is it not] it because of your sinful longings? They fight inside you” (James 4:1, NIV; read also Galatians 5:17). What basic struggle do both of these verses describe?



The Christian life involves a lifelong battle against self.

The opening verses of James 4 describe believers torn apart by the bitter struggle going on in the church. There is an inward cause of the outward quarrels in the church. It is the desire for pleasure (the word in Greek gives us our word *hedonism*).³ These sinful desires, which Paul speaks of as “the flesh,” are making war against our higher, spiritual desires. The Christian life involves a lifelong battle. If this battle is not governed by the “wisdom from above” (James 3:17), it will spread out to the church itself and cause spiritual problems among believers.

Read James 4:2, 3. What certain sinful desires are listed? And how are they influencing the church?

These verses directly point to the Ten Commandments. “You lust [desire] and do not have. You murder and covet [desire what belongs to another] and cannot obtain [get]” (James 4:2, NKJV). The problems of jealousy and wanting what belongs to someone else (read also James 3:14, 16) are much the same as the problems brought up by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In His sermon, Jesus focuses on desires, not just outward actions. So, murder could mean anger. The earliest church groups probably did not have members killing one another.

“It is the love of self that causes people to quarrel. When we are born from above, the same mind will be in us that was in Jesus. Jesus’ mind led Him to humble Himself that we might be saved. Then we shall not be seeking the highest honors. We shall desire to sit at the feet of Jesus, and learn about Him.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pages 330, 331.

DEFINITIONS

3. hedonism—the belief that pleasure or happiness is the most important goal of life.

FRIENDSHIP WITH THE WORLD (James 4:2–4)

Read James 4:2–4. Why does James call his readers “adulterers and adulteresses”?⁴ Read Jeremiah 3:6–10, 20; Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 2:2; and Luke 16:13.

James uses the Bible example of Israel as God’s bride. He says that believers who go along with worldly customs and are influenced by worldly attitudes are guilty of spiritual adultery. In reality, the people of Israel are choosing a different master and lord or husband than Jesus.

The next verse, James 4:5, is not easy to understand. Some have called it the most difficult verse in the New Testament. Because the Greek wording is unclear, the English is difficult in the major translations. Some consider the “spirit” to be the Holy Spirit (“the Spirit . . . in us yearns [desires] jealously,” NKJV, HCSB. “He jealously desires the Spirit,” NASB). Others consider it to be the human spirit (“God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell [live] in us,” NRSV. “He jealously longs for [desires] the spirit he has caused to dwell [live] in us,” NIV). The NIV translation fits the grammar and meaning best. Still, the meaning of the verse is not very clear. A careful study of the grammar and meaning of verses 5 and 6 could be translated as follows: “Or do you think that the Scripture [Bible] speaks in vain [for no reason] against envy? The spirit which He [God] has caused to dwell [live] in us yearns [desires], but He gives more grace.⁵ Therefore He says, ‘God resists [opposes] the proud but gives grace to the humble’ ” (James 4:5, 6, author’s translation).

As verses 1–4 make clear, the human spirit (or “heart”) is filled with desires. These desires, while not evil in themselves, have been twisted by sin into wicked ways. Grace is the only real answer to our problem. But proud people have put themselves in a position where they cannot easily receive that grace. Someone wrote that we get grace like beggars holding out a tin cup before a waterfall. Only a very humble person who understands his or her great need and feels unworthy is open to grace. As Ellen G. White wrote, “Our great need is our only claim on God’s mercy.”—Adapted from *The Desire of Ages*, page 317.

Look at yourself. What in you makes you worthy of salvation? How does your answer help you understand the great need of grace in your own life? How does the Cross, and the Cross alone, answer that need?



“Our great need is our only claim on God’s mercy.”

DEFINITIONS

4. adulterers and adulteresses—men and women who are unfaithful to their marriage vows.

5. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

**SUBMISSION (SURRENDER) TO GOD
(James 4:8–10)**

“Surrender to God! Resist [oppose] the devil, and he will run from you” (James 4:7, CEV). Notice the order of the commands here. If we try to resist the devil in our own strength, can we succeed? No! So, we need to surrender to God and His will in order to resist the devil. By taking that very step, we *are* resisting the devil.

At the same time, we should not think that the first readers of James’s letter had never surrendered themselves to God before. James is clearly writing to those who claimed to be believers. So, we need to think more about surrendering ourselves to God *daily* and resisting the devil *whenever* he tempts us.

Read James 4:8–10. What commands does James give? How are they related to one another? How are they connected with the surrender to God?

In these verses, James’s encouragement to us to change is the sum total of all that he has been saying since 3:13. In the verses we have been studying this week, there are differences between heavenly wisdom and devilish wisdom. There are also differences between the proud who glorify (give praise to and honor) themselves as the devil did (read Isaiah 14:12–14) and the lowly who surrender to God and humble themselves. There is also a charge against those who are unfaithful to God (James 4:4). And the charge of being double-minded (two-faced; hypocritical) is brought up again (James 4:8; read also James 1:8). So, the call to surrender to God is more than a stern warning. It is calling sinners to repentance (turning back to God), as Jesus called sinners (Luke 5:32).

How should one repent? James gives the steps (based on Psalm 24:3–6): (1) come nearer to God, and He will come closer to you; (2) cleanse your hands and make your hearts pure (clean up your actions and your thoughts); (3) mourn and weep for your weaknesses. You need to understand again your need before you can claim God’s grace.

“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up” (James 4:10, NKJV). What does that mean? How do you learn to humble yourself? How can we learn to copy Jesus’ humble nature?

ADDITIONAL STUDY: “There are many people whose hearts are hurting under a heavy load of worry because they try to fit in with the world. They have chosen its service, accepted its problems, adopted its ideas. So, their character [thoughts; feelings; actions] is stained, and their life becomes a burden. In order to satisfy ambition and worldly desires, they abuse the conscience and bring upon themselves an additional [more] burden of regret and sorrow. The continual worry is wearing out their lives. Our Lord desires them to lay aside this yoke of slavery. . . . He encourages them to find first the kingdom of God and His righteousness [goodness and holiness]. And His promise is that all things they need in this life shall be added.”
—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 330.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Think more about the two kinds of wisdom discussed in Monday’s study and make a list of the thoughts connected with each. Now think about times during this week when you made important decisions or took important actions. Which kind of wisdom was involved?
- ② Sunday’s study showed God’s promise to Israel that if they obeyed His laws, the neighboring nations would come to admire them as “a wise and understanding people.” But did this not lead Israel to become proud? So, this is not heavenly wisdom, which leads to humility. What happened to the people of Israel, and how can we learn to avoid their mistakes? How could a proper understanding of the true meaning of the sanctuary service have prevented them from pride? How should the Cross, for us today, help prevent us from pride?
- ③ Read again Ellen G. White’s quote above. How much of the world’s things do we work for? Are those things always wrong? So often we read of people who seem to have everything, but their lives turn out to be wrecks. What should that tell us about how deceptive the world really is? How can we learn to resist the world and help our young people not to fall into this trap?
- ④ Think more deeply about this idea of being humble. Why is that so important in the life of a Christian? Why is pride so deadly for anyone who wants to follow Jesus?