

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Spiritual Wisdom in Action

by Dan Trygg

“Who among y’all is wise and understanding? Let him outwardly-show by his good habitual-behavior his deeds in the meekness of wisdom. But if y’all have bitter competition and selfish-rivalry in your hearts, do not go on boasting against [others] and be phony against what is real. This is not the practical-savvy coming down from above, rather [it is] earthly, ‘soulish’, demonic. For wherever jealous-competition or selfish-rivalry are, there is insurrection and every unhealthy thing. But the wisdom from above, on the one hand, is first pure, next reconciling, yielding, open-to-reason, full of merciful-acts and good fruits, not prejudiced, without hypocrisy. But righteousness’ fruit is sown in harmony/safety by the ones making reconciled-relationships.”

James 3:13-18

In I Cor. 3:1-3, Paul indicated that the Corinthian Christians were immature, because there was strife and division in their midst. It is interesting to see some of these same themes here in James 3. Paul attributed their behavior to a “fleshly” orientation. He said they were “walking according to mankind”, not according to the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 3:3). It is interesting to see the same themes surface in the book of James.

James is more of a general letter. It is not written to a local congregation, but to Christians at large (Jas. 1:1). **The topics he addressed were those dealing with *commonplace* issues and problems.** James, the half-brother of Jesus, had become one of the most visible leaders of the church in Jerusalem. From the birth of the church at Pentecost, he had been present through all the growth pains and experiences of those early days. As a pastor-type of leader of a church of over 5,000, he was able to repeatedly observe the dynamics of people’s spiritual growth. There was probably not much that he had not seen, or had to deal with, in his service there. As leader of the founding church of the Jesus movement, James also received reports concerning Christian expansion from all over. He was very much aware of issues that were typical, recurrent phenomena that would surface in virtually any group of believers. **This is important for us to realize, because it helps us to see that *we are not all that different from those first generation believers.*** We are made of the same stuff, so we should not be surprised if we encounter some of the same issues along the pilgrim way. Often described as New Testament wisdom literature, **James’ writing is very practical and down to earth.**

The Jerusalem church had also been a successful “laboratory of love”. The Body there had discovered the dynamics that produced the *agapē* love and unity that Jesus had spoken of. **What James writes in his letter is meant to directly address the relationship issues between believers.** He writes about the pragmatic dynamics that produce health in the Body of Christ. In writing about “true spiritual wisdom (i.e., the practical-savvy, or the how-to-do-it-strategies, for living life) and understanding”, he appears to be challenging those who may have made excessive claims of maturity and “spiritual stature”. **James seems to be addressing people who, like the Corinthians, were *overly proud of their spirituality.*** Evidently, a typical pitfall for Christians is to see ourselves as “farther along” than is really the case. **A common characteristic of James’ approach is to challenge any such braggadocious rhetoric with *the litmus test of action.*** James would give us a reality check to humble us and help us focus on where the real edges of growth are in our lives together. **Following are some of the points and principles James would communicate with us:**

1.) **Genuine wisdom is what is visible in *action*, not just cerebral.** In the phrase, “let him *show* by his good behavior his deeds” (NASB), the word, “show”, means to “outwardly demonstrate”, or “prove by demonstration”. A friend of mine used to say, “Talkin’ is easy. Doin’ is tough.” From the standpoint of true wisdom (where wisdom = skill at living), **how can anyone *claim* to be “wise” unless he can *demonstrate the skill in specific actions?*** The word translated as “understanding” means “expert, one endowed with knowledge and experience so as to be highly skilled”. Again, **how could this kind of claim, or *self-perception*, have any *basis* without a *track record* of successful implementation?** The Greek also indicates that James had in mind, not just a *few* victories, or “*trophy* episodes”, but a *customary, habitual manner of living* one’s life. **Demonstrated skill is most convincingly evidenced by *repeated and consistent* results.** Anyone can *accidentally* succeed at something. True competence is shown by *reliability*.

2.) **There are two sources of wisdom available for every Christian. One originates from God, and the other is from this world system.** We all are inundated with the world’s wisdom day-in and day-out. It comes from those around us, from within our own selfishness (Gk., *psuchikē*, pertaining to the soul, self, or natural life -- I Cor. 2:14), or from evil spiritual suggestion. **To learn to live according to the wisdom from above will require a clear, determined effort on our part to search it out and to implement it.**

3.) **Wisdom from *this* world has its roots in *self-discontent, comparison, and unhealthy competition* (vs. 14a).** The Greek word for “jealousy” means literally a “ferment or boiling of spirit”. It refers to an “envy, resentment

or covetousness". Without discontent inside of one's self, and comparison to others, this could not exist. The word "bitter" shows how poisonous and intense such feelings can become. The word translated as "selfish ambition" is related to the word in I Cor. 3:3, "strife". It means any "pushing of one's self forward for personal gain, or for recognition". Often it results in stubbornness, arguing, and divisiveness.

4.) Wisdom from *this* world tends to *self-inflation* and *phoniness* (vs. 14b). James warns against these two tendencies because *they are common pitfalls*. When the threat of disagreement and discontent are felt, it is quite typical to either (a.) "*puff up*" and "*get 'big*", ...to speak or act boastfully to *attempt to dominate the other person's* objections; or (b.) *pretend nothing is amiss, avoiding conflict* but *smugly* taking comfort that *you* are right, and *the other person* is wrong. Neither approach engages in profitable discussion or evaluation of the truth.

5.) Jealousy and divisiveness produce rebellion and pettiness (vs. 15). The word translated as "disorder" in the NASB means "insurrection". There is a sense of agitation, a brewing irritation that can grow into outright rebellion or an attack against someone. The word for "evil", in the phrase "every evil thing", means "slight, petty, paltry, or cheap". The idea is that *the irritation produced by this jealous, self-seeking orientation will often come out as small negative comments, "cheap-shot" criticisms, or petty disagreements*. All of this is deadly to any hope of Body-life and the interdependent synergy that God wants us to develop.

6.) The wisdom from above is

pure -- unmixed in motives and intentions, no hidden, "unclean" agendas.

peaceable -- peace loving, desiring and valuing healthy relationships.

gentle -- yielding, forbearing, and considerate.

reasonable -- open to reason, easy to approach, willing to "give in" to another.

The KJV translates this as "easy to be entreated".

full of mercy -- the word in Greek indicates merciful *actions*, not just empathy or sympathy.

and good fruits -- again, *outward actions* are in view.

unwavering -- literally, "without prejudice, open-minded".

without hypocrisy -- not phony for appearance' sake; sincere, genuine.

Finally, from the experienced mind of James, the most visible leader of the early Jerusalem church,

7.) Righteousness' fruit is sown in peaceful interaction by the ones *making reconciled relationships*. This is a fascinating statement. *It speaks of the importance of having and maintaining healthy, open, positive relationships in the Body in order to accomplish God's purposes*. The fact that James is thinking primarily of the church is evident in vs. 14, where the phrase "in your heart" (NASB) is literally "in the heart (singular) of y'all (you plural)". They have a common heart, one that needs to be kept from division and strife. ***The primary context for this entire passage is the church.***

The word picture also indicates a growth process. Obviously, a farmer does not sow the finished fruit. He sows *seeds*. There are seeds sown today which will bear fruit down the road. *Small relational investments today can produce significant change over time*. There is often a *duration of time* involved for these seeds to come to full maturity, or to find full expression. This should encourage us in that, **though we may not immediately see much in these apparently small transactions of reconciliation, they can have a huge impact later on.**

Note that **it is the fruit or end-product of righteousness that becomes the seed that is peacefully sown** by the ones making peace. What does that mean? **The end result, or fruit, of the righteousness of God operating in our lives will motivate us to be peacemakers.** Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God" (Matt. 5:9). The righteousness of God is given to us as a gift by grace. It *is* a righteous standing before God (justification), but, more than that, **God imparts to us a new nature and a new inworking of righteousness** (Eph. 4:24; Phil. 1:9; II Cor. 3:5-18). ***Experiencing and walking in that does not happen automatically. We must pursue righteousness*** (I Tim. 6:11; II Tim. 2:22), **and our pursuit of God should result in *training in righteousness*** (II Tim. 3:16; Eph. 5:7-10). It is the fruit or the mature outworking of righteous, Christlike character that is sown like seed in the Body, through our interactions with one another. **The ones sowing the seeds of mature, Christlike character into their relationships with one another are those who would be peace-makers.** *To truly stop living life according to the self-centered, evil inspired, divisive world system which is all around us, and to effectively pull people together in healthy, respectful, loving, open relationships that are supportive and beneficial, will provide a powerful testimony to God.* As Jesus said, by our love "the world will know that you are My disciples", and by our oneness the world will know "that You did send Me, and did love them" (Jn. 13:35; 17:21). **Christian maturity produces Christian unity, ...a solid testimony that God loved us enough to send Jesus to save us and give us a whole new way of living.**