

“Who Is Wise?”

“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.”

*—James 3:13,
English Standard
Version*

WISDOM CAN BE BRIEFLY

described as the ability to properly use and apply knowledge in the daily conduct and decisions of life. A person might possess a high degree of knowledge along various lines, yet not be wise. For example, one might have an excellent knowledge of national and international politics, yet not be a wise statesman. A certain degree of knowledge is essential in every aspect of human endeavor, but to be successful in a chosen field one must have, or acquire, the ability to make proper use of knowledge, and it is this that constitutes wisdom.

What is true in human pursuits is also true in our relationship to God and to one another as brethren in Christ Jesus. It is important that we acquire knowledge of the plans and purposes of God; but beyond this, it is essential that we make the proper application of this knowledge in our daily service to the Lord and to his people. Paul wrote that the “wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.” (I Cor. 3:19) Therefore, if we are to be

wise according to God's standards it is essential that we acknowledge the superiority of his ways and seek to be guided by them. Solomon wrote, "The fear [Hebrew: reverence] of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight."—Prov. 9:10, *ESV*

A true reverence for the Lord will manifest itself in an earnest desire to become acquainted with his plans and purposes, particularly as they relate to his will for us as individuals. Through study of his Word, we will learn that by heredity we are members of a fallen and dying race which is alienated from God because of sin, and that we therefore have no standing before him in our own righteousness. (Rom. 3:10-12,23) It requires humility to acknowledge this. If we do, we will rejoice in the provision the Lord has made, upon the basis of devoting ourselves to the doing of his will, to accept us into his favor through Christ and cover us with the robe of his righteousness.—Isa. 61:10; Rom. 5:21

The acceptance of these truths and our obedient response to them are initial steps in the pathway of wisdom. However, the spirit of humility before God manifested by dedication to his service must remain with us. It serves as a proper background to every decision we make and every act we perform in our earnest desire to know and to do God's will. Self and its interests have no place in the life of one who is endeavoring to be filled and guided by heavenly wisdom.

God's will for his people of the present age is that they lay down their lives sacrificially in his service, even as Jesus did. Those who have accepted

this viewpoint, and are attempting to be guided by it, are following the course of heavenly wisdom. To the extent that they hold back from carrying out the terms of their consecration, they are unwise. To the world the course of a consecrated Christian seems foolish, but if we are wise, we will not allow the world and its viewpoints to swerve us from the path of sacrifice and service.

JESUS' EXAMPLE

Jesus was guided by heavenly wisdom, and his example is of great value in helping us to determine the course we should take. Near the close of his ministry Jesus revealed to his disciples that he was going to Jerusalem where he expected to suffer many things, and to be killed. The disciples knew of the enmity that existed in Jerusalem toward Jesus, and Peter concluded that he was making a mistake to go there, especially since he knew what would result if he did so. Peter said to Jesus, "Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee." To this the Master replied, "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men."—Matt. 16:21-23

Jesus, of course, did not mean that Peter was actually Satan. Rather, in trying to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, Peter had assumed the role of an adversary in an effort to prevent his Master from laying down his life as he had covenanted to do. In doing this Peter had expressed a selfish human viewpoint. It was a position that, generally speaking, is considered wise in worldly circles.

Then Jesus pressed the lesson further by explaining that this way of sacrifice would have to be accepted by those who desired to be his disciples. He said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." (vss. 24,25) To tell a person of the world that the only way to save their life would be by losing it, would certainly seem foolish. Yet, for the followers of the Master, this is the course of true wisdom.

What a wise course it is! Because of our reverence for God and our willingness to be instructed by him, we have learned that those who suffer and die with Jesus will live and reign with him. In "the first resurrection" they will be exalted to "glory and honour and immortality." (Rev. 20:6; Rom. 2:7) This glorious reward, however, will be given only to those who are "faithful unto death." (Rev. 2:10) This being true, how unwise it would be to hold back from laying down our lives in doing our Heavenly Father's will.

Paul wrote, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, ... that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." (Rom. 12:1) To the worldly mind it would seem most unreasonable to present one's body in sacrifice, but not so from the standpoint of divine wisdom, for the apostle says this is a "reasonable service." Again, Paul wrote, "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." (II Tim. 1:7) The "sound mind" which the Lord has given us through his

Word is not a mind with a disposition to hold back from sacrifice lest the way become too difficult. On the contrary, it is a mind that urges on to greater service and sacrifice, and when needed, corrective self-control.

The Lord has also given us the spirit of love, and if we have love it will be manifested in our willingness to lay down our lives for the brethren, and in bearing witness to the Gospel. For a consecrated child of God to view the Christian life in any other way would be manifesting the spirit of an unsound mind and a lack of the heavenly wisdom with which the Lord has endowed us through his Word. In the following chapter Paul writes to Timothy, "It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us." (II Tim. 2:11,12) How unwise it would be to take a course of unfaithfulness which might result in our being denied by the Lord!

James wrote, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord." (James 1:5-7) The "all men" in this passage to which James says the Lord gives his wisdom liberally should not be construed to mean the entire human race, but rather those who are in Christ Jesus and have taken up their cross to follow the Master in the way of sacrifice and service. To these God will give wisdom.

Another important lesson from this passage is to be able to accept the Lord's answers to our prayers for wisdom. James suggests the possibility of wavering in our requests, and the cause of this might well be a lack of faith in God's response to our prayers. He continues, stating that "a double minded man is unstable in all his ways." (vs. 8) Those who are double-minded are not wholly devoted to the Lord's ways. They are not guided entirely by heavenly wisdom. They know they should lay down their lives, but their flesh holds back. When these ask God for wisdom, they are hopeful that he will show them an easier way to follow in the Master's footsteps, and they will not be prepared for the answer which they receive. Thus, their unreasoning mind may conclude that the Lord did not hear their prayers.

If we are truly wise toward God, we will be prepared to accept whatever he gives us in answer to our prayers, whether our prayers be for wisdom or other assistance. Our material welfare should occupy a relatively minor place in our prayers, and then primarily to the extent which is related to our life of sacrifice in the divine service. The burden of our prayers should be in the nature of thanksgiving for all the Lord's goodness to us, and for his promised guidance and strength as we walk in the narrow way which leads to life in association with our blessed Master.—Matt. 7:14

WISDOM FROM ABOVE

The Christian life is one of sacrifice, but in his Word God has laid down certain principles for guidance and wisdom in our daily walk. To know

these principles and to practice them is also to be guided by heavenly wisdom. In our opening text, James asks the question, "Who is a wise man?" He begins his answer by stating that wisdom is gained by means of "good conduct." Continuing, James adds the following: "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."—James 3:14-17, *ESV*

Here the apostle presents some details pertaining to heavenly wisdom. He says that this wisdom that is from above is "first pure." No matter what undertaking we might have in mind, especially in connection with our service to the Lord and association with his people, we should see to it that our motive is pure, and that we are not seeking to accomplish our ends by worldly methods of any kind. We should also not compromise with our flesh, which is fallen and untrustworthy. Heavenly wisdom requires that we hold fast to the pure, fundamental teachings and principles of the Scriptures which we have learned through study and fellowship with our brethren in Christ.

Furthermore, we are to lay down our lives in making known the glorious Gospel of the kingdom, and in serving our brethren in Christ. This is the will of God for us. The wisdom from above will guide us in doing this in the Lord's way, which is in purity. If we are controlled by heavenly wisdom, we

will not engage in efforts to impress others with the “great works” which we are accomplishing. Purity and holiness will mark our words and conduct if heavenly wisdom is ruling in our hearts.

“Then peaceable,” James adds. We should both desire, and work toward, peace and unity of the spirit among fellow members of the body of Christ. (Eph. 4:2,3) Paul expands this thought by saying that so far as possible we should endeavor to “live peaceably with all men.” (Rom. 12:18) Heavenly wisdom urges that we dwell together with our brethren and others in unity and peace if this can be done in purity and without compromising divine principles which might be involved.

The wisdom from above is “gentle,” James tells us. Those who possess heavenly wisdom, and are guided by it, will not be of a harsh disposition. They will not run roughshod over others. Worldly wisdom often dictates that one should show authority even to the point of being unkind to those over whom he wishes control. This is rule by fear, not by love, and is unwise from the divine standpoint. We should ourselves endeavor to be governed by love, and our associations with others should be upon the basis of love, and “love is kind.” (I Cor. 13:4) This does not mean that we should not stand firm for what we believe to be right, but heavenly wisdom dictates that we should never be unkind in our firmness, but always gentle and mild-mannered.

Another facet of heavenly wisdom as set forth by James is that described by him as “open to reason,” or as the *King James Version* renders it, “easy to be intreated.” This means a willingness to hear the viewpoints of others, and where principle is not

violated, a willingness to take them into consideration in reaching conclusions. This is particularly important where such non-essential matters are viewed differently between brethren. Under such circumstances, to take the viewpoint that one is entirely right and another member of the body of Christ is completely wrong would display a lack of heavenly wisdom.

We are all frail and deficient. Differences exist because of imperfections of the flesh, and because none of us have complete knowledge on every subject. Even the Apostle Paul stated, "Now I know in part." (I Cor. 13:12) This is one of the first lessons we learned in acquiring heavenly wisdom. Even now we should remember its importance in our dealings with others. We should not set ourselves above being approached, but humbly "be intreated" and willing to listen and consider the viewpoints of others.

"MERCY AND GOOD FRUITS"

Another element of heavenly wisdom is mercy. When we think of the degree to which our Heavenly Father is continually extending mercy toward us, how unwise it would be for us not to exercise mercy toward others. The quality of mercy is revealed by our willingness to forgive others for their trespasses against us. The Scriptures make it clear that unless we are willing to forgive others, neither will our Heavenly Father forgive us our trespasses against him.—Matt. 6:14,15

In this connection we recall a statement by the Prophet Jeremiah shortly after the nation of Israel had been overthrown and taken into captivity

because of her sins. He wrote, "It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness." (Lam. 3:22,23) According to the terms of the Law, God could have justly destroyed the people of Israel. Instead, he simply permitted them to be taken into captivity to be punished, and this was due to his mercy.

Indeed, as Jeremiah indicates, God's mercies are daily manifested toward his people, and that is just as true now as it was in the case of the Israelites. God's mercies are "new every morning," and how wonderful it is that we can have this assurance as each day we embark upon our various activities. The Heavenly Father wants us to be like him in this as well as in all other respects. Are we wisely conforming ourselves to his will by being merciful to others when they offend us because of their inherited weaknesses? Jesus' lesson to Peter concerning the forgiving of those who sin against us even to the extent of seventy times seven, impresses the fact that our mercies, like those of our Heavenly Father, should be new every morning. We should never become weary of exercising mercy. It is a vitally important ingredient of heavenly wisdom.—Matt. 18:21,22

James includes with mercy what he describes as "good fruits." These are the fruits of the Spirit. (Gal. 5:22,23; Eph. 5:9) If the Holy Spirit is not producing the proper fruitage in our lives, then we will be lacking in heavenly wisdom. Thus again the difference between knowledge and wisdom is emphasized. The Lord wants us to study his Word and thereby become more and more acquainted

with the various features of his glorious plan of salvation. The primary purpose of this knowledge is that we might show ourselves approved by conforming our lives to the principles of righteousness set forth by the Truth. (II Tim. 2:15) If we merely attain a knowledge of the Scriptures, and then fail to apply its principles in our lives, we will be severely lacking in the wisdom which is from above.

IMPARTIAL

James reminds us that heavenly wisdom is impartial in its dealings with others. In the previous chapter of his epistle, he gives us an illustration of partiality, which he declares to be a sin. "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?" To this James adds, "If ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin."—James 2:1-4,9

This illustration is based upon conditions which existed in the days of the Early Church. Nevertheless, it points out the fact that if we are guided by heavenly wisdom, we will not be partial in any of our dealings or associations with the Lord's people. According to the flesh, it is natural to be drawn to some persons more than to others. In itself, this is not necessarily wrong, but if we permit ourselves

always to be favoring some, and ignoring others, then we are not being guided by heavenly wisdom.

It is possible for us to practice a degree of partiality in our association with the brethren without our being aware of it, thereby missing blessings which we might otherwise be enjoying. It is well to seek to fellowship with those whom ordinarily we might be inclined simply to greet casually. We do not know what may be in the hearts and minds of others unless we converse with them. There may well be blessings waiting for us if we make it a point to become better acquainted with those who we may not often speak with at length.

SINCERE

Wisdom, James says, is sincere. The Scriptures are firm in their denouncement of the sin of hypocrisy, which is the opposite of sincerity. A hypocrite has no rightful place among the people of God. One cannot be guided by heavenly wisdom, and at the same time be a hypocrite. Paul spoke of being all things to all people that he might save some, but he did not mean by this that he was playing the part of a hypocrite. (I Cor. 9:19-23) Jesus said that we should be wise as serpents and harmless, or simple, as doves in our presentation of the Gospel message so as not unnecessarily to offend the hearers, but again this does not imply hypocrisy.—Matt. 10:16

If we are guided by heavenly wisdom we will be open and sincere to all. We will not be deceivers either by word or deed. Sincerity of heart is one of the essential elements of true Christian character. Without it we cannot be pleasing to the Lord, nor will we be able to make our calling and election

sure to a place in the kingdom with Christ. May we indeed endeavor at all times to be sincere, and may the Truth quickly cleanse us from the slightest encroachment of the sin of hypocrisy!

WISDOM—FROM THE LORD

King Solomon, who asked for wisdom in order to rule righteously over Israel, was given much of this highly desirable quality by God. (II Chron. 1:8-12) He recognized that God was the source of wisdom and wrote of that fact, thus agreeing with James that it comes only from above. We too receive this heavenly wisdom from our Heavenly Father through his Word of Truth and our obedience to it.

We quote Solomon's words concerning wisdom: "The LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly. He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of his saints." If we search for this wisdom through earnest study of God's Word and through prayer, and if we are willing to have our lives guided by it, then we will "understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea, every good path."—Prov. 2:6-9 ■