

Prayer

We thank You gracious Lord, for the amazing truths we discover by reading Your Word. May all Your people value it and learn to use it as was intended; as the revelation of Your character and plan for this world, and as the spiritual reference point for all who seek the truth. Let us not be carried away with our own ideas, but inspired by all you have revealed through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Ask the Lord for the blessing of healing, in your body, your soul, your mind and your spirit

On-going prayers

- **Pray this week** about witness. *Pray about your own witness as a Christian; ask the Lord to help you get this right.*
- *Give thanks for any successes you have been blessed with this week*
- *Pray against the evils of pornography and its affect on the young*

Meditation

The ways of the Lord are compassionate and His love is incomparable;

He focuses the minds of those who need to deal with bad debt,
He liberates those entrapped by life who have no sense of purpose,
He helps with the most difficult decisions taken in the work place,
He re-ignites passion in wounded marriages by nurturing true love,
He heals the hearts of parents and children, shattered by separation,
He re-envisions those who need to find hope to face the future,
He ministers to the pain of the aged when gripped by chronic illness,
He heals and purifies the spirit of those who know the hell of abuse:

He has faced the toughest pain, the Cross; and His victory is our strength.

Bible Study - James 3:13-18

¹³ Who amongst you is wise and understanding? Then show by your good life that your works are done with humility born of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition within your hearts, do not be proud of it and by the standards of truth, live a lie. ¹⁵ This kind of wisdom does not come from heaven, but is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. ¹⁶ For wherever there is envy and selfish ambition, you will also find disorder and all manner of bad practice. ¹⁷ However, heavenly wisdom is first of all pure, then peaceful, gentle, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits, and with no partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Review

Moving on from his previous extraordinary but powerful outburst (3:8-12) about the evil of the tongue and his stark warnings about 'faith without works' (2:14f.), James continues his letter with more measured advice. It is clear that what made James so vigorous in his writing was the inappropriate behaviour of the rich in the church at expense of the poor (2:1-7). Here, he talks about the false standards of 'selfish ambition' (3:14,15) and the humility of true wisdom (3:13), and our passage reads like a considered set of spiritual principles governing godly behaviour. It speaks both of what is good and what is bad Christian behaviour; but there is a continuing sharpness to James' writing, which makes it all the memorable.

We need to remember that this message was given first to early Jewish Christians, so James used a well known feature of Old Testament writing to teach his lesson, and this is 'wisdom' teaching. 'Wisdom' literature often sets out two paths, one good and one bad. The first being the path of true wisdom, such as found in verse 13 and explained later on in verses 17 and 18. The second being the path of worldly wisdom,

as outlined in verses 14 to 16. We can see a similar use of this technique in Proverbs (e.g. 2:13f.), and Jesus used something similar in a number of his sayings; for example, when He said 'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.' (Matt 7:13). Some commentaries suggest that the complex ideas, rich Greek and wisdom techniques used in this letter mean that it could not have come from a man who was a Galilean fisherman. Frankly, I regard this as prejudicial and ill-considered, not unlike the like the prejudicial negativity of human behaviour castigated by James in his letter. Christian history is littered with example of people of lowly birth who have risen not just to high positions of spiritual authority within the Church but also intellectual greatness; there is no reason why James could not be one of these.

In the substance of what James says here, he identifies the important characteristics and true spiritual wisdom of humility in action (3:13), which he describes as 'pure, peaceful, gentle, submissive, full of mercy and good fruits, with no partiality or hypocrisy' (3:17). It may seem to us that these characteristics could never combine within someone to produce a person who would be strong and effective in matters of faith, or who would make a good Christian leader, for example. However, we would be wrong, and all too often, it is our inability to see the spiritual value of these qualities that can hold back the church of God, even today. By contrast, when James identifies the qualities of those who are ungodly, he mentions some that seem to have a good habit of hanging around the life of God's people, the church, even to this day; envy, ambition and pride (3:14). In addition, these qualities can quickly become far more demonic in their effects, being the basis for further hypocrisy, unspiritual wisdom, self-centredness, disorder and bad practice (3:15,16). With care, we can see that James sought to expose ambition and pride as stepping stones to some of the worst qualities of humanity, and they should not be tolerated within the church.

It may be that through the regular reading of God's Word, in which lists such as this are common (particularly in the writings of Paul), the spiritual truths of God's Kingdom will dawn on us. I do believe that there is a need to put aside all attempts to manage God's church by appointing high energy autocratic leaders who drive through their own vision of 'new ways of being church' as if being faithful to the church was a matter of being submissive to their own ideas. Despite this, God will do His work, and 'a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace' (3:18).

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What other qualities of godliness would you add to James' list? What do they add to what James already says?
2. What other qualities of worldliness would you add to James' list? What more do they add to what James already says?
3. How is the Church today to go forward without competing forcefully in the modern world?

Discipleship

Discipleship issue in this text

- *Heavenly wisdom; humility, purity, mercy etc.*
- *Earthly standards of envy ambition and hypocrisy*
- *The 'harvest of righteousness'*

Personal comment:

The contrasts drawn by James are telling. The meekness of the characteristics he applauds as 'heavenly wisdom' are extraordinary, and it would be wise for all leaders of God's people to consider how they measure up to such standards. I fear too much emphasis is placed today on people who are strong leaders in a cultural rather than a spiritual sense, and the church is impoverished because of it.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Read through Galatians 5 and compare Paul's lists of the fruit of the spirit and the works of the flesh with this passage.*
- *Discuss with a friend whether 'wisdom' is a useful concept in today's church, or find a practical way to 'make peace' (see 3:18) with someone or something in your life today.*

Final Prayer

We worship you, Lord God Almighty! We worship you in our words, our deeds, our thinking and our feelings; each of us with all our 'heart, soul, mind and strength'. We give ourselves to You so that Your will might be done on earth, both now and forever: Alleluia! AMEN
