

Wisdom from Heaven
James 3:1-18
Key Verse: 3:17

by Dr. Jim Rabchuk

"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

The book of James is a great book. I know that not everyone would agree with me. Martin Luther once said, "James is an epistle of straw." And it is clear enough from the book of Acts and certain letters of Paul that James and Paul did not always agree. What is more, Jesus' brothers including James participated in some questionable activities during Jesus' ministry on earth. For example, Mark says that at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry Jesus' mother and brothers came to take Jesus home, by force if necessary! And John remarks when Jesus' brothers tried to get Jesus to become a "public figure" that even Jesus' brothers did not believe. For all these reasons and more, I was a little hesitant to study James. As we've already read, James discourages the idea that everyone should be a Bible teacher, while our ministry is largely based on the idea that every Christian should be a Bible teacher. So, should we pretend that James doesn't exist, or that his book isn't by him, or is simply not worth listening to? No, we shouldn't. His book is included in the New Testament as a part of God's word. It is therefore inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

But this isn't just about taking our medicine and liking it. James is truly great. Think about it! James was a brother of Jesus. How hard it must have been for him to see past his family ties to accept that Jesus was the Son of God! How hard it must have been for James to follow Jesus without any expectation of favoritism! How hard it must have been for James to proclaim the gospel of love to legalistic Jewish believers in Jerusalem! And how hard it must have been to see Gentile believers prospering, while the Jewish believers lived in poverty and under constant persecution! And yet, when it really counted, James made the most important decision of the early church to welcome Gentile believers into the church as Gentiles, not as converted Jews. The book of James displays the fruit of this intense and real struggle in James' life. I believe that God preserved this book especially for Christians of today. Like James, we need to struggle against our sense of personal entitlement, our sense of cultural superiority, and our worldly desires that war against our souls. Most of all, we need to follow James' example and come to the Lord Jesus as we are so that we might find true wisdom for our Christian lives.

James challenges us right off the bat in verse 1. "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." James is not saying that Bible teachers aren't needed, or that only priests should be Bible teachers. James is reminding us that being a Bible teacher is a great honor but an even greater responsibility. When the Risen Jesus visited the frightened disciples in their locked room, he told them, "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." Jesus entrusted the disciples with the ministry of the gospel and the forgiveness of sins. As Paul writes, "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." Therefore, those who wish to participate in the ministry of God's word will be judged more strictly, in accordance with the seriousness of their task. That judgment will not be performance based -- it will not be based on a number. It will be based on our motives. 1 Co. 4:5b says, "Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God." If our motives are right, how happy we will be on that day! But if our motives are found to be impure and self-seeking, there will be trouble and distress!

James continues in verse 2. "We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check." As we know, James himself desired to receive glory and honor through being the brother of Jesus. He confesses here that he has stumbled more times than we know. And he is sure that we all have and will continue to stumble in our lives of faith. Becoming a Bible teacher is not a cure for stumbling. Becoming a Bible teacher makes our stumbling an even bigger problem. What is more, being a Bible teacher means we have to rely on the most unreliable part of our body -- our tongue. In short, becoming a Bible teacher exposes our shortcomings and stumblings on a daily, even moment by moment basis. When I studied Russian in Moscow during my junior year of college, one of the strictest teachers at the institute declared to her American students, "None of you is capable of speaking even one sentence in Russian correctly!" She was right. But what could we do? We were living in Moscow. All we could do was face up to our shortcomings and learn to speak in the right way. Likewise,

here we are! We have all received the calling to be Bible teachers. We are committed to using our tongues in service to God. May God have mercy on us!

James mentioned that a person who is never at fault in what he says is a perfect man able to keep his whole body in check. But who can do this? Only our Lord Jesus was never at fault in what he said. He alone kept his body in check to the end, and so won the victory over sin and death! He is the perfect man. For the rest of us, it is not we who keep our tongues in check. Rather, our tongues take over our lives and set them on the course for hell. We all have something to say. Usually, it is in order to boast or show off. And sooner or later our boasts lead to corruption and then destruction. You have all heard king Solomon described as the wisest man ever. He had a son, Rehoboam. When Rehoboam was named king after Solomon, the people asked him to lighten the burden of the people's service to the kingdom. But Rehoboam was feeling pretty good about just having been named king. So instead of acknowledging the peoples' complaint, he made a boast, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions." Afterwards, perhaps, he gave a high five to his young advisors. But his rash words caused a rebellion and the division of Israel from then on. His tongue literally set his nation on fire. What a tragedy! But the greatest tragedy Rehoboam would face was the judgment of God for what he had done with his evil tongue. All kinds of animals have been tamed and are being tamed. Recently, Russian scientists were able to tame wild foxes! But there is no man who can tame the human tongue.

The particular example James gives is how otherwise devout worshippers of God speak about one another. Look at verses 9-10. "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be." One man was a deacon in his church, because he came from a wealthy family. But he would curse and threaten violence to his wife and children on the way home from the worship service. The children are still suffering 20 years later from this abuse. We all agree that such a thing is terrible. Yet we are so easily led into the same sin by cursing, criticizing, and abusing our brothers and sisters in Christ and even our wives or husbands and children. The result is years of hurt feelings, division and bitterness. These are wounds not easily healed. How can we put an end to this practice? James teaches us that the problem is at the source. What we say comes from what is in our hearts. A salt spring will cause salt water to gush forth. If we are going to be Bible teachers, we need to be changed at the source. This can't be a superficial change that yields fresh water "some" of the time. We must be changed from having a salt spring, to having a fresh water spring welling up in our hearts.

Look at verses 13-16. "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice." We all agree that bible teachers need wisdom, just as Christian believers need faith. The book of James teaches, however, that there is demonic wisdom, just as there is demonic faith. Demonic faith is faith that God exists, without practice of what God requires. Likewise, demonic wisdom is teaching based on God's word, without the foundation of practice of what God says. Instead, it flows from the selfish ambition and bitter envy in our hearts. Paul mentions in Philippians that "[some] preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains." The magician Simon wished to buy the apostles' power to give the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands. And it is said that the man who just killed more than 90 Norwegian young people was a Christian fundamentalist seeking to purify Norway. But these are just extreme examples of what happens in sinners like us every day. There's no use denying it. As Bible teachers we all want wisdom. Unless we are careful, however, the wisdom we obtain might lead to disorder and every evil practice.

James says that if you have bitter envy or selfish ambition in your hearts do not boast about it or deny the truth. The key to avoiding demonic wisdom is not more study or better speaking practices. Those things are a cover up. The only way sinners like us can have true wisdom starts with confession and repentance before the cross of Jesus. The only way sinners like us can have true wisdom is by asking for the wisdom from above that only Christ Jesus can give. James describes the character of that wisdom as "... first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." There is no room in what James says for our being impure, inconsiderate, divisive and partial, "by faith." Let's read verses 17 and 18 together. "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness." This is the absolute standard for those who would serve others in the Lord as Bible teachers and even shepherds. So, what must we do? We must

learn to live by faith in God's grace through Christ Jesus all the more. There is no other way. We must go deeper into Jesus' grace of forgiveness, mercy and love until we find the source of real wisdom, wisdom that is from above. That is the only way to make the salt spring in our heart fresh.

When my Lutheran friend asked me why I became a Bible teacher, I told him that I wanted to please God as my heavenly Father, just as I had become a physics major to please my earthly father. I was tired of living selfishly and without commitment to anyone or anything. I was truly thankful for God's grace that forgave my sins and gave me a new life purpose. I hoped that by becoming a bible teacher, I could grow in the image of my Savior, Jesus Christ, and bear the fruit that God had chosen me to bear. I wanted God to be happy with me and my life. And God truly blessed my decision and my life. He opened up the Scriptures to me, and made my life a blessing for others. I felt that I was co-working with God, like Adam in the garden of Eden. But as I grew in stature in UBF, the extra responsibilities I had taken up were more than I could handle. Instead of confessing my weakness, I tried to cover them up by my own efforts. I became ambitious to receive more and more recognition as a "great man." But getting that recognition didn't make me better. Instead, I became petty and selfish. I fell into the temptation of lust. My relationships with my coworkers and even my wife and children became strained to the point of breaking.

It all came to a head two years ago when I was expected to attend a "leaders' retreat" in Maryland during the Thanksgiving break. I had no money to attend. I was going to leave my wife to care for the many guests we had visiting us for the holiday. Without thinking, I was preparing to borrow some money off our credit card to pay for the trip. But then it struck me. Who am I really trying to please? Would it please God for me to go into more debt to attend a meeting for the sake of improving relationships among UBF leaders when my relationship with my own wife was falling apart? I was clinging to my status as a bible teacher in UBF for dear life. But it wasn't to please God. It was so that I could still feel good about myself, in spite of my many sins. I was using God's calling on me to be a Bible teacher to justify myself before God. And it just wasn't working. I called and said I couldn't come. I cried for an hour after that. It really felt like dying.

And that should have been it. I had failed as a husband, bible teacher and shepherd. But by God's grace I studied the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman twice last summer, the passage that had helped me to confess and be healed when I first received Jesus as Christ and Lord. Here I was, 23 years later, the very same sinner, maybe even worse. But that wasn't the end of the story, for through that passage I met Jesus newly and discovered that he hadn't changed either. Knowing all of my sins and failures, Jesus still offered me the living water that leads to eternal life. And Jesus renewed his calling of me to be a source of blessing, a Bible teacher and shepherd for others. But it wouldn't be based on my righteousness or devotion. It would be by the grace of God alone, just as he had always meant it to be. And step by step he has helped me to have living faith and heavenly wisdom, not by doing great things, but by doing basic things by faith. I thank God that this summer, I could work together with my wife Jennifer to help my mom move to Macomb and live in an assisted living facility near our house and worship together with us on Sunday. And we could work together with the Lee's to help Josh Wood have a testimony of faith in Christ as Lord, and a decision to serve him as a Bible teacher as he goes to Korea for study abroad. I could begin to make new friends in Jesus, both inside and outside UBF. And I could humble myself and confess my weaknesses as an administrator, and ask many people at my University how I might grow as a leader and a better provider for my family.

Now, I look at my family and see how much my wife and children have grown, and rejoice. At the same time, I can see that once again I am growing as a man in Christ, with a living hope in the kingdom of God. For I have rediscovered that every good gift comes to us from above, through the grace and mercy of our Heavenly Father, and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I pray that we may deeply acknowledge the seriousness of the challenges involved in serving this generation as Bible teachers and shepherds. The standard we must meet is not UBF heritage, but heavenly wisdom. I pray that God will use this passage and my testimony to encourage each of you to repent and come to Jesus newly for his grace and heavenly wisdom that alone equips us for the holy mission of being a bible teacher and shepherd for the young people of this generation.